

Margaret Conrad: The Making of a Political Historian and Commentator

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Abstract

Margaret Conrad started out as a political historian; her first major work was a political biography. Yet even her earliest work was non-traditional and innovative. Her dynamism and engagement with political history make her one of Canada's most distinguished historians, astute commentators and thoughtful critics of current Canadian politics.

Résumé

Margaret Conrad débuta comme historienne politique; son premier travail important était une biographie politique. Même là, son tout premier travail au début de sa carrière était non-traditionnel et innovateur. Son dynamisme et son engagement en histoire politique en font une des historiennes les plus distinguées, commentatrices bien avisées, et critiques réfléchies des politiques canadiennes courantes.

Margaret Conrad began her academic career, as did so many of her contemporaries - both male and female - as a political historian. Raised in the rural community of Springfield, Nova Scotia (on the edge of the Annapolis Valley), Conrad brought to the study and analysis of politics an ethical commitment to social justice that was a basic tenet of her Baptist upbringing. As a historian, she started out in that most traditional sub-field of political history: political biography. But even in her early endeavours, Marg was never traditional, always innovative. And, throughout the course of a professional career that is far from over, Margaret Conrad has epitomised the dynamism that is essential to the continuing evolution of the discipline. This paper will focus on that dynamism and on the evolving and continuing engagement

with political history that has made Margaret Conrad not only one of Canada's most distinguished historians, but also one of Canada's most astute and trenchant commentators on - and thoughtful critics of - current Canadian politics. But let me begin at the beginning.

Marg Conrad did not choose to be a political historian except in so far as she accepted a destiny that was thrust upon her. In the preface to her political biography of George Nowlan, a book based on her doctoral dissertation, she tells a revealing story. And we can picture it all, "a cold Sunday afternoon in February of 1970," a young lecturer, summoned to a meeting with the dean of arts at Acadia University - one Harry MacLean - and the widow of a prominent Annapolis Valley politician - one Miriam Nowlan. MacLean was anxious to acquire George Nowlan's papers - an extensive collection - for the Acadia University Archives, but Miriam Nowlan had her price: she wanted a member of the faculty to write a biography of her husband. As Margaret tells it,

With that twinkle in his eye which was typical of MacLean when he felt that the world was unfolding as it should, he informed me and Mrs Nowlan that I was the biographer....I think that Miriam Nowlan had some misgivings about MacLean's "biographer" and I know that I did, especially as I watched the massive collection growing daily in the sub-basement of Acadia's Vaughan Memorial Library. When I finally surrendered to my fate, doubts gave way to the awesome realization that I was in possession of a truly remarkable collection of papers. (Conrad 1986, xi)

She proceeded to write a truly remarkable political biography of George Nowlan.¹ And always thereafter chose her own destiny as a historian.

As someone who shared Nowlan's "rural and regional origins," Marg "found it easy to predict his reactions to most political issues" (Conrad 1986, xvi). Nowlan's regional advocacy struck a chord with the young scholar, who admits to a "ferocious regional chauvinism during the 'thesis years'" (1986, xvii). Even then she recognized that regionalism, subject to complex and changing interpretations, defies precise definition. For

this very reason, she argued, a regional perspective could offer an instructive "angle of vision...to anyone attempting to understand twentieth-century Canadian politics" (1986, xiii).

By 1980, Marg Conrad had emerged as one of a coterie of young historians developing the framework for the theory of underdevelopment that soon became central to Atlantic regional historiography. In an article that provided a first glimpse of the research undertaken for her doctoral dissertation, she examined the economic and political history of the Annapolis Valley apple-growing industry, concluding that, "by purposely confining Valley agriculture to a limited regional market and by refusing to assist in the search for external markets, Ottawa sealed the fate of agriculture in the Atlantic Provinces, permitting it to follow the route of secondary industry into a dependent and underdeveloped state" (Conrad 1980, 39).² Farmers, manufacturers, politicians and academics in the Atlantic Provinces refused to accept their fate, however, and sought to influence Ottawa by combining forces. Conrad analysed this political response to underdevelopment and, when she was selected as one of three scholars to deliver the Winthrop Pickard Bell Lectures in Maritime Studies at Mount Allison University during the 1986-87 academic year, offered a wonderfully lucid and engaging analysis of the Atlantic Revolution of the 1950s. Grounded in her now detailed knowledge of the political history and climate of the period, her argument was made more compelling because it was spiced with her own passionate regional sensibility (Conrad 1988, 55-96).

