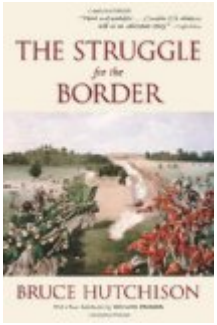
H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Bruce Hutchison. *The Struggle for the Border.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2011. vii + 500 pp. $24.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-19-544792-7.



Reviewed by Beau Cleland

Published on H-War (November, 2014)

Commissioned by Margaret Sankey (Air University)

Oxford University Press has reissued Bruce Hutchison's *Struggle for the Border* (1955) as part of their Wynford Project series of classic Canadian publications. As a facsimile reproduction, the only things that have changed from the original are the paperback cover and the new foreword by Vaughn Palmer, who ably describes Hutchison's career as a political journalist, columnist, editor, and author of a number of popular and well-received nonfiction books. This book, a bestseller in its heyday, is very much a work of popular history, with no footnotes or references, full of romantic prose and sweeping generalizations about nations and races that have not all worn well with time. The narrative is focused almost entirely on the major figures of the pre-Confederation (that is pre-1867, for those not up to speed on Canadian history) era, and focuses on an evolving series of struggles, mostly military but occasionally economic, that Hutchison, who died in 1992 at the age of ninety-one, felt defined the emerging division of North America (sans Mexico).

The tripartite struggle between the French, English, and native peoples comprises the first quarter of the book. Very much a product of a previous era, the story is full of the usual references to the English or French "races"; the heroism of Robert de La Salle, James Wolfe, and Louis-Joseph de Montcalm; and the noble savagery of the Native Americans, who are given a fair treatment, relatively speaking, by Hutchison as historical actors rather than victims or dupes, despite the unfortunate terminology and an emphasis on their supposed delight in torture. Following the French and Indian War, the conflict becomes one between Canadians (and Hutchison uses this term somewhat cavalierly for a group of people who did not yet identify as such) and the nascent United States. For him, the American Revolution defined the continent's destiny, as it spurred Canadians, including resettled Loyalists, to feats of willpower to defy what he calls the "primary continental logic of union" (p. 3): the division of North America rather than its unification, presumably under American thumb. The narrative

that follows is an engagingly written but romanticized history that occasionally fudges on the details: the race to explore the West; the War of 1812 (which looms far larger in the Canadian national consciousness than it does in the United States); the Fenian raids; and so on. What emerges, after the English conquest of New France, is a repeated story of Canadian pluck in the face of the flood of American influence, malevolent or not. It is a motif destined to please Canadian readers and leave Americans wondering just where the Fraser River is.

Despite these shortcomings, *The Struggle for the Border* is not without merit. In his original introduction, Hutchison decried the schools of history, left unnamed, that "hold that man's affairs are settled by ineluctable, impersonal, and calculable forces," and asserted his intention to write "not a formal work of history" but rather "an adventure story" featuring the "human beings—uncertain, personal, and incalculable" involved in the creation and preservation of Canada (pp. ix-x). He succeeded in this endeavor, for this is an entertaining book that is still well suited for an informed, casual audience. One also gets the impression that Hutchison opposed some of the very historians he cited as his own influences, particularly Charles Beard, Donald Creighton, and presumably Creighton's academic predecessor Harold Innis, all of whom emphasized the causal role played by economics, geography, and natural resources, often at the expense of leading men. While Hutchison's writing self-admittedly may not reach the evidentiary standards of academia, the reader does get a sense of the contingency of history—i.e., the importance of chance and personal agency in Hutchison's interpretation—in a way that might please Edward Ayers and other proponents of "deep contingency."

For an academic audience, there are far more recent and rigorous books available on the history of the U.S.-Canadian border relationship (Stephen Randall and John Herd Thompson's *Canada and the United States: Ambivalent Allies* [2002] or Francis M. Carroll's *A Good and Wise Measure: The Search for the Canadian-American Boundary, 1783-1842* [2001], for example), as Hutchison himself noted, so this reissue is perhaps more useful for scholars seeking to understand Canadian historiography in the mid-twentieth century. Hutchison's book reflects in some regards Canada's national sense of anxiety in the 1950s, as Canadians of all stripes sought to understand their country's place in the Cold War order and the nature of their suddenly transformed relationship with their inescapable, overwhelming neighbor to the south. The Canadian economy had been radically reoriented by the upheaval of the Second World War, from an Atlantic relationship centered on imperial trade preferences with Britain, to one in which the United States had become its biggest trade partner and investor. Canadian political observers wondered whether they would be treated as a partner or as a client state subject to unequal terms of trade. Hutchison was an optimist: "The universal question and the hope of our time, it may be said, is represented by an imaginary line, not one of its 3,986.8 miles defended, running from Fundy to Fuca's Strait" (p. 489).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at https://networks.h-net.org/h-war

Citation: Beau Cleland. Review of Hutchison, Bruce. *The Struggle for the Border*. H-War, H-Net Reviews. November, 2014.

URL: https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=40289