People and Place — Studies of Small Town Life in the Maritimes 

People and Place is a collection of essays written by faculty members of Mount Allison University in Sackville, New Brunswick as part of a project on small town life, sponsored by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council. The editor, Larry McCann, writes that the project was the faculty’s "opportunity to learn about ourselves." The book can be seen as the attempt of a group of thoughtful people to reveal the deeper meaning of the place in which their lives and work are rooted. If taken as such, the book has an immediate appeal for anyone interested in the Maritimes' "regional identity."

This exercise in self-knowledge gets off to a bad start with William Godfrey's essay on "James Glegg and the Politics of Sunbury County." Loyalist themes are undeveloped and remain a mere setting for a parochial political thesis which is interesting only for specialists. Perhaps the collection should have started closer to home; this is suggested by the more satisfying quality of Dean Jobb's essay, "Sackville Promotes a Railway: The Politics of the New Brunswick and P.E.I. Railways, 1872-1866." A photograph by Thaddaeus Holownia shows one of Sackville's foundations built near the main track while a map on the next page illustrates the story: a rivalry between Sackville and Amherst to become the centre of an economic corridor between Prince Edward Island and the major port of Saint John. If you are unfamiliar with the history of the region, this essay is worth reading if only for the way Jobb portrays the diverse resource-based economy of Sackville as it took on a new manufacturing base under the direction of an energetic group of well-established local entrepreneurs. The purpose of building a railway to P.E.I. was to promote economic growth and the whole town was delighted by the shrewd political maneuvering which successfully brought it to completion.

As a historical slice of regional life this essay is fascinating, but the reader is left startled by the image of a booming economic life which is a stark contrast to the ghost town Sackville is today. At least part of the morning of the Maritimes — part of the mystery of the regionas a whole — is focused by what happened in Sackville.

The very next essay by McCann and Burnett takes us further down what became the Inter-Colonial Railroad to New Glasgow, Nova Scotia which, during the same period, was transforming itself into a major industrial area. Another Holownia photo shows the steel plant in Truro (along with New Glasgow, Stellarton, and Westville, these Picton County "towns" constitute the industrial core of northern Nova Scotia) and a few pages later there are a couple of panoramic maps of New Glasgow. These maps are less informative than the map in Jobb's essay. Nevertheless, we get a visual sense of how steel and coal changed the character of the communities. The authors provide a scholarly argument that the North American args-to-riches stories of this period were the exception to the rule in New Glasgow where a closed, traditional social hierarchy kept "things" the same even as the economy was quickly changing. However, we never get a broader political-economic perspective on why New Glasgow never fulfilled its potential of the later nineteenth century.

Perhaps I should be satisfied with these two competent, sometimes lively essays on Sackville and New Glasgow life, and not take seriously the editor's claim to some degree of self-knowledge. After all, as the editor writes, the authors are a "truly multidisciplinary lot" and a synthetic historical perspective is very hard to achieve. Still, I was struck by the way the collection as a whole managed to evade the phenomenon which could be the most elusive unifying theme — Confederation. This is the event ingrained in the consciousness of many Maritimers and it explains a great deal about the place and the people who live here. Maritimers are haunted by memories of the "Gold Rush," which they believe characterized life in the region immediately before Confederation. According to the myth, Confederation was something we were manipulated into; it destroyed a whole way of life and the economy based on that life, and led the region into the doom and gloom of the twentieth century. Perhaps the most accessible way for other Canadians to understand this belief is to view the National Film Board's evocative video, Empty Harbour, Empty Dreams. No doubt the authors in this book cannot swallow this myth whole. Still, they cannot start to "learn about ourselves" without confronting the basic truth conveyed by the myth and its influence on the region's consciousness.

This section reveals the ambiguity of the book's apparent leading theme. The opening sentence of the editor's preface restates its subtitle — "the Maritimes is a region of small towns." The authors are supposed to have "recognized the significance of this fact," but either as an assumption or a leading theme "this fact" is consensual. Rhyme off some of the major station stops on the railway: Moncton, Sackville, Amherst, Truro, New Glasgow and Sydney. Only Sackville can really be considered a small town, and in Jobb's essay we see that town struggling to become a large manufacturing centre; in the twentieth century it leaped back, forever, into being a small town. In general, these railway stops signified one basic fact: the Maritime economy was changing in the late nineteenth century from the traditional fishing (or "land and sea") which captures the interaction focused in the shipping industry) to the newer industrial and manufacturing bases. This meant a shift from small town to urban life. McCann writes that "the essays group themselves quite naturally into three major themes: casting the pattern, the passing of traditional society, and contemporary small town life." Yet the 1870s and 1880s around which the first group of essays generally revolved was the time when the traditional pattern was being broken; this time was really the "passing of traditional society."

In turn, the politico-economic themes raised in the Sackville and New Glasgow essays are not developed or complemented by the others even though economists Del Benecci and Price write about contemporary economic trends in the Maritimes. In an atrociously jargon-ridden and mathematically obscure text, which is com-

plemented by nine statistical tables, the authors seem to want to prove all the horrible things ever said about the "dis- natural science." They draw the breath-taking conclusion that towns moderately dependent on the service sector grew, and that towns highly dependent on the "smokestack" and primary industries suffered decline. The social scientists who dominate the third section do a good job of stilling any sign of life as decades of bureaucratically inspired mega-projects in the Maritimes have done.

