

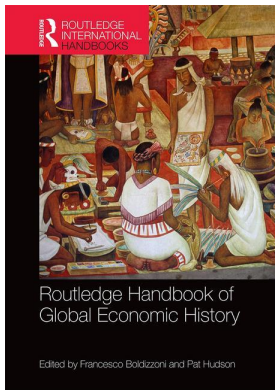
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Access details: *subscription number*

Publisher: *Routledge*

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## Routledge Handbook of Global Economic History

Francesco Boldizzoni, Pat Hudson

### Making A Country (And An Economy)

Publication details

<https://test.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9781315734736-4>

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**Published online on: 14 Dec 2015**

**How to cite :-** Douglas McCalla. 14 Dec 2015, *Making A Country (And An Economy)* from: Routledge Handbook of Global Economic History Routledge

Accessed on: 27 Mar 2023

<https://test.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9781315734736-4>

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## 4

# MAKING A COUNTRY (AND AN ECONOMY)

## Economic history in Canada

*Douglas McCalla*

Following the American Revolution, Britain's remaining colonies on the northern half of the American continent were tiny. In 1800, there were not quite 100,000 people in five colonies on the Atlantic; more than 200,000 along the St Lawrence River in Lower Canada; and fewer than 40,000 upriver and along the lower Great Lakes, in Upper Canada (Harris 1987: plates 32, 68). A majority of the entire population was French-speaking. Through the Hudson's Bay Company, Britain also claimed the remaining lands to the west and north. Between 1867 and 1873, this territory (except for Newfoundland, population 170,000) was united in the Dominion of Canada, an independent country within the British Empire. Over three-quarters of the Canadian population of about 3.7 million lived in what now were the provinces of Quebec and Ontario. Upper Canada/Ontario alone represented over 40 percent of the Canadian total, and its per capita income was the highest in Canada by a substantial margin (Inwood and Irwin 2002: 161–2). In the next century, settlement expanded across the continent, central Canada industrialized, and the Canadian population grew to 22 million. That was still little more than 10 percent of the population of the United States. Although the two western provinces, British Columbia and Alberta, were becoming more important by 1971, economic power still was concentrated in the Montreal area and in southern Ontario.<sup>1</sup>

This summary suggests a number of Canadian issues for economic historians, including the transformation of marginal colonies into a highly developed national economy; the character of pre- and post-contact aboriginal economies; the relationship of the colonial and Canadian economies to France, Britain, and the United States; and variation among regions and cultures. Understanding that economy also requires consideration of growth, migration, demography, technology, industrialization, and inequality – standard themes that have locally specific elements.

Of course, the entire world is open to economic historians working in Canada, and they have made important contributions to the study of every region and period (for examples from medieval history, see Munro 1994; Squatriti 2014). In the recent *Oxford Encyclopedia of Economic History* (Mokyr 2003), for example, there are three articles on exclusively Canadian subjects; that at least forty contributors have Canadian affiliations speaks eloquently to the practice of economic history in Canada. But work on the history of other places tends to fall within frameworks appropriate to them, and it is difficult to identify particularly Canadian dimensions in this scholarship (Neill 1991: ix–x).<sup>2</sup> Hence the decision to focus this chapter essentially on studies of Canada.

## Political economy and the staples approach

The beginning of academic study of economic history in Canada reflected both Canadian recognition that industry and urbanization were transforming a primarily agricultural economy and wider trends in the study of western society (Ferguson 1993: xv, 5–6). At the University of Toronto, a youthful W.J. Ashley was recruited from Oxford as its first professor of political economy (McKillop 1994: 193–5).<sup>3</sup> As Ian Drummond writes (1983: 21), Ashley’s inaugural lecture on 9 November 1888 ‘nailed his standard firmly to the German Historical flagpole. Classical economic doctrines . . . have “only a relative truth.” Fruitful work was to be done not in “the abstract deductive method . . . but in the following new fields of investigations – historical, statistical, inductive.” Laissez faire was no longer acceptable “as a general principle. Each case must be decided on its merits.”’ This was the spirit in which economic history developed in Canada, although Ashley himself soon left, lured to Harvard in 1892 as its first professor of economic history.<sup>4</sup> His immediate legacy at Toronto was his recommendation for a successor, James Mavor, whom he described as ‘among the top ten or twelve most distinguished English economists’ (Drummond 1983: 26). Later, the College of Commerce at the University of Birmingham, founded by Ashley, would influence Canadian curricular development, with its integration of economics, politics, commerce, and history.

Mavor was actually a Scot, whose many interests included deep concern at the impact of industrialization and urbanization on the poor in Glasgow. Active in socialist circles in the 1880s, with a wide circle of friends that included William Morris, George Bernard Shaw, and Patrick Geddes, he was moving by the end of the decade towards a more liberal perspective. In the thirty years he held the Toronto chair, he recruited faculty, shaped the curriculum, and laid the foundations of one of the university’s and Canada’s most important intellectual centres (Shortt 1976: 119–35; Drummond 1983: 26–52; McKillop 1994: 485).<sup>5</sup> Much of his writing was on current subjects, in reports commissioned by governments and business interests (e.g. Mavor 1905, 1925). Of his historical writings, the most enduring was a monumental *Economic History of Russia* (Mavor 1914).<sup>6</sup> An avid traveler, he understood economics to have strongly geographic dimensions, thinking that would be important at Toronto long after his retirement (Warkentin 2014).

