

The Class of '32: St. John's Reformers on the Eve of Representative Government

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Volume 6, Number 2, Spring 1977

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/acad6_2art05

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

The Department of History of the University of New Brunswick

ISSN

0044-5851 (print)

1712-7432 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Matthews, K. (1977). The Class of '32:: St. John's Reformers on the Eve of Representative Government. *Acadiensis*, 6(2), 80–94.

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The Class of '32: St. John's Reformers on the Eve of Representative Government

The first thing which interested men in the political history of Newfoundland was its development from an uninhabited fishery into a self-governing colony. Thus the events which led to the establishment of representative government in 1832 have been written about long and often, usually in terms of a struggle for liberty between Newfoundlanders, and an alliance between the Imperial Government and a reactionary band of West of England fishing merchants who opposed the growth of settlement and government on the Island.¹ But to look at Newfoundland only in these terms is to forget that the Island was also part of a wider empire. If one forgets about Newfoundland's particular past and examines the attainment of local government in terms of wider political currents in the early nineteenth century, an alternative interpretation may be suggested.

To some degree, the colonial triumph of 1832 was little more than one of inevitability against inertia, a struggle between the desire for political change based upon non-political changes which had already taken place, and the indifference and apathy — at least in the beginning — of the vast majority of the inhabitants of Newfoundland. By the 1820s, Newfoundland was no longer "a ship moored near the banks" but had become a place of fixed and permanent settlement. As late as 1790, the migratory fishery remained large and flourishing; the winter population totalled only some seventeen thousand souls and many of these were servants recruited to spend a year or two on the Island before returning to their homes (or families) in England and Ireland. By the end of the Napoleonic wars, however, the migratory fishery had all but vanished, the population had grown to forty thousand,² and the mercantile structure had changed dramatically. In 1790 the most important merchants resided in Britain, with agents in the commercial centres scattered along the Newfoundland coast. By 1820 the outport merchant with his head-

1 The standard reference work for this period is A. H. McClintock, *The Establishment of Constitutional Government in Newfoundland 1783-1832* (London, 1941). However, a more recent book takes a much less fervent view of the "patriots". See G. E. Gunn, *The Political History of Newfoundland 1832-1864* (Toronto, 1966). See also D. W. Prowse, *A History of Newfoundland* (London, 1895) and H. A. Innis, *The Cod Fisheries* (Toronto 1944).

2 S. Ryan, *Abstract of Newfoundland Statistics in C.O. 194 Series* (St. John's, 1969).

quarters in Poole or Dartmouth in England was in serious decline and the commerce of Newfoundland was falling into the hands of men more or less continuously resident on the Island, as St. John's began to capture control of the outport fishery and commerce. In 1784 the outport merchants could call St. John's "a mere Portsmouth, or rendezvous for the Army and Navy".³ By 1820 it was quite clearly the economic, administrative and social centre of all of the eastern and southern coasts of Newfoundland.⁴ While the inhabitants of the west and south west coasts looked rather to Halifax, and Labrador was still broadly controlled directly from England, these regions had but a small population and played little role in the political life of the Island. It was the mercantile elite in St. John's who were to lead in the struggle for representative institutions.

This elite no longer faced any active opposition from British politicians, few of whom now saw the fishery as vital to Imperial interests. Traditionally the British Government had viewed Newfoundland as the supreme nursery of seamen for the Royal Navy and as an important branch of commerce to the nation. But the Industrial Revolution had greatly diminished Newfoundland's relative commercial importance, while Britain's naval supremacy after 1815 made politicians less interested in questions of naval nurseries.⁵ By 1830 the only active opponents of representative government were some of the merchants in Poole (who were themselves of declining economic importance in the fishery), a few scattered and sceptical individuals within the Island, and some of the government officials in St. John's, most notably two Governors, Sir Charles Hamilton and Sir Thomas Cochrane.⁶ Even their opposition was not based upon a belief in the virtues of the status quo, but upon a well-founded suspicion that a legislature in St. John's, dominated by the mercantile classes and driven by religious and racial differences, would not be the overwhelming and unmixed blessing which the patriots imagined. Although their numbers were few, the opponents of representative government were vocal and their arguments were wide ranging. They argued that the economy could not afford representative institutions, and the Island did not need them;⁷ that the social and economic structure of Newfoundland with a small

3 Jeffrey's evidence, 20 January 1786, Board of Trade 5/2, f. 60, Public Record Office, London.

4 K. Matthews, *Lectures on the History of Newfoundland 1500-1830* (St. John's, 1973), pp. 243-8.

5 The Newfoundland reformers were very slow to realise this. See G. S. Graham, "Fisheries and Sea Power", *Canadian Historical Association Annual Report* (1941), pp. 25-31.

