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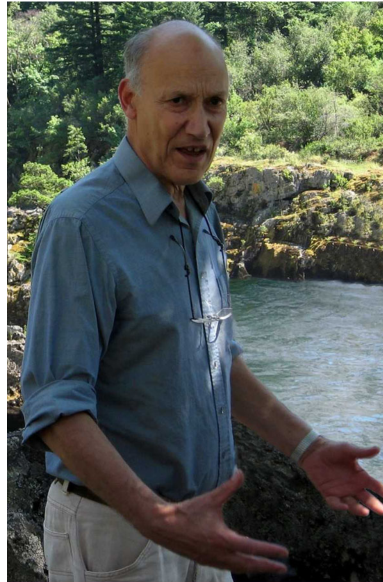
Cole Harris: Geographer of Canada



Cole Harris

Cole Harris's formidable scholarly promise was evident early. In an invited paper for a special centenary issue of *The Canadian Geographer*—his first in this journal—in 1967, he described Canadian historical geography as a sparsely tilled field (Harris, 1967). Barely thirty years old, already writing a now familiar spare, crystalline prose intended (he often said) to achieve maximum clarity with minimum words, Cole claimed that "the land" was geography's central object of inquiry. He also identified potential research topics deemed "worthy" by the interest that they would arouse. That took chutzpah. Cole was always supremely confident in his intellectual judgement, though never given to arrogance, pretension, or self-promotion. He was a scholar's scholar, driven by ideas. When you told him something he listened with almost frightening intensity. Bending his head slightly towards you, eyes off to the distance, he focussed on your every word. It often seemed that whatever you said fell short of what his concentrated effort demanded.

Richard Colebrook (Cole) Harris was born in Vancouver on the 4th of July, 1936. This was a cause of mild chagrin for a proud Canadian. Though he was never a thoughtless nationalist, it would surely have been more appropriate for him to share a "natal day" with the country he held dear. Cole's father, Richard (Dick) Harris, was a high school teacher, and his mother, Ellen (nee Code) Harris, a CBC radio show host. After taking a BA in Geography and History from the University of British Columbia (UBC) (1954–1958), where he was also president of the United Nations Club and ran track, Cole spent the better part of a year in Montpellier, improving his French. In autumn 1959 he enrolled at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. There he completed a PhD under the supervision of the Canadian historical geographer Andrew H. Clark, who steered him to work on early (French) Canada on the strength of his recently polished language skills. After a temporary lectureship in Geography at UBC (1963–1964), during which he and Muriel Watney were married in Vancouver, Cole was appointed Assistant Professor of Geography at the University of Toronto. In 1971, he and Muriel, a medical geneticist with a doctorate from Toronto, returned to Vancouver, largely for family reasons. Thirty years later, Cole retired Professor Emeritus. He died at home on September 26, 2022. His mind and his concern for Canada never flagged. His son, Douglas, wrote that even on his last morning when he lost the ability to speak, "the hand gestures he was making in bed … [suggested] he was in full flight again, helping us to see and understand the country."

Quebec, the subject of Cole's first book, was fundamental to that understanding. Published in 1966, *The seigneurial system in early Canada* (Harris, 1966) was a bold, even brash, revisionist study. It argued that everyday life along the St Lawrence had been less influenced by the seigneurial system than historians generally believed. French feudalism was old and effete at the beginning of the 17th century. Although its legal

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structure of land tenure was transferred across the Atlantic, the geographer's examination of patterns on the ground revealed that it was far less relevant to the development of Canada than statute books suggested.

