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Volume 62, Fall 2008

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/11t62art03>

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Publisher(s)

ISSN

0700-3862 (print)

1911-4842 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Korneski, K. (2008). Race, Gender, class, and colonial Nationalism: Railway Development in Newfoundland, 1881–1898. *Labour / Le Travail*, 62, 79–107.

Article abstract

Historians have long noted that policies of “progress” were integral to men and women throughout northern North America in the 19th century. A range of scholars have commented on the centrality of railway technology to these policies. Indeed, they have suggested that, in the 19th century, bourgeois nationalists were swept up in a kind of “railway fever,” and that even though there were detractors, the tenacity of pro-railway elites, and the considerable patronage that huge construction loans and contracts provided them, ensured that these projects triumphed over other possibilities. The Newfoundland case suggests that there is a need for both a slightly revised assessment of elites and their views and goals, and a more nuanced reading of the role of ordinary men and women in the policy-making process. While elites in the colony did view the railway as a means of becoming a “progressive” or “modern nation,” and while they viewed economic prosperity and “enlightenment” as central to modernity and progressiveness, commercial dynamism was only one important component of a more encompassing program. Elites supported the railway because it provided them with a way of living according to standards of Britishness that became important to Newfoundlanders and others in “white” settler dominions, especially after the mid-19th century. Central to “Britishness” as policy makers understood the term, was the idea that “British societies” were those in which men lived according to their “god given manly independence.” A careful analysis of the daily press suggests that many working people took these ideals seriously, and that they saw railway work, and the future employment and other economic opportunities its promoters promised, as a means of living according to them. When opponents of railway development did maneuver themselves into power, they found efforts to change course were met with popular upheaval. Ultimately, it was a broadly based solidarity founded on notions of male entitlement that determined which policies were “feasible.”

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ARTICLE

Race, Gender, Class, and Colonial Nationalism: Railway Development in Newfoundland, 1881–1898

Kurt Korneski

ON THE MORNING OF 16 AUGUST 1881, a large crowd gathered near “Oak Farm,” the residence of a Mr. John Dwyer, just outside of St. John’s on Carpasian Road.¹ A small number of those assembled, approximately 50 men, were the centre of attention. They had been hired by a consortium of capitalists to build a railway from St. John’s to Hall’s Bay. Most historians who have examined or commented on the project suggest that its appeal lay in the promise of economic growth, the allure of the technology itself, and the political support railway promoters could garner with the patronage that huge loans and construction contracts allowed them. That is, according to most historians, many 19th century bourgeois nationalists in Newfoundland and elsewhere were swept up in a kind of “railway fever.” They viewed the railway itself as a “wand of progress” that would provide their citizens with the economic prosperity and mental faculties essential to progressive and modern nations.² Factories, mines, sheep runs, saw mills, and farms, all worked by enlightened citizens, would emerge as the railway linked “howling wilderness” regions to the “modern world.” These historians note that there were detractors. They also suggest, however, that those in opposition turned out to be no match for their pro-railway counterparts who were unshakable in their convictions and were able to sway large numbers of ordinary people by providing them employment.

1. *Newfoundlander*, 16 August 1881.

2. James Hiller, “The Railway and Local Politics in Newfoundland, 1870–1901,” in James Hiller and Peter Neary, eds., *Newfoundland in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries: Essays in Interpretation* (Toronto 1978), 123.

So irresistible was this drift toward the “railway age” that it became the policy of national development even in locales where the capital outlay entailed by construction was so great that it actually undermined the basis for political independence.³

An analysis of development policy in Newfoundland in the late 19th century suggests that the situation was somewhat more complex than this interpretation allows. In particular, it suggests that there is need for both a revised assessment of elites and their views and goals, and a more nuanced reading of the role of ordinary men and women in the policy making process. Elites in the colony did view the railway as a means of becoming a “progressive” or “modern nation.” Their vision of modernity, however, was far more specific than other scholars have suggested. Like other men and women in settler societies, Newfoundlanders were linked with, and made sense of themselves through and in light of, a broader imperial context. In the later 19th century, changes in imperial relations fostered British support for both mass settlement and greater political autonomy for “British peoples” throughout the empire. With this shift came a reconceptualization of the empire, both for those living in Britain and also those living elsewhere in the empire. Now there were two kinds of empire. On the one hand were colonies of settlement inhabited by “Britishers” whose status as such was evidenced by their conformity to the gender norms and individualism central to prevailing standards of Britishness. On the other hand were the dependencies – colonies whose population consisted primarily of “lesser races.” While in theory they were distinctive, in reality at the outset men and women in both imperial spaces diverged significantly from “British society.” The aim for a host of settlers, then, became that of transforming the social, economic, and other practices in their locales to demonstrate that they deserved to be counted among the Britons of what late 19th century observers called “Greater Britain.”⁴

In Newfoundland, colonial elites ranging from lawyers, to newspaper editors, to clergymen, to fish merchants and other businessmen concurred that the island’s traditional staple, the cod fishery, was not only stagnating, but also was a central cause of Newfoundlanders’ non-conformity to “British standards.” While most accepted that changes were necessary, there were marked disagreements about how to ameliorate the situation. Some, such as William Whiteway and Ambrose Shea, argued that a sharp break with the fishery and the directing of the country’s resources into a large-scale program of landward development based on the construction of railways was desirable. Others, such as Robert Thorburn and his Reform Party, advocated a more cautious

3. A.A. den Otter, *The Philosophy of Railways: The Transcontinental Railway Idea in British North America* (Toronto 1997), 21–31, 221–23; James K. Hiller, *The Newfoundland Railway, 1881–1949*, Newfoundland Historical Society Pamphlet Number 6 (St. John’s 1981), 3.

4. See, for example, Sir Charles Dilke’s, *Greater Britain* (New York 1869) and his *Problems of Greater Britain* (London 1890).

approach based on road construction and the expansion of the existing coastal steamer service. Ultimately, however, working people determined which doctrine of development would prevail. That is, a careful analysis of the daily press suggests that many working people took railway promoters' suggestion that railway work, and the future employment and other economic opportunities its promoters promised, was not only a source of employment, but the most promising means by which they might live according to ideals of masculinity central to prevailing definitions of Britishness. When Thorburn and other anti-railway politicians came to power in 1885 and implemented their alternate policy of development, they were met with social unrest, a storming of the legislature, and personal threats. While the Thorburn administration abruptly shifted course in an attempt to quell unrest and to secure a long-term political future, Reformers went down to defeat in the next election. An increasingly democratic franchise after 1889 ensured that the railway remained at the core of the country's development policies in the years to come.

I

FOR MUCH OF ITS POST-CONTACT history, Europeans viewed Newfoundland "not as an object of settlement but as an industry."⁵ That is, the main focus was on the fishery, and the island itself was of interest mostly because it was a good place from which to catch and dry cod. Prior to the late 18th and early 19th centuries, most fishers were waged labourers who used the island as a base of operations, but who returned to Europe at the end of the fishing season. This arrangement began to change after the late 18th century. At that time, a series of wars, which lasted up through to the early 19th century, made trans-Atlantic voyages more treacherous than usual and also gave Britons a temporary monopoly in the fishery. The precariousness of trans-Atlantic travel and the unprecedented high prices fishers fetched for their goods made settlement desirable.⁶ Nevertheless, while those in the industry now conducted their trade differently, fishing remained the island's central commercial activity from that time up through the 20th century. It was central not only because the resource itself was extensive, but also because a scarcity of topsoil, a cold, wet, and short growing season, and limited boreal forest meant that few other industries were possible.⁷ Settlers did spend a considerable amount of time engaged in other

5. Sean Cadigan, *Hope and Deception in Conception Bay: Merchant Settler Relations in Newfoundland, 1785-1855* (Toronto 1995), 18.

6. Shannon Ryan, "Fishery to Colony: A Newfoundland Watershed, 1793-1815," in P.A. Buckner and David Frank, eds., *The Acadiensis Reader, Volume One: Atlantic Canada Before Confederation* (Fredericton 1985), 130-148; Sean Cadigan, "The Moral Economy of the Commons: Ecology and Equity in the Newfoundland Cod Fishery, 1815-1855," *Labour/Le Travail*, 43 (Spring 1999), 13.

7. See Sean Cadigan, *Hope and Deception*, esp. vii-xii, 1-17.

activities. For instance, they grew vegetables (mostly hardy root crops) for personal use, cut wood, gathered food, caught game, made clothes, baked bread, and undertook a myriad of other tasks necessary for survival. However, the scarcity of local resources meant that the populace depended on imports for many essential food items, manufactures, and raw materials, and the main product they had to trade was saltfish and products derived from other marine species, such as seals.⁸

Heavy dependence on this resource fundamentally shaped social relations in the colony. From the early 19th century onward, the basic social unit in Newfoundland was the fishing family, who were engaged in what is called a “truck” system. In this system men caught fish from small vessels close to shore, while women and children formed the bulk of the “shore crew” – i.e. those who cured the cod after it was landed.⁹ Ideally, at the end of the season fishers took their saltfish to a merchant to repay him for any equipment or other items he might have given on credit at the beginning of the season, and also to purchase goods needed to sustain the family through the winter. As long as fish were plentiful, the system both sustained the island’s populace and provided a lucrative area of investment for both foreign and local capitalists.¹⁰ The problem was that as the population grew, so did the need for an expansion in the fishery, and by the 1830s there is evidence to suggest that there existed an imbalance between fishers and local stocks of cod.¹¹ That merchants and fishers alike faced real economic problems rooted in an ecological imbalance is indicated by declining catches.¹² It is also suggested by the fact that merchants began to restrict credit by the middle of the 19th century to fishers who could and would invest in technologies like bultows, cod seines, and cod traps that enabled them to catch more of a declining resource locally, or to those who could afford the larger vessels needed to seek out and harvest fishing grounds either further offshore, or in more remote regions off the coast of Labrador. The intensification of fishing efforts and the exploitation of new

8. Eric Sager, “The Merchants of Water Street and Capital Investment in Newfoundland’s Traditional Economy,” in Lewis Fischer and Eric Sager, eds., *The Enterprising Canadians: Entrepreneurs and Economic Development in Eastern Canada, 1820–1914* (St. John’s 1979), 86. Shannon Ryan, *The Ice Hunters: A History of Newfoundland Sealing to 1914* (St. John’s 1994), 104–106.

