

**Michel Ducharme.** *The Idea of Liberty in Canada during the Age of Atlantic Revolutions, 1776-1838.* Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2014. 296 pp. \$32.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-7735-4401-7.

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## Canada and the Atlantic Revolutions

Situating the Upper and Lower Canada rebellions of 1837-38 in the broader context of the Atlantic intellectual world is a complex task. Issues such as diverging regional identities, especially between English and French colonial societies, relationships with Europe, and the revolutions in France and the United States all influenced the motivations for reforming society and governance in Canada. Thankfully, Michel Ducharme ably untangles this web of ideas, events, and peoples to present an engaging text that provides new insight into the concepts that contributed to the outbreak of the rebellions.

At the core of Ducharme's work is parsing what politicians, promoters, and others meant by a desire for liberty in Upper and Lower Canada. Liberty, as Ducharme points out, was not a singular concept, and needs to be carefully defined by both the ideals of those promoting liberty and the historical contexts through which those ideas arose. In particular, Ducharme explores two concepts of liberty used by the reform movements that led to the rebellions. Both these ideas of liberty sought to reshape Canadian society, but their visions for reform were incompatible due to ideological divisions regarding the relationship between citizens and the government. The first is modern

liberty, which focuses on defining the relationship between people, governments, and monarchy through constitutions and other structures designed to establish and protect the rights of specific classes and people, often to the advantage of landowners. Modern liberty, which first arose in England during the Glorious Revolution, grew in prominence during the American Revolution for its emphasis on defining inalienable rights of citizens and protecting citizens from people, classes, and institutions that jeopardized those rights.

The second form of liberty discussed by Ducharme is republicanism, which is most clearly defined by the ideals espoused by French revolutionaries: *liberté, égalité, fraternité*. Unlike modern liberty, republicanism does not differentiate or guarantee the rights of different classes or groups within a society. Instead, republicans sought to provide citizens with equal opportunity to participate in and influence a legislative body with absolute power, thus reducing the significance of social and economic divisions. These intricate definitions could have proven confusing for readers, and it is a testament to Ducharme's abilities as a researcher and writer, and the skill of the translator Peter Feldstein, that both concepts are explained in a clear manner and the reader can easily understand their importance.

Although these definitions of liberty created significantly different visions of how government and society should function, Ducharme rightly cautions against viewing them in Manichean terms and explores how these ideas were presented, accepted, and utilized throughout Upper and Lower Canada. The text focuses mainly on the period leading up to the outbreak of violence in 1837-38, the development of movements backing these two types of liberty, and how individuals and institutions adapted them to local concerns in Upper and Lower Canada. Following a chapter dedicated to explaining modern liberty and republicanism, chapters 2 through 5 examine how these ideas were adopted and adapted in Upper and Lower Canada, with a close focus on the publications, politicians, and reformers backing them.

By framing this debate over liberty as a significant influence on the rebellions, Ducharme argues that "the conflict grew up around two irreconcilable visions of the ideal society and legitimate state" (p. 161). This argument differs from those of previous historians, who argued that issues of class, ethnicity, colonial allegiance, and economics lay at the root of rebellions, without connecting them to the Atlantic Revolutions. Ducharme wisely

does not seek to replace these studies with a revisionist take on the rebellions as a whole. Rather, he adds a new layer to the existing literature that situates these individual issues in a wider ideological debate.

Ducharme focuses on elites in Upper and Lower Canada, especially radicals, politicians, and other interest groups who drew from debates about liberty in the Americas and Europe to make their own cases for change. This approach has its downside: *The Idea of Liberty* does little to explain how differing ideas about liberty translated into tangible goals for the farmers, workers, and others who joined the rebelling militias. This absence does not detract from the author's argument; rather, it highlights the complexity of the motivations for rebelling. However, this complexity and Ducharme's narrow focus makes *The Idea of Liberty* a text best suited for readers already familiar with the history of the Upper and Lower Canadian rebellions.