On sabbatical in 1968–1969, Cole began to read the philosophy of history, both to undergird his defense of historical geography in debates with Toronto colleagues who embraced a quantitative analytical view of the discipline, and in response to the gathering critiques of Andrew Clark's book *Acadia* (1968). Espousing the idea that the future of geography was as a spatial science, William Koelsch's assessment of Clark's book was especially cutting. It characterized it as "neither sheep nor goat, merely mule, possessing neither pride of ancestry nor hope of posterity" (Koelsch, 1970, p. 202). Cole's stirring response, published in this journal in 1971 as "Theory and synthesis in historical geography" (Harris, 1971b), insisted on multiple approaches to knowing the world. Cole argued that defining geography as a formal science of spatial relations foreclosed forms of integrative and interpretive inquiry (long familiar in the discipline) that he called "geographical synthesis." In contrast to the abstracting and generalizing ambitions of spatial science, geographical synthesis sought to understand "the gamut of factors [including human meanings and values] that underlie particular situations" (Harris, 1971b, p. 164). It was an important intervention. As first formulated in a spring 1970 colloquium in the Department of Geography, University of Toronto, the argument was advertised, intriguingly, as "Reflections on the fertility of the historical geographical mule" (Harris, 1970) in direct pushback against Koelsch's belittling barnyard comparison. For Cole, the seminar was one of the intellectual highpoints of his career. It was as if he had lit a small bomb in the basement of Sidney Smith Hall. He remembered the subsequent discussion as feisty but civil, crackling with sharp intellectual exchange, continuing long into the evening. He said later to Matt Farish that it felt like "the future of academic geography in North America was being thrashed out in the department" (Farish, 2010, p. 40).

Perhaps Cole's finest substantive realizations of geographical synthesis were his articles on the Quebec seigneury of Petite Nation (Harris, 1971a), on Mono Township in Ontario (Harris et al., 1975), and on Idaho Peak in British Columbia (Harris, 1985). Each essay described the entanglements of people and place. But these were not "mere descriptions." Each drew out larger interpretations of the specific conjuncture of general forces and specific geographical circumstances that shaped the everyday lives of "ordinary" Canadians. The Petite Nation story revealed the plight of mid-19th-century French Canadians living hardscrabble lives on the edge of the Canadian Shield, wracked by exploitation and the power imbalances vested in both seigneurial quasi-feudal relations and anglophone merchant capitalism. In Mono township north of Toronto, Cole understood the displaced Irish Protestant migrants living there as a remote by-product of the British industrial revolution. Reprinting "Industry and the good life around Idaho Peak" in *The resettlement of British Columbia*, Cole acknowledged that his and Muriel's families were "bound up with that mountain [and the rough and tumble silver mining, the small town commerce, and the genteel orcharding located on its flanks] for the last 100 years" (Harris, 1997, p. xvi). Nonetheless, he remained clear eyed about Idaho Peak's larger historical and social significance. At the broad scale, he averred, it was akin to 16th-century Labrador Basque whaling stations and 18th-century fur posts on Hudson Bay; all were temporary, male-dominated workplaces in the wilderness, connected "by lines of credit to distant sources of capital, and by ties of family and culture to distant sources of labour" (Harris, 1985, pp. 339–340).

To write compelling syntheses and to shift analytical scales so dramatically at resolutions beyond the local was (and is) difficult. To do so during the early 1970s, and at the sub-continental level, was made even harder by enormous gaps in the literature on early Canada. *Canada before Confederation* (Harris & Warkentin, 1974), a ground-breaking text that Cole co-authored with John Warkentin, filled in some of those holes. Original, impressive, and much praised, the book echoed the claims of Andrew Clark and others in the 1950s and early 1960s, that historical and other geographers had similar interests in sub-national regions and human landscapes. Historical geographers, it asserted, were interested in the people who shaped places, not equations, and inclined to synthesis rather than analytical reductionism. Caught between two worlds, *Canada before Confederation* focussed on "considerations that most historians relegate to the peripheries," pulled together such information as there was, and skated boldly across gaps in the literature to offer a comprehensive, provocative, and distinctive account of foundational elements of the nation-to-be.