9. Marilyn Porter, “‘She Was Skipper of the Shore Crew’: Notes on the History of the Sexual Division of Labour in Newfoundland,” *Labour/Le Travail*, 15 (Spring 1985), 105–124.

10. James Hiller, “The Newfoundland Credit System: An Interpretation,” in Rosemary Ommer, ed., *Merchant Credit and Labour Strategies in Historical Perspective* (Fredericton 1994), 82–101.

11. Cadigan, “The Moral Economy of the Commons, 17–23.

12. David Alexander, “Newfoundland’s Traditional Economy and Development to 1934,” in James Hiller and Peter Neary, eds., *Newfoundland in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries: Essays in Interpretation* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press 1978), 20–21; Cadigan, “The Moral Economy of the Commons,” 18.

stocks provided a temporary reprieve. Yet, stocks were soon thinned to a great enough degree that Newfoundlanders needed either new technologies or new fishing grounds to sustain fishing families and profit margins.¹³

By 1850, many local elites acknowledged that the fishery alone could not continue as the main area of investment and employment for a growing population of settlers on the island, and over the next half century one of their central focuses was to diversify the economy. At first they seem to have believed that granting rights to the use and benefit of the lands and resources of the island's interior at a minor cost would itself entice settlers and investment to the island. Accordingly, in 1860 they passed an Act which outlined the procedures and conditions of the sale of unoccupied Crown lands.¹⁴ The 1860 Act seemingly had disappointing results, and in May of 1866 the Assembly passed another Act which offered bounties (eight dollars for the first acre and six dollars for each of six additional acres) to those who cleared and brought into cultivation unoccupied lands in the colony. While diversification in general appealed to the colony's elite, failures in the fishery throughout the 1860s made the situation more urgent, and they framed the latter Act (tellingly entitled *Act for the Reduction of Pauperism, by encouraging Agriculture and more effectually carrying into Operation the Provisions of the Act 23 Vic., Cap. 3*) explicitly with the view that the "present means of support" were "not sufficient to provide" for wants of the populace.¹⁵

The problem of declining stocks was exacerbated by structural and production problems within the fishery itself. While bultows, seines, traps, and the bank and Labrador fishery may have provided short term solutions to problems of supply, they also meant that processors (the "shore crew") had to contend with large quantities of fish all at once. At the same time, the introduction of steamers, which carried larger cargoes than ever before, changed the dynamics of the fishery for exporters significantly.¹⁶ To command the best prices for fish, Newfoundland exporters had to get their products to market before their Norwegian and French competitors. The emphasis on getting cargoes together as quickly as possible, and of getting the fish to market as quickly as possible, led merchants to relax their standards. Indeed, during the last half

13. Cadigan, "The Moral Economy of the Commons," 25–7; Sean Cadigan and Jeffery A. Hutchings, "Nineteenth-Century Expansion of the Newfoundland Fishery for Atlantic Cod: An Exploration of Underlying Causes," in Paul Holan, Tim D. Smith, and David J. Starkey, eds., *The Exploited Seas: New Directions for Marine Environmental History* (St. John's 2004), 31–65. See also Cadigan, "Failed Proposals for Fisheries Management and Conservation in Newfoundland, 1855–1880," in Dianne Newell and Rosemary Ommer, eds., *Fishing Places, Fishing People: Traditions and Issues in Canadian Small-Scale Fisheries* (Toronto 1999), 147–169; Shannon Ryan, *Fish Out of Water: The Newfoundland Saltfish Trade, 1814–1914* (St. John's 1986), 48–9.

14. 23 Vic., Cap. 3 (*Acts of the General Assembly of Newfoundland – AGAN* [1860], 29–31).

15. 29 Vic., Cap. 5 (*AGAN* [1866], 55–57).

16. Ryan, *Fish Out of Water*, 77–98.

of the 19th century many fish exporters, and particularly those dependent on the Labrador fishery, began purchasing fish *tal qual*. With decreased selectivity, fishers often concentrated on catching rather than curing fish, and overall there was a decline in the quality of fish produced in Newfoundland, which, in the long term, made it difficult to capture a larger share of rapidly expanding foreign markets in the late 19th century.¹⁷ The decline in the competitiveness of Newfoundland fish in combination with increased tariffs in what had been key markets for the island's exporters only added to an already difficult situation.¹⁸ Thus, after 1866 policy makers devised a range of strategies to deal with economic decline. Successive governments extended the bounty system in agriculture and passed a host of other acts designed to generate growth.¹⁹ They also eventually established a Fisheries Commission to address problems in the fishery itself and passed a Bait Act in an effort to disadvantage key competitors in the fishery.²⁰

II

MOST OFFICIAL SUPPORT for the railway came from men like William Whiteway, A.W. Harvey, Moses Monroe, Ambrose and George Shea, Daniel Greene, Michael Carty, Moses Harvey, Michael O'Mara, James McGrath, Richard MacDonnell, William Donnelly, Robert Kent, James Callanan, Thomas Mitchell, and Thomas J. Murphy. Some of these men – and particularly A.W. Harvey and Moses Monroe – were bona fide Water Street merchants. The majority, however, were prosperous retail merchants, industrialists, financiers, prominent lawyers, and well-to-do artisans based in St. John's.²¹ Most were not

17. Shannon Ryan, "The Newfoundland Salt Cod Trade in the Nineteenth Century," in James Hiller and Peter Neary, eds., *Newfoundland in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries: Essays in Interpretation* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press 1978), 51.

18. Ryan, *Fish Out of Water*, 133.

19. For instance, in 1868 they passed an Act to encourage oyster farming, in 1873 they passed a Homestead law based on similar US and Canadian legislation, and in 1877 an Act to encourage manufacturing. Two years later they sought to compensate for declining inshore catches of cod by passing an Act to encourage the bank fishery. In the same year, they offered grants of land, tax breaks, and exemptions to existing legislation restricting the ownership of dogs to prospective sheep farmers. See 31 Vic., Cap. 11 (AGAN [1868], 78); 36 Vic., Cap. 7 (AGAN [1873], 85–89); 40 Vic., Cap. 10 (AGAN [1877], 61–2); 42 Vic., Cap. 14 (AGAN [1879], 89–91); 42 Vic., Cap. 10 (AGAN [1879], 80–82). On the parallels between the Newfoundland and Canadian and American homestead legislation, see Michael Stavely, "Saskatchewan-By-The-Sea: The Topographic Work of Alexander Murray in Newfoundland," *Newfoundland Quarterly*, 77 (Fall 1981), 31–41.

20. Keith Hewitt, "The Newfoundland Fishery and State Intervention in the Nineteenth Century: The Fisheries Commission, 1888–1893," *Newfoundland Studies*, 9 (Spring 1993), 58–80; Hiller, "The Railway and Local Politics," 135.

21. While the majority of the top tier of the St. John's social hierarchy were fish merchants, as Bonnie Morgan has noted, there was also a key group of "those who directed society through

directly interested in the fishery, but nevertheless understood that a decline in the fishery meant general economic collapse. These men saw the island (in this period Labrador almost never entered the discussion) as a resource hinterland which ought to be developed for the benefit of the Avalon Peninsula where the majority of Newfoundlanders lived at this time.²² Encouraged by Surveyor General Alexander Murray's optimistic reports of extensive agricultural lands and mineral and timber resources in the interior, these men argued that building a railway across the island would make these resources accessible. Mining and lumbering would not only provide new areas of investment for merchants and other businessmen who hoped to lessen their dependence on an industry in which the possibilities for expansion were limited, but also would create employment for those who could no longer be sustained in the fishery. Moreover, settling agriculturists in the interior would take additional pressure off of the fishery, and would also provide a market for industrial prod-

