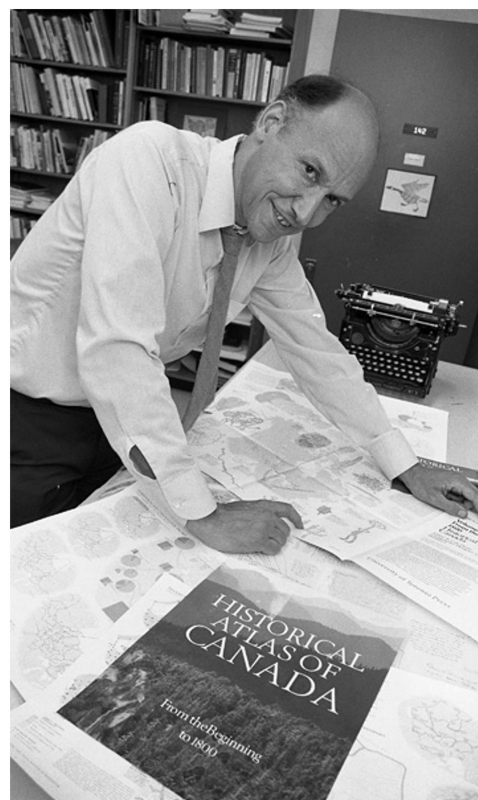


# Richard Colebrook (Cole) Harris, OC. FRSC. LL.D *Honoris causa*, PhD (1936–2022)

Graeme Wynn<sup>a\*</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Professor Emeritus, Geography, The University of British Columbia, Vancouver, BC V6T 1Z2, Canada

\*[wynn@geog.ubc.ca](mailto:wynn@geog.ubc.ca)



Cole Harris with the Historical Atlas of Canada 1987  
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Cole Harris bestrode the field of historical geography in Canada, and his renown as a scholar spread far beyond. In retrospect, his course in life might seem to have been pre-destined. Born in Vancouver, on 4 July 1936, he spent many childhood summer months at the “ranch” his grandparents developed after 1896 on a bench above Slocan Lake in the West Kootenay mountains of British Columbia. This bounded patch of land, carved from the forest, full of possibilities, but offering no certainties, nurtured his sense of lives lived as mediations between people and place. An undergraduate degree in History and Geography at the University of British Columbia strengthened this perception and led him to graduate study at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, to be supervised by

Canadian-born Andrew Hill Clark, then North America's foremost student of historical geography. Entering the job market as new universities hired, and established ones expanded their programmes, Harris joined a go-getting Department of Geography in Canada's finest university in 1964 (Maclaren and Gad 2010).

In the end, however, Harris's rise to pre-eminence is better understood as a product of intellect, application, and contingent circumstances than of pre-destination. At Wisconsin, Clark encouraged his new student to work on Quebec, because his own research programme centred on the patterns of European settlement overseas, and because Harris had spent the year between UBC and UW-M in southern France, improving his competence in French. An examination of the seigneurial system along the St Lawrence was an inspired choice: it fit Clark's agenda; drew upon copious documentation; and placed Harris among a small band of Anglophone scholars respected in Quebec for their deep appreciation of that province's history. When the dissertation appeared as *The Seigneurial System in Early Canada* (Harris 1966), it was hailed as an important contribution for its argument that land and life along the great river had been much less influenced by the legal provisions of seigneurial tenure than implied by established interpretations. This work also gave Harris a particular fondness for habitant society and a sense of the distinctiveness of Quebec, both of which shaped his subsequent thinking about the province's place in Canada.

On the strength of this first book and two invited articles (one of which reviewed what he took to be the somewhat parlous state of historical geography in Canada and outlined an agenda for its future), Harris was granted a Guggenheim Fellowship for 1968–69 (Harris 1967). Other awards followed in relatively short order. The Canadian Association of Geographers conferred its Award for Scholarly Distinction upon him in 1980. Two years later, he was elected to Fellowship in the Royal Society of Canada and received a Canada Council Killam Fellowship (1982–1984). Book and article prizes, including the Canadian Historical Association prize for the Best Scholarly Book in Canadian History in 1988 and 2003, came his way, as did four UBC awards. In 1993, York University awarded him the degree of Doctor of Laws, *Honoris Causa*, in 2003 he received the Massey Medal of the Royal Canadian Geographical Society, and in 2004 Harris became an Officer of the Order of Canada.