This bold approach stood in marked contrast to Andrew Clark's despairing caution. Advocating "scholarly prudence," Clark rested content simply to set down an accurate factual record of phenomena. Partly prompted by the work of his doctoral student Leonard Guelke on South Africa, Cole reached for the interpretive horizon, insisting that hard and sharp thought offered a better route to broad understanding than the endless accumulation of facts. This led to one of Cole's most celebrated papers, about the simplification of Europe overseas (Harris, 1977). His bold and expansive thesis was that in Europe, large populations and concentrated ownership of limited land drove down the price of labour, created wealth disparities and power imbalances, and underpinned strongly hierarchical societies. In territories colonized by immigrants, the circumstances were reversed. Initially at least, people were scarce, land was abundant, society was a good deal more egalitarian, and "Jack" could believe himself as good as his master (Harris, 1977; Harris & Guelke, 1977).

From the late 1970s, Cole turned his attention to a grand national project. The *Historical atlas of Canada* required a marshalling of all his considerable powers. At times, he said, it drove him bonkers. Based in the Cartography Laboratory of the University of Toronto, and from 1979 generously funded by SSHRC, this massive, multidisciplinary endeavour involved dozens of scholars from across the country. As editor of Volume I (Harris, 1987), the first out of the blocks, Cole had an outsized role in shaping the entire project. It occupied him for the better part of a decade and, in the days before email, it generated copious correspondence with members of the editorial board, contributors, and cartographers, and required him to undertake numerous trips from Vancouver to St John's, Montreal, Toronto, and a dozen places between, even while meeting his teaching responsibilities at UBC. *From the beginning to 1800* (Harris, 1987) was an extraordinary achievement. It dealt with the radically

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different worlds of Indigenous and European North America, presented an immense wealth of data, and thanks in large part to Cole's assiduous efforts, it integrated the many individual contributions into a coherent whole that offered Canadians a unique visual, textual, accessible, and up-to-date account of "the nature of Canada." Revealingly, the volume was dedicated to the great Canadian political economist H. A. Innis and to Andrew H. Clark: to Innis for "the interest in spatial economy"; and to Clark for "its equal interest in settlement and the local region." These were the twin "geographical poles" of the volume.

The *Atlas* was inevitably a product of its times, and of the intellectual worlds and traditions in which its contributors, editors, and cartographers were trained. But geography was changing, moving from spatial science to social theory. As the latter seized geographical imaginations, new colleagues and new graduate students in Cole's UBC department engaged in animated discussions of social theory. Wearied by the demands of continent- and millennia-spanning toil on the *Atlas*, and energized by debate, Cole immersed himself in the new literature. The consequences were arresting and transformative. Quickly Cole concluded that "a growing conversation between historical geography and parts of social theory would enrich both" (Harris, 1991). His engagement with Michel Foucault, Jürgen Habermas, and others clarified and honed his understanding of things he intuited, and others that he knew implicitly.

In the late 1980s, Cole returned to work on British Columbia that had been set aside for the *Atlas*. He had long found the province's historical geography hard to fathom, possibly because he had been so embedded within it. Early in the 1990s, however, Cole published a flurry of new essays informed by social theory in *BC Studies*, *Ethnohistory*, and *The Canadian Geographer* (Galois & Harris, 1994; Harris, 1992a, 1994, 1995). In 1997, these and other pieces (Harris, 1992b) were tweaked and gathered in *The resettlement of British Columbia* (Harris, 1997). The subtitle of this book, *Essays on colonialism and geographical change*, reflected its focus on the "uneven intersection of colonialism and modernity," and its concluding essay was a potent rumination on "the creation of an immigrant society in a reconfigured geographical space."