political institutions." Many of the leaders of the pro-railway groups – men like Whiteway and Shea – were among this segment of Newfoundland's late 19th century ruling class. See Bonnie Morgan, "Class and Congregation: Social Relations in Two St. John's, Newfoundland, Anglican Parishes, 1877–1909, MA thesis, Memorial University of Newfoundland, 1996, 37. For information on the individuals mentioned here, see James Hiller, "William Whiteway," *Dictionary of Canadian Biography Online*, <<http://www.biographi.ca/EN/ShowBio.asp?BioId=41263&query=william%20AND%20whiteway>> (19 February 2008); and Hiller, "Ambrose Shea," *Dictionary of Canadian Biography Online*, <<http://www.biographi.ca/EN/ShowBio.asp?BioId=41186&query=ambrose%20AND%20shea>> (19 February 2008). See also Melvin Baker, "A.W. Harvey," *Dictionary of Canadian Biography Online*, <<http://www.biographi.ca/EN/ShowBio.asp?BioId=40894&query=augustus%20AND%20harvey>> (19 February 2008); and Baker, "Moses Monroe," *Dictionary of Canadian Biography Online*, <<http://www.biographi.ca/EN/ShowBio.asp?BioId=40430&query=moses%20AND%20monroe>> (19 February 2008). See also "James Callanan," in *Encyclopedia of Newfoundland and Labrador: Volume 1* (St. John's 1981), 313; "Michael Carty," *Encyclopedia of Newfoundland and Labrador: Volume 1* (St. John's 1981), 379; "William Donnelly," *Encyclopedia of Newfoundland and Labrador: Volume 1* (St. John's 1981), 635; "Richard MacDonnell," *Encyclopedia of Newfoundland and Labrador: Volume 3* (St. John's 1991), 406; "James McGrath," *Encyclopedia of Newfoundland and Labrador: Volume 3* (St. John's 1991), 409; "George Shea," in *Encyclopedia of Newfoundland and Labrador: Volume 5* (St. John's 1994), 153; "Patrick J. Scott," in *Encyclopedia of Newfoundland and Labrador: Volume 5* (St. John's 1994), 110–111; "Thomas Murphy," in *Encyclopedia of Newfoundland and Labrador: Volume 3* (St. John's 1991), 655. For more on Murphy and for information on Thomas Mitchell see Melvin Baker, "The Government of St. John's, Newfoundland, 1800–1921," PhD thesis, University of Western Ontario, 1980, 242, 248.

22. Although by the later 1890s Newfoundlanders grew more concerned with Labrador's mineral and timber resources, in the period under consideration they tended to regard it as a fishing station. That is, they concerned themselves with little beyond the coastal zone they needed for conducting the fishery. Indeed, until around the turn of the century, they had not bothered to determine the boundaries of the region. See Richard Budgel and Michael Staveley, *The Labrador Boundary* (Happy Valley-Goose Bay 1987).

ucts which both merchants and politicians (often the same people) hoped to produce locally at a handsome profit.²³

There was also a great deal more than profits that concerned local elites. They wanted to create, and to benefit inordinately, from a vibrant economy, yet this was one essential element in a more encompassing vision linked with the growth of colonial nationalism which was, in turn, intensified by the changing nature of imperial relations in the last half of the 19th century. At or around mid-century, a series of rebellions in Jamaica, India, and New Zealand dovetailed with a global economic crisis (a depression in profits) to produce new departures among imperial officials. Hitherto, the aim had been to dominate native populations both to extract profits and to “civilize” them. After this time, imperial officials promoted the “settlement of British peoples in colonial spaces.”²⁴ Placing Britons who had been granted control over local political matters into territories over which the British either held or sought dominion, they surmised, would ensure the loyalty of the colony, and also promised future economic vitality for Britain.²⁵ Rather than using extra economic force to extract profits from indigenous labour, the new strategy was to put in place a state that ensured (by force if necessary) conditions that allowed purely economic force – the “imperative of the market” – to coerce men and women into allowing a net transfer of their productive powers. The newly settled areas would provide markets, new frontiers of investment, and would act as a safety valve for mounting social tension within Britain itself.²⁶

Ultimately these policy shifts had important ramifications for the shape of imperial relations and for the ways men and women within the empire thought about themselves. British political and economic support for mass

23. Moses Harvey, “This Newfoundland of Ours: A Lecture Delivered on Behalf of the St. John’s Athenaeum, 11 February 1878” (St. John’s 1878); “Report of the Select Committee to Consider and Report Upon the Construction of a Railway,” *Journal of the House of Assembly*, 1880, 127. For earlier examples of similar views see, for example, Father Morris, “The Proposed Railway Across Newfoundland; A Lecture Delivered in the New Temperance Hall, 9 February 1875.” (St. John’s 1875); David Alexander, “Newfoundland’s Traditional Economy and Development,” 25.

24. Adele Perry, “Whose World Was British? Rethinking the ‘British World’ from an Edge of Empire,” in Patricia Grimshaw and Stuart Macintyre, eds., *Britishness Abroad: Transnational Movements and Imperial Culture* (Melbourne 2007), 145. On the political economy of the period, see Bernard Porter, *The Lion’s Share: A Short History of British Imperialism, 1850–1995* (London and New York 1996), 28–73; see also, E.J. Hobsbawm, *Age of Empire* (New York 1987), 53–76; P.J. Cain and A.G. Hopkins, *British Imperialism, 1688–2000* (London 2001), 228–242.

25. On the appeal of federation see Peter J. Smith, “The Dream of Political Union: Loyalism, Toryism and the Federal Idea in Pre-Confederation Canada,” in Ged Martin, ed., *The Causes of Canadian Confederation* (Fredericton 1990), 148–171; and his, “The Ideological Origins of Confederation,” *Canadian Journal of Political Science*, 1(March 1987), 3–29; Ged Martin, *Britain and the Origins of Canadian Confederation, 1837–1867* (Vancouver 1995), esp. 81–116.

26. For an excellent discussion of the distinction between various forms of empire, see Ellen Meiksins-Wood, *Empire of Capital* (New York 2003).

settlement and colonial nation building created a distinction between colonies of settlement and the dependent empire. The difference between the two was theoretically straightforward. The dependent empire consisted primarily of indigenous people that the British administered directly or dominated through a system of collaboration.²⁷ By contrast, the empire of settlement consisted of predominantly European-descended populations who embraced social, political, cultural, and economic systems that resembled those in the countries from which they hailed. The distinction, however, was more than an innocuous label designed to differentiate two kinds of imperial relationship. The dependant empire consisted of the “lesser races” who were not fit for self-government and other “British institutions” and “traditions.” By contrast, those in settler societies were not only fully human beings equal to Britons, but were a kind of extension of Britain itself. They were among the Britons of what colonial nationalists called a “Greater Britain” – a transnational community of men and women whose members ostensibly shared a common set of values and institutions.²⁸ Both within Britain and among settlers, the terms “British institutions” and “British traditions” conveyed no precise meaning. They were, rather, contestable terms and depending on the definition given them, could serve to bolster a wide variety of social orders. The forms of these concepts that most colonial nationalists embraced were essentially an idealized version of English bourgeois life. In terms of politics and economics, this meant a prosperous, liberal-capitalist society that consisted of sober patriarchs who dealt with the trials and tribulations of a capitalist economy and liberal polity, and cultured, nurturing women who centred their lives on a “private sphere” of home, family, and emotion.²⁹

In Newfoundland, as in other settler colonies, nationalists were adamant that they were among the finest examples of the “British race,” and yet they were woefully aware that life in the territory they inhabited differed markedly from the one implied in prevailing standards of Britishness. Rather than being the hub of a prosperous country, for example, St. John’s was a muddy, foul smelling place.³⁰ More generally, diminishing catch rates, and in some years

27. Patrick Wolfe, *Settler Colonialism and the Transformation of Anthropology: The Politics and Poetics of an Ethnographic Event* (New York 1999), 1–7.

28. On the “British world” see, for example, Carl Bridge and Kent Fedorowich, eds., *The British World: Diaspora, Culture and Identity* (London 2003).

29. See Kurt Korneski, “Britishness, Canadianness, Race, and Class: Winnipeg and the British World, 1880s–1910s,” *Journal of Canadian Studies*, 41(Spring 2007), 161–184; Anthony Moran, “As Australia Decolonizes: Indigenizing Settler Nationalism and the Challenges of Settler/Indigenous Relations,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 25 (November 2002), 1013–1042; Adele Perry, *On the Edge of Empire: Gender, Race, and the Making of British Columbia, 1849–1871* (Toronto 2001), 3–4; Cole Harris, *The Resettlement of British Columbia: Essays on Colonialism and Geographic Change* (Vancouver 1997), xi–xxii.

30. *Mercury*, 24 August 1886; see also David Kennedy’s 1892 description of the city as found in *The Book of Newfoundland, Volume 2* (St. John’s 1937), 243.

almost total failures, in the fishery meant that people on the island regularly contended with poverty and, periodically, with severe poverty and even starvation. While elites envisioned a society of “self-possessed,” freely choosing individuals characteristic of liberal society, the truck system fostered dependency and paternalism. Moreover, Newfoundlanders often did not conform to the gender norms characteristic of their supposed racial type. That is, while the arduous work of the “shore crew” sat uneasily with the “binary logic” of 19th century bourgeois gender systems, the stationer fishery in Labrador was totally unacceptable. In this fishery women worked much as they did on the island, but in Labrador they faced rough living conditions, reportedly had no privacy, and were not under the supervision of “morally upstanding” men and women. While the Labrador fishery had been ongoing for many years, by the late 19th century it became a point of disgust for a host of men and women. It continued on as a point of concern up through the early 20th century.³¹ One of the most vocal, early critics was a clergyman named Henry Lewis. He viewed the fishery much as a sign of Newfoundland’s backwardness. In “British societies,” he argued, “women should be at home, attending to domestic duties and the training and education of their children.” To allow them to continue on in the “primitive conditions” of the Labrador fishery was to further “heathenish practices.” He chided the “kindhearted, sympathetic Christian men and women” in Newfoundland who were “deeply moved by the condition of the heathen abroad,” but who allowed their own people to “sink in degradation and misery as bad as that which exists in Africa, China and Japan.”³²

III

THUS, WHILE ECONOMIC development was important, the railway also appealed to its proponents because it was itself an important symbol of civility. It was one of the accouterments of an “advanced” or “British society.” To have a railroad was to be “modern” or “advanced,” while the lack of such a technology on the island placed Newfoundlanders on a plane with “lesser peoples.” As Moses Harvey, writing under the pseudonym “Locomotive,” explained,

31. See Sean Cadigan, “Whipping them into Shape: State Refinement of Patriarchy among Conception Bay Fishing Families, 1787–1825,” in Carmelita McGrath, et al. eds., *Their Lives and Times: Women in Newfoundland and Labrador, A Collage* (St. John’s 1995), 48–59; see, for example, “Report on Female Labor on Labrador Schooners, 1901,” Maritime History Archives 13–B, 2-2. See also Krista Chatman, “Impurity, Temptation and ... the hot Passions of Stalwart Fishermen: Governor Sir Henry McCallum and the Women of the Labrador Floater Fishery,” honours dissertation, Memorial University of Newfoundland, May 2004.

