

A History of the Newfoundland Ranger Force. Harold Horwood.

Marilyn Tuck

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REVIEWS

A History of the Newfoundland Ranger Force. Harold Horwood. St. John's: Breakwater Books Limited, 1986.

MARILYN TUCK

NOW THAT THE Royal Newfoundland Constabulary is expanding its jurisdiction to take over some of the R.C.M.P. territory that the Newfoundland Ranger Force once policed, this book is timely.

Harold Horwood's *History of the Newfoundland Ranger Force* is a combination of documentary history, oral history, and folklore, with the emphasis on the latter two. Horwood recounts the saga of how 204 young men, about 50 at any one time, policed and administered all of Newfoundland and Labrador, with the exception of the Avalon Peninsula and Corner Brook, for the fifteen years from 1935 to 1950. Under the British-controlled Commission of Government, the local politicians were impotent and the small group of Newfoundlanders who served on the Commission was the chief mediator between the Newfoundland fishermen and loggers and the British civil servants-turned politicians.

In the fall of 1935, Commission of Government created the Newfoundland Ranger Force, charged it with administering government affairs in rural areas of the province, and three or four months later sent the first Rangers to posts in Labrador and on the northern peninsula. Until 1942 recruits to the Ranger Force were trained at headquarters in Whitbourne. By that time Rangers manned detachments as far south as the tip of the Burin Peninsula.

As general administrators for the Commission, the Rangers worked for all departments of government, but were solely responsible to the Department of Natural Resources. A list of their duties shows that Rangers did

almost anything. They enforced fish and game laws, inspected everything from logging camps and sawmills to weights and measures, acted as wreck commissioners, fire fighters, customs collectors, agricultural representatives and emergency doctors, registered aliens, checked on immigrants, licensed dogs, and finally, evaluated public opinion about confederation. It is an understatement to say that the reports to Commission of Government on all these activities kept the government "the best informed government that Newfoundland had ever enjoyed".

But their chief role until a vestige of prosperity appeared in 1940 was as relief officers, not as policemen. Crime was a rarity in outport Newfoundland, but poverty was not. In 1935, about a quarter of the population was on able-bodied relief. Commission of Government was adamant in its determination to reduce relief expenditures, with the result that thousands of people were literally starving. The Rangers were stuck in the middle. The Commission's policies were made in St. John's, with little or no contact with or first-hand knowledge of outport conditions; many Rangers justifiably chose to support the starving.

During their routine monthly patrols, Rangers met the people and, unlike many of the Commissioners, saw the absolute deprivation of many of the outports. Ranger patrols were extensive and were conducted by any means possible — by foot, dog team, boat, motorcycle, car — whatever was least expensive, most readily available and "did the job".

Strictly speaking, this book should not be classified as a work of history: it does not meet historical standards. For instance, although there are textual references to Commission of Government documents, there is no bibliography to indicate to an interested reader where the documents are. (Reading between the lines of these original documents is an eye-opener, an experience which should be encouraged.) Another questionable characteristic of the book is the heavy reliance upon folklore and legend, and stories which, in some cases, the author himself discredits as being inaccurate and discriminatory. However, perhaps we the readers should ask in this connection, who classifies books? Why classify books at all?

Horwood has written a very readable popular history in the narrative style — a book which will have wide appeal and make this fascinating era in our history better known to more than a limited academic or literary audience. On balance, some of the best sections are those in which Horwood is telling a story about people and things he has researched or dealt with in another context, Labrador, for instance.

Harold Horwood has shown very well that although the Newfoundland Rangers had only a very short history, in that fifteen years they developed a firm place for themselves in the general story of Newfoundland. What he has not sufficiently emphasized is the degree to which the Newfoundland

Ranger Force exemplified the economy and efficiency that Commission of Government so clearly sought and achieved, largely because of the Rangers. Harold Horwood, the consummate raconteur, has chosen to leave us with the impression that the Newfoundland Rangers are as much a part of our culture and folklore as the mummers are. However, the Rangers deserve to be recognized as honest and capable administrators as well.