Appointed to the Brenda and David McLean Chair in Canadian Studies at UBC for 1997–1999, Cole chose to focus on the development and implications of the Indian Reserve system in British Columbia—or more pointedly on how Indigenous people were "put in their place" on small parcels of inadequate land. Continuing a trajectory initiated in the first volume of the *Historical Atlas* and further limned in *Resettlement*, this emphasis chimed with the zeitgeist. Contributors to *A reader's guide to Canadian history* published in 1982 (Granatstein & Stephens, 1982; Muise, 1982) had basically ignored work on Indigenous peoples; a dozen years later two successor volumes marked the "explosion" of interest in Indigenous histories, and both pre- and post-Confederation volumes included chapters surveying important literatures (Owram, 1994; Taylor, 1994). As J. R. Miller remarked in his contribution to the later volume (Owram, 1994), Aboriginal involvement in constitutional questions and more grievous confrontations (such as at Akwesasne and Kanesatake) had "catapulted Native peoples into the consciousness of the general public" (Miller, 1994, p. 179). Conscious of the importance of his topic and aware that his arguments would land in the middle of often-fraught debate and litigation (see Harris, 2012), Cole worked intensely to turn his McLean lectures into the large, dense book that entered the world as *Making native space* (Harris, 2002) after his formal retirement. Deeply researched, meticulously detailed, sensitive to complexity, and clearly and compellingly written, this book disturbed, prompted reflection, and inspired, as it elaborated upon the basic premise that "Discontinuous as it was, the line separating the Indian reserves from the rest became, in a sense, the primal line on the land of British Columbia, the one that facilitated or constrained all others" (Harris, 2002, p. xviii). It stands as a fitting keystone to a professorial career that spanned almost four decades and was substantially devoted to understanding the fundamental qualities of its author's beloved home province and country.

Through these years, Cole's commitment to understanding Canada and British Columbia more astutely also found expression in countless undergraduate lectures, hours of graduate student supervision and mentorship, and multiple field trips. His often-lyrical lectures were delivered in a relaxed, conversational style, with a broad narrative trajectory enlivened by anecdotes and asides. Presented without notes, they gave the appearance of spontaneity but they were well planned and practised; Cole thought about and talked through the substance of all his presentations ahead of time, "to get them into my head" as he put it. Some students found note-taking difficult in his classes, but the purpose of his lectures was to captivate and intrigue rather than to produce a list of bullet points for subsequent regurgitation in "the exam."

By the standards of today, Cole's graduate students were not numerous—between 1964 and 2001, he supervised a dozen completed PhDs and approximately 20 MAs. All were given rigorous training and close, caring mentorship (as well as being welcomed into the Harris household and the orbit of the family). Individuals were encouraged to define their own topics, but there were strong suggestions for those who dallied in this task. Thesis drafts were invariably subject to thoughtful reading and painstaking editing. Cole worked hard at his own writing and expected no less of his students. Woolly thought, cumbersome phrases, opacity and long-windedness were not tolerated. "Read Hemingway" was not infrequent advice for those whose prose lacked the cogency and succinctness Cole esteemed. The single word "Elaborate," written often in text margins, thus became a puzzle; was it instruction (verb) or comment (adjective)? For some of those who struggled to bring dissertations to completion, however, there was an invitation to spend a summer at the Harris ranch above Slocan Lake, where quiet, beauty, and the attentive ever-presence of Cole himself usually conspired to move things forward.

And then there were the field trips. These have (rightly) become legendary. Believing in "being there," in taking the measure of the place one sought to understand, and in the possibility of seeing the land with the eyes of its former inhabitants, Cole frequently took students, colleagues, visitors, and friends "into the field." At best loosely planned, invariably based on the principle of keeping costs to a minimum, and undertaken before university bureaucrats mandated the filing of safety plans, many of these ventures toyed with—but somehow avoided—misfortune. Generations of participants revel in their memories of a Cole field trip. The occasion on which Cole's 1956 Pontiac, much used for field trips in

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the 1960s, ended up with its passenger-side wheels hanging through the ice that covered a roadside ditch in Quebec, can stand in for many. The vehicle was perched precariously, with no traction, its occupants growing concerned about falling temperatures and fading light, with neither residence nor other vehicle having been seen for hours. Then along came a farm tractor, equipped with a winch; the driver quickly extricated the car, and went on his way, bemused but with a tale to tell about the hapless *géographes* he had saved from ignominy, if not hypothermia.