The year 1986 also brought the publication of Conrad's political biography of George Nowlan. Hers is not a traditional political biography, for we learn that, despite his passion for politics, Nowlan was a man of parts. Yet, while the book considers the formative influences on him - including his participation in World War One - and effectively situates Nowlan within both his family and his community, the analysis revolves around his political career. In her preface, Conrad explained that she had chosen not to take an "anecdotal approach,"

as to have done so "would do a disservice both to Nowlan and to the people whom he represented for much of his adult life" (Conrad 1986, xii). Readers, who will find much of substance in this rich biography, can be grateful that she made this decision. Given that she did not, in the first instance, choose to become the biographer of George Nowlan, it is perhaps ironic that she did not, in the end, write the biography of Ellen Fairclough, the subject she did choose. Fairclough was a contemporary of Nowlan and a fellow cabinet minister. A Conrad biography of her would have made an interesting companion to the Nowlan biography. But, while Nowlan had left boxes of material behind, he had not written his own memoir. Fairclough, who was very much alive when Marg offered to become her biographer, had written a memoir. Conrad decided that "this document, written in the ninth decade of her life by one of Canada's significant 'first' women, deserved a better fate than to be mined for information by academic vultures such as I" (Conrad 1995, viii).

In her decision to edit Fairclough's manuscript rather than to write her biography, we see the beginning of a new phase in Margaret Conrad's approach to political history, as she moved even further beyond the political biographer's traditional choice of subject and approach. Following a newly emerging trend in women's studies, she chose to engage with her subject in a collaborative enterprise, thereby definitively rejecting the historian's traditional claim to objectivity and omnipotence. The result, published in 1995, was a political memoir, contextualized rather than analysed by Conrad. Fairclough situated herself within her family and her community, although, as was the case with the Nowlan biography, the discussion revolves around the subject's political career. Conrad provided a general introduction to the book, as well as brief introductions to the various sections. For those of us who have been trained as traditional political historians, but are now steeped in the discourse of post-structuralist multiple truths, the Fairclough memoir and the Nowlan biography offer an intriguing juxtaposition. How, one wonders, might a

memoir written by Nowlan himself have compared to Conrad's portrayal of him and how might a Conrad biography of Fairclough have compared to Fairclough's portrayal of herself?

In an article written a year after the publication of the book, the reader gets a glimpse of what a biography of Fairclough written by Conrad might have looked like. The very title of that article, "'Not a Feminist, But...'," signals to the reader that Conrad's interpretation is likely to differ from Fairclough's. Declaring that she is "mindful that Ellen Fairclough functioned - and that I select information - in a shifting framework that is often invisible," Conrad bravely adds: "but I refuse to be daunted by this numbing poststructuralist insight...instead drawing inspiration from it to the extent that I am free to ask the questions that interest me" (Conrad 1996, 6). The questions that interest Conrad are those designed to "offer insights into women's political practices between the granting of suffrage and that so-called 'second wave' of the Women's Movement," questions that would also have interested Fairclough. While she did not consider herself a feminist, Fairclough was a proud member of Zonta, a professional women's club which was unique in its requirement that members be involved in the public sphere at executive or decision-making levels.³ She would, moreover, surely have recognized herself in the analysis, even if she perhaps would not have agreed with all of Conrad's conclusions. In this instance, Conrad chose a middle ground, possibly because she found Ellen Fairclough a charming and sympathetic subject, a woman of her own time and place in the same way as the historian is a woman of her own time and place. To ask whether the reader knows Fairclough better as a result of reading the memoir or the article begs the question. For while "poststructuralist insights" remind us that all interpretations are constructed, this does not imply that all interpretations are equally valid but only that there are multiple realities and that every version of a life is an edited version. While such issues may have troubled Margaret in 1986, when the Nowlan biography was published, and even in 1996, when the

