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SEEING BEYOND THE FRONTIER: MAINE BORDERS, THE BORDERLANDS, AND AMERICAN HISTORY

BY SASHA MULLALLY

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THE STATE of Maine is home to a unique borderland, one that is understudied in American history. Situated on the northeastern edge of the United States-Canada divide, Maine is a “multiple borderland.” The state is defined by a long forested land border with the provinces of New Brunswick and Quebec, and also shares an “ocean border” with both New Brunswick and Nova Scotia just a few miles off its rugged coastline. Pushing well north of the famous “49th parallel” line of latitude, Maine’s position as the northernmost jurisdiction within the contiguous United States means it lies at the intersection of both national and cultural-linguistic watersheds. Its history is marked by Aboriginal, French, and English territorial competition, commerce, and conflict. The components of these dominant cultural-linguistic heritages shape the culture of the state to the present day.

Because of these multiple borderlands, the way scholars have conceptualized borderlands history is critically important to understanding the state’s history. In the 1990s, University of Maine geographer Victor Konrad wrote that borderlands “exist when shared characteristics set a region apart from the countries that contain it, and residents share more with each other than with members of their respective national cultures.”¹ This describes the history of some communities along the Maine-New Brunswick border, such as the northern communities in the Madawaska Valley, a remote northwestern corner where the Saint John River Valley straddles the borders that divide Maine, Quebec, and New Brunswick. In the northern reaches of this borderland region, people

did not always see themselves as “belonging” to the Canadian province of New Brunswick, and in the popular histories of New Brunswick, the region is referred to as a “quasi-independent state.”² The “magnificent myth” of the Republic of Madawaska, which was shaped by the *brayon* ethnic identity of the region’s dominant Francophone population, can be traced back to the nineteenth century and persists to the present day. Some of the leading citizens of the business and professional classes came together in the 1930s to create a fraternal organization they called the Order of the Republic, comprising professional and businessmen from all sides of the New Brunswick-Quebec-Maine border. A prominent Quebec-born Edmundston physician, Dr. P. H. Laporte, occupied a permanent position as “Knight” on the executive committee, and he helped design a Madawaskan coat of arms, which the order had nationally registered in Canada in 1949.³ As historians Beatrice Craig and Maxime Dagenais have recently pointed out, this “land in-between” retained its status as a cultural and economic frontier, and a borderland, well into the twentieth century, although the Madawaska transborder communities became increasingly divided, or “bordered,” as time went on.⁴

The process whereby a borderland community or place becomes “bordered” was first outlined by Jeremy Adelman and Stephen Aron, who argued that borderlands between Canada and the United States became increasingly bordered in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, as informal local traditions of dealing with the boundary gave way to more formalized recognitions of national hegemony.⁵ This appears to be the general historical experience of the Maine borderlands when the focus is political history and state formation, but the challenge of the borderland to bordered land teleology sometimes unravels in the face of social, economic, or environmental factors. The fluidity of transitions back and forth from border to borderland make these kinds of studies critically important to understanding the experience of any region, people, or place.

The publication of this collection on the Maine borderlands is very timely. As John Nieto-Philips observed in his recent essay on borderland history for the *Journal of American History*, the longstanding interest in American borders and borderland history has seen a resurgence in recent years. It has gone, in his words, “from margins to mainstream.”⁶ Over the last twenty years, most of this scholarship emerged from explorations of border-crossing communities, such as migrant workers or indigenous populations. Other studies examine border-defining projects

and expeditions, such as the military expansion efforts of the state. Contemporary scholars maintain an interest in these expressions of borderland history, but see broader potential for borderland analysis. As scholars Stephen Hornsby and John Reid have observed about Maritime-New England comparative scholarship, “political bordering can have...profound social, cultural and environmental consequences” as well.⁷ Beyond the positivist historical narrative of community transition from borderland to bordered land, most see border areas as sites where the hegemony of empire, the influence of forces from the metropole, are continually challenged. As historians Pekka Hämäläinen and Samuel Truett point out, borderland peripheries often, in fact, influence policies and practices in the imperial and cultural center. Things happen in the borderlands that change the “centre...[and] shape transnational relationships, define ethnic and cultural relationships, and create opportunities for those willing to work with the possibility of transcultural and transregional potential.”⁸ To reflect back on the example of Madawaska, we can see that the people of this transborder region created the conditions for borderlands community-building as much as they reacted to the Canada-U.S. border that was meant to demarcate communities that straddled two provinces and one state.

