

Northern Visions: New Perspectives on the North in Canadian History, edited by Kerry Abel and Ken S. Coates. Peterborough, ON: Broadview Press, 2001. 224pp., index, notes, tables, illustrations, photographs. ISBN 1-55111-401-1 (pb) \$26.95 CDN. Reviewed by Sherrill Grace.

Challenging Northern Historiography

It is Canada Day 2002 today, and as I sit down to write this review of *Northern Visions: New Perspectives on the North in Canadian History* the CBC is airing a program on Canadian history. Most of the students interviewed say history is boring, irrelevant, Canadian history especially so. Those who find something more positive to say stress their engagement with history through stories that bring dry facts, dates, abstract events, and long-ago happenings to life for them here and now; they have become hooked on history by doing it, albeit in small ways. There are lessons for us all in these reflections on the subject of history, on how it is written, and on how it is taught. Many of these reflections are explored in this volume; indeed, these reflections, and the problems or challenges prompting them, constitute the fundamental impetus for the book.

In *Northern Visions*, the editors Kerry Abel and Ken Coates, have collected eleven essays that address the absence of northern historiography in Canada. And that absence was audible in today's Canada Day history lesson. To be sure, the purpose of the program was not to identify the scope of our history; however, examples of events, dates, and names were inevitable, and not one of these was remotely northern. So if there could be any doubt about the absence of the North in our history or about the importance of the challenges *Northern Visions* addresses, the history of my immediate moment gives that doubt the lie. We know too little about the history of our norths; we seem unable to train professional historians (at least in sufficient numbers) to create that history; and we seem unwilling to integrate the North into a larger, evolving concept of Canadian identity.

What is to be done, and equally important, how must we go about bringing new perspectives to our history, to our norths, to the historiography of Canada? *Northern Visions* provides some answers and methods. For this reason, as well as for the nuggets of northern gold in individual essays, I am delighted to have this book and I recommend it heartily to *all* scholars who care about Canada. Rather than summarize individual essays, I want to reflect on the larger issues addressed by the book as a whole and, inevitably, on what I find missing here.

Key to the challenge of writing northern history—and to writing Canadian history as a northern history—is the fact that we are not starting from scratch. Rightly, the essays collected here remind us that we already have a

northern history. The first puzzling question then is: why do we keep thinking we don't? Many of the authors in this volume praise the decisive contributions of W.L. Morton, who alerted us all to the presence of a northern history. After Morton came Morris Zaslow, and after Zaslow come contemporary historians who have carried the torch, many of whom are present in this volume. I have traced this lineage in my own work and found it exciting and invigorating; it exists and it is already ours. The second puzzling question is: why has this distinguished body of work not made a transformative impact on the larger story of Canadian history? To this there are many answers in *Northern Visions*, and they range from a failure of history itself, and of the historians who write it in rigid, academic ways, to the lack of adequate funding for field work at the graduate student, never mind the professorial, level.

Hovering over this discourse of critique, at times of lament, is the pervasive feeling that northern history and historians are not taken seriously by the gate keepers of academic history whose methodologies privilege written archival research and events of wide political (read southern) significance over local events and oral story. Ironically, however, the contributors to this volume seem to me to be indifferent to the wealth of popular history, popular culture, and the arts, which have made long-standing, rich, and influential contributions to the representation of the North for at least the past 150 years. Several of the voices in this volume identify northern research as fundamentally interdisciplinary, but that interdisciplinarity must be more inclusive, more aware of the arts and humanities than it currently is. Whether we like it or not, it is writers like Pierre Berton and Farley Mowat and other media and genres—theatre, film, visual art—that enjoy a larger audience than academic work currently does in our sadly anti-intellectual country, and if those students just interviewed on the CBC are to be taken seriously, then the writers and teachers of history must recognize the value of the popular, the local, or the theatre approach to making history itself relevant to young lives.

For me, the most interesting debate to emerge across the essays is the question of whether the North is regional or national. Perhaps the best answer is that it is both, and I very much enjoyed Charlene Porsild's elegant articulation of the ways in which the regional example can be shown to have national import. Another crucial debate concerns how history is written and how historians decide what matters and how to tell that story. Several of the contributors tackle this problem and courageously identify historiography and historians as the root problem, but Shelagh Grant is the most precise about why and how to change the way history is done. The most focussed critique concerns what defines North as different from South and to what extent the rhetoric of difference helps or hinders northern historiography. This debate is enjoined by Coates and Morrison, Waiser, Neufeld, and Kelm, as well as by two essays on non-Canadian Norths (Alaska and Russia).

But let me end with a challenge to Abel and Coates, as to the others: produce more northern history. It's time for a biography of Morton. It is also time for my history colleagues to learn from the arts, in addition to the social sciences—Carl Berger has blazed that trail. And finally, it is time to include more of the North. In his concluding remarks, Bruce Hodgins calls for more work on Labrador, Nunavik, and the interior of British Columbia, but I was particularly struck by the complete absence of Labrador in *Northern Visions*. Dear editors and authors, in the next volume please include Labrador. You could start with Marie Wadden, Nympha Byrne and Camille Fouillard, and some of the Innu who give us their histories in *It's Like the Legend*, and don't forget Daniel Ashini who is doing archeological history on-site in Nitassinan. I'll be here, on another Canada Day, eager to learn more about our history and our Norths.

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Issues in the North, Volume I (1996, ISBN 1-896445-02-0 (pb, 219pp.)), *Issues in the North, Volume II* (1997, ISBN 1-896445-04-07 (pb, 206pp.)), and *Issues in the North, Volume III* (1998, ISBN 1-896445-08-X (pb, 208pp.)), [all] edited by Jill Oakes and Rick Riewe. Edmonton and Winnipeg: Canadian Circumpolar Institute and the Department of Human Ecology, University of Alberta and the Department of Native Studies, University of Manitoba. Tables, graphs, illustrations, photographs, maps, notes, bibliographies., \$25.00. Reviewed by Floyd McCormick.

The idea of the North is central to the Canadian identity. As former Primer Minister Pierre Trudeau told Queen Elizabeth and the Duke of Edinburgh during a trip to Iqaluit (then Frobisher Bay) in 1970, "You have not seen Canada, until you have seen the North." Countless artistic depictions, from Group of Seven landscapes to B-grade Hollywood Mountie films, have described Canada in terms of "northernness"—cold, vast, isolated, pristine and forbidding.

Yet while the idea of the North is central to Canadian identity, the real North as experienced by those who live there has, historically, been peripheral to Canadian consciousness and policy-making. Another Canadian Prime Minister, Louis St. Laurent, once admitted to the House of Commons that Canadian governments had "administered these vast territories of the north in an almost continuing state of absence of mind." This "absence of mind" affected different areas of Canada's North in different ways. Historically, the