

Revisiting the North Atlantic Triangle: The Brebner Thesis After 60 Years

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The year 2005 is both the sixtieth anniversary of John Brebner's classic work on "the North Atlantic Triangle" and the twentieth anniversary of the *London Journal of Canadian Studies*. It is fitting, therefore, that this year's edition of the *Journal* should be devoted to a collection of articles that examine Brebner's work from a number of critical perspectives written by academics from Britain, Canada and the United States.

Two of the articles in this collection (by Terry Crowley and Tony McCulloch) are based on papers delivered at a conference entitled "The North Atlantic Triangle Revisited" held at Canterbury Christ Church University in October 2004 under the aegis of the London Conference for Canadian Studies. Another one (by Gordon Stewart) was prompted by the conference but delivered at the Institute for the Study of the Americas in February 2005 as part of the Canadian Studies programme organised by Professor Philip Buckner. A fourth was presented (by Neville Wylie) at the annual conference of the Transatlantic Studies Association, University of Dundee, in July 2004 and a fifth was given (by Hector Mackenzie) at the same conference in July 2005 at the University of Nottingham. The sixth and final article (by David Haglund) is an update of his book *The North Atlantic Triangle Revisited: Canadian Grand Strategy at Century's End* published in 2000.

The main purpose of this brief introduction is to explain Brebner's concept of a North Atlantic Triangle, as set out in his book published in 1945. Certainly Brebner's work has its critics, as can be seen from several of the articles included here, but it also has its defenders. Above all, and this is the primary justification for the present set of essays, discussion of the North Atlantic Triangle idea can still generate wide-ranging and stimulating scholarly debate that goes far beyond the rather anglocentric views put forward by Brebner sixty years ago.

In his Preface Brebner stated: "My primary aim was to get at, and to set forth, the interplay between the United States and Canada—the Siamese Twins of North America who cannot separate and live". By "interplay" he said he meant

not just issues in the field of international relations but also social and economic interaction between the two countries. “The great obstacle to a simple account of this interplay”, he continued, “was that many of these activities could not be explained in merely North American terms. Most notably of all, the United States and Canada could not eliminate Great Britain from their courses of action, whether in the realm of ideas, like democracy, or of institutions, or of economic and political processes.” A further “complication”, as he put it, was the existence of a distinctive French-speaking minority within Canada with little “emotional attachment” to Britain or the United States.¹

Brebner then explained that in dealing with his subject “I have felt forced to give Canada more attention than her importance relative to the United States and Great Britain would ordinarily justify because I could not count upon any large amount of common knowledge concerning her.” The history of Canadian development was much less studied than British or American history and therefore “Americans and Britons know next to nothing about Canada”. Even Canadians, Brebner said, were not fully aware of “what has happened to Canada as a whole during her uneasy course among the powerful currents of attraction and repulsion which have been set up by the United States and Great Britain.”²

Beyond these introductory remarks Brebner gave very little definition to his concept of a North Atlantic Triangle. Having devoted the first half of his text (164 pages out of 328) to a survey of the history of North America up to 1865, he saw a North Atlantic Triangle emerging as a result of the Treaty of Washington in 1871—a treaty he characterised as “the cornerstone of triune understanding”.³ A chapter on “the materials of a triangle, 1896–1940” which referred to “the unparalleled interlocking of the American, British and Canadian economies” in that period was followed by one entitled “a triangle takes form, 1880–1917” in which Brebner argued that Canada’s movement towards greater independence from London was stimulated by outrage over the outcome of the Alaskan boundary dispute of 1903.⁴ This development was underlined after the First World War by Canada’s status at the Paris Peace Conference and her membership of the League of Nations. The uneasy relations of the 1920s were followed by “the perplexing triangular interplay during the prelude to war” but cooperation was much closer between 1939 and 1945, including a “triangular economic integration for war”.⁵

It is clear from the above that Brebner was not blind to the contentious issues that had, in many ways, characterised the North Atlantic Triangle—issues such as trade relations, boundary disputes and political differences. Indeed,

he concluded his work by alluding to “the continuing problems of the North Atlantic Triangle”.⁶ Britain, the United States and Canada had much to offer the post-war world in terms of their experience of collective security, he wrote, but “they also still have a great deal to learn about the more immediate problem of getting along together”.⁷ Quoting Churchill’s famous peroration in the House of Commons on 20 August 1940 comparing the growth of cooperation between the British Empire and the United States to the Mississippi—“it just keeps rolling along”—he concluded by saying: “Americans, Britons, and Canadians may heartily share in the aspiration which was voiced in ‘Let it roll on full flood, inexorable, irresistible,’ but they also know from the record of the past that they must share in the hard work if they are to make real the rest of Mr Churchill’s sentence—‘benignant, to broader lands and better days’”.⁸

Given the vagueness of Brebner’s concept of a North Atlantic Triangle it is perhaps not surprising that some writers have doubted whether it existed at all and the first article in this collection begins by asking “What North Atlantic Triangle?” Similarly, in view of Brebner’s predominantly political and economic perspective on relations between Britain, Canada and the United States and his emphasis on the years 1917–1945 it is no surprise that historians and political scientists interested in the Triangle thesis have tended to follow suit. Consequently, the next four articles are essentially case studies from the 1930s and 1940s. The final article, written by a political scientist, deconstructs the metaphor of the North Atlantic Triangle and finds that it may still have some relevance even now.

The relevance, or otherwise, of the North Atlantic Triangle, especially to the bilingual, multicultural Canada of today, was the question considered by the final plenary session of the Canterbury conference mentioned above. Clearly the relationship between Canada, Britain and the United States has changed significantly since the time when Brebner first coined the term but two main themes emerged from the ensuing discussion. Firstly, that the North Atlantic Triangle’s value as a historical term was largely confined to the 1930s and 1940s. Secondly, the relevance of the North Atlantic Triangle since then is part of a much larger debate on Canada’s national identity and international status—a debate that shows little sign of abating.

A final word of thanks must be given to the contributors to this special edition who between them, I believe, have produced a wide-ranging and stimulating collection of articles on Brebner’s thesis. My special thanks are due to Hector Mackenzie, Senior Historian at the Department of Foreign Affairs, Ottawa, for his considerable help and advice during the editing of this volume. It has

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Endnotes

- ¹ John Bartlet Brebner, *North Atlantic Triangle: The Interplay of Canada, the United States and Great Britain*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1945, p. xi.
- ² Ibid. p. xii.
- ³ Ibid. p. xviii and pp. 182–197.
- ⁴ Ibid. p.xix and pp. 257–262.
- ⁵ Ibid. p.xix-xx and pp. 273–328.
- ⁶ Ibid. p. xx.
- ⁷ Ibid. p. 328.
- ⁸ Ibid. pp. 324 and 328.