6 Cochrane to Goderich, 14 April and 4 May 1831, Colonial Office [hereafter CO] 194/81. All reference to CO files are to microfilm copies in the archives of the Maritime History Group, Memorial University.

7 "Looker On", *Royal Gazette* (St. John's), 28 September 1830.

but wealthy elite dominating a large and illiterate class of labourers and fishermen was unsuitable for self-government;⁸ and that the whole campaign was a device by the merchants to dominate the poor and run society according to their own selfish desires.⁹ Some saw in it a plot by the St. John's merchants to control and monopolise the trade of the Island, and others dismissed it as a device to further the ambition of local demagogues and upstarts.¹⁰ Most feared that representative institutions would create political, racial and religious strife that would disturb the harmony between classes which seemed to exist during the 1820s.¹¹

Nonetheless, by 1832 the voices of opposition were few in number and almost completely silenced. The real struggle which had faced the reformers was to overcome the apathy and indifference to reform which pervaded Newfoundland society, even in St. John's, until the late 1820s. Since they knew that the British Government was strongly hostile to the Newfoundland merchants as a group,¹² the reformers realised that reform would only come if they could mobilise the rest of the Newfoundland population against the Imperial authorities. The first step must be to convince the people that under the existing system they were oppressed. The inadequacy of the legal and administrative structure gave the reformers plenty of ammunition. After 1811 a constant stream of anomalies and grievances exercised the passions of the people, the pens and mouths of reformers, and the wearied attention of Government. Yet, as late as 1828, after many campaigns on specific issues and quite a few partial successes by way of changed legislation and administrative practice, reformers were still talking about a widespread apathy towards the question of representative government.¹³ People had become unsettled, but the ultimate aim of uniting the inhabitants of the Island behind the campaign for self-government seemed little further advanced.

Under the surface, however, the mood was changing. The brilliant and acerbic minds of William Carson and Patrick Morris, who led the reform movement, had created a theory which was beginning to gain wide acceptance. Newfoundland's economic and social advance, they argued, had been retarded by an unholy alliance between the West of England fishing merchants and the British Government which had never wanted Newfoundland to become a colony. British restrictions and interests had prevented the develop-

8 Cochrane to the Colonial Office, 14 September 1827, CO 194/74; "Looker On", *op. cit.*

9 Report on the speech of Lord Howick, *Newfoundlander* (St. John's), 4 August 1831.

10 Cochrane to the Colonial Office, 1 May 1827, CO 194/74.

11 Speech of Aaron Hogsett, *Newfoundland Public Ledger* (St. John's), 16 December 1828.

12 And had been ever since 1675. See K. Matthews, "The West of England-Newfoundland Fishery" (unpublished D.Phil. thesis, Oxford University, 1968), *passim*.

13 *Newfoundland Public Ledger*, 18 July 1828.

ment of agriculture, the exploitation of land resources, and, in the interest of friendship with France and the United States, was sacrificing the fishery. By controlling the sources of revenue for the Island, the British Government was robbing the population and misappropriating sums which, if devoted to local development by an indigenous government, would lead to a transformation of the economy.¹⁴ The legitimate political aspirations of Newfoundlanders were being denied by a government which had freely granted representative government to other colonies. "The wealth and intelligence of the people now entitle them to have a direct concern", declared Thomas Brooking, "and the establishment of a local legislature can alone constitute to the comfort, prosperity and independence of the Island".¹⁵ William Carson stressed that the "depressed condition of the trade and fisheries, and infant agriculture required fostering care and the encouragement of a local legislature which would represent the wants and interests of the people".¹⁶

In fact, the battle was half won. While the *Ledger* in 1828 bemoaned the widespread apathy towards political reform, it also claimed that "We may fairly hazard the assertion that there is not one man within this town who would not affirm that the present order of things in this country ought no longer to exist".¹⁷ Even allowing for the *Ledger's* ardent support of reform, this statement seems broadly correct, at least for St. John's. It remained only to agitate the outports and win over the sceptics who remained there. By 1830 even the South Coast area "which until lately were averse to any change [had] come into the measure with spirit" and the last sinners were proclaiming their repentance and conversion.¹⁸ Newfoundlanders appeared united, at least in their desire for self-government in some form or another. What lay behind the success of the reformers: in part, perhaps the eighteenth-century assertion that men who tell others that they are badly governed will never lack a following. But Newfoundland was certainly labouring under many evils and hardships during this period. The ancient system of government (or lack of it) was plainly incapable of coping with a population exceeding sixty thousand souls. Imperial attempts at reform often received as

14 This theory is fully discussed in McClintock, *op. cit.*, pp. 120-61. See also P. Morris, *Remarks on the State of Society, Religion, Morals and Education in Newfoundland* (London, 1827); *Newfoundland Public Ledger*, 26 December 1827, 10 June, 7 October, 2 and 16 December 1828, 23 January 1829, 12 October, 23 November 1830; petition of the inhabitants of St. John's, 1830, CO 194/80, f. 429.