Fairclough article was published, she no longer found them troubling by 2003, when she wrote, "The notion that there are many histories of the same past enables us to transcend what economists are fond of calling 'path dependency'....If we need to hang on tightly to one concept in the twenty-first century, it is that history, as an ever-evolving discipline, helps to liberate us from its grasp, and does not make us its unwilling victims" (Conrad 2002, 160).⁴

Marg Conrad's early 1990s analysis of political cartoons demonstrates her continuing evolution as an innovative and path-breaking political historian. Her first foray into this field, published in 1991, was originally given as the 1989 W.S. MacNutt Lecture at the University of New Brunswick (Conrad 1991, 5-21).⁵ A second article, extending the analysis of the first, was written for a collection of essays focussing on Atlantic literature and culture (Conrad 1993, 17-36). Pointing out that "political cartoons reflect and reinforce aspects of popular culture," she argued that "since cartoonists...are successful only to the degree that they tap the conscious and unconscious tensions of the majority, their work can profitably be studied for what it reveals about our collective institutions and values" (Conrad 1991, 5-6). Suggesting that cultural history had something to offer the political historian, she concluded that "for students of popular culture, the imagery found in the work of [cartoonists Donald] McRitchie and [Robert] Chambers supplies ample evidence of the 'Americanization' of Canadian culture, and the growing material values invading Nova Scotia society" (Conrad 1993, 35). Conrad saw a distinctive regional political culture as well as a distinctive regional identity refracted through the lens of political cartoonists, whose work both reflected the political debates of the day and offered a commentary on those debates.

Throughout her career, Margaret Conrad has herself engaged in political commentary, as a strong and effective spokesperson for her region.⁶ Since the early 1990s, she has regularly accepted invitations to comment on current political issues. In 1992, she brought both her knowledge of political history and her historical sensibilities

to bear in her contribution to a conference on the constitutional future of the Prairie and Atlantic regions of Canada. Focusing on "The Politics of Place: Regionalism and Community in Atlantic Canada," she argued that "the Atlantic regional identity is more than an angle of vision and a political posture...the sense of regional identity is historically and culturally deeply rooted and remarkably resilient, having survived more than a century of dramatic and often debilitating shocks" (Conrad 1992, 19). Then, taking an almost postmodernist position, she went on to focus less on the resilience of identity than on the social construction and reconstruction of identity, even as she reminded her audience of the significance of human agency: "Since regional identity is nothing more or less than the culture of the people living and working in a defined area, Atlantic Canadians, at any given time, will always have an identity of some kind. It is the range of human agency and the quality of our choices, in the contested terrain of the late twentieth century, that is at stake" (Conrad 1992, 19). One somehow suspects that George Nowlan, operating in a very different time, would have understood.

Conrad's political commentary and her ethical commitment to social justice coalesced in 1996, in one of her most trenchant presentations, a post-referendum response to what she referred to as Canada's "protracted constitutional crisis." For Conrad, asked to speak to the perspectives of both women and the Atlantic region, the major issue was the "constitutional invisibility" of these "marginal Canadians" in an era when the federal government was increasingly embracing "the global corporate agenda which is devoted to maximizing profits, reducing social spending, and letting global market forces restructure national economies" (Conrad 1997, 93). Identifying herself as "one of the beneficiaries of the post-war consensus that valued human rights, democratic processes, and Keynesian economic policies," she stated that "In the prosperous post-war decades, the notion that the public good was served by state assistance to the poorest and the least powerful in society gave coherence to much of Canadian public policy," and professed herself "profoundly