Guggenheim sabbatical plans to delve into nineteenth century Quebec and begin a book on early Canada were disrupted somewhat by developments within Geography. In the 1960s, some geographical practitioners joined with other social scientists to embrace what were loosely known as positivist methodologies. These encouraged a view of geography as a science of spatial relations, devoted to the development of spatial theories and the formal testing of hypotheses. When enthusiasts for such approaches published severely critical assessments of recent work in historical geography (including one suggesting that Andrew Clark's recent book revealed a field with the familial expectations of a mule), Harris responded. Based on wide reading in the philosophy of history and on the development of geography, "Theory and Synthesis in Historical Geography," made a compelling argument for that field as an interpretive, essentially humanistic, endeavour exhibiting a particular synthesizing habit of mind and devoted to understanding "the gamut of factors that underlie particular situations" (Harris 1971). Exemplified in a series of publications including *Canada Before Confederation* (1974), co-authored with John Warkentin, this approach did much to invigorate historical-geographical scholarship in Canada (Harris and Warkentin 1974).

Harris was also prompted, by the stinging critique of his mentor and the emerging work of his graduate students, to think anew about the central *problématique* of Clark's work: what differentiated colonies of settlement from those societies from which they sprang? Clark, an ardent empiricist, wrung his hands over this question: perhaps the somewhat mystical ideas of historian F J Turner about the role of the frontier in American life had some value, but every "new world" society seemed to develop differently and there were far too few studies on which to base reliable generalizations.

Rather than follow his supervisor into the empirical swamp, Harris began to think of the question in more abstract terms. His presentation of some of these ruminations at a conference on early New England led the famous Harvard historian Bernard Bailyn to remark on the difference between his fellow historians (who had vast amounts of information but offered little sense of what it meant), and the geographer from Canada who had few facts but powerful ideas. These ideas had to do with the dramatic inversion of land: labour ratios in old world and new. In Europe, people were plenty and land was scarce, at least insofar as much of it was owned by a few. This drove down the price of labour, fattened the purses of landlords, and produced great inequalities of wealth and power. In the new worlds, at least initially, settlers were scarce and land was for the taking; few would labour for others. Riches were correspondingly hard to accumulate and a more egalitarian social order emerged. Stripped thus to its bones, this formulation was certainly open to niggling, specific challenge, but in identifying a motor driving “The Simplification of Europe Overseas,” it drew notice around the world by indicating the value of bold conceptualizations and opening new comparative prospects (Harris 1977).

After a lengthy gestation, one of Canada’s great national scholarly projects was launched with SSHRC funding in 1979. This was the *Historical Atlas of Canada*, an ambitious attempt to present, in three large volumes, the complex story of land and people in northern North America in textual and visual form (Wynn 1995). Based in the Cartographic Laboratory of the University of Toronto, the entire project took two decades to bring to completion. Harris, who assumed editorial responsibility for the first volume – that began with the Late Wisconsinan ice sheets (20,000–12,000 BP) and ended with Native Canada ca 1820 – substantially shaped the entire project (Harris 1987). His own volume took almost a decade to complete. It included contributions from almost 60 scholars (as well as a couple of dozen research assistants) from several disciplines and required enormous amounts of correspondence, meetings with colleagues across the country, and long discussions with cartographers. Harris was an able, knowledgeable, even magisterial editor whose vision and unrelenting commitment to clarity and coherence forged disparate perspectives on vastly dissimilar human and biogeophysical circumstance into an original and authoritative interpretation of the northern reaches of the western hemisphere through 12 millennia.

