

S. J. R. Noel, Politics in Newfoundland

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Politics in Newfoundland. S. J. R. Noel. Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1972.

Twentieth-century Newfoundland has been a subject largely neglected by professional academics. Indeed, for many years, consideration of Newfoundland affairs was dominated by a small cadre of journalists, largely based in St. John's and working out of papers such as the *St. John's Daily News* and the *St. John's Telegram*, who apart from their immediate concern with the current political affairs of the island, often served as amateur historians. A. B. Perlin, "The Wise Old Owl" of the *Daily News*, and J. R. Smallwood, among others, bridged the gap between the observations of contemporaries and the work of the professional historian. *The Book of Newfoundland*, edited by J. R. Smallwood, of which the first two volumes appeared in the late 1930's and the last two in 1968, contains examples of the literary and historical writings of this small cadre of journalists. Some extended their activities beyond the publication of short monographs and articles. For example, the future premier, Mr. Smallwood, published *Coaker of Newfoundland* (London, 1931), a biography which still stands as the most comprehensive reference on this twentieth-century fishermen's populist leader.

On the other hand, the political leaders of Newfoundland contributed little to elucidate their role in the politics of the island. A few felt constrained to explain their position¹, but only William Coaker of the island's political leadership published fairly extensively, writing on his organization, the Fishermen's Protective Union. Newfoundland politicians apparently were so unconcerned with the judgment of history and its writing that only Sir Robert Bond saw fit to leave behind any personal papers.

Works by academics on Newfoundland were not abundant. Scholars such as Henry Mayo published a small number of articles on Newfoundland topics,² and there was the odd dissertation,³ but not until the mid-1960's did a new generation of scholars, largely Newfoundland expatriates and the products of Newfoundland's Memorial University, commence to produce articles on 20th-century Newfoundland subjects. Prominent amongst these are George Perlin at Queen's University, and Peter Neary and S. J. R. Noel at the University of Western Ontario.⁴ In the small academic community located at Memorial, substantial contributions are also underway. Gordon Rothney, when he was

1 For example, see A. B. Morine, *The Railway Contract, 1898, and Afterwards* (St. John's, 1933).

2 An example of this scholar's work is to be found in H. B. Mayo, "Municipal Government in Newfoundland," *Public Affairs* (March, 1941), pp. 136-139.

3 A dissertation which is representative of the studies prepared on Newfoundland in the post-war period is R. L. Clark, "Newfoundland 1939-49—A Study of the Commission Government and Confederation with Canada" (unpublished Ph.D dissertation, University of California, 1951).

4 See S. J. R. Noel, "Politics and the Crown: The Case of the 1908 Tie Election in Newfoundland," *Canadian Journal of Economics and Political Science*, XXXIII (1967), pp. 285-291.

Head of the University's History Department, stimulated research into the island's history, and the Institute of Social and Economic Research of the University had produced by the late 1960's nine substantial publications on various facets of the Newfoundland economy and society, in most cases done by visiting scholars such as Ottar Brox and Cato Wadel.⁵ A highlight of the examination of Newfoundland affairs occurred with the issuing of a work by Richard Gwyn, a journalist, who produced in 1968 a biography of J. R. Smallwood, entitled *Smallwood: The Unlikely Revolutionary* (Toronto, 1968). This volume undoubtedly will remain for several years, or at least until the former Newfoundland Premier produces an autobiography, the definitive work on Smallwood the man and his relationship to post-confederation politics and society in the province. The Gwyn book, which has assumed the vanguard in the journalistic, popular genre of studies of Newfoundland, has been followed by an equally valuable publication, the first general survey of the political history of the province in the twentieth century, S. J. R. Noel's *Politics in Newfoundland*.⁶

The period of Newfoundland history examined in *Politics in Newfoundland* extends from the end of the nineteenth century, which was marked by the building of the transinsular railway by the Reids, to the 1968 election campaign and the beginning of the decline of the Smallwood Government. This book is written very much in the Oxbridge tradition and possesses the style of a nineteenth-century British historical work, with its methodical and thorough research of the rise and fall of Cabinets, and the growth and wane of political personalities. The classical election battles are described in detail, such as the Bond-Morris struggle of 1908, and there is a heavy reliance upon newspaper accounts. Little attempt is made to utilize the current approach toward cepholgy, electoral behaviour, with its intensive use of statistics.⁷ Yet, *Politics in Newfoundland* departs into statistical analysis particularly when it deals with the post-confederation society of the island and attempts to indicate broad social changes which have occurred in the last few years, such as improvements in education, the growth of consumer goods spending, and so forth. Even the personality of the Honourable J. R. Smallwood, who exercised an untrammelled political hegemony over the Island's affairs, does not perhaps shine as brightly because of Professor Noel's emphasis on changes in the society of the province.

Indeed, although trained as a political scientist, and a teacher of political science, Professor Noel possesses a catholic approach toward his subject ma-

5 As an example of the studies of the Institute, see Cato Wadel, *Marginal Adaption and Modernization in Newfoundland: A Study of Resettlement of Outport Fishing Communities* (St. John's, 1969).