15 *Royal Gazette*, 4 October 1831.

16 *Ibid.*

17 *Public Ledger*, 18 July 1828.

18 Report on a meeting in Placentia Bay, *Public Ledger*, 23 November 1830; *ibid.*, 27 January 1832.

much criticism as praise,¹⁹ and the spreading tide of reform in England after 1828 communicated itself to Newfoundland. With the rest of the English-speaking world crying reform, it would have been amazing if Newfoundland had not.

Nonetheless, if in the Empire at large demands for reform arose from self-confident optimism, in Newfoundland they were both tempered and reinforced by growing anxiety. The years between 1815 and 1830 were ones of hardship, starvation, bankruptcy and depression in Newfoundland, and a growing population, completely dependent upon the fishery, found that events beyond its control were reaping havoc. Civil strife in many of the fish importing countries, combined with new protectionist measures and higher duties on the importation of Newfoundland fish, and increasingly successful competition from Scandinavian fish products created what by 1830 must have been regarded as an eternal depression in the fishery.²⁰ Production was broadly maintained, but prices declined, and Newfoundland was forced to send much of its catch to poorly paying West Indian markets where once she had almost monopolised the wealthy markets of Spain, Portugal and Italy.²¹ Most of the merchants were quite recent arrivals, and unable to remember much of the eighteenth or early nineteenth-century fishery, tended to look back to a golden age, the period between 1811 and 1815, when unique circumstances of war had placed the Newfoundland fishery in a monopoly supply position in the North Atlantic area.²² Comparing the feverish prosperity then with conditions since, they saw themselves as even more victimized than they actually were.²³

In examining the depression the reformers failed to identify its causes correctly. Where they should have considered Scandinavian competition, they blamed the French and American fishing bounties and the treaties which gave these nations fishing rights in Newfoundland waters, which they argued, without any great evidence, were making Newfoundland's fish uncom-

19 *Mercantile Journal* (St. John's), 5 July 1822; *Public Ledger*, 17 June 1828. This dissatisfaction comes through most clearly over the Act which allowed for the establishment of a municipal government in St. John's. See McClintock, *op. cit.*, pp. 168-9.

20 See *Royal Gazette*, 4 October 1831; *Public Ledger*, 23 and 27 January 1829; *Mercantile Journal*, 6 February 1823; Report of the St. John's Chamber of Commerce, 20 December 1830, CO 194/81, f. 16.

21 See K. Matthews, "The Export of Fish from St. John's 1819-1832, A Statistical Analysis of Vessel Clearances" (unpublished paper, Memorial University, 1973).

22 K. Matthews, "West of England-Newfoundland Fishery", pp. 598-600; S. Ryan, *Abstract of Newfoundland Statistics*.

23 Report of the St. John's Chamber of Commerce, 20 December 1830, *op. cit.*; *Mercantile Journal*, 3 January and 16 May 1832; petition of the Inhabitants of St. John's, May 1822, Colonial Secretary's Letter Book, Provincial Archives of Newfoundland.

petitive.²⁴ By refusing to grant similar bounties or to force an end to foreign bounties by diplomatic means, the Imperial Government seemed to show indifference towards the Newfoundland fishery.²⁵ The merchants correctly identified the problem of high import duties in the importing nations, but unfairly used the failure of the British Government to force reductions as further evidence of Imperial disregard for the welfare of Newfoundland. It was also strongly felt, although this was not really true, that the British Government was indifferent if not hostile to the development of agriculture and other non-fishery resources. If representative government was secured, the reformers argued that somehow or other these problems would be solved and an era of prosperity and happiness would occur.

