

Protectorate to Province: Newfoundland, 1934-1957

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“No”, Christopher agreed. “When you grow up here you’re a separate breed, forever. You may become a professor at a great university, or a research scientist, or something that I can’t guess at, but I know one thing — you’ll be a Newfoundlander, and a bayman, to the end of your days”.

THIS QUOTATION FROM HAROLD HORWOOD’S novel of a generation ago, *Tomorrow Will Be Sunday*,¹ came to mind as I read the books reviewed below. I grew up in a Newfoundland outport and was nine years old when the island became a province of Canada. Among my most vivid childhood memories is sitting hushed in the kitchen with my father listening to radio broadcasts from the National Convention. Like thousands of Newfoundlanders, that is how I came to know Joey Smallwood and Peter Cashin and Gordon Bradley and the other delegates who formed the cast and chorus in a drama of mounting intrigue and emotion that lasted from the fall of 1946 to the winter of 1948. With my father as tutor, it was the best course in Newfoundland history and politics I would ever have, and, seen through the fresh lenses of childhood, the most memorable.

The issue then seemed simple: should Newfoundland continue on with Commission of Government, under which mother Britain had provided shelter from the storm of imminent national bankruptcy in the early 1930s; or should we opt to regain our national independence, now that the economy had dramatically, if artificially, improved; or should we choose to throw in our lot with a larger and more prosperous British dominion, Canada? Often the simplicity of issues as understood in childhood become immensely more complex when revisited decades later. Not so here: the issue was and remains fundamentally simple, perhaps because the options were so few. What is complex are the emotions and experiences of the 45 men who, together with a chairman, made up the National Convention.

The record of their doings and sayings is contained in the two volumes of debates (vol. I), and reports and papers (vol. II) of *The Newfoundland National Convention, 1946-1948*, edited by J.K. Hiller and M.F. Harrington (Montreal and Kingston, McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1995). For anyone with an interest, whether personal or scholarly, in what is arguably the most important debate in Newfoundland history, these volumes make for riveting reading. The two volumes, totalling more than 2000 pages of dense text, constitute a fecund archive of primary materials on the work of the National Convention, whose debates broadcast throughout Newfoundland prepared the way for the coming of Confederation, even though the Convention itself,

1 Harold Horwood, *Tomorrow Will Be Sunday* (Toronto, 1966) p. 206.

by a large majority, was opposed.

It was a long and arduous journey for editors Hiller and Harrington, as well as for the sponsors, especially Memorial University, but scholars with an interest in Newfoundland history will be grateful that all concerned stuck with the project, for the end result is an indispensable source for an understanding of how Newfoundland became a province of Canada. The one serious, and acknowledged, omission is the famous "Black Book", the report of the Ottawa delegation and the documents relevant to the talks with the Canadian government in the summer of 1947. While the draft terms of union as discussed by the Convention are included, the project cannot be considered completed until the Black Book is published.

It is perhaps better to read the second volume first, containing as it does the reports and papers that were prepared to enable the 45 representatives to do their job. That job was to assist "the people of Newfoundland to examine the future of the Island and express their considered views as to suitable forms of government for the Island, having regard to the financial and economic conditions prevailing therein" (*The National Convention Act, 1946*). The better to organize their immense task, the delegates agreed to divide up into nine committees. The "reports and papers" of volume II are the analyses and conclusions of the committees, as follows: Forestry, Education, Transportation and Communications, Local Industries, Agriculture, Fisheries, Public Health and Welfare, Mining, Financial and Economic Position of Newfoundland. In addition, volume II includes the reports of the delegations sent by the convention to London and Ottawa, the latter containing the proposed arrangements for entry of Newfoundland into Confederation. All these reports were presented to the Convention and formed the basis of its debates.