troubled by the apparent success of the neo-liberal agenda (popularly dubbed neo-conservatism)" (Conrad 1997, 95). Arguing that, "Although it is rarely framed in this way, the constitutional debate is now entangled in the larger effort to control the so-called Information Age economy," she concluded that "The silencing of women and the Atlantic region makes perfect sense if the only goal of the constitutional process is to prepare the way for a new world order where questions of human rights, equity, democracy, and stewardship - I use these old-fashioned words deliberately - have little place in the discourse. If Canada is to survive in any useful way, these questions must again be inserted into the national debate" (Conrad 1997, 96). Privatization, decentralization, and employment restructuring were particularly devastating to the people at the margins, people such as women and Atlantic Canadians, whose income levels were lower and economic opportunities fewer to begin with. Conrad told her audience that, in the face of the growing thrust towards privatization, it was their duty as citizens, "individually and collectively, to insist that democracy, equity, and environmental stewardship prevail in a world where the baser instincts of human beings - aggressiveness, competitiveness, succeeding at all costs - increasingly inform human behaviour." She enjoined people to become participants in the discussion, arguing that, "although the current situation is daunting even to the most empowered groups in our society, we must persist in our efforts to shape a nation state that can carry a progressive message into the larger global context upon whose well-being we all depend" (Conrad 1997, 99-100). Yet, like many scholars, Conrad was frustrated with the political path her country seemed to be taking in 1996, and her response to the larger question - "Can Canada survive and under what terms and conditions?" was a pessimistic one:

...in some configuration - asymmetrical federalism, sovereignty-association, economic union - Canada will probably survive, but to what end? Unless some notion of the common good and responsible citizenship is

reintroduced into the constitutional debate, I am prepared to accept that regions and groups must retreat into communitarian independence so that they can support life-sustaining policies for the cultural, material, and spiritual well-being of at least some of the people who formerly called themselves Canadians.

(Conrad 1997, 101)

We might say that Marg Conrad has, over the years, put political history into cultural practice and, in so doing, has become a powerful and sometimes outspoken political commentator on and spokesperson for the region, which she often chooses, these days, to deconstruct. Nowhere is this clearer than in her David Alexander Lecture, given at Memorial University in 2003. This lecture exemplifies the kind of cultural history Conrad has come to embrace: "The best cultural history," she told her audience, "builds on the findings of earlier theoretical approaches. It recognizes that culture and economy are mutually constructed - that beliefs and practices shape economic development, political behaviour, and social institutions and vice versa" (Conrad 2002, 159). "Historians," she admits, "increasingly have come to accept that slippery terms such as 'nation,' 'identity,' and 'culture' change their meaning over time. At the dawn of the twenty-first century, these terms are so freighted with meaning that they risk losing their value as analytical tools" (Conrad 2002, 160).

Recognizing "region" as "another one of those slippery concepts whose meaning changes over time," Conrad went so far as to argue that "Even at very basic levels...formal, functional and imaginative, the region of Atlantic Canada does not exist, except perhaps in the recesses of the Ottawa bureaucratic mind" (Conrad 2002, 161-162). Because provincial, not regional, boundaries "have had pride of place in establishing our sense of citizenship and identity, region has little power to tap our deepest emotions....Regions of the mind...are even fuzzier than their formal and functional counterparts." Yet, having asserted that calling people from the region Atlantic Canadians is a case of mistaken identities, Conrad went on to suggest that "if there is not an 'Atlantic Canada' now, we should invent

one." She further rejected the notion that region had lost its value as an analytical tool:

Region, I contend, is a tool that we should not abandon lightly in our quest for renewal. It may well have legs, though perhaps they are not as steady as those that prop up nation and province. If, as some scholars claim, identity can exist entirely in the realm of the imagined world, then we have the capacity to draw upon our common regional experiences, as tenuous as they are, to inform our actions in the present and our dreams for the future. History and cultural production will play an important role in our dreaming, but we have a lot of work to do if we wish to get the most out of our regional identities. (Conrad 2002, 168)