32. *Mercury*, 16 November 1885. This letter was part of a more general campaign that Lewis carried out through the local press. For other, similar statements see *Mercury*, 14 November 1885; 16 November 1885; 18 November 1885; 27 November 1885; 5 December 1885; 29 January 1886.

all civilized nations have found it necessary to introduce the locomotive railway. Without it, progress is found to be slow or impossible, and in order to develop their resources and keep their place in the onward march, at whatever cost, railways had to be built. It would be difficult to find any country, having any pretensions to the term civilized, without railways.³³

As of the 1880s only "China and Newfoundland" had been able "to resist the innovation; and now the latter threatens to give way." To oppose the railway was to assume the status of the Chinese, and Harvey even referred to detractors as "our fine old Chinese Newfoundlanders." If allowed to guide the country's future, these men, bound to a conservative, rigidly structured social system, guaranteed "stagnation and death. ... the people who refuse to advance or to accept fresh thoughts," he warned, "must degenerate and perish."³⁴

The railway also appealed because, according to its proponents, it provided Newfoundlanders an escape from an industry, the fishery, which promoted forms of social organization and habits within the populace that did not conform to the standards of Britishness to which they aspired. As is suggested above, for elites throughout the empire a "British society" was a liberal society. For them, as for many other 19th century liberals, individuals were both male and ultimately consumers whose natural impulse was to employ their capacities and faculties to satisfy a limitless number of appetites. The "good society" was in part that which fostered conditions that maximized the production of those things needed to satisfy individual wants. Of course, given that "individuals" were "bundles of appetites" motivated by an impulse toward accumulation meant that maximal productivity required a guarantee of exclusive rights to what they accumulated through the use of their skills and abilities. That is, men and women were stirred to action by a limitless number of appetites, and if they had no reason to believe that they would have control over, and the right to exclude others from, what they had accumulated through the use of their skills and abilities, there would be no motivation to produce anything beyond basic subsistence.

For proponents of the railway, then, the fishery, and especially the supplying system which was associated with it, was problematic. Merchants determined both the price of fish and the price of supplies. According to critics, by overcharging for supplies and undervaluing fish, merchants created a scenario in which fishers always owed the whole of their catch (and then some) to the merchant. Rather than working to encourage innovation and productivity, this system encouraged men and women to act in ways associated with "lesser peoples."³⁵ That is, it fostered an emasculating dependence, and it encouraged them to default on debts, to lie, cheat, deceive, and steal to wring as much out of merchants as possible. These practices, and particularly the failure to

33. *Morning Chronicle*, 10 July 1880.

34. *Morning Chronicle*, 8 June 1880.

35. *Mercury*, 3 November 1884; 4 November 1884.

honour debts, compounded the problem, for merchants inflated the cost of supplies to those who were honest to cover bad debts.³⁶

By whatever miracle, as one observer noted, "four hundred years of a baneful system of trade have failed to eradicate from our people those virtues of independence, self-reliance, honesty and industry so characteristic of the British races."³⁷ Nevertheless, were the colony ever to take its "rightful place at the forefront of British possessions," massive changes were needed, and the railway, "that ... innovator, that overturner of old systems and ideas, that enemy of sung monopolies," would serve this end.³⁸ It would do so in part because it promoted the payment of workers in cash. That is, the railway itself not only paid its workers in cash, but proponents of the project predicted that the industries generated by the railway would also pay cash wages. Cash was preferable to credit because it gave workingmen control over the product of their labour. They could choose between suppliers and, in seeking to maximize their return for their money, would force merchants to compete with each other and to ensure that they charged prices determined by the market. Moreover, individual control over wages would also create incentive to increase earnings and would allow independence that promoters of the railway viewed as characteristic of "British societies."³⁹

Dependence, of course, was only problematic for males in the imagined society, and while the railway appealed because it would foster independence for men, it also appealed because it promoted female dependency and allowed more male control over female lives. For some, railway work, and work in the industries that the railway generated, would employ men with wages sufficient to support a wife and children who stayed at home.⁴⁰ For others, like, James Monroe of the ropewalk, it meant something different. He was not opposed to young women and children working. After all, in virtually every large industrial centre in the western world large numbers of women were factory

36. Robert Sweeny suggests that the tendency to default on debts was indeed pervasive. See his "Accounting for Change: Understanding Merchant Credit Strategies in Outport Newfoundland," in James Cadow and Carol Corbin, eds., *How Deep is the Ocean?: Historical Essays on Canada's Atlantic Fishery* (Sydney 1997), 121–138.

37. The idea that Newfoundland had been hampered by greedy merchants was pervasive. This quote comes from *Mercury*, 12 February 1884. See also, for example, the *Morning Chronicle*, 23 December 1881; *Mercury*, 5 November 1884. Sean Cadigan mentions the importance of this view as well in his *Hope and Deception*, esp. vii–xii.

38. *Mercury*, 4 March 1882.

39. This type of commentary was common. See, for example, *The Mercury*, 19 April 1882; 13 May 1882; 24 June 1882; 27 June 1882. *Morning Chronicle*, 24 January 1882; 30 June 1882. *Newfoundlander*, 1 March 1881; 30 June 1882; *Carbonear Herald and Outport Telephone*, 16 September 1880; 13 May 1881.

40. *Mercury*, 1 September 1886.

operatives.⁴¹ The railway and the industrial development it would spawn could provide appropriate employment situations. Rather than traveling to isolated locales, women could work as they did in other “advanced” settings. They could work under the supervision of men while at work, and those away from home could be protected from danger and kept from endangering the community by elite women, who, working through modern social agencies, could keep a watchful eye on female operatives during their leisure time.⁴²

IV

DURING THE LAST DECADES of the 19th century, most of the colony’s elites would have accepted that Newfoundland was a British territory and that it ought to become a British nation (meaning that it ought to conform to the standards of Britishness outlined above) of the first rank. Most also recognized that if Newfoundland were to become such an entity, significant changes were needed. Yet, not all of these men and women embraced the railway as the best way to sustain national independence, or to provide the populace with the economic opportunities necessary for life according to prevailing standards of Britishness. Proponents of the railway painted detractors in stark terms. According to them, Newfoundland was embroiled in a struggle between the “party of progress” and the “fish flake” or “stagnation” party. The former consisted of forward-looking men who embraced innovation and modernity; the latter was comprised of backward looking, self-interested merchants – the late 19th century representatives of a long line of men who sought to keep Newfoundland in a state of impoverishment and servitude.⁴³

41. *Newfoundlander*, 26 January 1883.

42. *Newfoundlander*, 11 March 1879; 26 January 1883. Often these ideas about the future that the railway would bring were implicit. See, for example, *Evening Telegram*, 6 January 1881; 19 October 1881; 21 October 1881; 1 November 1881. Newspaper reports toward the end of the 19th century indicate that the city contained organizations that had been developed elsewhere to deal with the “problem” of young female wage earners. A report in the *Evening Telegram* for 4 June 1897, for example, mentions that St. John’s was home to a branch of the Girl’s Friendly Society, an organization that was founded in London, England in 1875.

43. Indeed, the majority of these men and women would have argued that Newfoundlanders were not only among the Britons of Greater Britain, but that they were among the finest examples of such men and women. Dominions like Canada, New Zealand, and Australia were “new,” “empty,” and believed to be resource rich. As a result, they found favour with British financiers and officials who saw them not only as territories in which to invest, but also as a possible source of spiritual rebirth that would assure Britain’s future global supremacy. By contrast, according to many of the colony’s elite in the 19th century, Newfoundlanders had operated under a yoke placed upon them by merchants and imperial officials who were determined that Newfoundland should be nothing more than a fishing station. For contemporary examples of these ways of thinking about Newfoundland and its history, see *Mercury*, 16 June 1883; 8 June 1883; 12 February 1884. *Morning Chronicle*, 23 December 1881. Other scholars have identified and commented on the pervasiveness of these notions. See, for example, Cadigan, *Hope and Deception*, vii–xii; Hiller, “The Newfoundland Railway,” 6; Jerry Bannister,

While these appeals may have made for good political sloganeering, the situation was more complex. Some of St. John's largest supplying merchants, men like A.W. Harvey and Moses Monroe, were ardent supporters of the railway, and most of the lawyers and politicians mentioned above were interconnected with them.⁴⁴ Moreover, most merchants who opposed the railway supported economic diversification and the development of landward resources.⁴⁵ Indeed, Charles Bennett, a virulent critic of the railway, was also one of the leading proponents of maintaining Newfoundland's independence in 1869. He desired to keep the country independent in part because he believed that if the country's resources were to be developed, they ought to be developed by Newfoundlanders.⁴⁶ He was also one whose faith in commerce and development was unmistakable. He, along with Alexander McNielly, Charles Ayre, Walter Grieve, Charles Bowring, and other major merchants who opposed the railway were among the key investors in Newfoundland's industrial and alternate resource development projects.⁴⁷

From the outset, men like Bennett praised railways themselves as generators of progress. As Bennett explained in a letter to the *Telegram* in 1882, commerce in general was the

"Whigs and Nationalists: The Legacy of Judge Prowse's History of Newfoundland, *Acadiensis*, 32 (Fall 2002), 84–109; and his, "Making History: Cultural Memory in Twentieth Century Newfoundland," *Newfoundland Studies*, 18 (Fall 2002), 175–194.