Volume II begins with a document prepared for the Dominions Office in London by two senior British public servants (G.W.St.J. Chadwick and E. Jones), intended to provide "a factual and objective statement of the financial situation [of Newfoundland]". In 1933, when the devastated former colony had sought mother-country refuge from its debtors, the British government had pledged that "as soon as the Island's difficulties had been overcome and the country was again self-supporting, responsible government would, on the request from the people of Newfoundland, be restored" (II, p. 16). It appeared that by 1946 the island had indeed reached economic self-sufficiency, inasmuch as revenues had exceeded expenditures for several years. There was therefore a *prima facie* case for the restoration of responsible government, or independence. The question was, what did the people of Newfoundland wish? To prepare the way for finding out, Britain authorized the holding of a National Convention "to review the alternative constitutional courses open to the Island and make recommendations to His Majesty's Government as a basis for a national referendum".

The economic question for the Convention was not whether technically Newfoundland was self-supporting but whether self-sufficiency was likely to last now that the war was over and the American and Canadian defence expenditures, which had resurrected the local economy, were declining. Long-term prospects depended, as they had always done, upon a flourishing export trade, especially for fish. But even more difficult than economic prophecy, and much more divisive for the Convention, was the central political and constitutional question: what should the people of Newfoundland be asked to decide, or, put another way, what choices should they be

given about possible forms of future government? It was this question especially which provided both the spark and the fuel for the highly combustible Convention that began in September 1946 and lasted 16 months.

Reading the reports of the nine committees half a century later one is impressed by a number of things. One is the quality of the writing, which is uniformly clear, economical, direct, and free of jargon and acronyms. The lucid, uncluttered prose stands in stark contrast to much bureaucratic and academic writing of the present. Another is the professional competence of the public servants who provide the large quantities of data (and much of the clear-headed prose, one suspects) for these reports, and who, when interrogated by delegates, as they sometimes are, show themselves intelligent, discreet and tough-minded. A third is the wide knowledge and discerning intelligence of the committee members, less than a third of whom had any post-secondary education. They ask cogent questions, master large quantities of complex information and show themselves capable of independent judgement. Finally, there is the ability of J.R. Smallwood to dominate and direct the course of any committee's work through prodigious research, mental agility and unembarrassable persistence. As each committee's findings are brought before the Convention, it is Smallwood who is protagonist or antagonist as suits his purpose.

Volume I, which runs to almost 1500 pages, contains an edited record of the debates that took place in the National Convention from 11 September 1946 to 30 January 1948. Early on, the Broadcasting Corporation of Newfoundland was invited to carry the daily sessions of the Convention. This experiment in public education had a profound effect on the character of the debate and, given the closeness of the ultimate vote, may well have determined the outcome. The generally thoughtful, well-prepared and sometimes passionate eloquence, which threatened at times to overflow its banks, was designed as much to impress the folks back home as to persuade other delegates.

Newfoundland had been without a political arena for 13 years. There had been no assembly where the economic and social issues of the country could be defined and disputed. When the National Convention was created, and delegates elected, it was natural that a flood-tide of political rhetoric would be released. And the fact that in the end the Convention had no authority to decide anything, but merely to advise the British government, only served to open the sluices wider.

But if the impressive eloquence owes much to the Convention's special circumstances, it also derives from Newfoundland's celebrated oral tradition. As noted, few of the delegates had been to university, yet the general level of discourse is high, both for clear presentation of fact and argument and the articulate expression of strong emotions. One delegate observed: "We have in this assembly representatives of all Newfoundland, including Labrador. From the great forests of the west to the stormy coastlines of the north — merchants and miners, lawyers and lumbermen, fishermen and farmers, teachers and teamsters; the rich and the poor, the classes and the masses — all are represented here" (I, p. 269). Some orators of course are more impressive than others, and a few — perhaps made taciturn by their colleagues' performances — say little or nothing. One or two frequent speakers would have done well to have followed their example and remained silent.