Thus, in April 1832, the news that Newfoundland had been granted representative institutions was received with almost universal pleasure. Traditional means were taken in St. John's and the larger outports to "celebrate this joyful occasion".²⁶ Then came the election campaign of 1832 and with it bitterness and bigotry which hardly anyone had anticipated and which led to great anguish in the ranks of the reformers. The immediate cause was an upsurge of Irish and Catholic bitterness, led by John Kent, against England and her local elite. On innumerable occasions that elite had proclaimed that "none of the civil or religious distinctions which so unhappily exist in the Mother Country are to be found in even the remotest parts of this Island".²⁷ "This country has become almost proverbial for the kindly liberal feelings which exists between all classes. Whatever prejudices men bring are deposited on their arrival here."²⁸ Protestant and Catholic leaders had vied in praising each other. The Roman Catholic Bishop, Fleming, lauded the wisdom, decency and generosity of the Protestant merchants, contrasted them with the Irish Protestant landlords, and promised his undying friendship and gratitude in terms which should have haunted him but a short time later.²⁹ The staunchly English and Anglican *Public Ledger*, in turn, praised the Irish Patrick Morris as the "O'Connell of Newfoundland".³⁰ This harmony disappeared almost immediately after the election campaign started, as Kent proclaimed that "The sooner the peace and harmony enjoyed by the people

24 Petition of the merchants of Waterford trading to Newfoundland, *Newfoundlander*, 9 June 1831; *Mercantile Journal*, 3 January 1818; *Public Ledger*, 22 August 1828 and 7 August 1832.

25 Memorial of the Chamber of Commerce of St. John's, 20 December 1830, *op. cit.*; *Public Ledger*, 22 August 1828; *Mercantile Journal*, 3 January 1822.

26 *Royal Gazette*, 3 April 1832.

27 *Harbour Grace Journal* (Harbour Grace, Newfoundland), 12 February 1829.

28 *Newfoundlander*, 25 August 1831.

29 *Public Ledger*, 27 March 1832.

30 *Ibid.*, 16 December 1828.

of this country are destroyed the better".³¹ The *Public Ledger*, previously at the head of the campaign for self-government, ruefully concluded:

If our House of Assembly is not to be composed of Men of high standing and respectability in the community—if it is to be filled by demagogues and visionaries—by inflated schoolboys [Kent] or by super-annuated old men [Carson], let us in the name of God retrace our steps, and frankly tell our enemies that they have judged rightly of us—that we are not yet ripe for those institutions of which so many of the younger colonies have for so many years enjoyed the benefits.³²

In January 1833, the editor of the *Nova Scotian* reviewed these events more condescendingly and pronounced the politicians of Newfoundland to be "like garrulous whist players . . . fighting their battles over and over, to little purpose but the disturbance of their neighbours".³³ Thus began the mainland amusement with Newfoundland politics which continues to this day. However, in Newfoundland this conflict occasioned little joy as the quarrel deepened the cleavage between Irish and English, and to a lesser extent—but in the end to a more permanent degree—that between merchants and fishermen, St. John's and the outports. By 1838 a large number of those who had not only supported but had led the campaign for self-government, were despairing over the result and thinking nostalgically of a return to the good old days.³⁴ There is a mystery here. One cannot doubt that the elite in St. John's genuinely believed that they were united and harmonious, that the poor loved them, and that somehow they had avoided the rancorous passions which divided men in other parts of the world. Contemporary reports of the 1820s constantly refer to this belief, which was not so much examined, as dogmatically proclaimed.³⁵ It is perhaps easy to overestimate the actual bitterness between English and Irish, even in St. John's, for social and to some degree political intercourse continued when passions were at their height, and economic relationships had inevitably to continue as before. In a small and interdependent society, the leaders could not avoid co-operation and some degree of mutual aid. But while the rupture probably occurred against the wishes of most participants, this may have increased the bitterness still further. How could the reformers have been so wrong in their expectations, and so misunderstood the world in which they lived.

31 *Ibid.*, 28 August 1832.

32 *Ibid.*, 14 September 1832.

33 *Nova Scotian* (Halifax), 10 January 1833.

34 See Gunn, *The Political History of Newfoundland*, pp. 33-73.

35 "An Irish Catholic", *Public Ledger*, 28 August 1832; *Public Ledger*, 14 September 1832; *Harbour Grace Journal*, 12 February 1828; *Newfoundlander*, 25 August 1831.