At Queen’s University, a Presbyterian institution in eastern Ontario, political economy was also introduced in 1888, taught by Adam Shortt, a Queen’s graduate who had studied philosophy and science in Glasgow and Edinburgh (Shortt 1976: 95–116; Neatby 1978: 180). His research would focus on the history of Canada. A key theme was the history of money and banking from the French regime onwards, on which he published dozens of articles based on extensive documentary research (Canadian Bankers’ Association 1986). But his work ranged far more widely, encompassing, Brian McKillop writes (1994: 197), ‘the empirical study of the evolution of the country’s economic, political, and financial institutions: tariff and transportation policy, war industries, currency, municipal government, taxation, trade, railways, industrial monopoly, and many other aspects of the “real” life of Canadian society.’ After moving to Ottawa in 1908 to join Canada’s new Civil Service Commission, he continued his historical work. Notably, with Arthur Doughty, the Dominion Archivist, he co-edited *Canada and Its Provinces*, a 23-volume history to which he contributed six chapters on economic history (Shortt and Doughty 1914–17). A seventh chapter, by O.D. Skelton, who now held Shortt’s chair at Queen’s, was an authoritative 180-page account of the Canadian economy since 1867 that laid out the main lines of a story that has continued to attract and challenge historians. Its final section, ‘1896–1912: The Coming of Prosperity,’ begins with the settlement of the west; ‘at last,’ he writes, ‘Canada’s hour had struck,’ as

external forces turned favourable, a rising tide of prairie wheat found its way to world markets, and a rising tide of immigration peopled the prairies (Skelton 1914: 191). As an undergraduate, Skelton had studied classics at Queen's before obtaining a doctorate in political economy from the University of Chicago, where he had been much influenced by Thorstein Veblen. He was a prolific author on political and economic subjects; his prize-winning first book, for example, was a critique of socialism that drew wide praise, including a letter from Lenin, written from Zurich (Skelton 1911; Crowley 2007). In the early 1920s, Skelton too left for Ottawa, soon to become permanent undersecretary of Canada's new Department of External Affairs.

By then, he had recruited W.A. Mackintosh, a Queen's graduate teaching at Brandon College on the Canadian prairies, whose Harvard doctoral thesis focused on agricultural cooperation in the west, particularly the dramatic recent growth of farmer-owned grain-marketing cooperatives (Mackintosh 1924; Fay 1925).<sup>7</sup> Mackintosh quickly became a leading analyst of contemporary economic problems, especially when sharply falling grain prices and drought combined to devastate the prairies during the Depression.<sup>8</sup> After 1935, he also played a vital part in federal government policy making, including writing the 1945 white paper that laid out the government's postwar employment strategy (Granatstein 1982: 153–8). These activities were informed by his understanding of economic history, first spelled out in 1923. Citing Frederick Jackson Turner and especially Guy S. Callender, Mackintosh turned away from the industrial and urban developments that had initially motivated the establishment of economic history in Canada to argue the importance of rural products, the staples that, he said, had everywhere in North America been 'the prime requisite of colonial prosperity' (Mackintosh 1923: 14). Staples also underlay his study of post-Confederation economic history, a work that long outlived the circumstances of its writing, as a study for the Royal Commission on Dominion–Provincial Relations.<sup>9</sup> It argued that in an economy reliant on primary products whose prices were determined on world markets, 'variability of export income' was central to the regional fiscal imbalances on which the Royal Commission focused (Mackintosh 1964 [1939]: 180–1).

By then, staples had become the core of Canadian economic history, embodied in what remains its most fundamental work, Harold Adams Innis's *The Fur Trade in Canada* (Innis 1930; Berger 1986: 94–100).<sup>10</sup> A graduate of McMaster University who had been wounded on the western front, Innis pursued a doctorate in economics at the University of Chicago, writing a thesis on the history of the Canadian Pacific Railway [CPR] (Innis 1923). Appointed in Political Economy at the University of Toronto in 1920, he set out to construct an economic history and an economics that reflected the Canadian experience. 'A new country', he wrote in 1929 (in Innis 1956: 3), 'presents certain definite problems which appear to be more or less insoluble from the standpoint of the application of economic theory as worked out in the older highly industrialized countries.' Initially, he mainly taught economic geography – which he also practised. Thus, to understand a trade based on European taste in hats, aboriginal trappers and hunters, and the ecology of the beaver, Innis went beyond the archives, traveling widely in fur-trade country and to Britain and Europe (Watson 2006: 123–5, 166). Furs had drawn traders ever farther from the St Lawrence and Hudson Bay; eventually, a Montreal-based enterprise spanned the northern half of the continent. When the CPR was built in the 1880s, it represented a continuation of fur-trade canoe routes, with the latest technology. Contrary to a then-common cliché, that Canada was a country of regions created in spite of geography, Innis argued (1930: 392) that 'It is no mere accident that the present Dominion coincides roughly with the fur-trading areas of northern North America.'<sup>11</sup> In a period when Canadian intellectuals and artists were seeking to articulate a national identity, this idea had much appeal (Berger 1986: 91).