Colleagues have often said that the great benefit of university retirement lies in the release from marking and administration. Cole never laid great store on either of these apparent advantages; he was rarely disillusioned by student work, and rarely invested much time or energy on administrative chores (other than those with intellectual foundations such as editorial responsibilities with the *Historical Atlas* and *BC Studies)*. His presidency of the CAG (1985–1986) was, perhaps characteristically, notable for the launch of an ambitious scholarly project, a series of edited volumes on Canadian geography under his general editorship; four of these appeared between 1993 and 1997. Although fully engaged with departmental colleagues, Cole generally avoided significant organizational responsibilities, especially those that required conscientious and frequent attention. He was briefly Graduate Officer at U of T—but one year left a file forwarded from the Commonwealth Scholarship secretariat languishing on a shelf until urgent inquiries from London led to its late-spring discovery by the graduate secretary.

Recognition of Cole's academic contributions accumulated. He was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1968–1969; the CAG Award for Scholarly Distinction in Geography in 1980; Fellowship in the Royal Society of Canada in 1982; and a Canada Council Killam Fellowship for 1982-1984. Among awards for individual works were: outstanding article in the *Canadian Historical Review*, 1985; the Gold Medal of the Royal Canadian Geographical Society, 1988; a Clio award from the Canadian Historical Association, 1998; and, twice, the Sir John A. Macdonald Prize of the Canadian Historical Association (1988 and 2002). From UBC came a Killam Research Prize, 1987; the Dean of Arts Prize, 1999; and a Just Desserts Award from the Alma Mater Society. From UBC Press, the 2008 K. D. Srivastava Prize for the best book published in the previous year. Along the way the Association for Canadian Studies added an Award of Merit in 1988 and York University awarded him a Doctor of Laws, *Honoris Causa*, in 1993. In 1994, the *Historical Atlas of Canada* project received the Centenary Medal of the Royal Society of Canada, and an Award of Distinction, from the Canadian Cartographic Association. In 2003 he received the Massey Medal of the Royal Canadian Geographical Society, and in 2004, Cole Harris was appointed an Officer of the Order of Canada.

Required to retire at sixty-five, Cole never stopped academic work. For years he spent most weekdays in a shared office in Geography. Faculty, graduate students, and post-docs gained from and enjoyed his presence. His primary purpose, though, was to read and think and write. He turned almost immediately to a long-contemplated task: to think again about *Canada before Confederation*. Too much time had elapsed and too much new literature had emerged for any simple "revision" of that book. Moreover Cole and his co-author, John Warkentin, had taken divergent paths. The 1974 text had to be re-imagined. When *The reluctant land* appeared in 2008, it was clear how much effort Cole directed to this end. Wedded to the same basic regional, east-west, chronological structure as its precursor, the new book added new literatures, new approaches and new arguments (Harris, 2008b). Reflecting the blurring of boundaries between disciplines in the preceding half-century, the new volume engaged more fully than its predecessor with aspects of the past once considered the realms of historians, anthropologists, and others. The result was both impressive and somewhat awkward. Cole sought to construct a "national" story from disparate sources—a broad "intelligent synthesis"—so that Canadians might know their country better. Although Indigenous people received much more attention than they had in 1974, the book's narrative arc clung close to the transformative effects of newcomers. Regional coverage was, inevitably, uneven; perhaps the pre-Confederation frame meant that the far north and even British Columbia received relatively short shrift. Individual chapters melded reviews of relevant empirical literature with theoretical conjectures, but did so unevenly. As Cole characterized his work, it was "full of the changing local arrangements of this sprawled land," even as it sought to offer an "incipient theorization" of the country as a whole (Harris, 2008b, p. xviii). The main interpretive line of *The reluctant land* tells of the transformation of a patchwork of early (re)settlements into a remarkable political entity—a Confederation of multiple regions, histories, and identities—that transcended both space and social difference. On these foundations, the book posits, modern Canada emerged, respectful and appreciative of "the differences of which it is composed" (Harris, 2008b, p. 474). This is a fine sentiment embodying the best of intentions, but it leaves one wondering about developments, machinations, shifting political-economic tides, and social change in the "missing middle" between Confederation and today.