From the beginning Smallwood, who had honed his talents through journalism, public broadcasting and as a labour organizer, stands out as a supremely confident and

skilful parliamentary debater, taking on all comers on almost any issue and nearly always getting the better of the argument. At his best he is irresistible. The Convention is little more than a month old when he introduces a motion to send a delegation to Ottawa to discuss terms of union. It is the first of many masterful appeals to Newfoundlanders' mingled sense of pride and shame, hope and fear. Only by quoting him at length can one convey the sweep and force of his oratory:

Our Newfoundland is known to possess natural wealth of considerable value and variety. Without at all exaggerating their extent we know that our fisheries are in the front rank of the world's marine wealth. We have considerable forest, waterpower and mineral resources. Our Newfoundland people are industrious, hard-working, frugal, ingenious and sober. The combination of such natural resources and such people should spell a prosperous country enjoying high standards, western world standards of living. This combination should spell fine, modern, well-equipped homes; lots of health-giving food; ample clothing; the amenities of modern New World civilization; good roads, good schools, good hospitals, high levels of public and private health; it should spell a vital, prosperous, progressive country.

It has not spelt any such things. Compared with the mainland of North America we are 50 years, in some things 100 years, behind the times. We live more poorly, more shabbily, more meanly. Our life is more a struggle. Our struggle is tougher, more naked, more hopeless. In the North American family Newfoundland bears the reputation of having the lowest standards of life, of being the least progressive and advanced of the whole family.

We all love this land. It has a charm that warms our hearts, go where we will: a charm, a magic, a mystical tug on our emotion that never dies. With all her faults we love her. But a metamorphosis steals over us the moment we cross the border that separates us from other lands. As we leave Newfoundland our minds undergo a transformation. We expect, and we take for granted, a higher, a more modern way of life such as it would have seemed ridiculous or even avaricious to expect at home. And as we return to Newfoundland we leave that higher standard behind, and our minds undergo a reverse transformation. We have grown accustomed to our own lower standards and more antiquated methods and old-fashioned conveniences that we readjust ourselves unconsciously to the meaner standards under which we grew up. We are so used to our railway and our coastal boats that we scarcely see them; so used to our settlements, and roads, and homes, and schools, and hospitals, and hotels and everything else that we do not even see their inadequacy, their backwardness, their seaminess.

We have grown up in such an atmosphere of struggle, of adversity, of

mean times that we are never surprised, certainly never shocked, when we learn that we have one of the highest rates of tuberculosis in the world; one of the highest infant-mortality rates in the world; one of the highest maternity-mortality rates in the world; one of the highest rates of beri-beri and rickets in the world. We take these shocking facts for granted. We take for granted our lower standards, our poverty. We are not indignant about them: we save our indignation for those who publish such facts, for with all our complacency, with all our readiness to receive, to take for granted, and even to justify these things amongst ourselves, we are, strange to say, angry and hurt when these shocking facts become known to the outside world.

We are all very proud of our Newfoundland people. We all admire their strength, their skill, their adaptability, their resourcefulness, their industry, their frugality, their sobriety, and their warm-hearted simple generosity. We are proud of them; but are we indignant, does our blood boil when we see the lack of common justice with which they are treated? When we see how they live? When we witness the long - grinding struggle they have? When we see the standards of their life? Have we compassion in our hearts for them? Or are we so engrossed, so absorbed, in our own struggle to live, in this country, that our social conscience has become toughened, even case-hardened? Has our own hard struggle to realise a modest competence so blinded us that we have little or no tenderness of conscience left to spare for the fate of the tens of thousands of our brothers so very much worse off than ourselves? (I, pp. 93-94)

There isn't any rhetorical tool Smallwood doesn't command, including irony — the most difficult to wield effectively. Combative, artful, and inventive in debate, it is easy to see why he provoked such strong emotions from other delegates, but even his staunchest enemies would have conceded that he dominated the National Convention, as he did the Newfoundland legislature for so many years after, by dint of those powers that only the greatest orators possess.