44. See Melvin Baker, "Moses Monroe," *Dictionary of Canadian Biography Online*, <<http://www.biographi.ca/EN/ShowBio.asp?BioId=40430&query=moses%20AND%20monroe>> (19 February 2008); see also Baker, "Augustus Harvey," in *Dictionary of Canadian Biography Online*, <<http://www.biographi.ca/EN/ShowBio.asp?BioId=40894&query=augustus%20AND%20harvey>> (19 February 2008).

45. Alexander McNeilly, MHA for Twillingate Speaker of the House under Thorburn, was, for example, a key investor in The Avalon Gold Mining Company. See *Telegram*, 5 March 1886. He was also involved in land and mineral speculation. See CNS Biographical File for Alexander McNeilly.

46. James Hiller, "Confederation Defeated: The Newfoundland Election of 1869," in Hiller and Neary, eds., *Newfoundland in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*, 76. Sean Cadigan and Jeffery Hutchings, "Nineteenth-Century Expansion of the Newfoundland Fishery for Atlantic Cod," 50–51.

47. Bennett was interested in a host of industries on the island. He, along with Smith McKay, started up the colony's first copper mine in Tilt Cove. In addition to mines, Bennett owned a brewery, a distillery, sawmill, slate quarry and foundry, was involved with ship building, was a founding member of the Agricultural Society, and constructed a model farm south of St. John's. On Bennett see CNS Biographical File for Charles Fox Bennett. See also Bert Rigg's article in *Telegram*, 28 November 2000. John Joy has shown that virtually all of the industrial ventures in St. John's in this period had financial backing from the colony's prominent merchants. See Joy, "The Growth and Development of Manufacturing in St. John's, 1870–1914," MA thesis, Memorial University of Newfoundland, 1977.

metal composing that great chain which is to link together the commercial interests of the world and bring the semi-civilized and barbarous races of mankind under the influence of, and in harmony with, the civilized portions thereof for the mutual benefit of all.⁴⁸

According to Bennett, in general as a promoter of commerce railways were a "powerful promoter of civilization ... even more powerful than the merchant and the Missionary." For Newfoundland in particular, however, they were a bad idea. He, Robert Thorburn, A.J.W. McNeilly, A.F. Goodridge, and other opponents of rail development argued that the pro-railway faction exaggerated the potential benefits of the project. The railway, they feared, meant a tremendous financial burden. Saddled with a debt it could not maintain, the country would have no choice but to join the Canadian confederacy.⁴⁹ They also believed that the project would drive up wages and taxes, detract from the coastal trade for their ships, and damage the fishery on which, at least in the short term, they depended for profits and most people on the island depended for a living.⁵⁰ The real question, then, was not if the resources of the country ought to be developed, or whether the socio-economic situation on the island needed to be changed. Rather, it was what policy of development ought to be undertaken. Anti-railway men suggested that Newfoundlanders ought to follow what they dubbed a program of "real progress." In this view, Newfoundlanders ought to continue on with the fishery and do nothing to injure the trade. They also, however, ought simultaneously to encourage industrial development through the use of subsidies and by adjusting tariff schedules, and ought to use and expand the already existing steamer service, combined with a series of strategically placed roads, to access resources and fertile agricultural regions once they had been identified.⁵¹

Critics of the railway organized themselves into an opposition party led by James Rogerson (the "New Party") in 1882, but were unsuccessful as Whiteway mustered a majority by forming a Conservative-Liberal coalition. A few years later circumstances had changed significantly. Though railway construction continued steadily for several years after 1881, the Blackman syndicate appears to have had financial difficulty almost from the outset. The company went bankrupt in the spring of 1884 before the completion of the proposed line. Francis Evans, a London banker and receiver for the Newfoundland Railway Company, saw through to completion the line from St. John's to Harbour Grace. The rather disappointing results of the first railway contract materialized at about the same time that sectarian tensions, spurred on by Orange-Catholic violence in Harbour Grace late in 1883, mounted in the colony. The result was

48. *Telegram*, 27 September 1882.

49. *Telegram*, 21 March 1881. For Thorburn's similar view see, for example, *Newfoundlander*, 1 April 1881.

50. Hiller, "The Railway and Local Politics," 129.

51. Hiller, "A History of Newfoundland, 1874-1901," 130.

that in 1885 Robert Thorburn and a reformulated New Party, now called the Reform Party, divided along denominational lines the Conservative-Liberal coalition that brought Whiteway to power in 1882.⁵²

Thorburn's government was elected on 31 October 1885. When the legislature convened in early February 1886, all evidence suggests that he and other Reformers were committed to a policy of "real progress" like the one Bennett advocated until his death in 1883, and that men like Speaker of the House A.J.W. McNielly and the Prime Minister himself continued to promote. The election, they claimed, was a statement against the former government and its development policies. As a result, the speech from the throne contained no mention of railway construction, an omission which the opposition heavily criticized.⁵³ They reaffirmed their commitment to a non-railway course of development again a month or so later when Ambrose Shea, former supporter of Whiteway and leader of the opposition, introduced a set of resolutions urging the legislature to resume railway construction. Thorburn vehemently argued against passing the resolutions.⁵⁴ In keeping with the policy of "real progress," he argued that the railway policy had not created the benefits its promoters hoped for. He furthered that such projects had added, and would continue to add, a tremendous financial burden to the colony and, in keeping with his views of "real progress," suggested that the government should encourage agriculture.⁵⁵ While the opposition claimed that the best way to do so was by building railways, in 1886, as in 1882, the Reformers preferred to provide transportation and employment by building an extensive network of roads.⁵⁶ Accordingly, he and the other reformers poured money into road construction and passed an *Act for the Promotion of Agriculture*. In essence, the Act established agricultural districts under the direction of a superintendent and staff who directed and managed the clearing of the land, kept track of who settled where, directed road building and other public works, and promoted "scientific agriculture."⁵⁷

By September 1886, however, he had altered his course dramatically and announced that railway work would resume. Because the government was still embroiled in a legal feud with the Newfoundland Railway Company, the plan was to build a branch line from Harbour Grace to Placentia.⁵⁸ The Reform

52. Hiller, "The Railway and Local Politics," 133–34.

53. *Mercury*, 19 and 20 February 1886; proceedings of the House of Assembly, 18 February 1886.

54. For a copy of the resolutions, see *Journal of the House of Assembly*, 1886, 80–89.

55. *Mercury*, 23 and 24 March 1886; *Proceedings of the House of Assembly*, 19 March 1886.

56. See Legislative council debates, 20 February 1886, in *Telegram*, 26 February 1886.

57. The legislature passed the Act on 19 March, the same day that it defeated Shea's railway resolutions. 49 Vic., Cap. 3 (AGAN [1886], 51–57).

58. Frank Cramm, "The Construction of the Newfoundland Railway," MA thesis, Memorial

Party organ, the *Mercury*, initially explained the decision to resume railway construction by claiming that it was merely an extension of the earlier efforts to promote agriculture. Not only would the building of the line open up new lands, but “habits of industry will be developed, and by railway work many will be trained for such labour as is required in clearing and cultivating land and their tastes in that direction will be developed.”⁵⁹ By the time of the next election in 1889, however, the Reform Party plan was virtually identical to the one that Whiteway put forth in 1880, and to the one, after he came out of retirement to run against Thorburn, he put forth again in 1889. Like the Whitewayites, Reformers now talked about the importance of railways for the development of “hidden resources” in the island’s interior.⁶⁰ As Jim Hiller has noted, “the wheel appeared to have come full circle.”⁶¹

Others have suggested that the return to railway construction resulted from the pressures of political survival and the need to deal with economic distress.⁶² In this view, Thorburn and his counterparts recognized that there was little future in politics along denominational lines. With an eye to political survival, he and his counterparts looked for a means to woo members of the Catholic opposition. At the same time, the 1880s in general were particularly bad years for the Newfoundland fishery. The ecological imbalance, about which such scholars as Sean Cadigan and Jeffery Hutchins have written, persisted. Foreign competition and the already mentioned international depression in profits that affected not only cod fishers, but also a host of primary and other producers created a “crisis period” for the Newfoundland fishery.⁶³ The fishery of 1886, like those immediately preceding it, was a total failure, making the situation desperate for those in the outports and in urban centres alike. Recommencing railway construction would put people to work, and constructing a branch line to the largely Catholic district of Placentia would appeal to representatives of Catholic districts.⁶⁴

Ultimately the resumption of railway construction did serve these ends. Construction required workmen, and after Thorburn announced his intention to resume construction, several Liberals did indeed cross the floor or at least frequently support Thorburn’s proposals. Yet, in themselves, political maneuvering and economic depression are unsatisfying as explanations for the Thorburn government’s abrupt shift in attitude toward and policy relating to railway development. Emphasizing concerns with political survival is

University of Newfoundland, 1961, 89–91.