6 All references unless otherwise cited are to this work.

7 In contrast to the approach of Professor Noel, see Parzival Copes, "The Fishermen's Vote in Newfoundland," *Canadian Journal of Political Science*, III (1970), p. 579.

terial; he states that his posture “. . . toward the study of politics permits no sharp distinction between the political, economic and social” (p. vii). On the whole, Professor Noel has done an admirable job of integrating into a relatively ‘seamless web’ the purview of a variety of disciplines. There is little awkwardness in the narration and the transition between the economic, political and social facets of island life, and there is none of the perhaps artificial compartmentalization which characterizes the North American approach toward the study of societies.

The author, however, does point out that there were deficiencies in the material upon which the book is based. A particular problem was encountered in dealing with the fishing industry, for Noel states that not since the death of H. A. Innis has there been “. . . an ingenious economic historian to piece together the economic picture from many unco-ordinated sources” (p. vii). Unfortunately, Innis’ massive work on the Atlantic coast fishing industry, *The Cod Fisheries: The History of an International Economy* (rev. ed., Toronto, 1954) is of value in examining the Newfoundland situation only to 1900 and does not include the period with which Professor Noel is primarily concerned. One need not espouse a marxist or semi-marxist approach to appreciate the problems presented by this situation. For many years, and well into the twentieth century, Newfoundland had as its economic base a “one-crop economy,” the cod fish. Unfortunately, there is no author to provide the background material, as was done by Vernon Fowke for the western economy on the great plains in the twentieth century, and Professor Noel cannot play the role of a Seymour Martin Lipset, tracing the relationship in depth between the economy and social behaviour on the island, and especially the influence of that unique facet of the island’s economy, the fishery, a common property resource.

Competition arising from a common property resource may be significant in having aggravated the political instability in Newfoundland, which Professor Noel so graphically portrays, and accentuated cleavages over race and religion which have bedevilled the island’s political life. Newfoundland is a society of the politics of scarcity. A major segment of the population was Irish who, as Professor Noel notes, brought with them “. . . a national heritage of poverty . . .” and a “. . . hatred of their English oppressors” (p. 4). Since the other major segment of the island’s population, the West Country English, provided “. . . a heritage of puritanical protestantism, social deference, and semi-feudal economic relationship” (p. 4), it is little wonder that the political life of the island has been one of turbulence, and turmoil.

Professor Noel’s description of politics in Newfoundland throughout the twentieth century is not dissimilar from the findings provided in the Amulree Commission which investigated the affairs of the island in the 1930’s. Noel feels that Newfoundland has suffered from a form of political moral turpitude, which has been characterized by the extensive use of patronage and the public treasury to secure electoral support. Only the Government of Sir Robert Bond,

according to Professor Noel, was relatively free from this pattern of politics and exercised "probity" in its conduct of office (p. 216). Virtually all other governments, including that of the recently retired J. R. Smallwood, he accuses of having practised a form of political opportunism. Noel does not become overly exercised concerning the style of politics on the island, but one feels that there is more than a touch of whiggism in his interpretation and in his desire for a conduct of government affairs on reformed principles. He regards as the great disaster of Newfoundland's political life the collapse of responsible government and its replacement with the Commission, "an essentially dictatorial form of government" (p. 217), which he attributes at least in part to the style of politics on the island and the continual raids by successive Governments, particularly those of Sir Edward Morris and Sir Richard Squires, on the public treasury to satisfy the particular interests which proffered them support.

One cannot but wonder if a case might not be made for viewing the structure of politics on the island as having a certain functionalism in the island's political and social system, and as having constituted a normal phase of development. Professor Peter Neary has suggested the similarities between the politics of the Quebec of Maurice Duplessis and those of Newfoundland.⁸ Both political structures possessed a substantial amount of "pathology," which found expression in practices such as the conversion of public funds to the private purposes of politicians in power. The role of Professor Noel is to some extent the apostolization of a new pattern of politics on the island, and the author is most probably representative in his approach to the new, educated class in Newfoundland, who were active in overthrowing the Smallwood Government in 1972, in much the same fashion as the intellectual elite of *Cité Libre* were instrumental in forming the vanguard of the quiet revolution in Quebec.

In contrast to the obvious distaste which the author has for the practice of politics of Squires, Morris and people of that ilk, Professor Noel adopts a sympathetic posture toward the reform oriented Fishermen's Protective Union of William Coaker and this movement's efforts to inject a new morality into the political life of Newfoundland and to break down the hegemony of the "fishocracy" who utilized political corruption to maintain power in the affairs of the island. The author's chapter, "The Rise of the Union Movement," while taking the reader into a relatively complex social situation, refrains from introducing much of the literature of sociology, but Professor Rudolph Heberle's book, *Social Movements* (New York, 1951), is utilized to explain one aspect of the growth of the Fishermen's Protective Union. Noel accepts that social movements are best transmitted in societies with strong social groupings and that this was the case with outport Newfoundland where the Fishermen's Protective Union developed. Comparatively little research has centered upon the

⁸ See Peter Neary, "Democracy in Newfoundland: A Comment," *Journal of Canadian Studies*, vol. 4, no. 1 (Feb., 1969), p. 42.