Not that he has all the eloquence by any means. Among the advocates of responsible government Gordon Higgins, Malcolm Hollett, J. R. Job and Michael Harrington are capable at times of true eloquence. So too is Peter Cashin, the acknowledged leader of the anti-confederate forces, but no more than the others is he any match for Smallwood in head-to-head combat. Among Smallwood's pro-confederate colleagues two younger men are notable for their trenchant interventions, exhibiting that potent combination of reason and rhetoric that is the essence of good oratory. They are William Keough, a 33-year-old writer and co-operative worker, and Isaac Newell, a 29-year-old former teacher and later university professor. Keough, who would become a long-time cabinet minister in Smallwood's governments, is especially eloquent — witty, allusive, inventive, even poetic, but at the same time pragmatic, his experience seemingly grounded in the struggle for survival and dignity of the Newfoundland people. In his speeches and Newell's one hears the voice of a younger generation of Newfoundlanders more concerned with giving people access to

a decent standard of living than with restoring lost national independence:

We have had a long association, Mr. Newell and I, with the men of this island whose overalls reek with the salt of the fish flakes, the manure of the barnyard, and the resin of the pulpwoods, and it has not been particularly conducive to the mouthing of platitudes. If at times we have sounded somewhat bitter, I hope that we haven't, but if we have, then that has been because we have sometimes seen such sights as a whole family curled up for a winter's night in a circle around the fire, or on the floor of a tar-paper shack; or a mother cooking for her children a dinner of pancakes of sourdough on top of a sawed-off oil drum that served as a stove, or because, to quote Mr. Newell, "I saw death and hunger on a barren coastline/The empty cupboard and the lean winter—/But deeper than all the beaten look of despair/Was the dumb and impotent fury/In a man's eyes as he turned/To the thing that had to be done". So if we said things that have rankled, don't think that they were dreamed up in an easy chair before a comfortable fire, because they weren't; and don't think we're sorry if by any chance we've disturbed somebody's peace of mind, because we're not. We may have had some hard things to say, but if we have, then it's been because we've felt that at this moment of historic decision, a few hard sayings wouldn't go amiss (I, p. 1218).

Many hard things would be said during the course of the Convention, on both sides. There was much at stake. The Convention had been asked to advise the British government on what alternative forms of government should be placed on a referendum ballot. It was relatively easy for the delegates to agree on (a) responsible government and (b) commission of government as choices, for they had had experience (generally unhappy experience, to be sure, but experience nonetheless) with them. The third option proposed to the Convention — union with Canada — had been considered in the distant past and rejected, and it thus proved fertile soil for suspicion, rumour and fear — fear of the loss of control over property, education and divorce laws; rumour of Canadian conspiracies to give Labrador to Quebec and to impose usurious taxes; and suspicion of a British conspiracy to hand Newfoundland over to Canada regardless. At the end the Convention voted not to recommend Confederation as an option to be put to the people.

It is hard in retrospect not to see the anti-confederates as anti-democrats, trying to prevent the Newfoundland people from having a real choice. At the time, however, there were some genuine as well as manufactured concerns. A majority of delegates thought it a better course for Newfoundland to regain its independence and, with a new national government, explore what opportunities for economic or political union might be then available. This was especially appealing for those who thought that Newfoundland's better destiny lay in an alliance of some sort with the United States, a country whose stock had risen because of the prosperity its defence bases had helped to bring. Perhaps, faced with such a prospect, Canada itself would be more generous in its proffered terms than it was in the arrangements before the Convention.

In the end the British government did what the Convention voted not to do: put Confederation on the ballot. It would take two referenda in 1948 to settle the matter,

and only by a slim margin would Confederation prevail. By then, however, the responsible government movement was a spent force, and except for the hanging of black crepe in some windows on 31 March 1949, the day Newfoundland officially joined Canada, the opponents of Confederation went quietly into the night. Momentum lay with the victorious and indefatigable Smallwood, who seized the day and the reins of political power in Newfoundland for the next two decades.