59. *Mercury*, 28 September 1886.

60. See, for example, Assembly debates, 7, 9, 10 May 1889 in *Mercury*, 14, 16, 18 May 1889.

61. Hiller, “A History of Newfoundland,” 133.

62. Hiller, “The Railway and Local Politics,” 135.

63. David Alexander, “Newfoundland’s Traditional Economy,” 23.

64. *The Colonist*, 24 July 1886; *Telegram*, 26 August 1886; 20 September 1886.

problematic for two reasons. On the one hand, there is no direct evidence to support the idea that Thorburn aimed to court Catholic representatives.⁶⁵ On the other hand, if Thorburn's strategy was simply to woo members of the opposition, it seems odd that he would have antagonized those he was trying to court in the weeks just after the opening of the assembly only to turn around to attempt to win favour with them. The idea that the need to provide employment caused the change in policy also seems problematic. Thorburn and other reformers were well aware of the country's depressed economic circumstances in February 1886, and from the outset and continuing through the year, they spent heavily on road construction, other public works, and on direct relief to alleviate the situation.⁶⁶ There is no obvious reason that he should have felt compelled to revive railway construction. If it was simply a matter of distributing more money for relief, why not do so in ways that accorded with their policy of "real progress"? Why not build more roads, provide more direct relief, and undertake more public works outside of railway construction to provide the unemployed and the needy with a living?

The difficulties encountered in the traditional explanation for the sudden shift in Thorburn's policy are rooted ultimately in historians' presumption that the form and viability of government policy is determined primarily by elites themselves. While elites were central in formulating and executing policies in the colony, they also did not work in isolation from and could not ignore the colony's working people, even if as late as 1885 large numbers of them had no voice in the formal political arena. In some ways the focus on elites is understandable, for the nature of source materials, especially in places like Newfoundland where illiteracy was widespread, make accessing popular understandings difficult. Yet, even if we cannot determine precisely what they thought of this technology, it is apparent that almost immediately the railway was of significant interest to Newfoundlanders of various standings. For instance, not only did a large number of men and women gather to watch the turning of the first sod near John Dwyer's farm in 1881, but on more than one occasion the local press noted that individuals' interest often got the better of them and that they often got in the way of work crews or ventured dangerously close to locomotives as they moved down the tracks.⁶⁷ Moreover, after the railway line was extensive enough, many people, including working people, incorporated train travel into their collective leisure time pursuits. In fact, almost immediately after the first train traveled from St. John's to Topsail

65. Cramm has noted the lack of evidence for this view. See "The Construction of the Newfoundland Railway," 93. I am not suggesting that sectarianism was unimportant for Newfoundland in general. Clearly the violence at Harbour Grace in 1883 indicates that the Protestant-Catholic divide still had significance. There is, however, nothing to indicate that sectarianism was important in the decision to resume railway work.

66. Hiller, "A History of Newfoundland, 1874-1901," 131-132.

67. *Newfoundlander*, 19 August 1882.



Part of a work crew on the Harbour Grace Railway, ca. 1885.

Courtesy of Archives and Manuscripts Division, Memorial University of Newfoundland, Collection 137, Series 24

in June of 1882 a host of unions, church organizations, clubs, and other societies in St. John's abandoned steamship excursions, which had been popular in an earlier period, for railway excursions.⁶⁸

While some of the appeal of the technology no doubt had to do with its novelty, there is also evidence to suggest that fishermen and other working people in Newfoundland were tired of the uncertainties of the fisheries and that they took politicians' promises of well-paid and long-lasting employment seriously. We find, for example, even before railway construction began, Francis Winton, editor of the *Morning Chronicle*, urging Newfoundlanders to continue on in their traditional pursuits. As he noted, "employment to any extent need not be expected upon the Railroad until late in the season." Indeed, the Railway Act had not "yet passed the three branches of the Legislature." Thus, he "strongly advised" every "man who has employment carefully to hold on to it.... The man who is foolish enough to throw up his present employment

68. There is discussion of the first railway excursion in *Mercury*, 27 June 1882; 5 July 1882.

There were, for example, general excursions reported in the *Telegram*, 3 July 1882; 22 July 1882. On 9th of August 1882 the employees of the city's foundries and engine and boiler works scheduled a similar trip. See ad in *Telegram*, 25 July 1882. Similar excursions are mentioned in *Mercury*, 14 July 1882; 19 July 1882. Hiller also mentions the popularity of the railway in his, "The Newfoundland Railway, 1881-1949," 9-10.

in expectation of work on the Railroad," he warned, "will be grievously disappointed and will deserve no pity."⁶⁹ Even after railway construction began, the number of men expecting work on the railway still disconcerted local elites. E.D. Shea, editor of the *Newfoundlander* and brother of longtime railway advocate Ambrose Shea, reminded fishermen that they ought only to look for work on the railway "when the fishery slackens."⁷⁰ About a month later he was pleased to see that "the people seem fully alive to the important benefits" of the railway. He also encouraged the "large number of applicants now waiting to be taken on the work" to explore other means of employment.⁷¹

A more telling account of both the extent of the popularity of the railway, and the meaning it held for a large number of Newfoundlanders, however, is found in developments shortly after Thorburn took office. Voting restrictions (that would, as we shall see, be lifted by Acts in 1887, 1889, and 1890) meant that many ordinary Newfoundlanders had no say in the election itself. Exclusion from formal politics did not, however, keep them from determining how the affairs of the colony ought to be run. By the spring of 1886, Newfoundlanders had endured several years of a deepening depression, and, as one *Telegram* reporter warned, "the masses [were] dissatisfied, sullen and angry."⁷² If civil strife were to be avoided, the same writer cautioned, "something must be done soon."⁷³ The writer had good reason to believe what he said. Beginning early in 1886, and continuing on through to the next year, large numbers of people within and outside of St. John's became more and more restive as they found themselves in increasingly dire straits. In late February 1886 a group of 300 to 400 fishermen and labourers gathered at the Court House in Harbour Grace to demand "Bread or Death."⁷⁴ On the 3 March an estimated 1000 people assembled at the Colonial Building to implore the government do something to "relieve their present distress."⁷⁵ On 18 March a group of men from Portugal Cove forced their way into the office of Judge Conroy in St. John's and threatened that "if they didn't get work ... they would break open a store and take provisions by force."⁷⁶ Later in the same month workers demanding that the government take action to ameliorate their situation forced their way into

69. *Morning Chronicle*, 6 May 1881.

70. *Newfoundlander*, 23 August 1881.

71. *Newfoundlander*, 16 September 1881. See also, *Newfoundlander*, 2 September 1881; 16 September 1881. There is similar commentary in *Morning Chronicle*, 6 May 1881.

72. *Telegram*, 23 June 1886.

73. There is evidence of mass privation and unrest in various parts of Conception Bay and in St. John's. See *Telegram*, 11 February 1886; 22 February 1886; 27 February 1886; 11 March 1886; 16 March 1886.

74. *Telegram*, 27 February 1886.

75. *Telegram*, 3 March 1886.

76. *Telegram*, 18 March 1886.

and occupied the Colonial Building while the Assembly was in session.⁷⁷ In the spring and summer workers from different parts of the island also made only slightly veiled threats in petitions. As a group from St. John's explained in their appeal to governor Des Voeux, "there is no fish to be caught, no work or labor to be had, and the town is filled with idle men, who are in a state of extreme destitution, and cannot exist unless some employment is given us immediately.... We receive but three days' work in a fortnight at three shillings a day, out of which we have to support our families." Therefore, "peaceably and quietly, as loyal subjects of Her Majesty" they asked Des Voeux "to advise your government to give us work at once, as we do not want to be driven by famine and poverty into a breach of the peace."⁷⁸ Several months later the situation had grown tense enough that workingmen harassed the premier himself as he walked through the streets of St. John's to protest some of his policies.⁷⁹

Politicians and the journalists and newspaper editors allied with them viewed petitions and social unrest as the work of a disorderly "mob" got up by a desperate, but ill-advised people. A close analysis of reports of that incident and of other, similar incidents when combined the demands outlined in workmen's petitions, suggests that these men acted with purpose. The men who occupied the Colonial Building in late March, for example, gathered at about 1:00 p.m., and, as legislators entered in anticipation of the opening of business later that afternoon, the crowd reportedly cheered as those who supported railway extension went up the steps on their way to the building's entrance.⁸⁰ Moreover, when those gathered forced their way into the legislature, they overpowered the Sergeant-at-Arms and several constables, upset benches or any other furniture that got in their way, entered the main room, and headed immediately for the Speaker's chair. On arriving at this location, they waved a "white calico flag with the word 'Railway' upon it."⁸¹ Similarly, about two weeks later men in Harbour Grace and Bonavista, both locations in which the local press had reported that "mobs" were active, sent petitions to their representatives. In at least some of those petitions they argued that the settlement of agricultural lands and the increase of mining enterprises was the "secret of better times for the laboring population." Like their St. John's

77. *Journal of the House of Assembly*, 1886, 88; *Mercury*, 31 March 1886. According to the *Harbour Grace Standard* of 3 April 1886, the arrest of those identified as the leaders of the "mob" at the Colonial Building precipitated still more unrest as "a mob gathered outside the Court House for the purpose of rescuing the prisoners, and were only prevented from breaking in the door and doing so by a squad of police drawn up before it with fixed bayonets, while the mounted men did their utmost to scatter the crowd."