Of particular interest for Atlantic historians will be the consideration of how local circumstances in Canada, such as discontent among French Canadians and the growth of a land-owning elite, contributed to the adoption of the ideas associated with the Atlantic Revolutions of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. This approach, presented most clearly in chapters 1 and 2, carefully defines how different ideas of liberty fit into the Upper and Lower Canadian milieu of the mid-1830s, and how the American, European, and South American revolutions influenced them. Ducharme's approach will be familiar to Atlantic historians, and the author acknowledges an intellectual debt to Robert P Palmer, Jacques Godechot, Bernard Bailyn, and Gordon Wood for his exploration of both liberty and the influence of the Atlantic Revolutions.

For historians of Canada, Ducharme's focus on an Atlantic perspective is a relatively novel approach and will likely be a valuable reference especially for intellectual historians. Of particular interest is how Ducharme draws upon the traditional

body of primary sources for this subject, parliamentary papers and newspapers, to glean new insights into how ideas of liberty developed in France, Britain, and the United States were received and adopted. However, while Ducharme's application of an Atlantic perspective to study the period leading up to rebellions is innovative, the author overstates its significance by claiming that considering Atlantic perspectives is rare within Canadian history as a whole. J. B. Brebner, Peter Pope, and Jane Errington among many others have made significant contributions to pre- and postconfederation Canadian history by using an Atlantic perspective to examine their subjects.[1]

*The Idea of Liberty* presents an intriguing and well-argued case for the importance of differing ideas of liberty in the lead-up to the Upper and Lower Canada rebellions. Perhaps more significantly, Ducharme's use of an Atlantic perspective contextualizes the rebellions in a way that will be useful for historians studying how wider intellectual trends shaped preconfederation Canada. Understanding the transmission and adaptation of social and political ideals orients Canada's history within the volatile world of the late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Atlantic. For Canadian historians, this is a significant contribution that advances new ideas regarding the rebellions as part of a wider conflict between differing ideas of society and government. For Atlantic historians, this adds to the growing body of work on Canada's participation in the wider economic, social, and intellectual Atlantic world.

Note

[1]. John Bartlet Brebner, *North Atlantic Triangle: The Interplay of Canada, the United States and Great Britain* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1945); Peter Pope, *Fish into Wine: The Newfoundland Plantation in the Seventeenth Century* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004); Jane Errington, *Emigrant Worlds and Transatlantic Communities: Migration to Upper Canada in the First Half of the Nineteenth Century* (Montréal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2007).

### **Review of Michel Ducharme's *The Idea of Liberty in Canada During the Age of Atlantic Revolutions, 1776-1838***

Situating the Upper and Lower Canada rebellions of 1837-1838 in the broader context of the Atlantic intellectual world is a complex task. Issues such as diverging regional identities, especially between English and French colonial societies, relationships with Europe, and the revolutions in France and the United States all influenced the motivations for reforming society and governance in Canada. Thankfully, Michel Ducharme ably untangles this web of ideas, events, and peoples to present an engaging text that provides new insight into the concepts that contributed to the outbreak of the 1837-1838 rebellions.

At the core of Ducharme's work is parsing what politicians, promoters, and others meant by a desire for liberty in Upper and Lower Canada. Liberty, as Ducharme points out, was not a singular concept, and needs to be carefully defined by both the ideals of those promoting liberty and the historical contexts through which those ideas arose. In particular, Ducharme explores two concepts of liberty used by the reform movements that led to the rebellions. Both these ideas of liberty sought to reshape Canadian society, but their visions for reform were incompatible with each other due to ideological divisions regarding the relationship between citizens and the government. The first is modern liberty, which focuses on defining the relationship between people, governments,

and monarchy through constitutions and other structures designed to establish and protect the rights of specific classes and people, often to the advantage of landowners. Modern liberty, which first arose in England during the Glorious Revolution, grew in prominence during the American Revolution for its emphasis on defining inalienable rights of citizens and protecting citizens from people, classes, and institutions that jeopardized those rights.

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By framing this debate over liberty as a significant influence on the 1837-1838 rebellions, Ducharme argues that "the conflict grew up around two irreconcilable visions of the ideal society and legitimate state."<sup>[1]</sup> This argument differs from those of previous historians, who argued that issues of class, ethnicity, colonial allegiance and economics lay at the root of rebellions, without connecting them to the Atlantic Revolutions. Ducharme wisely does not seek to replace these studies with a revisionist take on the rebellions as a whole, but rather he adds a new layer to the existing literature that situates these individual issues as part of a wider ideological debate.

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