It is the first of those two decades that Raymond Blake considers in *Canadians at Last: Canada Integrates Newfoundland as a Province* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1994). Professor Blake, an historian at Mount Allison University, describes, as the book's subtitle suggests, how the federal government set about incorporating Newfoundland into the Canadian family, and how Newfoundland adapted to its role as a province of a larger dominion rather than a dominion in its own right, as it had been, more or less, for almost a century.

Blake is a careful scholar and a good guide. He doesn't purport to cover every aspect of the relationship between Newfoundland and Canada in the first decade after Confederation, but those areas he chooses to examine are important, and they are well described and documented. Beginning with a description of the issues and events that led to the confederate victory in the second referendum of 1948, he proceeds in turn to deal with negotiations of the terms of union; implementation of the social programmes prescribed by those terms, the effect of Confederation on Newfoundland's secondary industries, the international implications of union, especially as they bear on Canada-U.S. relations, and Ottawa's feckless attempts to come to terms with the Newfoundland fishing industry.

Many other important issues — education, forestry, mining, transportation, etc., all of which were equally affected by union with Canada — are left aside. But better Blake should limit his scope and cover well those areas selected, as he has done, than deal superficially with a more ambitious agenda. He has done a particularly fine job of illustrating how it was senior Ottawa public servants (including Norman Robertson, Lester B. Pearson and Hume Wrong) who, well before their political masters caught the spirit, were seized with the importance of bringing Newfoundland into Confederation. It was largely through the skilled and enlightened professionalism of a much larger group of federal public servants that the administrative integration of the Newfoundland civil service went so smoothly and the desperately-needed social programmes of the Canadian government were so expeditiously made available to Newfoundlanders. Ironically, but typically, it is because the public servants did their job so well that so little tribute has been paid to their achievement.

Not to say federal politicians did not also play their part well, especially in the period leading up to Confederation. Blake summarizes trenchantly the appeal to Canada of Newfoundland:

Because of its geographical position, Newfoundland seemed destined to occupy an important place in the growing and profitable world of civil aviation. Already a pioneer in the field, Canada stood to benefit handsomely if it controlled Gander which later gained the title 'Crossroads of the World,' an indication of its importance to air travel. Likewise, union would simplify Canadian defence matters in Newfoundland and prevent Washington from assuming even greater control on the island. Moreover, union promised to

add considerable mineral and forest resources, especially from Labrador, and give Canada title to the rich fishing grounds off the east coast. It would, above all, complete the union of all British North America into one dominion that the Fathers of Confederation had envisaged. And now Prime Minister William Lyon Mackenzie King, nearing the end of his career, saw union as his crowning achievement (pp. 9-10).

Given this attraction, it must at times have been difficult for the Canadian government to practise restraint during the campaign for Confederation. To do otherwise, however, would likely have scuppered the chances of the campaign's success, for it would have fuelled a latent fear among many Newfoundlanders of being swallowed by the Canadian wolf.²

Blake gives a full account of the political and diplomatic dealings between Canada and the United States over the status of American armed forces in Newfoundland, where the 99-year military-base leases that had been granted during the Second World War now seemed an affront to Canada's sovereignty. Also well documented is the failure of both the Newfoundland and federal governments to modernize the fishery in the 1950s, a failure that has sadly continued. It is a tribute to Blake that one comes away from *Canadians at Last* with a deeper sense of how immensely complex it was to change an industry on which so much of the sociology of Newfoundland life depended. It is good, for example, to read a balanced assessment of the centralization-of-communities programme, a plan which has too generally and superficially been judged a mindless political act of deracination of outport people.

