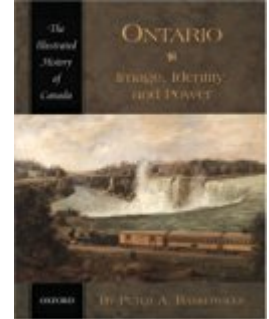


Peter A. Baskerville. *Ontario: Image, Identity, and Power.* Don Mills: Oxford University Press, 2002. vi + 250 pp. CAD 36.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-19-541137-9.



Reviewed by Jeffrey L. McNairn

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With considerable reluctance, I offered a seminar last year entitled "The History of Ontario." Like the editors of a recent collection of essays on post-Confederation Ontario, I did not even pretend to justify "Ontario" as a particularly useful way to organize a set of readings.[1] A more honest, if prosaic, seminar title would have been "Selected Themes That Interest the Prof. Set in What Is Now Ontario."

Oxford University Press's decision to organize its Illustrated History of Canada series regionally poses particular problems for Ontario which is either more than one region or not one at all. Ontario is to Canada and Canadian historiography what England is to the United Kingdom and British history. Both have often identified themselves more with the larger entity than with themselves. Both have too often been the real focus of scholarship that purports to be about the larger entity. Ironically, they thereby become the awkward bits left over when the historiographies of more self-consciously "regional" entities flourish. The situation is compounded on this side of the Atlantic since there was no geopolitical entity

called Ontario until 1867 and its current boundaries date only from 1912. How do you write collectively about those whose imagined community has been principally something larger such as the British Empire, Canada, or North America, or something smaller, more local, such as the Ottawa valley? How do you write a regional history of a non-region that, for the most part, lacks a historiography? Can there be much that is "Ontarian" about a history of Ontario?

Perhaps wisely, Peter A. Baskerville ignores such questions, at least until the last page. For Baskerville, Ontario is not united by a shared sense of place, collective values, or a common history but is simply the geographic area of the current province. In nine chronological units from the retreating of the ice to Mike Harris, Baskerville weaves together a wide sample of the exploding scholarship in Canadian history set in Ontario.

The results, given the obstacles, are impressive. It is refreshing to see a history of Ontario where the pre-Confederation period is given its due--about one-third of the text. The book is

equally inclusive in theme, attempting to balance rural and urban, north and south. Clearly grounded in an earlier social history committed to a history "from the bottom up" that would debunk narratives of progress and organic community, the emphasis on social class and ethnicity is here broadened to reflect subsequent historiographic trends. For instance, far greater attention is paid to women and First Nations than was common in the first wave of social history. Indeed, one of the strongest aspects of the book is the full integration of First Nations peoples into every period. Likewise, environmental history makes welcome appearances throughout. The structures of inequality and hierarchy privileged by traditional social history have also been humanized with well-chosen quotations from individuals, not to enliven the text with anecdote or character sketch, but as testimony to power used and resisted. The numerous and well-chosen illustrations are not directly integrated into the main narrative, but they are evocative; substantive captions add to the insight and interest. These illustrations and a generous layout combine with Baskerville's broad chronological and thematic scope to ensure that *Ontario*, despite its brevity, supersedes previous surveys of the province's history.

Those who fret about the discipline's fragmentation will note how few Ontarians there are compared to groups defined by their sex, "race," ethnicity, class, and, perhaps to an insufficient degree, religion. These groups are almost always engaged in zero-sum conflict rather than a common project or conflicting interpretations of common values. Perhaps it was inevitable in a regional series, but topics in which Ontario was inescapably playing on a larger stage, such as Canadian federal politics or the world wars, get short shrift. Conversely, those who welcome Baskerville's frank foregrounding of difference and conflict will notice the absence of any sense of hybridity, indeterminacy, or negotiation. While the categories of social analysis have expanded since the early days of social history, they remain remarkably unprob-

lematic. For better or worse, this is a history on which postmodernism has had no discernible impact. Specialists of either bent will be able to point to omissions, over-generalizations, and perhaps a slip or two in their own corner of Ontario history, but this only underlines the herculean task that Baskerville has undertaken. Considering that he has performed this task in a space more suited to an interpretative essay than a survey text, my sense of how well he has grappled with it increases.

But lacking a more substantive sense of what Ontario is or what its history might mean, what holds *Ontario* together? Its subtitle is "Image, Identity, and Power," but only the last makes much of an appearance. Indeed, the use and abuse of power in the service of self-interest and the resistance to it forms the book's central trope. "Power, Self-Interest, and Resistance" would have been more accurate, "Men Behaving Badly" more fun.