For Conrad, political history and women's history often intersect, though it is the political side which has the upper hand in "Addressing the Democratic Deficit: Women and Political Culture in Atlantic Canada" (Conrad 2003a, 82-89). In seeking political solutions, as in writing political history, Conrad is an innovative thinker, refusing to let path dependency - the notion that what we are today is a result of what happened in the past - hobble her imagination.⁷ Arguing that "competitive political practices, first-past-the-post elections, and per capita representation do not work well for the small, less powerful provinces in Confederation," she raises a number of pertinent questions: "Has the federal system, based on nineteenth century notions of liberal democratic practices, outlived its usefulness as far as the Atlantic provinces are concerned? Should we as a region be prepared to take control of our future by redefining political structures to ensure better representation of the population at large in our political institutions?" (Conrad 2003a, 84). Her answer is a resounding "yes" to both questions; her evidence, the experience of Scandinavian countries, where women's political representation in legislatures approaches 50%. Instituting the Scandinavian formula for success would constitute a second Atlantic Revolution. It would mean "establishing quotas, adopting a system of proportional representation, and making women's participation a priority of public policy" (Conrad 2003a, 87).

Margaret Conrad's knowledge of regional, national and international political history adds a depth and breadth to her analysis that few commentators on contemporary issues, whatever their discipline, can match.⁸ From 2002 until 2009, she held a Tier 1 Canada Research Chair in Atlantic Canada Studies at the University of New Brunswick. As a member of a panel on the relevance of Canadian regionalism in the twenty-first century at the 2005 Atlantic Canada Studies Conference, Conrad argued that "Regions serve an important role in the Canadian federation where powers are continuously negotiated" (Conrad 2006, 140). Noting that "The Canada Research Chair that I hold is devoted to improving the capacity of the Atlantic Provinces to meet the challenges of the 21st century," she went on to consider how a historian could best address that interdisciplinary mandate. "[H]istorians need to reinsert themselves into the public policy debate....History not only offers the perspective of the *longue durée*, but it also reminds us of values that have stood the test of time and that should not be jettisoned to satisfy the narrow interests of the moment" (Conrad 2006, 141).⁹

During her tenure as Canada Research Chair, Conrad consistently and persistently reminded Canadians who would seek to understand the present of the value of a historical perspective. In 2008, in an essay prepared for a special eastern issue of the *Literary Review of Canada*, she responded to a question "designed to get [her] dander up": "Is history an albatross around the Maritimes' neck?" With only the merest hint of impatience, she began with a corrective to the original question, explaining that the terms Maritimes and Atlantic Canada "should not be conflated," and noting that she would be expanding her analysis "to include Newfoundland and Labrador as well as the three Maritime provinces" (Conrad 2008, 3). Assuring readers that "Atlantic Canadians are no more hobbled by the past than other Canadians," she deplored the continuing tendency of scholars as well as politicians and political commentators from other regions "to substitute a conservative stereotype for research when the analytical gaze turns to

Atlantic Canada" (Conrad 2008, 3).¹⁰

Rejecting the notion of History as "an albatross," Conrad argued that "History does matter, less as a cause of the region's second-class condition than as a means of understanding it." History tells us, for example, that small populations, rather than a lack of initiative or entrenched conservative outlooks, put the Atlantic provinces at a disadvantage in Confederation. They simply "lacked the numbers in the House of Commons to shape policies in their interests and received inadequate per capita grants to sustain their provincial administrations" (Conrad 2008, 3-4). That kind of history has informed the thinking of many Atlantic Canadians, who were "understandably wary of the neo-liberal agenda that descended in the 1980s." Arguing that "the major economic question of our time - or of any time, for that matter - is how a society distributes its wealth and cares for its citizens," Conrad cited reports from Census Canada, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development and the United Nations to support her assertion that "we are not doing a very good job of wealth sharing or of insuring the well-being of the least prosperous among us. Atlantic Canadians, along with a great many other Canadians, bear the brunt of this policy failure" (Conrad 2008, 4). Such failures make it all the more essential that the conversation continue, and that historians remain part of that conversation.