With his volume of the atlas done, Harris turned again to work on British Columbia that he had begun in the 1970s, only to find new intellectual currents coursing through (and substantially remaking) Geography and other social sciences. “Social theory,” built upon the broadly “poststructuralist” ideas of European thinkers such as Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze, and Lyotard, opened new perspectives on this rugged, fragmented western province, the development of which seemed to resist coherent synthesis. Now it could be understood as a product of “the uneven intersection of colonialism and modernity” (Harris 1997). After a sabbatical in 1991–1992, important publications poured forth under Harris’s name, detailing the strategies and tactics used to marginalize Indigenous people in their own land. Characteristically, their author described his approach as “soak[ing] oneself” (in both the place one would understand and the broader literatures that might yield ideas about it) while “thinking hard” (about the intersection of and relationships between these two sources of insight).

Luminous essays on the impact of smallpox on Indigenous populations around the Salish Sea, about strategies of power in the Cordilleran fur trade, about the different ways in which various people, and the groups to which they belonged, encountered and understood the Fraser canyon, on the making the lower mainland, and on other topics were eventually assembled into *The Resettlement of British Columbia* (Harris 1997), a provocative and important book that framed an agenda for subsequent scholarship on the province. This was followed by the ironically titled *Making Native Space* (Harris 2002), a remarkable account of the creation of the Indian Reserve system in British Columbia that reaches across disciplinary and cultural divides to offer a timely rumination on how

one of the most divisive and contested boundaries in Canada (that between “Natives and Newcomers”) was etched on the land and into the minds of generations. Critical, caring and hopeful that better understanding of the history it presents might pave a way to a more just and inclusive future, this accomplished book could surely stand as fitting culmination to a remarkable scholarly career.

Yet Harris would not leave things there. Notwithstanding the mandatory end of his three-decade-long, and highly influential, teaching and research career at UBC in 2001, after his 65th birthday, Harris never retired in the conventional sense of that term. So far as I know, he was unaware of Ted Chamberlin’s lovely bon mot – that university professors spend their lives telling stories, calling the new ones “research” and the old ones “teaching” – but Harris made these words flesh even as he would have denied the old/new distinction on which they rest (Chamberlin 2003). He believed that his research had urgent work to do in teaching people how better to know, understand, and shape their lives and their country. In 2008, he published the long-contemplated “revision” of *Canada Before Confederation. The Reluctant Land* covered much the same space and time as its predecessor, but it was a radically new work (Harris 2008). Reflecting the long intellectual journey of its author, and his lifelong attachment to the idea of Canada, the book suggests that contemporary Canadians’ respectful appreciation of the differences that mark the modern country rest in some degree upon the ways in which early inhabitants overcame differences and challenges to turn a difficult environment into a fledgling political entity.

Relieved of this self-imposed yoke, Harris turned his attentions from the proto-national to the local scale (Harris 2018). *Ranch in the Slocan* focusses on the small, forever unprofitable, farm established on a bench above Slocan Lake to serve the booming (but soon to bust) mining communities around Idaho Peak – a place, Harris reflected, that was always “near the heart of my life, and more than anything else, I think, made me a historical geographer” (Harris 1997). But however strong the affection for this place, however centred upon the Harris family this account may be, it is no parish pump history. Cole’s grandfather was an English immigrant, a “settler” in modern usage. The “ranch,” developed in Sinixt territory, carved from the forest, and running upslope into the margins of rock and cold, was in some sense a synecdoche for the country as a whole. Life on the farm had its many challenges, but worked at, adapted to, and treasured, it allowed good lives to be lived. Might not, should not, Canada do the same? This is, surely, the unspoken implication.

In 2020, in what he knew to be his final contribution to scholarship, Harris published *A Bounded Land*, a thoughtfully edited compilation of some of his previous writing, connecting his thoughts on settlement, colonization, colonialism, dispossession, and power to currently surging scholarly engagement with newly theorized ideas about settler colonialism, the quest for reconciliation, and the need to indigenize Canadian scholarship and society (Harris 2020). Though present-day manifestations of these commitments are quite distinct from the concerns of much of Harris’s earlier work, in particular, almost his entire oeuvre speaks to the underlying, and urgent, need (evidenced in current debates) for Canadians to better understand the foundations of the country and society in which they live to shape a more just and equitable future for all residents of this, their, place.

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