With this work complete, Cole turned to chronicle and reflect on the family ranch on the side of Idaho Peak that, he wrote in *Resettlement*, "has always been near the heart of my life, and more than anything else, I think, made me a historical geographer" (Harris, 1997, p. xx). Developed from 1896 by Cole's grandparents, British expatriates Joseph and Margaret, on a well-watered but bounded bench above Slocan Lake, the ranch never prospered commercially, but it anchored four-going-on-five generations, psychologically, This beautiful corner of British Columbia is home to the Sinixt people, but from the late 19th century it was subject to successive waves of incursion, from prospectors, miners, loggers, and settlers (capital and labour). During World War II, New Denver and the Harrises' Bosun Ranch became internment camps for relocated Japanese-Canadians. In the 1960s, the area attracted members of the counterculture, and it has been favoured since by nature-lovers and tourists. *Ranch in the Slocan* chronicled the Harrises' place in all of this with insight and affection (Harris, 2018). As Dan Clayton, one of Cole's PhD students, noted in an extended rumination, the book "is a vibrant meditation on why family histories matter in places like B.C." (Clayton, 2018). Adding to this legacy, Cole initiated, wrote, and substantially financed publication of a series of Slocan History Booklets between 2014 and 2022 (https://slocanhistoryseries.ca/catalogue/). Six weeks before he died, he was planning additions to the series.

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There was also one last book. As arguments for the indigenization of scholarship swept through Canadian universities in the years after 2008, Canadian historians increasingly couched their studies in the language of "settler colonialism." This approach derived from the argument of Australian scholar Patrick Wolfe to the effect that the occupation of Indigenous territories by newcomer settlers was predicated on a "logic of elimination" (Wolfe, 2006). Cole saw this as a prompt to reflect upon, and find new coherence in, his own diverse studies of colonization published through the preceding half-century, including a 2004 piece in which he sought to broaden understanding of the ways in which colonialism dispossessed (Harris, 2004). Assembling many of his more theoretical essays in *A bounded land* (Harris, 2020), he sought to map the "underlying architecture of settler colonialism as it grew and evolved" between "rock and cold to the north and a political border to the south." Drawing together a lifetime of thought about and concern for the land and people of northern North America, upon which he also reflected in Harris (2008a), the carefully curated essays in this collection defy easy summation—as their author observed in a Champlain Society podcast about the book (Harris, 2021). In a manner characteristic of Cole's corpus of work, however, *A bounded land* complicates and challenges established arguments, even as it draws inspiration from them. Ultimately it brings readers to ponder the tantalizing contention that "to some fair extent, the Indigenous critique of settler colonialism is situated within a larger critique of modernizing societies in the throes of deep structural changes" (Harris, 2020, p. 284).

After some years of poor health, that never seemed to slow his scholarship or affect his razor-sharp mind and prodigious memory, Cole died at home, and at peace, in Vancouver in late September 2022. His mortal remains were laid to rest in the cemetery at New Denver alongside those of his parents and grandparents on the following Thanksgiving weekend. His ideas, suffused like those of his father and grandfather before him, with thought about what it means to live a good life, and the importance of place to the realization of that goal, will live on, as will the wisdom of his general entreaty to live on earth "more thoughtfully and much more gently" (Harris, 1997, p. 275).

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