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Radio and the Invention of Newfoundland

THE COVER OF JEFF WEBB'S engaging social history of broadcasting in Newfoundland, *The Voice of Newfoundland: A Social History of the Broadcasting Corporation of Newfoundland, 1939-1949* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008), has a telling image. It is of a young Joey Smallwood with a cowbell – used to punctuate news reports – as he reads his script at the microphone of VONF in his seminal role as "The Barrelman" (the radio broadcast of his popular newspaper column, which was on the air from 1937 until 1943). This image points to the integration of mass media with the development of modern Newfoundland as a political entity, and Webb makes the case for the central role of radio in the debates over Newfoundland's entry into Confederation and, before that, the Commission of Government's use of radio as a means of reaching the far-flung population. While radio ownership was largely concentrated in St. John's, Webb describes how radio brought together members of smaller communities in the home of whomever owned the device in order to listen to news and entertainment broadcasts as well as to receive locally specific messages. This communal function of radio in Newfoundland reveals a rich forum of interaction and engagement, which is contrary to the assumption that mass media has an alienating function as a consequence of its individualized use. As Webb states: "For many families the radio receiver was a sort of aural hearth, a device around which they would huddle for comfort at the end of the day's labour" (3).

The book's primary concern is to examine the material factors giving rise to broadcast policy through an analysis of existing evidence of listener response such as written correspondence and to develop an understanding of how citizens come to understand and make use of radio content at a time of tremendous social change in Newfoundland. Webb downplays the function of textual analysis of extant recordings because of the gap between creation and consumption, acknowledging that listeners are not blank slates but bring their own predispositions and preferences to bear on the messages received. Rather than privilege one form of analysis over another, however, it would have been more productive to approach textual and reception study together as complementary means of understanding the subject. Yet given that there is very little in the way of surviving recordings, it is appropriate that a non-textual approach was undertaken. One notable source is surviving program scripts, but here Webb does suggest the appeal of textual analysis by noting how the act of listening to extant recordings reveals "dimensions of the broadcasts not apparent in the written text" (13). Rather than fully explore these dimensions, though, what we do get in this book is an analysis of the social and policy context in which the broadcasts took place. In this way, the study demonstrates how radio serves as an important inroad to the cultural history of the time as well as a new way of understanding the policies of the Commission of Government and the place of radio in the formation of Newfoundland popular culture.

VONF, the Voice of Newfoundland, became the state-owned broadcaster in 1939 and a provincial branch of the CBC in 1949. But it began in 1932 as a private broadcast station operated by people experienced in American radio, and had its earlier origins with VONA, a station operated by Pastor Harold Williams of the

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Seventh Day Adventist Church. It was the second radio station to emerge in Newfoundland and the second to be operated by a church (the first, VOWR or Voice of Wesleyan Radio, began in 1924). These points of origin reveal the integration of secular and religious spheres as well as the overlap of private and public sector interests, and the book traces the continuity in programming from private to public ownership eras. This is an important contribution of this book, for it troubles existing assumptions of a foundational distinction between the public and private spheres in broadcasting histories. Webb positions this history in the religious sectarianism dominating Newfoundland society and compares the situation with Canada where, in the 1920s, the government had banned church-owned broadcasters. There was also conflict in terms of the broadcast of church doctrine over the air in Britain. This is an important comparison, because both the BBC and the CBC served as models for VONF. The church-operated broadcasters in Newfoundland managed to avoid partisan and sectarian strife, and Webb notes the difference between radio and the other popular mass medium of the era, the newspaper, which tended to be fiercely partisan; the religious broadcasters also undertook a public service role that was an extension of marine radio (i.e., in assisting rescue missions at sea). In contrast, most existing broadcast histories are premised on the distinction between the self-interest of private broadcasters and the public service of state-run outlets. Moreover, Canadian cultural studies remains stubbornly anchored in anxieties over American influence on the distinctiveness of national culture. After all, as Webb notes, the foundational rationale for public broadcasting in Canada was a simple choice: "the state or the United States" (12), echoing Graham Spry's demand, made in the 1920s, that the Canadian government recognize the value of national public broadcasting as distinct from American commercial radio. Worries over American influence certainly existed in Newfoundland, but they inflected in a way that is distinct from Canadian concerns.