The protagonist of this book, as of all books about Newfoundland during this period, is again Smallwood. Blake maintains admirable objectivity towards the last "Father of Confederation", paying tribute to his political genius while holding him accountable for the neglect of Newfoundland's economic development, a matter not even seriously discussed during the negotiation of the terms of union. Smallwood's egocentric and dictatorial behaviour, evident very early in his premiership, is also illustrated, and nowhere more forcefully than in a remarkable 1951 letter of rebuke from Gordon Bradley, Smallwood's mentor and partner in the quest for Confederation, and at the time a federal cabinet minister:

Why on earth do you embark upon projects of this kind where the federal government is involved without first giving me any information about the matter? . . . As it now stands, I can only try and straighten up an awkward situation which you yourself have created. . . . I have told you time and again that it is one of your great failings. You go ahead and on your own, make decisions and proceed to implement them without consulting others who have a stake in the matter and who can perhaps give you some sound advice (p. 167).

Not many people ever spoke to Premier Smallwood in this way, and it is a pity for

2 A popular chant among anti-confederates during the 1869 referendum on confederation with Canada, not forgotten by 1948, was:

Our face towards Britain, our backs to the gulf,
Come near at your peril, Canadian wolf.

Newfoundland that he proved deaf as a post to those who tried. It was clear, even by 1951, that Newfoundland's birthright from Confederation would be poorly invested, if not squandered.³

To move from the debates and reports of the National Convention and a historian's account of the integration of Newfoundland into Canada, interesting as those volumes are, to Peter Neary, ed., *White Tie and Decorations: Sir John and Lady Hope Simpson in Newfoundland, 1934-1936* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1996) is to leave a two-dimensional world of fact and opinion for a three-dimensional world, with the third dimension being sensibility.⁴ Here, in *White Tie and Decorations*, are unguarded and un-selfregarding perceptions, observations and conclusions. Here are the texture and nuance and directness of private, intimate communication. Here are two remarkably intelligent and interesting people whose own relationship is the fascinating ground bass of their letters to others.

At age 65, Sir John Hope Simpson might justifiably have been settling into retirement. He had had a long and adventurous career in the British colonial service by the time he sought out appointment as one of the original six members of the Newfoundland Commission of Government. Accompanied by his equally adventurous wife, "Quita", he left behind in England five adult children, and most of the correspondence in this collection are "letters home" from mom and dad. And what great letters they are.

When the Hope Simpsons arrived in St. John's in the winter of 1934 they found a people demoralized by the Depression and by the loss, after almost a century, of responsible government. Newfoundlanders' impoverished self-esteem was mirrored in their economic circumstances: somewhere between a quarter and a third of the population was living on a meagre dole of six cents a day. While the Depression had inflicted a hard penance on all of North America, in Newfoundland it represented, as one National Convention delegate put it, "the Gethsemane of a people".

During the two years of their stay the Hope Simpsons saw much that confirmed the belief they seem to have formed upon arrival, that Britain's first colony was a nearly hopeless case which could be saved only by strong leadership, a root-and-branch reform of the denominational school system and a spiritual transformation of the Newfoundland character. While they were impressed and often charmed by the individuals they came to know, the Hope Simpsons hosted to the end a dismal view of Newfoundlanders in general. The picture that emerges from the correspondence is of a people who have fallen from grace, been deceived and betrayed by their politicians, exploited by the merchants of St. John's and some off-shore companies, pauperized by subsistence social-welfare provisions, and the will-to-work enervated by economic circumstance and weak moral character. After a year in Newfoundland,

3 Anyone wishing an insider's view of Smallwood's unwise investment of the dividend of Confederation should read John Crosbie's autobiography, *No Holds Barred: My Life in Politics* (Toronto, 1997).

4 Praise is due to editor Peter Neary for whom this project seems to have been as much a labour of love as of scholarship. Professor of History and Dean of Social Science at the University of Western Ontario, Neary is the author of (among other books) *Newfoundland in the North Atlantic World, 1929-1949* (Toronto, 1988). No one could have done a finer job of editing and introducing this charming and instructive book.