78. See *Telegram*, 5 July 1886 for a copy of the petition. There is a copy of another, similar petition from workers from Harbour Grace in *Telegram*, 16 April 1886.

79. *Mercury*, 13 December 1886.

80. *Harbour Grace Standard*, 3 April 1886.

81. *Mercury*, 31 March 1886; *Harbour Grace Standard*, 3 April 1886.

counterparts, they demanded the resumption of railway work, arguing that it would provide the island's populace a means of, as they put it, "ridding ourselves" of poverty.⁸²

The organizations that many working people in the colony found appealing corroborate what is suggested by "mob" actions. Not long after popular discontent peaked, a group of men in St. John's organized the Home Industries Encouragement Society (HIES). The HIES was born in part out of dissatisfaction with government efforts to deal with the economic crisis. That is, a considerable number of workingmen reportedly had come to the conclusion that if something were to be done, workingmen themselves would have to take action to "elevate the condition of the people." As the name of the organization implies, its organizers believed that "the secret of improving and elevating the condition of the people" lay in multiplying home industries⁸³ and in "drafting a portion of the people who cannot live by the fisheries to other industrial occupations."⁸⁴ Its organizers presented these aims not simply as desirable, but as the tie that bound all true patriots in Newfoundland, and their nationalism was quite popular. Just over a month after its founding, the HIES had a membership of over 500 (181 of which had been recruited between 8 and 22 November) comprised of shoemakers, carpenters, tailors, blacksmiths, bakers, tinsmiths, sail makers, general labourers, coopers, fishermen, saddlers, and others, each of whom paid a one dollar membership fee.⁸⁵ The organization was by no means a bastion of revolutionary sentiment. Indeed, its organizers saw their purpose as promoting harmony and cooperation between employers and workers. The bulk of its member were workingmen, however, and while organizers urged employers and affluent men in general to fraternize with these people, the organization was explicitly a workers' organization.⁸⁶

In themselves, HIES objectives appear generic enough to have included virtually anyone promoting any policy of economic diversification. Closer analysis reveals that there was a definite bias to the organization. The president of the organization, who was elected directly by the membership, was James Angel, a foundry owner and a loyal Whitewayite who was rewarded for his support with an appointment to the legislative council after Whiteway came back to power in 1889.⁸⁷ One of the vice presidents, Thomas Mitchell, was a baker who

82. For copies of the petitions, see *The Telegram*, 16 April 1886.

83. *Mercury*, 13 October 1886; *Evening Telegram*, 14 October 1886.

84. *Mercury*, 23 October 1886.

85. *Mercury*, 23 November 1886.

86. *Mercury*, 8 November 1886; 11 November 1886; 16 November 1886. The number of people organized is mentioned in *Mercury*, 23 November 1886. The inclusion of "interested capitalists" is mentioned in *Mercury*, 17 December 1886.

87. *Mercury*, 28 October 1886 mentions that Angel was elected president of the organization. On Angel himself see "James Angel," in *Encyclopedia of Newfoundland and Labrador*:

Whiteway appointed to city council in 1892.⁸⁸ Regular speakers at the organization's meetings included pro-railwayites like A.B. Morine and Thomas J. Murphy, and new arrivals to the political scene like Edward Morris.⁸⁹ Workers and others who flooded into the organization in the first months of its existence seem to have found Whiteway's policy of development appealing.

Workers' demands and the ways that politicians attempted to address the social unrest of the mid- to later 1880s suggests that those further down the class ladder were enthusiastic about more than just a means of procuring sustenance. That is, the Thorburn administration had poured money into the construction of regular roads, public works, and into purchasing and distributing supplies to the needy, and workers were well aware of that fact.⁹⁰ For those in the "crowds" and at the centre of efforts to draw up petitions in Harbour Grace, St. John's and elsewhere, it was not "relief" that they wanted. Indeed, evidence of dissatisfaction with work or employment conditions that had a stigma of charity associated with them is found in the already mentioned instances in which workingmen surrounded and intimidated Thorburn on the street. When Reformers provided work, whether on the Placentia line or on road or other public work, they decided to withhold a percentage of workers' earning so that they might be distributed later in the year. Thus, Reformers claimed that the work they provided was "not a demoralizing system of issuing pauper relief to the able-bodied," and that "a fair day's wages for a fair day's work' [would] be given."⁹¹ Government refusal to relinquish control over money that had in theory been earned indicated that there was some ambivalence as to whether workers really had earned wages that they could use as they pleased, or whether they were paupers. While the railway was a form of employment that enabled them to live according to ideals of masculinity characteristic of what imperialists and colonial nationalists throughout Britain's territories called a "British race," the lack of individual control over earnings which was a part of Thorburn's scheme was unacceptable because of what it suggested about those receiving the wages.

Volume I (St. John's 1981), 47. See also, Paul O'Neill, *The Oldest City: The Story of St. John's, Newfoundland* (St. John's 2003), 666.

88. On Mitchell see Melvin Baker, "St. John's Municipal Chairman and Mayors, 1888-1988," *Newfoundland Quarterly*, 89(July 1988), 5-6.

89. *Evening Telegram*, 23 November 1886. Morris was elected as an independent in 1885, promoted railway development, later supported Whiteway in the 1889 election, and went on to be leader of the "People's Party" and prime minister of Newfoundland. See "Edward Morris," in *Encyclopedia of Newfoundland and Labrador: Volume 3* (St. John's 1991), 622; and also James Hiller, "Edward Morris," in *Dictionary of Canadian Biography Online*. <<http://www.biographi.ca/EN/ShowBio.asp?BioId=39843&query=edward%20AND%20morris>> (19 February 2008).

90. James Hiller, "A History of Newfoundland, 1874-1901," PhD dissertation, Cambridge University, 1971, 131.

91. *Mercury*, 4 October 1886.

Just as Thorburn's ambiguous attitude about who ought to control the finances paid to those employed on government-financed projects upset large numbers of people, his refusal to recommence railway construction was the cause of public outcry. From the 1870s onward, key portions of the island's elite touted railway work as desirable and honourable. Payment in cash gave workers control over how and where they spent what they earned and allowed them to live according to their "god given manly independence."⁹² When Thorburn refused to continue with railway construction in a period when other waged work was difficult to find, working people in the colony reacted strongly, not because they wanted relief, but precisely because they did not want relief. Thus, when men in Harbour Grace petitioned the government, they asked their representatives to enable them to *rid themselves* of poverty, and they believed that railway construction was a means to that end. Similarly, when the crowd of workers stormed the Colonial Building, they did not want handouts, but, rather, respectable employment. As the *Telegram* reported, they "hooted and yelled and refused to leave, saying they wanted 'Railway.' ... they did not want food, and did not pretend to want it. They wanted Railway."⁹³

In terms of understanding Thorburn's shift, then, popular unrest was vitally important. Equally important for the longer term were changes in the political system alluded to above. What is perhaps more important for the long term are the already mentioned changes in the political system itself in the late 19th century in Newfoundland. That is, the upheavals both reflected and promoted what Kenneth Kerr has called a "creeping plebianism" in Newfoundland politics in the late 19th century.⁹⁴ In the late 19th century, the government not only adopted the secret ballot, but also introduced a more democratic franchise. Given their heightened activity in and outside of St. John's, and the fact that many of them traveled to and from regions in which such practices already existed, it is probable that workers themselves encouraged these changes. There is, however, insufficient evidence to corroborate these suspicions. What is evident is that elites themselves were concerned about how they appeared to their counterparts abroad, and their desire to be an "advanced" people with suitable political institutions had something to do with late 19th century transformations in Newfoundland politics. That is, men and women in Newfoundland were conscious of how others saw them, and as class conflict in the metropolitan centres with which they identified transformed liberal theory and practice, it also transformed the ideal of "civilized life" to which Newfoundland's elite aspired.⁹⁵ When men like Bond argued

92. *Telegram*, 23 June 1886

93. *Mercury*, 31 March 1886.

94. Kenneth Kerr, "A Social Analysis of the Members of the Newfoundland House of Assembly, Executive Council, and Legislative Council for the Period 1855–1914," MA thesis, Memorial University of Newfoundland, 1973, 31.