Thus, I am not sure what general readers or junior undergraduates will make of the statement that "upper-country Loyalists couched their demands in the 'country party' rhetoric that, in England, had developed in response to excessive centralization of power and the corrupt exercise of such power by cliques and oligarchies protected by appointed governors and their councils" (p. 50); however, it does not much matter since "in their fundamental objective, they stood as one with imperial administrators: all they wanted was a larger piece of the pie" (p. 51). This seems all that anyone ever wanted. Baskerville clearly sees his task as unmasking government, business, and other holders of power to expose "the real purposes behind" (p. 61) their words and actions. These invariably turn out to involve their own self-interest, power, and profit at the expense of just about everyone else and the physical environment. Defining community values "was often simply a matter of power" (p. 80) and Upper Canadians were subjected to a litany of acts of deceit, corrup-

tion, violence, and oppression solely to continue "the essentially self-interested nature of the elite's program" (p. 92). Given such a jaundiced view of human nature, it is not surprising that Baskerville has nothing good to say about relatively "free" or "laissez-faire" markets. He is not particularly enamored with governments either. Patronage trumped policy and reform victories were grudging, usually unenforced, and often designed to coopt—"more symbolic than real" (p. 143). What was said by way of explanation was often "a con's game" (p. 148), not to be taken seriously because ultimately what mattered was who the politicians' powerful friends were (p. 200) or how they "pandered to people" (p. 137) to maintain office at the expense of what were obvious and better solutions. Principles were never believed; motives were never mixed.

Such blatant exercises of power and bad faith naturally provoked resistance whether in the form of petitions, rebellion, strikes, emigration, unruly behavior, or support for radical causes. In turn, the state, laws, police, schools, churches, and reform movements were all instruments of social control that tried to threaten, silence, divide, coopt, and ultimately govern in the interests of those who controlled them.

It is a bit unrelenting. The point is not that such themes would not form part of an adequate explanation or that we should return to a complacent and celebratory narrative of progress or romantic nostalgia. Baskerville demolishes both admirably. Perhaps he hopes to inject students with a healthy dose of skepticism about such linear narratives or inflame their sense of injustice. I fear that the result might instead be cynicism and apathy. I am also not sure that most undergraduates need much convincing that "rural Upper Canada did not provide equal opportunities for all" (p. 83), that past social norms were often "discriminatory" (p. 146), or that there was more to urban reform than a concern for "the interests of the community as a whole" (p. 155).

More importantly, the result is selective. While fully aware of why people left or rebelled, readers of Baskerville's *Ontario* will have a harder time explaining why many continued to come and to stay or why so few joined the rebellion. They would not know and could not explain why administration supporters enjoyed considerable electoral success throughout the Upper Canadian period. They might also have trouble explaining how Ontario was transformed from what was, to Europeans, a distant periphery of a declining fur trade to an integral part of one of the demographic and economic heartlands of the world's most powerful continent or how it, despite all the prejudice, force, and fraud that Baskerville rightly documents, became one of the safest, sanest, and most tolerant places to live. Finally, have those events and processes emphasized in this account been explained fully by its somewhat limited interpretative repertory? We must be careful not to assume that because we have discovered some interest behind an action or statement that we have thereby explained its motivation and exhausted its meaning. What did it signify to contemporaries? How did they interpret it and in light of what standards? Why did so much that seems, in hindsight, cant to Baskerville seem credible to many Ontarians? How was such credibility maintained in some cases and lost in others? What we need is a sense of the culture or mentalities of governors and governed.

Thus Baskerville's interpretative strategy renders *Ontario* stony ground for intellectual and cultural historians. While impressive in its thematic reach, there is little here about ideas, values, or non-aboriginal culture in either its anthropological or its aesthetic sense. Regarding the latter, having grown up in Huron County, I could not help but notice the absence of Alice Munro who captures so much of the Ontario of my parents and grandparents. Others will not hear their favorite fictional voices either. The single index entry for the University of Toronto leads to a passage about how provincial premiers before James

Whitney controlled it as a political fiefdom rather than to the discovery of insulin or to Harold Adams Innis, Northrop Frye, or Marshall McLuhan. Baskerville's discussion of architecture is limited to the typical pioneer log cabin and, while Tom Thomson's "Autumn Foliage" is reproduced in full-page color splendor, the absence of any comment is emblematic of the book's treatment of culture.

Baskerville offers us a behaviorist and materialist history of noteworthy chronological and thematic breadth, but one devoid of ideas, culture, and psychological nuance. It represents both an accomplished expansion and a concise expression of an earlier social-history paradigm. Herein lies its greatest strength and weakness. The limits of this once-revisionist paradigm have been reached, but I am still not sure what Ontario history means or why I would organize a seminar around it.

Note

[1]. Edgar-Andr= Montigny and Lori Chambers, *Ontario since Confederation: A Reader* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000).

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