Their naivety may be partially explained by the fact that until 1832 there was little to feud about in Newfoundland. Power was held by officials appointed by and answerable to the British Government. A common desire to wrest power from London drew men together and led them to downgrade the differences which might exist between them. Once representative government arrived, an internal power struggle was inevitable. Moreover, there were practically no Tories in Newfoundland until 1832 — not even in the sense that Liverpool or Wellington were Tories. The British born mercantile and professional classes were overwhelmingly Whiggish, wholeheartedly espousing Irish Emancipation, the 1832 Reform Bill, and the whole gamut of liberal forces which struggled in Europe and South America during this era.³⁶ The newspapers supported the “Brave struggle of the Polish people” and the anti-imperialist faction in Brazil; they took a passionate interest in the politics of the European fish markets and invariably supported constitutional liberals. The *Ledger*, for example, talked harrowingly of the arrival of Portuguese refugees in England after their proscription “by the Traitor Miguel for their noble adherence to the constitutional cause”.³⁷

Nonetheless, the reform leaders were often confused and contradictory in their assertions. They saw themselves as representing the inhabitants of Newfoundland, but were only a small and highly vocal section of that population, the mercantile and professional elite. While they talked of Newfoundland’s demands, they were overwhelmingly based in St. John’s, which with its urban population and commercial structure was in no way representative of outport needs and thoughts. They talked of Newfoundland in patriotic terms but almost to a man were not natives but recent immigrants. Bishop Fleming, John Kent and Patrick Morris were natives of Ireland; William Thomas, Thomas Brooking, George Robinson, William Rowe, Newman Hoyles, Robert Wakeham of England; and William Carson was a Scot.³⁸ It is difficult to think of one native-born Newfoundlander who was in the forefront of the reform movement. Indeed, those native Newfoundlanders whose position entitled them to take their place among the local elite tended to be indifferent and in some cases hostile to the campaign for representative government. This was partly because until 1832 the meagre civil service of Newfoundland was heavily staffed by such native-born families as Bland’s, Carter’s and Gill’s. They, and not emigrants from Britain, would be dis-

36 Speech of Mr. Winton, *Newfoundlander*, 31 December 1827; *Public Ledger*, 2 May 1828; *Newfoundlander*, 7 April, 16 June 1831 and 21 June 1832.

37 *Public Ledger*, 7 November 1828.

38 This information is compiled from the “Name Files”, a collection of biographical data in the archives of the Maritime History Group. See K. Matthews, *An Index to Who was Who in the Trade and Fisheries of Newfoundland 1660-1840* (St. John’s, 1971).

placed if the nativist campaigns of John Kent and others succeeded. However, the native section of the elite was small in number and submerged by the more numerous and aggressive first generation arrivals. Perhaps they were overawed by the newcomers emanating from a much more self-confident and experienced society. Certainly some of the native-born were apprehensive of the reform movement. "This is my native land and I would not willingly see it a prey to intestine commotion or to unnecessary evils", one "native" wrote.³⁹ When representative government finally arrived, the only St. John's native to stand for election plaintively pointed out that "The appearance of a native seeking for place and patronage is a novelty in our Isle".⁴⁰ Perhaps needless to say, he lost.

In part, the absence of a strongly nativist voice was not surprising. Although Newfoundland was the oldest part of the New World to be exploited by England, much of its development as a place of settlement had been crammed into the period since 1793 and while there were thousands of native-born fishermen and planters the mercantile and professional urban population had only developed recently. The vast majority of the mercantile and professional residents in St. John's could date their arrival no earlier than the Napoleonic Wars and the handful of older established "resident" merchant families, such as the Gill's, the Garden's and the Hutching's, and the William's, took little part in the campaign for representative government. Ironically, although the reform leaders criticised the indifference and neglect of that older generation of West Country merchants who had never established themselves permanently on the Island, many of them were the sons and nephews of the old, migratory merchants. William B. Rowe, Robert Wakeham, William Thomas, Thomas Booking, and Newman Hoyles were all descendents of long lines of South Devon families involved in the fisheries.⁴¹ A number of them would not end their own days on the Island. Thomas Holdsworth Brooking, one of the most prominent of the reformers, retired to England in 1832 even before the advent of representative government, leaving his Newfoundland trade in the hands of an agent. Patrick Morris inveighed against the West Country merchants for being absentees, interested far more in English than in Newfoundland's development and politics,⁴² but he spent as much if not more time campaigning for Daniel O'Connell in Ireland as he did in campaigning in Newfoundland for self-government. During the 1820s he spent almost every winter in Ireland and was probably one

39 *Royal Gazette*, 5 October 1830.