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Sir John writes:

This is a cruel country in many ways. Life is maintained by killing something — fish or seals or deer or beaver — or birds — and from their babyhood the children learn to kill. The result is indiscriminate killing. The caribou is supposed to be protected. The poacher goes out & kills, not one, but as many as he can, and then leaves the corpses rotting on the ground, just taking tidbits for his consumption. The same with birds. They shoot for the sake of killing. The same with salmon in the rivers. They poach the salmon — ‘jigging’ they call it — and often leave them lying on the bank — just kill for the sake of killing. And yet they are a highly religious people. What is needed is education, and we are arranging for that . . . (p. 137).

Though it was not part of his own portfolio, Sir John saw educational reform as the key to social progress, and he was hopeful the Commission of Government would make real changes here. He clearly underestimated how deeply rooted in the collective psyche of this “highly religious people” was their anachronistic church-based system of education. It would take more than another half-century before the government of the day could bring an end to it.

By contrast with their estimation of Newfoundlanders, the Hope Simpsons’ response to the Newfoundland geography, landscape and even climate is positive to the point of rhapsody. They agree that this is the most beautiful country they have ever seen (and they had travelled widely), but it is Lady Hope Simpson who descants most lyrically, time and again, on her surroundings — whether from the Newfoundland Hotel in St. John’s where they lived, or driving around Conception Bay in their powder-blue Austin 6.6, or from a boat or train as they travel tirelessly through and around Newfoundland. This encomium from a June 1934 letter is typical:

This country is more colourful than Scotland; the atmosphere is so intensely clear that all the outlines & colours spring sharp cut & intensely vivid to the eye, so that the beauty catches you by the throat. And it is so intensely green & the sea & sky so deeply blue. And in addition there is here that quality of light you find in Greece — an indescribable radiance of dawn & sunset. You will think I exaggerate; I only tell my experience. Every day I am here I seem to feel the beauty of this country more intensely (p. 104).

Of the two Lady Hope Simpson is the more opinionated and uninhibited in her judgements, both positive and negative. She is also fearlessly adventurous. In September 1936 she is in one of her favourite spots: Little Falls on the Humber River:

By 11 o’c., I was up in a lovely lake under the foothills and startled a black duck in the rushes. I was just deciding that I must turn back but must just see what lay beyond an island, when, on the shore beyond the island about 100 yds. away, a great bull moose came strolling along. He was a beautiful creature — I could hardly believe his horns — a glorious red in the sunshine & great mass I could hardly believe they were horns. We drifted along & gently paddled a little nearer. He took a good look at us and suddenly shook his mighty horns. I thought he was trying to shake them off, but Roy quietly

backwatered &, when he shook them again, he continued to backwater. Then the bull came walking on towards us — along the shore — wading & swimming, & then up he lifted onto the shore again & strolled off up a birch-hung gully. Roy said, ‘For two pins that fellow would have come after us. I didn’t like the look in his eye.’ But wasn’t that a wonderful experience. It was such a picture (p. 340).

Fearless in her approach to nature, she is no less so in some of her epistolary pronouncements: “The Governor is away on tour, which means peace. He is a nervous, jumpy, active person — not at all the kind to be Governor at all. Both he & Lady Walwyn love talking in public, and they both talk drive!” (p. 334).

It is Sir John who gives us the more cogent analysis of social conditions and how the Commission of Government is attempting to ameliorate them. And while it may not have been evident to many Newfoundlanders, with whom the government was not generally popular, progress, he believed, was being made:

We are unpopular in many quarters. We demand that, before a man travels by train, he shall take a ticket. In the old days, about half the people travelled without tickets and got away with it. We insist that the legal minimum size of a lobster for canning shall be observed. It is the custom to catch any lobster — down to a six-inch baby or even smaller — and to can it irrespective of the law. We insist on observation of the game regulations and prosecute for trapping beavers, for which there is a closed season. This has never been done before. In a thousand ways, we are governing where government was hitherto a farce.