What made the book foundational was its twenty-page conclusion, which generalized beyond the fur trade. In a new land, settlement could succeed only if migrants found a way to buy goods that allowed them to retain a European culture and living standard. The possibilities for exports were limited to resource products. Although Canadians liked to think of their country as rich in natural resources, at any one time these had been few in number; and a resource economy was always vulnerable to forces beyond colonists' control: world prices, changes in metropolitan demand, and new technologies developed elsewhere. Thus, the economic history of Canada could be told as a sequence of staples whose properties, and what later would be called linkages, largely determined the location, character, timing, and limits of development: cod, beaver, pine timber, and wheat sold in and (in the case of cod) beyond Europe; and, later, sawn lumber, minerals, pulp and paper, and (in the era after he wrote) oil, natural gas, and even hydro-electric power, all more likely sold in the United States.<sup>12</sup>

Innis's argument was eloquently complemented by historian Donald Creighton, a colleague and friend, in *The Commercial Empire of the St. Lawrence* (1937), which embodied the vision of imperial officials in Canada, who prided themselves on having a larger perspective than most colonials, and of leading English-speaking merchants, who sought to maintain and later rebuild a Montreal-centred trans-Atlantic commerce linking the American Midwest and Britain. As the book closed, that dream – which took much of the actual economy of Canada in its period for granted – had failed. On the other hand, as Creighton's subsequent work argued, political and entrepreneurial visionaries would reorient it to build a new transcontinental nation, with the CPR as its essential link.

Innis wrote prolifically in the 1930s and was a key figure in encouraging others' writings. Besides a massive study of the original North American staple, the cod fishery (Innis 1940), he wrote many essays, both historical and current, the latter grounding their understanding of the problems of the Depression in Canada in an economy based on staples (Innis 1933, 1956). Universally recognized for his leadership in Canada, he was also by far Canada's best known social scientist internationally. He was the second president of the Economic History Association, turned down an attractive offer in 1945–46 to join the Economics Department at the University of Chicago (Mitch 2011: 245–7), and at the time of his death in 1952 was president of the American Economic Association. By 1940, his interests were shifting to the history of communications and cultural change in the very long term, extending the range of his work in ways that Canadian intellectuals continue to celebrate – and pore over (Acland and Buxton 1999; Bonnett 2013).

These discussions no longer engage, indeed entirely ignore, economic historians (Drummond 1987: 857–8), yet Innis's work remains fundamental in economic history. Having shaped the research agenda, staples framed the narrative of what became a classic textbook (Easterbrook and Aitken 1956).<sup>13</sup> From a description of how the Canadian economy came into being, this interpretation was extended into a theory of economic development (Watkins 1963; Caves 1965) and applied in the emerging field of development studies and subsequently in what practitioners called 'the new Canadian political economy', a comprehensive critique of capitalism, in Canada and beyond, that began in economic nationalism, soon to be combined with Marxism (Clement and Williams 1989; Watkins 2006). With its emphasis on unbalanced growth led by exports from one or more leading sectors, the staple approach fit well with other mid-century approaches and was taken up in settings beyond Canada, applied, for example, by Douglass North in his account of regional patterns in American economic history (1955: 247–8; 1961: 2, 19) and by McCusker and Menard in their rich study of the colonial American economy (1985: 10–13, 18–32).

If staples have provided Canadians with a compelling narrative, accepting it required ignoring important questions, raised long ago (Buckley 1958). As Stanley Engerman wrote (1977: 253), in a reflection on North's work that has more relevance to Canada than many have recognized, 'it would seem that the foreign and external demand sources must have been important to the explanation of what happened, yet the quantitative magnitudes always seem too small to make them necessary conditions for the growth that did occur . . . Any one sector is only a relatively small part of the economy.' Innis's emphasis on staples also had a deterministic quality, which obscured human agency and political decision making; and his writing style, particularly in his essays, sometimes drew conclusions about causes and relationships that did not fit actual sequences.<sup>14</sup> More generally, in making exports of primary products the main issue, the staple story ignored economic life in areas that did not have an obvious staple, assumed economic development in the heartland depended essentially on resource exports from the hinterland, and largely misrepresented agriculture in the Canadian heartland. Thus, Mackintosh (1923: 15) dismissed at least half the population of British North America in 1800 – and more than two centuries of French Canadian agriculture – for 'fail[ing] to rise beyond the stage of primitive diversified agriculture, a self-sufficient, conservative peasantry.'

### Another language, a different space, alternative approaches

Anyone studying French Canadian society, as historians of Canada writing in French mainly did, had to confront this interpretation: was agriculture this backward; if it was, why; and did this explain the place of French Canadians in the twentieth-century economy? At Laval University in Quebec City, economic history began to be taught only in the post-Second World War era, by Albert Faucher. The leading graduate in Laval's first class in social sciences, he could not pursue further studies in France because of the war and instead worked with Innis in Toronto. A central theme of his research was to situate nineteenth-century Quebec in a North American context (Faucher 1973; Dupré 1992). In Laval's new history department, economic history was approached in the *Annales* tradition, that is, as an element within a comprehensive historical project. A pioneering work by Jean Hamelin (1960) began as a thesis on artisans during the French regime, supervised by Charles Morazé at l'École Pratique des Hautes Études in Paris. Setting its subjects within a larger view of the colony's social structure and economy, it sought to explain 'les faiblesses de l'économie de la Nouvelle-France en 1760.' One of these weaknesses, Hamelin concluded (1960: 123, 137), was that the principal wealth-generating elements were controlled from France, an argument that sharply challenged nationalist historians who argued that there had been a vibrant local bourgeoisie whose loss at the Conquest set the stage for French Canadians' subsequent economic difficulties.