Coaker movement with the exception of J. R. Smallwood's book and J. Feltham's thesis "The Development of the Fishermen's Protective Union in Newfoundland (1908-1923)" (unpublished M.A. thesis, Memorial University of Newfoundland, 1959), but utilizing esoteric sources of social history such as Nicholas Smith, *Fifty-two Years in the Labrador Fishery* (London, 1936), Professor Noel attempts to trace the social basis of Coakerism in the fishery. As more is written about Newfoundland without a doubt the Fishermen's Protective Union will come in for greater scrutiny, and efforts will be made to relate it to movements in North America and elsewhere.⁹

Although Professor Noel gives little indication of espousing a Newfoundland nationalist position and singling out for particularly sympathetic attention those situations which fostered autonomy from the triadic influence of the United States, Canada, and Great Britain, he does deal with Newfoundland's constitutional development. Noel approves of Sir Robert Bond for resisting pressures from the government of the United Kingdom to bring about union between the island and Canada, and for attempting to wrest economic concessions from the United States. Sir Robert Bond is painted in *bas* relief, and contrasted to the figure of Edward Morris who was willing to traffic with exploiters of the island, such as the Reids. Professor Noel is also very aggrieved at the loss of responsible government by the island. Yet, on the subject of Newfoundland's union with Canada in 1949, he comments almost laconically that ". . . a vote for confederation . . . was also in effect a vote to integrate Newfoundland into a more prosperous, dynamic, and competitive system of North American capitalism, with its 'consumer culture, and liberal values'" (p. 263). Those concerned with the relationship of Newfoundland to the Empire and the United Kingdom would be advised to consult St. John Chadwick, *Newfoundland: Island into Province* (Cambridge, 1967), and utilize Professor Noel's book to fill the relevant interstices on the island's domestic political scene. *Politics in Newfoundland*, for example, provides an excellent account of the 1908 constitutional crisis on the island, and the heavy handed role played by Governor MacGregor vis-à-vis the Government of Sir Robert Bond, in the former's efforts to bring about union between Newfoundland and Canada.

Politics in Newfoundland, in short, contains information for all those who have specific interests. Possibly the single greatest weakness of the book is that it attempts to encompass too much, and rushes forward in its task of narration with little indication of pause for reflection. Many areas are glossed over perhaps a little too lightly. For example, the vital story of the economic development of the island, which is currently so relevant to both federal and provincial governments, is treated only tangentially. Nonetheless, the Noel book is the beginning of the scholarly study of Newfoundland's history in the

9 A tentative step in this direction has already been made. See G. Panting, "The Fishermen's Protective Union of Newfoundland and the Farmer's Organizations in Western Canada," *Canadian Historical Association Report*, 1963, pp. 141-151.

twentieth century as a whole. It is, to borrow the jargon of the social scientist, "macro-history," and deals with a large expanse of specific actions and events agglomerated together. However, without the existence of a "micro-history," studies which focus in on particular periods and individuals, it is difficult to check and balance the Noel interpretations. For example, Sir Richard Squires is portrayed as an opportunist who was willing to engage in corruption to favour his own ends, although it has been suggested by an apologist for the Squires Government, the Honourable Leslie Curtis, that there were a substantial number of irregularities involved in the trial of Sir Richard Squires.¹⁰

On the whole, *kudos* are to be extended to Professor Noel on the undertaking of a more than successful narration and analysis of Newfoundland in the twentieth century. Whatever shortcomings it possesses are largely beyond the control of the author, and lie inherently in the subject matter and the paucity of research sources. It is to be hoped that future research will be undertaken to round out some of the tentative interpretations taken by Professor Noel. One may expect that this will occur as the number of professional historians from Memorial University increases, if the current interest in Newfoundland continues, and if non-Newfoundland scholars can be co-opted into research on the island's affairs.

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The Blacks in Canada: A History. Robin W. Winks. Montreal, McGill-Queen's University Press, 1971.

Most Canadians, Professor Underhill used to say, live in a curiously isolated world at the top of the North American continent. To their snug haven, gently touched by the great tides that have swept over and disrupted mankind in the past two centuries, they have welcomed people from many places and heard their stories at the national fireside. From time to time they have reached outward to become involved in worldwide affairs at the highest level, though nearly always at one step removed from the centre of events. They have participated smugly, vicariously, in other men's dramas and have formed opinions that reflect the life of other countries rather than being derived from their own domestic experience. This is true in particular of their attitudes towards race. On one side Canadians have been fascinated by the great American dilemma arising out of the oppression of Blacks in a society dedicated to Freedom; the Loyalists leaving New York in 1783 saw the irony in the presence on the docks of George Washington's aide-de-camp, who was there to ensure that an accurate record was being kept of each departing Negro for whom the Americans might claim compensation. On another side they have shared in the paradox

¹⁰ See Hon. Leslie Curtis, "I Have Worked With Two Premiers," in J. R. Smallwood, ed., *The Book of Newfoundland* (St. John's, 1967), III, p. 145.