40 *Ibid.*

41 Data from the "Name Files" of the Maritime History Group.

42 McClintock, *Establishment of Constitutional Government*, pp. 148, 175.

of the most transient of all the St. John's merchants of his day. Indeed, while the local elite saw themselves as tied to the soil of Newfoundland, living and working there in contrast to the older generation of merchants, most of them commuted regularly between their homes in the British Isles and their summer homes in Newfoundland.⁴³

Thus the urban centres of St. John's, and to a lesser extent Carbonear and Harbour Grace, were dominated by first generation arrivals who were less committed to permanent residency than their rhetoric implied. Yet only in these comparatively large communities was there a large enough middle class to be able to organize the movement for self-government. As these urban elites came to dominate the economic activities of the entire Island, they were able to impose their views upon the rest of Newfoundland.⁴⁴ This emigrant middle class was sustained in its view of what Newfoundland was like, and had been like before, by the fact that a very large proportion of the urban working classes were also recent arrivals. Viewed from St. John's, political life was a simple matter of winning local autonomy for Newfoundlanders. Viewed from the outports, it may well have been a question of exchanging the hegemony of London for that of St. John's, for both were equally remote in practical terms from a community in Gander Bay or along the South Coast. But the voice of the outports beyond Conception Bay was seldom heard during this period. The scattered population and the impossibility of constant and regular communication, combined with the fact that the Newfoundland government had neither helped nor hindered outport life significantly and would not do so for generations, left the question of politics to the Avalon Peninsula. With the best will in the world the rest of Newfoundland could not take much part in political life as a whole and even on the Avalon, except at election time, politics were pre-eminently a sport of the St. John's residents.

Thus the political campaign for local government was led by a group of men who knew very little about the Island except what happened in St. John's. Acting in ignorance and isolation, talking only to each other and seldom challenged in their assumptions, the reformers did indeed see themselves as patriots, true representatives of Newfoundland in its struggle to achieve self-government. In retrospect they seem to have been fighting not for the freedom of Newfoundlanders, but for recognition of their own rightful

43 Analysis of the passenger lists in contemporary newspapers reveals that a large majority of the professional commercial elite spent considerable time out of Newfoundland. The luckiest were those with Bermudan connections for those who were associated with Demerara did not tend to live long if they commuted there. Most, however, travelled regularly between the British Isles and Newfoundland, although by 1850 this transient life was dying away.

44 As Lord Howick pointed out, *Newfoundlander*, 4 August 1831.

position as the leaders and rulers of Newfoundland society. This explains the pain of a large segment of the St. John's elite, when they saw the wide franchise which accompanied the Act of 1832, and during the years which followed many of the new Conservative party came to believe that the whole experiment should be abandoned, primarily because the British Government refused to grant a narrower franchise.⁴⁵ While the St. John's reformers talked of equality of political rights for "Every class of subjects throughout the wide dominions of our revered monarch", they also had an extremely paternalistic view of society. They believed that the wealthy should be generous, and the poor should most certainly be contented and grateful for the wise and benevolent direction of their superiors.⁴⁶ In fact, they demanded representative government for Newfoundland not because of any abstract belief in equality, but because they believed Newfoundland's "wealth and intelligence" should be recognized.⁴⁷

It would certainly be wrong to view Newfoundland's reformers as opposed to British institutions or the British connection, for they saw Newfoundland as an integral part of the Empire. William Carson, who perhaps more than any other created the image of Britain as unsympathetic to Newfoundland's aspirations, also expressed to William IV the "most profound expression of our loyalty and attachment to your Illustrious House more especially to express our heartfelt gratitude . . . for the interest which your Majesty has evinced in raising this your ancient and loyal colony to a similar rank with the sister colonies of Nova Scotia and New Brunswick by granting the inestimable blessings of the British constitution".⁴⁸ Bishop Fleming at one meeting called for "Three cheers for our good king, three for the Duke of Wellington, three for Mr. Peel and as many as their lungs would permit for Daniel O'Connell Esq.". On another occasion he praised the Catholic Relief Bill for bringing "its own reward in the increased love, fidelity and attachment towards our august and beloved sovereign, as also in the indissoluble union of all classes and denominations of His Majesty's subjects".⁴⁹ To some degree these speeches reflected conventional attitudes but a glance at such non-political events as the annual St. Patrick's day dinner of the Benevolent Irish Society confirms the identity of the reformers with and not against the Empire. The

45 *Newfoundlander*, 11 October 1832. See also Gunn, *Political History of Newfoundland*, pp. 82-114.

46 Letter from Henry Winton, *Newfoundlander*, 31 December 1829; *Public Ledger*, 28 September 1832. For Bishop Fleming's view of the relationship between master and man see the *Public Ledger*, 27 March 1832.

47 *Royal Gazette*, 4 October 1831.