Fernand Ouellet, a close colleague of Hamelin, continued this line of analysis for the post-Conquest period in a passionately argued 600-page work (Ouellet 1966). Greatly influenced by the approach of Ernest Labrousse, he used the movement of prices and international trade to identify conjunctures, combining these data with an interpretation of the *mentalité* of French Canadians to address the grand themes of society and politics (Poitras 2013: 350–1, 356 n.66). During the first forty years of British rule, with much unexploited land to develop, French Canadian farmers found no need to change attitudes and techniques. After 1802, Ouellet depicted a gathering crisis in the wheat economy that reflected and reinforced rural resistance to economic change. A backward agriculture that exhausted the soil, a rapidly growing population, a francophone commercial class that focused on merely local trades, and



an inheritance system that led to the ‘morcellement incessant des terres’ (Ouellet 1966: 580) cut *habitants* off from the stimulating currents of the international economy and created deepening rural discontent that a growing class of liberal professionals turned against British authority. The outcome was a rebellion in 1837 and, by mid-century, the beginning of a massive exodus of French Canadians to the industrial towns of New England.

This interpretation was quickly accepted in English-language historical circles and remains prominent in national texts, in part, no doubt, because it was in the staples tradition and aligned with Creighton’s account. In the 1960s, it also appealed to intellectuals celebrating Quebec’s ‘Quiet Revolution’ as an escape from the constraints of the past. For us the more important point is the research it provoked on the Quebec economy, which, as selected examples indicate, questioned many elements of its interpretation. Thus, Gilles Paquet, an economist, and Jean-Pierre Wallot, a historian and later Canada’s National Archivist, began to publish research that argued that it was precisely in this period that ‘Un Québec moderne’ began to take shape (Paquet and Wallot 2007). Their evidence included samples of probate inventories that documented increasing rural wealth and sophisticated rural strategies towards the accumulation and inter-generational transfer of land. Serge Courville, a historical geographer, and historians Jean-Claude Robert and Normand Séguin explored rural exchange, which Ouellet had downplayed; the rapid rise of villages in the period revealed dynamic and increasingly complex local economies (Courville 1990; Courville et al. 1995). There proved to be far more variation in rural society than Ouellet had allowed for, which called into question the basic idea that there was a singular rural *mentalité*. In fact, relating rural backwardness to the 1837 rebellion missed that support for the rebellion was strongest where French Canadian farmers had shown the greatest openness to change (Dechêne 1986: 199).

In relying on contemporary critics who lamented the subdivision of farms, Ouellet also missed the reality of rural practice; despite the legal formalities of equal inheritance, families consistently found ways to distribute estates that maintained farms at economic levels. Holdings too small to be viable farms were an element of the rural economy, not its essence, and even on them, many families proved to have been responding imaginatively, using land in strategic ways, such as to support migration (Ramirez 1991: 24–5, 44–5). Finally, many elements of French Canadian farm practice that nineteenth-century critics (and Ouellet) saw as backward were not unique to *habitants*; they were common among English-speaking farmers in Lower Canada, Upper Canada, and other North American regions too (McInnis 1982; Lewis and McInnis 1984). Ouellet was right that wheat growing diminished sharply in Lower Canada in the first third of the nineteenth century, but that cannot be explained by a common peasant *mentalité*. And because farmers were adaptable it did not constitute a long-term crisis.

The best indication of a crisis – although this too was not unique to French Canada (Gentilcore 1993: plate 31) – was large-scale emigration. Just 10,000 migrants (including about 2000 women) from France had settled and married in Canada during the French regime (Boleda 1990: 162, 168; Charbonneau et al. 1996: 33–5), but by 1850 their descendants were so numerous that they were pushing at the limits of potentially arable land in Quebec’s St Lawrence valley.<sup>15</sup> The background to this nineteenth-century story was the subject of a long-term study launched in 1966 by demographers at the Université de Montréal. Much influenced by the work of Louis Henry, taking advantage of developing information technology, they set out to reconstitute the entire European population of New France, starting from a remarkable body of documents, the parish registers of births, marriages, and deaths that had been an essential element of the French regime (Charbonneau et al. 1987:

23–5). Some 690,000 records carried the PRDH [Programme de recherche en démographie historique] data base to the end of the eighteenth century.<sup>16</sup>

At exactly the same time, what would be the most powerful work on Quebec in the *Annales* tradition was in progress, Louise Dechêne's *doctorat d'état*, completed in 1973 under the direction of Robert Mandrou and much influenced by Fernand Braudel (Dechêne 1974; Rudin 1997: 178–81). It focused on the island of Montreal, a seigneurie well administered (and well documented) by the Sulpicien order with a population limited enough to study intensively (about 5000 at the end of her period). Notarial records took Dechêne beyond standard sources, such as official correspondence, to provide evidence on the strategies and practices of her subjects and on the structures that framed them. A key argument was that although the fur trade was vital to Montreal's merchants, there was a 'coupure' between it and the island's agriculture (Dechêne 1974: 484). The expansion of the latter, the principal sector of the economy, was driven not by the staple trade but essentially by demography, as a steadily growing rural population at once required and sustained the process of making new farms.

In subsequent work, Dechêne, her students, and other historians of New France extended and revised this analysis, finding, for example, more complexity in rural society and more links between agriculture and commerce, including the fur trade (Dépatie et al. 1998). Her work only grew in ambition, as she widened its frame to ask how an *Ancien Régime* state had functioned in a new world setting, with war and the ever-present possibility of war as the main theme (Dechêne 2008). Considering this particularly from the perspective of ordinary families, she made the rural economy central. Thus, to study government policy towards food supplies, a problem whenever war broke out, she closely analyzed the entire grain economy, beginning with the farmers themselves (Dechêne 1994).