Nevertheless, things are unquestionably improving. Everyone realizes that fact. Even our enemies (p. 132).

Sir John’s faith that things would improve gradually was not well founded. In the second half of the decade conditions would, if anything, worsen, and it wasn’t until the Second World War brought American and Canadian military investment in Newfoundland that the economy would take a sudden turn for the better and put the country back on the road to self-sufficiency, and thus to a post-war choice among alternative forms of government.

In their perceptions and sensibilities the Hope Simpsons are sufficiently different that, even when they describe the same issues or events, they are complementary rather than repetitive. Nor is it only in their correspondence that they complement and complete each other. Running through this correspondence is a touching love story, of two people devoted to each other’s comfort and happiness. Occasionally this is made explicit,⁵ but mostly it is revealed in frequent and tender references to each other and in the obvious pleasure they take in doing things together. One is reminded of

⁵ Typical is this excerpt from a letter by Sir John to daughter Greta, 29 September 1935: “Here is our 35th wedding anniversary—outside a day of gloom. The foghorn is mooing like a distressed cow. Rain is coming down in streams. . . . There is no gloom either in our temporary home or in our hearts. You have a wonderful mother and I a very wonderful wife, as I have realized throughout these 35 years”.

Harold Nicolson and Vita Sackville West, except this Vita is a Quita, with every bit as much spirit but fewer wayward proclivities.

1999 is the 50th anniversary of Newfoundland's entry into Canada, and the 65th anniversary of the advent of Commission of Government. The former will be widely celebrated, for obvious and justifiable reasons. That the latter will be ignored is understandable, for it is a reminder of the failure of the Dominion of Newfoundland at a crucial moment in its history to manage its own affairs. But the contribution of Commission of Government to the rehabilitation of a devastated economy and people deserves to be more generally acknowledged. That Newfoundland had the options it did after the Second World War is attributable in no small measure to Sir John Hope Simpson and the other commissioners. Their professionalism and prudence not only averted economic disaster and political chaos, but prepared the way for the sensible and fortunate choice Newfoundland made to join Canada.

Mine of course, like everyone else's, is a partial and provisional judgement. The glass through which we view the past is really a kaleidoscope of feelings, fragmentary recollections and retroactive wish-fulfilment where images are perpetually dissolving and re-forming. One yearns for greater permanence of perception, some true-north on the compass of understanding. Histories and historical records, despite the implicit promise, do not deliver that. To catch a glimpse, we must turn to the imaginative truth of art.

In his new novel, *The Colony of Unrequited Dreams*, Wayne Johnston daringly weaves fact with fiction into an intricate and compelling tapestry of Newfoundland during the period covered in this review. Not surprisingly, perhaps inevitably, the historical Joey Smallwood is the book's protagonist, while his counterpoint is the fictional Sheilagh Fielding, who bears and bares the soul of the island that Smallwood both loved and neglected. In a final brilliant poetic unspooling of memory, she puts Newfoundland's choice in a much longer perspective. Like Horwood's Christopher, she speaks to what is immutable about Newfoundland — the part that transcends depressions and wars, politics and economics, and even history:

It doesn't matter to the mountains that we joined Confederation, nor to the bogs, the barrens, the rivers or the rocks. Or the Brow, or Mundy Pond, or the land on which St. John's and all the cities, towns and settlements of Newfoundland are built. It wouldn't have mattered to them if we hadn't joined. . . . [T]he northern night, the barrens, the bogs, the rocks and ponds and hills of Newfoundland. The Straits of Belle Isle, from the island side of which I have seen the coast of Labrador.

These things, finally, primarily, are Newfoundland.

From a mind divesting itself of images, those of the land would be the last to go.

We are a people on whose minds these images have been imprinted.

We are a people in whose bodies sea-seeking rivers roar with blood.⁶

JAMES DOWNEY

6 Wayne Johnston, *The Colony of Unrequited Dreams* (Toronto, 1998), pp 560-2.