95. Over the course of the 19th century, the socio-economic system involved "an uneven, but

that the 1887 Ballot Bill and the expansion of the franchise were desirable because they prevailed elsewhere in the "civilized world," he, consciously or not, worked to realize a "new" liberal, as opposed to just a liberal, social order in Newfoundland.⁹⁶

Whatever its origins, the effects were significant for politics in Newfoundland. The first change to the electoral system came with the 1887 Ballot Act.⁹⁷ Basically this Act put in place a system of secret, as opposed to open voting. In 1889 legislators revised the Election Act to enable all males over the age of 25 to vote, and in 1890 they lowered the age to 21.⁹⁸ The move to a secret ballot was important for several reasons. First, in an open system, where each voter had to declare the candidate for which he voted, the decision could easily be swayed by physical threats at the polling station. Perhaps more significant was that in the old system, elites knew who voted which way. Thus, men of small means knew that if they voted for the wrong candidate, they might find themselves at an economic disadvantage in the post-election period. After 1887

steady and cumulatively vast expansion of the activities and responsibilities of both the state and local authorities. More and more aspects of economic and social life came under legal regulation and restriction." The increasing regulation provided a reality that did not correspond to such central classical liberal beliefs as that of the necessity of a minimalist state, or the notion that freedom "consisted essentially in the absence of all but a minimum of law, regulation, and compulsion." On the other hand, the more complex, more concentrated economic system that gave rise to the need for regulation and coordination also led to the massing of men and women near the facilities that employed an expanding portion of the population. The concentration of working-class men and women into centres where they lived out and talked about their similar existence, provided fertile ground from which class consciousness and programs for social change, some of which entailed the restructuring of the social order itself, could and did develop. These unanticipated developments disconcerted a range of thinkers. Indeed, such prominent figures as T.H. Green, Arnold Toynbee, L.T. Hobhouse, J.M. Keynes, Richard Ely, Sidney and Beatrice Webb, and others directed their energies toward providing a theoretical basis for, and to thinking through the implications of, a move away from conceiving of society as a collection of discrete individuals whose central concern was with the defense of the "freedom of the individual," and toward a more organic conception of human relatedness and a greater emphasis on the "condition of the people." Doing so was necessary to provide some parallel between theory and actually existing liberalism. It was also a precondition for developing a state whose legitimacy stemmed from a polity comprised increasingly of the "rabble" who liberals traditionally excluded. These quotations come from Arblaster, *The Rise and Decline of Western Liberalism* (London 1984), 285. On Ely, see Dorothy Ross, *The Origins of American Social Science* (New York 1991), 99–110; see also Stuart Hall and Bill Schwarz, "State and Society, 1880–1930," in Schwarz and Lanagan, eds., *Crises in the British State* (London 1985), 7–32. On the advent of developmental liberal democracy more generally see Arblaster, *The Rise and Decline*, 284–295; C.B. MacPherson, *The Life and Times of Liberal Democracy* (Toronto 1977), 44–76.

96. *Telegram*, 11 March 1887; 16 March 1887.

97. 50 Vic., Cap. 10 (AGAN [1887], 133–153).

98. In 1889 they had amended the Act to allow all males over the age of 25 to vote. Prior to that time, only householders over the age of 25 had been able to do so. See 52 Vic., Cap. 15 (AGAN [1889], 106–107); 53 Vic., Cap. 13 (AGAN [1890], 98–101).

there was no way for politicians to be sure who had voted which way, and they had to find new tactics to influence voters. The new situation required that politicians win votes through convincing large segments of the electorate to vote for the bulk of the population by promising to bring about changes that would benefit them. That is, they had to address their political platforms directly to the island's working people. The introduction of a more democratic franchise after 1890 only accentuated these tendencies.⁹⁹

The form of the 1889 election began to take shape in 1887. At that time Robert Bond and Alfred B. Morine, both independent MHA's, urged William Whiteway to come out of retirement. He agreed, and he apparently understood the new political realities and the appeal that railway development had among Newfoundland's workers, for he marked his official return to the political arena and the beginning of his campaign for reelection with a huge torch-lit rally, complete with marching bands and fireworks. No longer was he simply the "party of progress." Instead, he was now the "apostle of progress," and "the leader of the workingman's party." He surrounded himself with banners. One had a picture of a locomotive on it. Another read "A Railway to Hall's Bay by Whiteway," while still others informed the crowd that Whiteway would bring "Progress," "Labour and Good Wages," and "No More Emigration."¹⁰⁰

That an estimated 3000 people came out to celebrate Whiteway's return to politics indicates that he enjoyed some popularity.¹⁰¹ While he was no doubt responsible for some of it, the continuing depression and Reformers' handling of railway work on the line to Placentia also were key. There was little Thorburn or any of the reformers could do about the depression. They did, however, have control over construction of the Placentia line, and, especially in the context of the new political situation, the populace would and could hold its members personally responsible for the treatment that they received. We have already noted the unpopularity of Thorburn's policy of withholding wages. In addition, while those who worked for the Blackman syndicate were paid on average a dollar a day, the Thorburn government paid only 75 cents. Workers also often had to take some or all of their wages in credit at stores operated by members, or friends of members, of Thorburn's administration, and were reportedly given a roll of tar paper and some nails with which they had to build shelters while they were on the line.¹⁰²

The miserable working and living conditions and payment in truck were extremely unpopular among workers, and Whiteway and his counterparts

99. Whiteway himself recognized the significance of these changes for politics on the island. He later claimed that the Ballot Act is what got him elected in 1889. See "Manifesto From Sir William V. Whiteway, K.C.M.G., The Leader of the Workingmen's Party." Bond Papers, Centre for Newfoundland Studies Archives, Collection 237, 3. 12.004, 1893.

100. *Telegram*, 29 August 1889.

101. *Telegram*, 29 August 1889.

102. Hiller, "The Newfoundland Railway," 11.

capitalized on that dissatisfaction. The *Evening Telegram* (the pro-Whiteway paper at the time) reminded workers of the comparatively low wages. Moreover, in addition to calling the Reformers familiar names like the “stagnation party” and the “fish flake party,” they also dubbed Thorburn and his counterparts the “flour and molasses party” as a way of drawing attention to the payment of wages in truck.¹⁰³ The Reformers tried to counter by arguing that they were now “in the van of progress,” and, as has already been mentioned, by adopting rhetoric that was virtually identical to that which Whiteway had used in the early 1880s, and that he continued to use in the 1889 election. They also took concrete steps to demonstrate that they were truly a party of “progress” as a large proportion of the electorate understood the term. In fact, late in 1888 they actually resumed work on the Hall’s Bay line.¹⁰⁴ The bulk of the voting population apparently did not find Reformers’ appeals convincing, for Whiteway, leading a group of young up-and-coming political figures like Bond and Morris, who would continue in politics as leaders of “workingmen’s” and “people’s” parties for many decades to come, swept back into office.

In the context of an increasingly democratic liberal political order, success in politics meant that candidates had to be able to read as well as to influence, popular sentiment. The direction of government policy after 1889 suggests that railways continued to be central to popular nationalism for some time to come. The year after Whiteway came to power, the government negotiated a contract with C.H. Middleton and Robert G. Reid to complete the railway to Hall’s Bay. While Middleton dropped out of the partnership in 1892, Reid and his descendants became synonymous with the Newfoundland railway and, indeed, came to loom large in Newfoundland history more generally. Reid not only saw the Hall’s Bay line through to completion, but also agreed to build a trans-insular line. He began that project in 1893, and workers in his employ completed it five years later. When construction began in 1881, the public debt of Newfoundland was just over \$1,000,000. When the workers drove the last spike in the trans-insular line in 1898, the debt had ballooned to approximately \$17,000,000, about 9.5 million of which was incurred directly as a result of the railway.¹⁰⁵ Moreover, the completion of the project did not bring the results railway enthusiasts had described. Instead, it meant more unemployment as those who had been in its employ no longer had jobs, and the line’s narrow gauge track, steep grades, and sharp turns, made it difficult to transport people and/or freight at a profit. While the government handed the line over to the Reids soon after it was completed, the railway continued

103. *Evening Telegram*, 25 September 1889; 18 October 1889. These sorts of comments continued on into the Whiteway administration’s first months in power.

104. Hiller, “The Railway and Local Politics,” 135. For contemporary discussions see, for example, Assembly debates, 7 May 1889, in *Mercury*, 14 May 1889; and Assembly debates May 11, 13, 14 1889, in *Mercury*, 20, 21, 22, 23 1889.

105. Cramm, “The Construction of the Newfoundland Railway,” 158.

to force the colony deeper into debt because the government spent another \$7,500,000 to subsidize the construction of branch lines (that stood no chance of turning a profit) to defray the Reid Company's operating costs, and to provide the island's unemployed with work.¹⁰⁶

V

LATE 19TH CENTURY Newfoundland politicians were a fairly typical lot. Like their counterparts in a range of locales where the climate was similar to northern Europe, and in which the indigenous population was marginal, they set out to build a British nation. In Newfoundland, as in Canada, Australia, and New Zealand, the imperialist national project had its origins as a bourgeois project. In terms of politics and economics, they envisaged a liberal-capitalist society. In the context of the 19th century, this meant not only private property, the production and exchange of commodities, and constitutional government, but also a host of mutually determining ideas about race and gender. According to most 19th century liberals, the "individuals" – i.e. fully functioning human beings – in this society would be sober, white, English speaking patriarchs who would be assisted by saintly, cultured, nurturing women.

In reality, conditions in Newfoundland differed significantly from those in the imaginings of the colony's elite, and they knew that if they were to transform Newfoundland from a sparsely settled, "backward" society whose populace depended too heavily on a resource in decline, they would have to bring about momentous change. While most would have agreed on the ends, there was little consensus about the means. Some supported longstanding policies of development based on road construction and the expansion of the steamer service. Others, with a faith in the transformative potential of railway technology, supported the more expensive policy of laying track. The success of one faction over the other had little to do with the intensity of the support or opposition elites could muster amongst themselves. Instead, it depended on the extent to which they could convince and/or compel a large number of men and women, with a very different location in and experience of the social order, to support their plans. Ideals of male entitlement proved a potent rallying point around which a broadly based solidarity among large socially diverse groups of people could be formed. In the end it was ordinary people, viewing the railway as opposed to other possible development strategies as a means of living according to their "god given manly independence," who made that policy of development "feasible."

106. Hiller, "The Newfoundland Railway," 19–20. On the construction of the later branch lines, see also Jason Clarke, "Railway Branch Line Construction in Newfoundland, 1909–1914," honours dissertation, Memorial University of Newfoundland, 1997.

My thanks to Sean Cadigan, Jim Hiller, Andy den Otter, and to the journal's anonymous reviewers for their comments and suggestions, and to Memorial University of Newfoundland's Institute of Social and Economic Research, which provided the funding for this project.