Another former Laval student working in Paris in the late 1960s was Gérard Bouchard. His doctoral work at Nanterre, also directed by Mandrou, addressed demography and rural social structure in eighteenth-century France through a study of a village in the Loire region (Bouchard 1972).<sup>17</sup> On his return to Canada, he began a systematic study of the population and economy of the Saguenay-Lac St Jean region north-east of Quebec City, to which migrants from the eastern part of the province began to move in 1838. As he shaped a comprehensive body of data that integrated population, land, and other records, he produced a series of sophisticated conceptual and methodological studies and eventually a major book on families, land, and markets in the socio-economic history of the region that found parallels to rural strategies elsewhere in North America (Bouchard 1996).<sup>18</sup> He also set out to extend his population data base to cover all of Quebec, linking it to the PRDH and generating what is now known as BALSAC, a comprehensive register of at least the Catholic population that extends far into the twentieth century.<sup>19</sup>

The parish, notarial, and seigneurial records that supported much of this work on Quebec did not exist for other parts of Canada. There the decennial census, which began in 1851, provided the most direct documentation of the entire population, particularly for years when the census manuscripts survived and were accessible to researchers. The 1871 census, the first that fully met international statistical standards, was directed by Joseph-Charles Taché. Among his collaborators was abbé Cyprien Tanguay, whose comprehensive genealogical work was an antecedent for the PRDH and BALSAC projects. With concerns that closely matched those stressed by Ouellet, they aimed to situate the French Canadian population, historically as well as in their time (Curtis 2001: 238–51). An entire volume of the 1871 Census was devoted to summarizing every French and British census of the colonial era.



### The quantitative turn: data and theory

As that volume indicated, governments had long sought information on population. Other areas of interest included public finance, international trade, banking, canals, and railways. After Confederation in 1867, such data began to appear annually in what became known as the *Canada Year Book*.<sup>20</sup> In 1918, many of the federal government's statistical efforts were drawn together in the Dominion Bureau of Statistics (now Statistics Canada). In addition to supporting public and private policy making, it provided abundant evidence for subsequent research in economic history, including many of the series incorporated in a comprehensive collection of historical statistics, produced by a large team (Urquhart and Buckley 1965). It included some series from before 1867, but mainly addressed the subsequent period, for which authoritative and consistent data were available, an emphasis even more pronounced in a second edition, which carried data into the 1970s (Leacy 1983).

Another dimension of the work of the Royal Commission on Dominion–Provincial Relations was to initiate efforts to create a system of national income accounts such as Simon Kuznets and colleagues had produced in the United States. This was a challenge government statisticians could not quickly respond to, but as the federal government's economic sophistication grew during the Second World War, the issue took on higher priority. The first systematic national income accounts appeared in 1946 (McDowall 2008). To supplement the official series, which ran only from 1926, O.J. Firestone, a senior economist with the federal government, used census data to extend it back to 1850 on a decennial basis (Firestone 1958, 1960). He found stronger economic growth in the final decades of the nineteenth century than had been generally understood. But the simplifying assumptions required to create his series, the ten-year gap between observations, and the loss of his underlying worksheets left many uncertainties. Hence M.C. Urquhart and several colleagues decided to revisit the period in an enormous project of research and synthesis that produced a new annual series for Canadian GDP and GNP from 1870 to 1926 (Urquhart 1986), accompanied by a meticulous presentation of their sources and procedures (Urquhart et al. 1993).<sup>21</sup> This was an absolutely fundamental resource for economic historians. Among other findings, it confirmed that there had been considerable growth in the later nineteenth century, although aggregate growth was substantially slower than in the United States and also slower than in Canada in the wheat boom era, between 1896 and 1913.<sup>22</sup>

As these projects demonstrate, Canadian economic historians were very much engaged in international discussions. Those working in economics departments had particularly close ties to American scholarship, their work frequently appeared in the principal American journals, and they regularly participated at the main American and international meetings. Firestone presented his work at the 1957 Conference on Income and Wealth, often seen as the foundational event in the cliometric movement, and Urquhart attended the famous Purdue Conference in 1960 where the movement declared itself. In Canada, economic historians soon began to organize regular conferences on the use of quantitative methods. Meetings featured work on both Canadian and non-Canadian subjects and included participants from the United States and elsewhere. At the third meeting, for example, Peter McClelland, a Canadian working in the United States, presented a paper that was among the most sophisticated of all the theoretical and empirical responses to Fogel and Fishlow's works on railroads and social savings (McClelland 1968).

At the first meeting, held in Toronto in 1965, a paper by E.J. Chambers and Donald Gordon, published soon after in an eminent American journal, fully captured the spirit of the new approach, posing an explicit counterfactual against which to test standard accounts of

the wheat boom. 'Let us imagine', they wrote (1966: 317), 'what would have happened if all the land that was brought under cultivation [on the Canadian prairies] between 1901 and 1911 had been impenetrable rock.' This speculation was motivated by a contemporary concern, the role of primary products in economic development; their answer, which necessarily depended on the appropriateness of the theory drawn upon and on the applicability of available data, was that the wheat boom likely accounted for only about 5 percent of the increase in per capita incomes in Canada during the decade. That provoked an immediate reaction – and reinforced a research agenda that extended back to Mackintosh.<sup>23</sup> Conference presentations addressed a wide range of issues, but at almost every meeting for the next thirty years participants would discuss some aspect of prairie settlement and the wheat boom (e.g. Bertram [1973], presented at the fifth conference, and Norrie [1975], presented at the sixth).<sup>24</sup> Certainly aggregate and per capita growth accelerated after 1896, driven by migration and investment in which prairie settlement was vital. Yet that was not the only reason investment rose so sharply then; the new technologies of the second industrial revolution provided many attractive opportunities, for example, as did rapid urbanization.<sup>25</sup>