48 Address of the Inhabitants of Newfoundland, *Newfoundlander*, 5 April 1832.

49 *Nova Scotian*, 18 June 1828; *Newfoundlander*, 28 June 1832.

capacity of the St. John's Irishmen to engage in what was well termed the "pious and patriotic ceremony of drowning the shamrock" caused innumerable toasts to be given — many of which caused dismay and incomprehension to a later generation of Irishmen. One over-patriotic toast — even for that era — to the Royal Navy evoked sustained and drunken cheering as the Governor's band played "Briton's Strike Home"; another toast referred to the "British Constitution, the admiration of foreign nations, the glory of our own"; and final heresy, a hardy annual favourite was "The Rose, the Shamrock and the Thistle, may they ever be entwined". The greatest cheer of all, however, was for "The Trade and Fisheries of Newfoundland" drunk to the tune of the "Banks of Newfoundland".⁵⁰

Although they fought for Newfoundland self-determination, the socio-economic elite in St. John's talked and argued on the basis of what they had learned in their place of birth, which was not Newfoundland. Patrick Morris, Bishop Fleming and John Kent were Irish nationalists who fought for Newfoundland not because they knew or cared much about the Island itself, but because they were Irish patriots who happened to be domiciled there. John Kent, the Irish merchant, campaigned on a plank of giving all place and patronage to native inhabitants, although he had only come to Newfoundland in the late 1820s.⁵¹ Perhaps when Kent was standing for "native rights", he was thinking of "Irish Rights" and a share of the patronage. When Bishop Fleming talked about the Newfoundland "People", he was primarily thinking of his Irish congregation. The same can be said of the English reformers. In terms of English political life, they were strong leftward leaning Whigs, who saw themselves, often consciously,⁵² as part of the rising middle class, in a struggle against the old men and the old ways. This enabled them to separate themselves as an elite from the old British based merchants who had preceded them. Educated society in St. John's followed British politics with great fascination and some — Patrick Morris in Ireland or George Robinson as the Member of Parliament for Worcester in England — were heavily involved in the reform campaigns of the old country. They saw Newfoundland self-rule as intimately bound up with such Imperial causes as Irish emancipation and British parliamentary reform. If they had been living permanently in Britain, they would be remembered — if indeed they would be remembered

50 Report of the St. Patrick's night dinner of the Benevolent Irish Society, *Newfoundlander*, 24 March 1832; Minutes of the St. John's Benevolent Irish Society, 18 March 1824, *ibid.*, 1 April 1823.

51 Election Address of John Kent, *Public Ledger*, 28 August 1832; letter from "Terre Neuve", *ibid.*

52 See the letter from "indignans" on the English Reform Bill, *Newfoundlander*, 21 June 1832; *Mercantile Journal*, 5 July 1822.

at all on that much vaster stage — for the roles they played in the reform agitation there.

The impulse behind the drive for representative government in Newfoundland came, then, not from Newfoundland itself but from the wider currents which existed in the Empire at that period — and especially in the British Isles. Since the St. John's elite were in Newfoundland and not somewhere else, their demands were for colonial freedom. Had they been in Tasmania, Canada or in any other part of the Empire, they would have been patriots of those regions. Had they remained in England, they would have been constitutional reformers. In that sense their identification of themselves and their desires with Newfoundland was purely coincidental. True scions of early nineteenth-century Britain, the world was their oyster and they carried their ideology with all the rest of their baggage. Convinced of the righteousness of their aims, they were not prone to examine the question of why their noble professions always seemed to match their own immediate interests. This rendered them impervious to criticism and rather prone to making moral statements of universal principle against which they, and their descendants, would later struggle in vain.

Thus the Class of 1832. Possessing a sincere and romantic, if also self-interested and uncritical regard for what they called Newfoundland, they were also completely identified with the Imperial whole. To be a Newfoundland patriot in no way diminished their feeling of loyalty to a larger entity; one could be a patriotic Irishman in one context, a Newfoundlander in another, and a patriotic Britisher anywhere. As they themselves put it, they wanted not independence but the "Blessings of the British Constitution".⁵³ Modern Newfoundlanders would hardly regard many of these men as ideal patriots. Yet these people created a sense of Newfoundland nationalism and an ideology, which, while it was created as little more than a convenient tool, became a psychological reality for future generations of Newfoundlanders.