Despite attention from well-known regional scholars in the Northeast, American historians have largely focused their attention on southern and western borderland experiences—in areas associated with the American “frontier.” Hämäläinen and Truett examined this relationship between frontier history and borderland history and highlight how the borderlands framework is often used to advance revisionist arguments that complicated past historical generations’ positivist assumptions about American continental hegemony. “If frontiers were the places where we once told our master American narratives,” they write, “then borderlands are the places where those narratives come unraveled.”⁹ But their essay struggles to define a productive goal for borderlands research. For these historians, borderland history offers “destabilized views of modern American history by leading nowhere in particular.”¹⁰

Yet, perhaps it is because of the dominance of the frontier narrative and the potency of the frontier in historical imagination that the newly re-emergent border and borderlands historiography remains dominated by scholarship from the West, the Southwest, and the Northwest, the later reaches of the American frontier in its continental advance over the nineteenth century.¹¹ Perhaps also since the northeastern border line, first drawn between British North America and the thirteen colonies, is

an older boundary, it is seen also as a more static boundary than western points of continental imperial conflict. This perceived stasis has made the northeastern borderlands seem less important and dynamic than other interstitial zones. In the borderlands issue of the *Journal of American History* mentioned above, none of the contributions addressed the border/borderland history of the Northeast. The Maine borderlands, apart from being more “settled,” also lie outside the dominant western “frontier epic” that reifies Turnerian narratives within American history, which, in turn, supports the presumption of American hegemonic advancement historically. The great “frontier” is, ultimately, declared “closed” and historians are left to make sense of the borders created to the north and the south of United States’ continental advancement.

This issue of *Maine History* might be seen, therefore, as part of a scholarly movement that will reorient borderlands history away from these Turnerian lines. The authors assembled here, who variously explore the social, political, environmental, and cultural conflicts and community-building activities along the rich, diverse multi-border zones of the Northeast, offer work that will advance understandings of this state and its societies. It is on the Maine borderlands that we may find the richest potential to break borderlands research free from the burden of the “frontier,” and like borderlands themselves, offer historiographical challenges and insights that may one day help reshape the “center” of American history.

NOTES

1. Victor Konrad, “Common Edges: An Introduction to the Borderland Anthology,” in *Borderlands: Essays in Canadian-American Relations*, ed., Robert Lecker (Toronto: ECW Press, 1991), p. vii.

2. W.B. Stewart, M.D., *Medicine in New Brunswick* (Saint John: The New Brunswick Medical Society, 1974), p. 211.

3. There is evidence that the Republic identity is stronger on the Canadian side of the border. See Beatrice Craig and Maxime Dagenais, *The Land in Between: The Upper St. John Valley, prehistory to World War I* (Gardiner, ME: Tilbury House Publishers, 2009), pp. 108, 129-130. However, a Madawaskan identity was given life during the Acadian cultural renaissance of the late nineteenth century. See Craig and Dagenais, pp. 334-336. In much the same way, the populations of the “Northeast Kingdom” of Vermont claims occasional quasi-independence from the rest of the state.

4. See Craig and Dagenais, *The Land in Between*, pp. 354-356. The economic history of the region is dealt with in detail in Beatrice Craig, *Backwoods Consumers and Homespun Capitalists* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009).

5. Jeremy Adelman and Stephen Aron, "From Borderlands to Borders: Empires, Nation-States and the Peoples in Between in North American History," *American Historical Review* 104.3 (June 1999): 814-841.
6. See introduction by John Nieto-Philips, "Margins to Mainstream: The Brave New World of Borderlands History," *Journal of American History* 98.2 (Sept. 2011): 336-337.
7. Stephen Hornsby and John Reid, "Introduction," in *New England and the Maritime Provinces: Connections and Comparisons*, eds., Stephen Hornsby and John Reid (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2006), p. 14.
8. Pekka Hämäläinen and Sameul A. Truett, "On Borderlands," *Journal of American History* 98.2 (Sept. 2011): 340.
9. Hämäläinen and Truett, "On Borderlands," p. 338.
10. Hämäläinen and Truett, "On Borderlands," p. 361.
11. See Nieto-Philips, "Margins to Mainstream," pp. 336-337.