In Canada, as elsewhere, mainstream economics paid diminishing attention to history after the 1960s. At a growing majority of universities, including almost all the francophone institutions, there soon were no economist historians at all (Dupré and Huberman 2000: 166). In departments that continued to include history in their offerings, the number of historians scarcely increased despite the massive expansion in overall hiring. And a number of those historians did not pursue cliometric research.<sup>26</sup> Thus, the pool of economists identifying themselves with the new economic history in Canada was relatively modest. Working in a discipline that emphasized essays and journal articles, not book-length studies, they produced a substantial body of theoretically sophisticated research that sharpened understanding of many issues but rarely sought to problematize the larger staples narrative.<sup>27</sup> Their work was necessarily selective as well, as can be seen in the bibliographies of overviews by two leading quantitative historians: on many topics, older writings, often from before 1960, remained the authorities (McInnis 2000a: 871–5; Green 2000: 1066–71). Indeed, McInnis argued elsewhere (2000b: 427 n.68), 'We are a long way from being provided with a consistent story of the economic development of the Canadian segment of North America.'

### An eclectic economic history

For more recent research, moreover, many of the principal authorities on subjects of economic importance are not economists. This can be seen, for example, in large collective projects, such as the three-volume *Historical Atlas of Canada*, shaped by historical geography, Innis's other early orientation. More than half of its plates address population and the economy (Harris 1987; Kerr and Holdsworth 1990; Gentilcore 1993).<sup>28</sup> A second example is the international effort to create an infrastructure of publically accessible population data sets from the manuscript census, in which the Canadian contribution is the work of historians, historical sociologists, demographers, and historical geographers (and just one economic historian, Kris Inwood).<sup>29</sup> A third example, a project based in the department of history at Memorial University in Newfoundland, was launched by Keith Matthews and David Alexander, both British trained, the latter in economic history. Using a massive collection of British records of crew agreements, the Maritime History Group transformed understanding of ships and shipping in and beyond Atlantic Canada; rather than a simple adjunct of the staple timber trade, the sector was shown to be complex, sophisticated, and global, carrying cargoes on the world's principal sailing routes, increasingly recruiting crews from throughout the

Atlantic world, and having diminishing links to the wider Canadian economy (Sager 1989; Sager with Panting 1990).<sup>30</sup>

If the latter complicated the staples narrative, other work deepened it. For the fur trade, modern research has enormously expanded understanding of economics, institutions, and culture. A pioneering work by historical geographer Arthur J. Ray used post accounts from one of the great resources for Canadian history, the records of the Hudson's Bay Company [HBC], to shift the emphasis from the European side of the exchange to its aboriginal participants, highlighting their agency and the place of the trade within their societies and economy (Ray 1974; Ray and Freeman 1978). Equally transformational were studies in history and historical anthropology that demonstrated the centrality of aboriginal women and of fur traders' families; from the latter, in the long term, an entire new people, the Métis, was born (Van Kirk 1980; Brown 1980; Ens 1996). In the exciting scholarship on aboriginal history that has followed, much more has been learned about the fur trade. In a notable recent book, for example, two leading economic historians use HBC records to model aboriginal peoples' responses to price changes; contrary to a common argument that higher prices produced smaller harvests because demand was relatively fixed, they show that increasing prices had the impact that might have been expected in other cultures, the application of additional effort to trapping and trading that led, eventually, to pressure on the stocks of beaver from overhunting (Carlos and Lewis 2010: 166).

In considering aboriginal peoples' consumption alongside their production, this literature is a reminder that the demand for European goods was basic to Innis's formulation of the staples approach. Yet this side of the exchange relationship was long taken largely for granted, with consumption understood as an essentially modern phenomenon (Parr 1999; Belisle 2011). Recently, historians and archaeologists addressing everyday patterns in the colonial era have begun to bring consumption into the foreground (Pope 2004; McCalla 2015). One result has been to complicate stories of a simple exchange of resource products for finished goods. Introducing a study that pays close attention to consumption in an area often imagined as one of the purest examples of a staples economy, the upper Saint John River valley in New Brunswick, Béatrice Craig notes the importance of this reorientation: historians now 'investigate concrete exchange networks, and participants' agency and choices. This shift in perspective on rural life has had several consequences: a new emphasis on regional and local markets as engines of growth and development in their own right; and a move away from the equating of "rural" with "farming" and of "market participant" with "men" or "producers"' (Craig 2009: 4).

Craig's work explicitly engages export-led growth models. In many cases, however, work on or pertinent to economic history by historians, geographers, and sociologists is less closely related to the staples narrative. Here it is possible only to suggest the value of an extensive literature through a few examples that illuminate how the economist's abstract variables, land, labour, and capital, actually functioned in Canadian settings. In contrast to the staples story, with its emphasis on only one or a few products, rural historians, as Craig argues, now aim to understand the entire rural economy, which until at least the end of the nineteenth century involved more than half of all Canadians. For these people, land was basic. In much of Lower Canada, it was held under seigneurial tenure until the 1850s; the implications for development and for the rural populace, then and later, already a main theme when Ouellet and Dechêne began writing, continue to be debated (Harris 2008: 82–7, 235–8). Elsewhere, land was held in freehold. For a long time, research focused on policy regarding the initial allocation of land, but historians and sociologists are at last exploring the actual market in land and farms (Darroch and Soltow 1994; Bouchard 1996; Wilson 2009).