This book provides an interesting picture of the role of broadcasting in the formation of the modern state. During the period of the British-appointed Commission of Government (1934-49) there were no formal public outlets for political debate, and radio played a pivotal role in articulating government policies, in individual campaigns for election to the National Convention, and in allowing Joey Smallwood and others, especially fiery opponent to the Commission of Government Peter Cashin, to stake out public positions in debates over Newfoundland's independence and whether or not to enter into Canadian Confederation. Webb describes Smallwood's familiarity with the medium (and audience familiarity with him) as an aid to how he positioned himself in these debates. Smallwood claimed his Barrelman radio show audience as the authentic people of Newfoundland and, whether consciously or not, allowed his own informal outport speech patterns to convey a sense of populism. Webb connects the particular history of radio to the broader and inter-generational social-political context by noting how "later generations of Newfoundland politicians sometimes affected rural speech patterns so they would not appear to be from St. John's. As the Barrelman, Smallwood could claim to be of Newfoundland, neither a St. John's man nor a bay man, but someone who could fit into either society" (100). VONF undertook selective broadcasts of the National Convention and, as an experienced broadcaster, Smallwood would have had inside knowledge on the broadcast schedule and was already a familiar and popular radio voice for Newfoundlanders while other delegates were not necessarily comfortable with the medium or even informed that microphones had been

installed. Webb deftly describes how Smallwood made the surprise move of announcing, during the first broadcast of a regular session of the National Convention, his proposal to send a delegation to Ottawa to negotiate Confederation and thus establishing himself as a leading pro-confederate. This is a great example of how the author engages the history of the medium in its interrelation with the political and social realm to articulate the role of popular culture in political debates. Smallwood maintained, with some justification, that his own voice was a vital part of Newfoundland popular culture, and the book more broadly provides historical grounding to the concept of popular culture in Newfoundland in a way that informs the use of this concept within the Canadian context.

No small part of the concept of popular culture is the central role of consumerism, and Webb notes how part of Smallwood's Confederation advocacy was "a vote for a North American consumer lifestyle" (163). In practice what this came to mean was the replacement of real political autonomy with the rhetoric of the uniqueness of Newfoundland culture, particularly as it was grounded in the folk culture of the outport. Webb's take on the relationship between political autonomy and folk culture is based on his understanding of culture as something negotiated through a confluence of forces rather than simply produced by an institution such as the state broadcaster. In fact, there were a multitude of forces jockeying for influence, and radio became an important battleground for these experiences. At the time, there were anxieties over the influence of American-style broadcasting, both in terms of the influence on local radio personalities (as imported entertainment) and as something accompanying the massive presence of American troops during the Second World War. It was the particular pace and manner of "American" speech, along with the presence of popular music (and racist-inflected anxieties over jazz), that raised concern – especially when set against a tradition of "British character" in the broadcasts (171). And there was also concern in terms of the influence of Canada; one complainant stated "advertisements were in the Canadian mode and in a voice and manner entirely foreign to Newfoundland" (174). These external forces competed against a more local inflection of voice and broadcast content, particularly in the selection of music. Webb avoids simplistic distinctions between private-public and popular-serious culture, noting "Newfoundland popular culture had always been in dynamic conversation with forms and ideas from elsewhere in the world" (7).

This case study of radio provides an opportunity to reclaim the concept of popular culture from its attachment to American consumerism and mass entertainment and grounds the notion of the popular in its original meaning as something significantly engaged with in the everyday lives of the people. This also avoids the simplistic dichotomy of an ideal of authentic local culture set against imported entertainment. Folk culture has a contradictory function in western society, both as a nostalgic marker of the past and as a commodity signaling authenticity. Webb makes the case for a distinct Newfoundland idea of the folk that navigates between these positions: "Unlike their American contemporary Walt Disney, Newfoundland cultural producers did not take folk culture and transform it into patented commodities, but disseminated it for others within the culture to use and modify" (111). Similarly, the book makes the case for the distinction, drawing on important work on Canadian public broadcasting by Marc Raboy, between a public broadcaster serving the administrative agenda of the state versus service to the democratic needs of the people. The debates

over the various on-air influences are expressive both of the form of local culture and of the political positions related to independence; they reveal as well the British paternalism embodied in the Commission of Government and its interest in using radio to unite empire in times of crisis through, for instance, sensational coverage of the 1939 royal visit – something at odds with ideals of independence. In this way the book outlines the complex intersection of popular culture with social and political history. Webb also draws links to contemporary concerns over the preservation of cultural distinctiveness as well as to an earlier modernist movement driven by folklore studies of the 1960s and 1970s over questions of authenticity. It is also a practical matter for cultural producers since VONF, as part of the CBC, provided few opportunities for Newfoundland content to be broadcast beyond the region on the national airwaves. This station, which began as a communal force within an independent nation, evolved into an outlet for one-way transmission in a way that mirrors the centre-periphery relations structuring modern Canada.

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