The same sort of paean of "objectivity" is behind the essay "Obligations for Care in Small Towns" by Storm, Storm and Strike-Scheman who conclude, for example, that "the consensus appears to be that children's needs of their elderly..." This idea of the enlightener provide. Patrick "Weekly Newspapers least readable, but imaginative, eclectic Maritime journalism."

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be that children should be aware of the needs of their elderly parents and organ- 
ize assistance." This statement gives an 
idea of the enlightenment the essay will 
provide. Patrick Baker's essay on 
"Weekly Newspaper Reporting" is at 
least readable, but fails to discuss the 
imaginative, eclectic and distinctively 
Maritime journalism that does exist. 
A welcome change of pace is Eric 
Ross' story of "The Rise and Fall of 
Picton Island." In a warm, informative 
manner, Ross traces life on the island 
from the arrival of a few Irish families to 
that of the Highland Scots. The power of 
his essay resides in his perceptive eye 
and ability to synthesize detail insight- 
fully in a clear narrative line. The reader 
easily sizes up the interaction between 
school relocation, television and unem-
ployment insurance. Further in this 
piece, the story of the hippies arriving in 
the 1970s and managing to integrate 
their new, communal life-style into the 
old ways gives a cheering edge to that 
typical Maritime feeling of loss for what 
one once was (whatever it was). 
Richard Knowles' essay on "The 
Malgrave Road Co-op Theatre Com-
pny" focuses on that feeling in what is 
undeniably the most inspiring essay in 
the book. It describes a small town 
"occupying the rugged northeast corner 
of mainland Nova Scotia" coming alive 
in theatre and enacting its present iden-
tity by telling stories of its past. As 
Knowles goes through the company's 
various productions we meet all the 
flesh and blood Maritime characters so 
often missing from some other essays— 
the fisherman most pointedly. 
The inspirational quality of the essay 
derives from the cooperative nature of 
the company: townspeople become ac-
tors whose art reflects the material con-
ditions of their lives. By this process, a 
historically recognized loss is turned 
into a gain. Still, the very fact of incor-
porating material conditions into one's 
art can turn back on itself. The whole 
concept is so bound up with community 
life that the logical artistic step of going 
"big-time" seems strange if not contra-
dictory. Is always being on the road any 
different from going down the road? 
One wonders whether the questions 
raised by Knowles are bound up with the 
theatre only, and not with the more so-
tary pursuit of writing literature, for 
example. This collection does have two 
short essays by Carrie MacMillan and Gwen 
Davies on the Maritime novel (1900s- 
1920s) and Maritime poetry (1920s and 
1930s) respectively. As the Maritimers 
became a more urban society its 
newspapers and poets realized the dan-
ger of people losing their sense of place; 
yet it is only out of the "seaward vision," 
as Carrie MacMillan puts it, that a dis-
tinctively Maritime imaginative litera-
ture can be sustained. MacMillan and 
Davies frequently imply that the value 
of Maritime literature lies in this inher-
ient tension because there is no avoiding 
the fact that it is not good enough, not 
tough enough to let the place speak for
Still circulating, slowly working their way in from the periphery, the Native margins in this country: stories, rumours, half-truths, lies, myths. Stories about pipelines, about hydro-electric projects, about the sporadic explosions of violence, about mercury poisoning. Stories that are the by-product of, or the sub-plots in a larger pattern of the systematic, continuing oppression of the aboriginal inhabitants of Canada. Somewhere in these sub-plots—as in the case of the two stories you will read about here, the story of a doctor or the story of a uranium mine—we perhaps catch a glimpse of these historical processes in their everyday disguise, as experiences. And, more rarely, a glimpse of how the historical process of dispossessing Native people is resisted on a day-to-day level, of the struggle that life has become in these margins, of the ways Native people find to fight against the Canadian State and international capital.

The two stories reviewed below illustrate, in part, that this struggle spills over the boundary of political economy as we narrowly conceive it, and even over the boundary of culture as that concept is exchanged in Native Studies. The struggle has come to inform every aspect of life, however we might choose to analytically slice it up. So, in one case we hear a story of how medical care in a small Native community is a highly charged, political issue. In the other, of how a large uranium mining project changes (threatens?) the way of life of another community by destroying the environmental basis of traditional Native pursuits. Some of these stories are told well, others badly; but I think we must read them all carefully and learn what we can, piece together what we can, because in some way or another we have a role to play. What we know helps to determine that oldest of political questions, whose side we’re on.

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An Error in Judgment: The Politics of Medical Care in an Indian/White Community

by Dara Cutlhe Speck


Alert Bay, the setting for Dara Cutlhe Speck’s An Error in Judgment: The Politics of Medical Care in an Indian/White Community, is located on Cormorant Island off the northern tip of Vancouver Island. I read this book the week I returned home to Denman Island, also offshore, midway up the eastern coast of the Island. Like the weather, Speck’s book was grey, dark, and disturbing.

Renee Smith, an eleven-year-old member of the Nimkish Indian Band, died in an Alert Bay hospital of a ruptured appendix on January 22nd, 1979. The author, a Band member by marriage, details the death and the events which followed. The story is a powerful one, far more than a mere statistical analysis. It includes the death of a young woman from an over-dose a few days earlier, the physical and mental abuse suffered by another woman, the final return to health care in Alert Bay, and other stories of lives lost and lives saved. The book is a careful critique of the administration of health care services to a small community of Indians and the government agencies that control their lives.

The book focuses on the administration of health care services to a small community of Indians and the government agencies that control their lives. The stories are told in detail, with interviews and documents. The book is written in a style that is accessible to a wide audience, and it is a valuable resource for anyone interested in the history of health care in Canada.