Labour is central to historians of work and workers. The most powerful interpretive strand in Canadian historiography draws on Marx and E.P. Thompson, focusing on craftsmen and other working men and women, seeing them in contexts of workplace, family, neighbourhood, and class – as actors in the story rather than a factor of production (Kealey 1980; Palmer 1992).<sup>31</sup> Some of this research is set in resource towns and other sites of staple production, but often it addresses the growing towns and cities. In the latter settings, some of the most important works centre on gender and family (Parr 1990; Bradbury 1993; Sangster 1995).

Capital and its workings are at the heart of business history, whose foundations can be traced back to Adam Shortt and especially to the early work of Donald Creighton. It tends to a more positive view of economic change than working class history – or current Canadian political economy (Taylor and Baskerville 1994). As the thinking behind Ashley's original appointment reminds us, the principal central Canadian cities grew rapidly after the 1850s; in the west, the settlement boom fostered dramatic urban as well as rural expansion. Business history has offered one perspective on the implications. One approach was through the technologies and utilities of the modern city (Armstrong and Nelles 1986). Michael Bliss, like Nelles a student of Donald Creighton, captured many elements of this story in a brilliant biography of Joseph Flavelle (Bliss 1978). Flavelle began as a small town provisions merchant, moved to Toronto, and by 1900 was part of the city's leading circle of capitalists, whose activities touched almost every major segment of the swiftly emerging modern economy.<sup>32</sup>

'Traditional Canadian economic history', the authors of the current standard national textbook argue, 'appeals because it is eclectic' (Norrie et al. 2008: xi).<sup>33</sup> They draw on much of the new work in economic history, especially research by scholars identifying with the new economic history, but because cliometricians' coverage of the field has been selective and because the new is incorporated into a narrative whose periodization and emphases are traditional, their story to at least 1945 would be recognizable to O.D. Skelton, W.A. Mackintosh, and Harold Innis. A partial reason for that is the regional or local focus of so much modern historical research, which can make it difficult to integrate into a national account. But in framing issues differently, such work can reveal the importance of factors that the national story ignores or understates. For example, research on the economic history of Ontario suggests that a staples-led growth model does not fit the balanced pattern of the province's development (Drummond et al. 1987; McCalla 1993, 1998); and the leading modern overview of Canada's other central province takes a similar view, arguing 'the inadequacy of the staple theory in explaining the dynamics of economic activity in Quebec' (Dickinson and Young 2003: 139). So far, however, no one has taken up the challenge of scaling this research up to shape a new national story. Unless that happens, the main narrative of Canada's economic history is likely to continue to embody an interpretation that now is almost a century old.

## Notes

- 1 In 2011, when Canada's population exceeded 33 million, Ontario still represented more than 38 percent of the total. By then the combined population of British Columbia and Alberta exceeded that of Quebec, a trend that has reinforced Canadian historians' attachment to the staples thesis.
- 2 As well, scholarly career trajectories sometimes carry those who worked in Canada to universities in the countries on which their work mainly focuses. For example, Robert Allen and C. Knick Harley, both American-born, had distinguished careers in Canada but then left for Oxford; and David Eltis, English-born, moved to Emory University after many years in Canada. Some who left, such as Michael Bordo and Ann Carlos, continue to work on Canadian as well as non-Canadian subjects.

- 3 Among the reasons for appointing someone from Oxford was a sense that Canadian candidates might draw the university into partisan politics. Ironically, he was interviewed in England by two leading Liberals, Oliver Mowat, the Premier of Ontario, and Edward Blake, Chancellor of the university and former leader of the federal Liberal Party. They were in England on legal business.
- 4 Lyons et al. (2008: 5) make Ashley's Harvard appointment the beginning of their story, at least 'in the English-speaking world.'
- 5 For example, Mavor persuaded the university to appoint the English economic historian, C.R. Fay, to a senior position in 1921. In the decade Fay spent at Toronto, his 'infectious zeal, broad knowledge, provocative ideas, and brilliant suggestions' mattered greatly to his younger colleague Harold Innis (Brady 1953: 91). Even after returning to Cambridge, Fay sometimes wrote on Canada. Newfoundland (after 1949 a Canadian province) was a particular interest (Ludlow 2010).
- 6 His links to Russia included his long-time friendship with the anarchist thinker Pyotr Kropotkin (who stayed with Mavor for some weeks during a visit to Toronto), and his very substantial role in facilitating Doukhobor settlement on the Canadian prairies.
- 7 When Skelton left for Ottawa, he considered Mackintosh, barely 30 years old, the best person to replace him as head of the department of economics and political science. Queen's instead offered the position to C.R. Fay, who declined; on Fay's recommendation, Herbert Heaton, unhappily situated in Adelaide, was appointed. In 1927 Heaton moved to the History Department at the University of Minnesota and Mackintosh became department head (Gibson 1983: 56–8; King 2006).
- 8 For example, he edited the nine-volume 'Canadian Frontiers of Settlement Series,' which was 'concerned chiefly with the agricultural settlement of the great central plain, the problems of which exceed in scope and significance those of any other Canadian region' (Mackintosh 1934: xiii). Funded by the American Social Science Research Council, this was one of the first systematic large-scale social science projects in Canada.
- 9 Two other classics of Canadian economic history were also written as studies for this Commission (Creighton 1963 [1939]; Saunders 1984 [1939]).
- 10 The book's impact was not evident in sales; it took 15 years to sell 1000 copies (Watson 2006: 128). Innis and Mackintosh each credited the other as the originator of the staple approach in Canada (e.g. Mackintosh 1953).
- 11 For a sharply worded critique of this idea, see Eccles 1979: 439–41.
- 12 For nationalists, the latter raised concerns both that Canada was becoming dependent on the United States and that its unity was being threatened because natural resources were provincially controlled and their development could be divisive.
- 13 Indeed, Alan Green contends that it remains 'probably the best survey on Canadian developments in the period up to Confederation' (Green 2000: 1067). The idea is also politically powerful, visible in the resource-oriented strategies of several provincial governments and of Canada's current federal government.
- 14 Thus, writing of the relationship between wheat and railways, he often made the latter a function of the former: in Upper Canada, for example, 'wheat . . . involved railways' (Innis 1956: 116). In fact, Upper Canada's wheat economy developed before railways (McInnis 1992: 17–48; McCalla 1993: 19–24, 71–6), and the strategy behind railways there had nothing to do with wheat, at least Canadian wheat.
- 15 One constraint was that expansion onto contiguous lands upriver, in Upper Canada, was impeded by Loyalist and later settlement there. A strong francophone presence was subsequently established in eastern and northern Ontario, but this outlet, like the Saguenay (discussed above), could only accommodate a small proportion of an exponentially growing rural population.
- 16 <http://www.genealogie.umontreal.ca/fr/leprdh.htm> (accessed 17 February 2015).
- 17 This was an important work, although questions have since been raised concerning the representative character of the village studied (Follain 2008: 22, 122–3).
- 18 Like Dechêne's *Habitants et marchands, Quelques arpents* was awarded the highest honour of the Canadian Historical Association, the Garneau Prize, which recognizes the best historical work published in a five-year period.
- 19 See <http://balsac.uqac.ca> (accessed 17 February 2015).
- 20 [http://www66.statcan.gc.ca/acyb\\_000-eng.htm](http://www66.statcan.gc.ca/acyb_000-eng.htm) (accessed 17 February 2015).
- 21 See the 1995 interview of Urquhart by Marvin McInnis (Lyons et al. 2008: 64–76). Urquhart had worked closely with W.A. Mackintosh in Ottawa during the war and was involved in early work to