Above all, as a political historian and commentator, Margaret Conrad retains her faith in Atlantic Canada and in Atlantic Canadians, asserting that, "Despite, or perhaps because of, the bumpy ride on the neo-liberal highway, the region's civil society remains strong, sprouting groups that demand wide-ranging reforms" (Conrad 2008, 5). And although "the future of the past in Atlantic Canada...does not look very promising...the future of the future has potential" (Conrad 2008, 5). Because Conrad believes passionately that such a historical perspective is necessary as well as useful in public policy debates, we can expect that hers will remain a strong regional voice, not only challenging regional stereotypes, but

enjoining her colleagues to follow her into the fray. Calling us to action, she asserts:

Living on the edge of a great country and a great continent, people in the Atlantic Provinces have developed a deep longing for economic justice and a growing capacity for interprovincial collaboration. Our voluntary collaborations remind us, perhaps even more than formal federal-provincial arrangements do, that we have agency. In the past, the loose-jointed nature of the Canadian federal system offered us spaces to imagine and negotiate better futures. It is time, once more, to bring our imaginations and negotiating skills to the table. (Conrad 2006, 143)

Endnotes

1. According to John English, Conrad's biography of Nowlan was "one of the finest Canadian political biographies....a remarkably insightful portrait of the many layers of Nova Scotian political life. Only Dalton Camp's memoirs rival *Nowlan* in its richness, but here the canvas is broader and the perspective deeper" (English 1987, 195). Similarly, Allan C. Dunlop judged the book "the most complete scholarly study of a major regional spokesman presently available for examination. As Nowlan recognized, this country is but the sum of its parts. When the biographies of other regional spokesmen appear, this book will be the benchmark against which they will be measured" (Dunlop 1987, 158).
2. This article was drawn from the first chapter of her doctoral dissertation (Conrad 1979).
3. An international organization, Zonta also adhered to a strict classification system, and each branch club was allowed only one member per business classification. Information on Zonta Clubs from www.zonta.org.
4. Conrad further notes that "The essence of path dependency is that what we are today is a result of what happened in the past, and that initial conditions often have a major impact on outcomes" (Conrad 2002, 160). The apparent anomaly in dates is explained in an Editor's Note: "this edition is dated Fall 2002; but at least some of the content derives from events which occurred in 2003," (158).

5. The Canadian Centre for Caricature, which opened in Ottawa in 1989, the year Conrad delivered the MacNutt lecture, reflected an emerging interest in the field. Raymond N. Morris, *Behind the Jester's Mask: Canadian Editorial Cartoons about Dominant and Minority Groups, 1960-1979*, was published the same year. Prior to 1989, however, Peter Desbarats and Terry Mosher, *The Hecklers: A History of Canadian Political Cartooning and a Cartoonists' History of Canada*, published in 1979, remained the only historical survey of the genre.

6. See, for example, her review of the second edition of *The Canadian Encyclopedia* (Conrad 1989, 204-08).

7. For a more detailed definition of "path dependency," see Conrad 2002, 160.

8. As well as the sources quoted in this paper, see also, Conrad 2003b, 87-96.

9. In this context, she cites Miller (1997).

10. She gave as her "favourite" example, "a statement by Barry Cooper, a political scientist based at the University of Calgary, who argued in 2002, as a matter of 'fact,' that 'stagnation and decadence remain the most prominent features of pre-modern communal life to have survived into the present' in the Maritimes" (Cooper 2002).

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A Tribute to Margaret Conrad: Activist, Scholar, Feminist Pioneer

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