

What Spines to Crack, What Leaves to Thumb! On Uncovering Black History in Atlantic Canada, from Cover to Cover

WHILE A TEEN LAD, AND THEN A YOUNG MAN, JUST 18, I heard little about African-Nova Scotian – or Africadian – history and roots and culture. The great radical striver for justice, Dr. Burnley “Rocky” Jones, had imparted some info – as had his cousin and my mentor, Walter M. Borden, the poet, playwright, actor, and newspaper editor. But I’d not really read anything except – at age 13 or so – the school-distributed *Pictorial on Black History: Nova Scotia* (issued by the Nova Scotia Human Rights Commission in 1973), which presented one-page, synoptic bios of heroes like boxer Sam Langford and singer Portia White (whom I knew was my late great aunt) – all illustrated by the lush, plush inks of artist Ken Pinto. Purposefully, the gallery of exemplary Africadians could not compose – or impose – a philosophical interpretation of our “national” history or cultural and other endeavours, eh?

Now that was a problem, for in the 1970s, sayeth scholars far and wide, Africadians were a lot of sorry failures, as attested to by the tome of Winks (1971) and the slimmer volume of Henry (1973), plus Clairmont and Magill’s sociological analysis of the bulldozer-cleared Africville (1974). Even the progressive thesis of Walker (1976) – i.e., that the Black arrivants of 1783 were not a simple rabble but were in pursuit of their very own Canaan – still identified the truly heroic “Black Loyalist Scotians” as those who’d sailed off to Sierra Leone in 1792. William Spray’s *The Blacks in New Brunswick* (1972) was empathetic – but more anecdotal than scholarly. Frank Stanley Boyd’s and Mary I. Allen Boyd’s epic, Pan-Africanist-inspired footnotes to their edited 1976 reissue of McKerrow’s 1895 classic, *History of the Coloured Baptists*, constituted a lonely outlier to the academic chorus of denunciation – or nullification.¹

1 Robin W. Winks, *The Blacks in Canada: A History* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1971; 3rd ed. 2021, with an introduction by George Elliott Clarke); Frances Henry, *Forgotten Canadians: The Blacks of Nova Scotia* (Don Mills, ON: Longman, 1973); Donald H. Clairmont and Dennis Magill, *Africville: The Life and Death of a Canadian Black Community* (1974; Toronto: Canadian Scholars’ Press, 1999); James W. St. G. Walker, *The Black Loyalists: The Search for a Promised Land in Nova Scotia and Sierra Leone, 1783-1870* (London: Longman and Dalhousie University Press, 1976); William A. Spray, *The Blacks in*

So, had I steeped myself in most of the materials available to me as a teen, I would have read mere highfalutin' reruns of Thomas Chandler Haliburton's racist denigrations (pun intended) of ex-slaves as being no better than slaves, who really desired to return to slavery. Arguably, professional Maritime historians of Africadians seemed overly impressed by pro-slavery Judge Haliburton's damning observations in his two-volume history of Nova Scotia (1829) and his curmudgeonly "Sam Slick" sketches (1835-40).² Thus these similar intellectuals pooh-pooed the ingenuity of a few thousand stranded, abandoned, mainly African Americans, who survived the barrens and all the scarcities and all the inclement conditions (illiteracy, intolerance, over-policing, and under-employment) of the Maritimes – an economically depressed (some say "backward") region of Canada – to create their own culture and indigenous speech, and, mixing with Cherokee and Mi'kmaq (and possibly Maliseet and Passamaquoddy), to produce a hybrid, Afro-Métis populace too. *I know*: I am one.

Yet, because I took the advice of Rocky – and then-wife Joan – to locomotive to the University of Waterloo in August 1979 and commence studies toward a BA in (Black Canadian) history, *via* courses taught by James Walker (courses I did not take – ultimately – because I majored in English), I ended up, a 19-year-old in southern Ontario, that autumn, feeling irrepressibly homesick – nostalgic – for Sweet Home Nova Scotia. To salve my plight, I hied myself to the Dana Porter Arts Library – a ten-storey, white, precast-concrete cube (slashed with hundreds of rectangular windows) that resembled a shotgun marriage of Speer and Gaudí – and there I ransacked every book that I could find on Black Nova Scotia, the Black North Atlantic, and the Black Maritimes. To do so, I shuttled among sociology and social work and history. Now, at long last, I was getting educated in my region, my "race," myself. It was a visionary revision.

New Brunswick (Fredericton: Brunswick Press, 1972; rpt. Fredericton: Brunswick Press, 2021, with foreword by Thandiwe McCarthy and preface by Funké Aladejebi); Frank Stanley Boyd and Mary I. Allen Boyd, *McKerrow: A Brief History of the Coloured Baptists of Nova Scotia, 1783-1895* (Halifax: Afro Nova Scotian Enterprises, 1976). I must also mention Pearleen Oliver's own significant follow-up to McKerrow's original *A Brief History of the Coloured Baptists of Nova Scotia, 1783-1895, and Their First Organization as Churches, A.D. 1832* (Halifax: Nova Scotia Printing Company, 1895) – namely, *A Brief History of the Colored Baptists of Nova Scotia, 1782-1953* (Halifax: [African United Baptist Association of Nova Scotia], 1953). However, I did not encounter that vital text until the mid-1990s and did not read it until December 2019. If I had read it as a teen, I would have recognized it as being at least a partial retort to the white-authored histories available up to 1953.

2 Thomas Chandler Haliburton, *An Historical and Statistical Account of Nova Scotia in Two Volumes* (Halifax, 1829); Thomas Chandler Haliburton, *The Clockmaker: The Sayings and Doings of Sam Slick of Slickville* (Toronto: Penguin Random House, 2007).

Truly, I began to see myself, not only as a subject in history, subjected to historical processes, but also as a subject worthy of history, who had a history credible for magic realist mythologizing. I picked up the booklet *Condition of the Negroes of Halifax City* (1962), and I saw Maynard Street – my childhood street – named.³ So, even if the authors were pointing out the *relative* poverty of our households (perhaps even mine – at 2357 Maynard), that our neighbours and we had occasioned professorial examination – even if not dissimilar to that afforded lab rats – registered still our status as meaningful. I read – and reviewed for my student newspaper – Clairmont and Magill’s *Africville* (1974), and revisited (or experienced vicariously) that welfare-reform would-be Marshall Plan, but one designed diabolically by Machiavelli. Pondering Boyd’s edition of McKerrow, plus Walker’s depiction of Black Loyalists, I found Muses for what became prize-winning poetry about the African (United) Baptist Association (AUBA) of Nova Scotia. (Cue my *Saltwater Spirituals and Deeper Blues*, 1983; then again, even my forthcoming *Canticles III* explores AUBA history, some 40 years after my tyro attempt.) Furthermore, now that Africadians are increasingly authoring our own history, its complexion has changed; it be somewhat sunnier, but not whitewash.

Every bibliography is either a yellow-brick-road to Oz (or self-deception) or a road to Damascus (or revolutionary Enlightenment). Upon entering this Africadian history bibliography, one need not abandon “hope.” Nope! Just the blinkered purview of stereotype.

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3 Dalhousie University Institute of Public Affairs, *The Condition of the Negroes of Halifax City, Nova Scotia: A Study* (Halifax: Dalhousie University Institute of Public Affairs, 1962), https://www.halifax.ca/sites/default/files/documents/about-the-city/archives/305.8.C-1962_ConditionOfNegroesOfHalifax.pdf.