The reformers had argued in their campaign for representative government that Newfoundland

Possessed all the material for a happy and prosperous colony. A climate peculiarly healthy — a situation well adapted for mercantile enterprise. In our cod and seal fisheries, staples exclusively our own; extensive tracts of unexplored and uncultivated land; in all probability well calculated for agriculture; a hardy enterprising and virtuous population; an enlightened and patriotic governor who feels his own glory in the interest and happiness of the people. We want only the Royal charter of our constitutional rights to consummate our happiness.⁵⁴

53 Indignans, *op. cit.*; see also Address of William Carson, *Public Ledger*, 25 September 1832.

54 William Carson, *Newfoundlander*, 24 March 1831.

They had also argued that the grant of representative government would make Newfoundland “rich and great”.⁵⁵ They created the myth that Newfoundland was impoverished and aggrieved solely because of an imperfect constitution and the indifference, even the hostility, of the Imperial Government. Thus were conceived two elements which have since been more or less continuous in Newfoundland’s political life: a conception of the outside world as hostile towards, and retarding, the rightful and natural development of the Island, and a large measure of millenarianism in the expectations and views of the people. It cannot be denied that, like the first campaigners for self-government, politicians have often found these characteristics useful, but they have also caused great harm within Newfoundland society, especially in obscuring the real causes and possible remedies of social and economic ills. That the British Government was by 1830 singularly incapable of properly governing Newfoundland cannot be doubted and representative institutions in Newfoundland did bring about many useful reforms in the years following 1832. But the exaggerated nature of the reformers’ claims tended to obscure the question of what was, and what was not possible.

On hearing the news that a local legislature had been granted, an enthusiastic reformer, signing himself “Cabot”, wrote:

O Isle of Newfoundland awkan’d Isle,
May heaven sustain and lend her aid to thee
support thee in they great important cause
And thy defiance with glory shall be crown’d.

Neglected Newfoundland a disregard
Was ever shown thy mountains and thy vales,
The emigrant has visited the coasts
And many a nabob has thou nurtur’d there.

Grieve not O Newfoundland! the time has come
When thy just rights shall boldy be maintained
Wise Statemen have considere’d thy great cause
And justice could not longer be denied.

Prosper O Newfoundland, may blessing hail
The land in which we live and live to love;
Where beauty loves to dwell and proudly reigns
In triumph with thy lovely daughters fair.

Much valued Isle where wealth lies wild in waste
As the wild cranberry that feeds thy deer;
Thy forest trees are waiting to be hewn
For golden corn to substitute the fir.

55 William Carson, *Public Ledger*, 16 December 1828.

Rejoice O Newfoundland, thy untill'd ground,
Will shortly yield to cultivation's power,
And gladden with its landscapes and its streams,
Thy hardy race and thy adopted sons.⁵⁶

This swelling love and expectation are still a part of Newfoundland today. In every generation, however, there are lonely and isolated doubters, bitterly conscious of the gulf between aspiration and reality. In 1832 one of these wrote in direct and savage repudiation of "Cabot's" dream:

O Newfoundland, O Newfoundland, thou sleepy looking Isle!
Beneath the blanket thou has laid a miserable while.
But Britain breaks the drowsy spell which bound thee to thy bed
And gently pulls the pillow now from underneath thy head.
Awake, Awake! and from thy couch I long to see thee rise
And rub away the frost and snow that hangs upon thine eyes.
Neglected Isle, neglected Isle! why do you grieve and weep?
The Deuce is in't if you've not had a belly-full of sleep!
And whilst thou slept the emigrant hath visited the lair
And great Nabobs and little Bobs have made their fortunes there
The King without his Parliament has taken up thy cause
And LEDGERSLATERS soon will make thee merchantable laws!
And so they ought; for where shall we direct our wandering view
To find an Isle O Newfoundland, comparable to you.
Your very deer are so genteel they scorn the birchen tree

And come and sip up one by one the fattening cranberry.
O Newfoundland! O Newfoundland! rejoice I say rejoice
Lift up your hands, lift up your eyes, still higher lift your voice.
For soon thy local Parliament will change thy frigid clime
Thy snow shall melt like artichokes before a herd of swine.
The Artic blast which sweeps thy breasts full six months of the year
Will soon be stopp'd by flowing ACTS in the midst of its career.
The seal and cod shall never fail and caplin shall abound,
And wheat and oats and rice shall spring obsequious from the ground.⁵⁷

If the author was an outport man (as the signature implies), it would not be surprising. The romance of Newfoundland has always seemed more real in St. John's than elsewhere. The dreams of an elite in the capital in 1832 (as later) did little to solve feelings of frustration, isolation and bitterness in the outports.

56 *Public Ledger*, 13 April 1832.

57 Sir Uncas Sing a Song, Salmon Cove, *ibid.*