- create the official series. He moved to Queen's afterwards, eventually succeeding to the chair that Shortt and Skelton had once occupied.
- 22 Although the significance of the issue is uncertain, the character of Canadian data on prices could have implications for interpreting real changes. To deflate his data for the nineteenth century, Urquhart had to rely heavily on a 1963 MA thesis on the cost of living in a small, slow-growing city in eastern Ontario (Urquhart 1986: 85–7; Dales 1986: 89).
  - 23 And to economists at the time, such as the Canadian-born economist Jacob Viner (Viner 1924). Urquhart (1986: 32) emphasizes the degree to which his GNP series supports Mackintosh's understanding of the period.
  - 24 For programs of all the conferences, see <http://www.economichistory.ca/pastConferences.html> (accessed 17 February 2015).
  - 25 It is not that wheat was unimportant. But a narrow focus on wheat obscures that in a complex economy, a single product was not the sole determinant of economic performance (Vickery 1974: 52–4).
  - 26 For example, they produced works in the staples tradition (e.g. McCallum 1980), major institutional histories (e.g. Neufeld 1972), and theoretically rigorous accounts of important policies (e.g. Dales 1966). Both Neufeld and McCallum later served as chief economist for Canada's largest bank, the Royal Bank of Canada. As well, some of those doing historical research taught and did research in contemporary fields, some (such as Angela Redish and Frank Lewis) published on both non-Canadian and Canadian topics, and a number worked only on non-Canadian subjects.
  - 27 Some, indeed, reinforced the basic framework; for example, the only two papers on Canada in the *Journal of Economic History* in the decade after 2005 addressed migration to the prairies and the role of natural resources in the Canadian economy (Green et al. 2005; Keay 2007). The principal exception is McInnis (1992, 2000a, 2000b), who completely revised nineteenth-century agricultural history and substantially modified the standard story of forest products.
  - 28 Historians also were substantial contributors, as was one economist, Marvin McInnis, whose work for the atlas informs his overviews of Canada's population history (McInnis 2000b, 2000c).
  - 29 These include the Canadian Century Research Infrastructure initiative which, working in cooperation with Statistics Canada, has produced samples from the population schedules of the manuscript census for 1911 to 1951, and other projects that have created samples from preceding censuses back to 1852. For the former, see <http://ccri.library.ualberta.ca/enindex.html>; and for the latter, <https://www.nappdata.org/napp/samples.shtml> (both accessed 17 February 2015). The ambition and the possibilities of such projects are suggested by Baskerville and Inwood (2015).
  - 30 Both founders died very young; the work was carried forward by colleagues and members of the team they had organized. These records are described at <https://www.mun.ca/mha/mlc/> (accessed 17 February 2015). Several eminent economist historians, including Douglass North, were consulted on the project (Sager 1989: xvi).
  - 31 The scope and variety of such work can be seen in the journal *Labour/le travail*, founded in 1976. Not surprisingly, given its perspective, its articles tend to take a pessimistic view of economic change. For example, it has rarely published material on workers whose skills were created by or adaptable to the industrial age. All but the most recent issues are now open online, at <http://www.lltjournal.ca/index.php/llt> (accessed 17 February 2015).
  - 32 During the First World War, Flavelle headed the Imperial Munitions Board; with responsibility for the procurement of all Britain's war materials from Canada, it had a vital role in the wartime economy (and was, for a few years, much the largest enterprise in Canada).
  - 33 That is, as written before the development of cliometrics. As this phrasing indicates, this is a positive comment.

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