

## Ronald Rompkey. *Literature and Identity: Essays on Newfoundland and Labrador.*

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sections, preferring to organize “in a series of sequences or chains of writing,” this reader would have found some thematic divisions useful in thinking about this book as a potential text for classroom use. The editors might also have used their editorial pens to correct minor errors such as the dating of Commission of Government in 1934 (not 1932). These quibbles aside, *Weather’s Edge* succeeds in providing readers with a glimpse of recent writings on women in Newfoundland and Labrador. In addition, the volume is handsomely produced with a signature cover by artist and designer Beth Oberholzer.

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Ronald Rompkey. *Literature and Identity: Essays on Newfoundland and Labrador*. St. John’s: DRC Publishing, 2006, ISBN 0-9781496-4-5

TO RATE THE SCHOLARS of Newfoundlandia would certainly be a mug’s game. There are so many and so many good ones. And then there would be the question of who should do the rating. Presumably not me. I am an English professor from Saskatchewan who fell in love with Newfoundland, with Newfoundland history, with Newfoundland music, and on down — or up — the list. I can claim only to be a dabbler, with a bit more knowledge of Newfoundland than most, but much less than many.

And yet perhaps my experience as an English professor makes me strangely appropriate. Newfoundland has a fine tradition of English professors who have combined literature and history, such as Patrick O’Flaherty. The classic examples are probably the dictionary trio, Story, Kirwin, and Widdowson, but another who comes to mind is E.R. Seary, who remains a prime source for the Newfoundland obsession with onomastics: “That’s not a Newfoundland name.” “It is too.” The author of the present volume, Ronald Rompkey, University Research Professor in the Department of English at Memorial University, is yet another. At least part of him is certainly a literary historian. His work on Sir Wilfred Grenfell is well aware of Grenfell as author. Still, much of Rompkey’s work, including much in this volume, is literary rather in the style of his own prose than in the subject matter. While it is for the most part clear and direct, a “plain style,” there are moments of a robust sententiousness, as in his description of the sailors depicted by Erle Spencer: “Men are still taking risks and receiving their reward.” (9) He admits that Spencer was “interested in Newfoundland as a setting for melodrama and romance, a *terra incognita* suitable for staging far-fetched adventure.” (3) Rompkey continues, “But let us not dismiss him immediately as a sentimentalist.” (3)

I highlight that last phrase because of what it says about Rompkey. While his intention is to lay out the facts, to say who these people were, what their books are and what was the culture they represented, he drops periodic hints of who he is. The

rhetorical flourish of that short first person plural contradiction says much about the sentiments of the critic. One of my teachers cast aspersions on this form by saying, “Leave the ‘let us’ for the salad.” “Let us” is always overtly rhetorical but as many great orators have shown — let us here recall Joseph R. Smallwood — it works. Rompkey draws us into complicity with Spencer and with Spencer’s vision.

Rompkey’s greatest success is no doubt his work on Grenfell, another fine rhetorician, as Rompkey shows in the essay here on *A Labrador Doctor*. Rompkey does the same with the rhetoric applied to various depictions of Grenfell in “Heroic Biography and the Life of Sir Wilfred Grenfell.” Still, he also goes well beyond such matters, as in “The Idea of Newfoundland and Arts Policy Since Confederation.” This very reasoned and revealing piece, published shortly after Rompkey completed his term as chair of the Newfoundland Arts Council, should be required reading for all politicians. The arts in Newfoundland have always received the rhetoric of support but funding has often been another thing altogether. If, as all the signs suggest, Newfoundland is about to become a “have” province, perhaps the artists can have a bit as well.

This is an interesting and entertaining book but its limitations are somewhat irritating. If you did not know the Arts Council connection you would not find it out from this volume. There is a brief biography in the introduction by Everard King, but there is nothing to connect the individual pieces to any of Rompkey’s other concerns. There is a list of books by Rompkey but no bibliographical information, not even enough to know which he authored and which he edited. While it is understandable that the essays have not been revised since their original publication, some commentary would have added interest, especially for the brief book reviews. Rompkey reviewed Harold Horwood’s *Bartlett* and the published version of Ted Russell’s *Tales From Pigeon Inlet* soon after they came out in the late seventies. I suspect that thirty years later Rompkey might have somewhat different responses to such interesting icons of a certain period.

But let us not allow a lament for limitations to deny significant success. Rompkey is an able observer who has devoted himself to this culture. The results are important. His *Grenfell of Labrador*, a book that has done much to shift understanding of that charismatic figure, is worth much more attention than anything in *Literature and Identity*, but this volume provides noteworthy glimpses of that and other work. Two of the essays are in French, reflecting Rompkey’s recent work to remind us that Newfoundland’s connection with France goes far beyond St. Pierre and Miquelon or a few names on the Port au Port. Rompkey’s future publications will offer much more to enshrine his position as a Newfoundland historian, of whatever category, but for now this is a pleasant summary of what he has already accomplished.

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