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Two Views of J.R. Smallwood

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See table of contents

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REVIEW ARTICLE

Two Views of J.R. Smallwood

Joey. Harold Horwood. Toronto: Stoddart, 1989. iv, 340 p. \$29.95.

Smallwood: The Unlikely Revolutionary. Richard Gwyn. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1968. xvi, 304 p. Out of print.

STUART PIERSON

NORMAN MAILER, IN HIS adoring and meretricious little essay on Marilyn Monroe, coined a term for the half-invented, over-dramatized, unverified, and unverifiable details found in popular biography: "factoids," he called them. Joseph Roberts Smallwood may not have attracted as much attention worldwide as Ms. Monroe, but his biographies contain as many of these deformed creatures masquerading as facts as hers do. In 1933 did JRS own a 38-foot schooner which he sailed from St. John's to Bonavista (RG 49) or was it a 36-foot boat which he "never tried to run . . . himself" (нн 59)? Did Churchill "growl" to JRS, re the dam on the falls now named after him, "It's a grand imperial concept . . . I use 'imperial' in the good sense" (HH 192), or did he say "I like it . . . It's a grand Imperial concept . . . And I don't mean Imperialist" (RG 257)? Did the first two volumes of the Book of Newfoundland (1936), bound in ox-blood alligator leather, sell for \$6 (RG 53), or were they in red imitation crocodile leather at \$5 (нн 62)? There are no references in either book, nothing beyond a perfunctory "selected bibliography" in Horwood (336-7) which ignores such works as Noel's book Politics in Newfoundland, misspells J.K. Hiller's name, and gives us no help should we wish to locate the writings of P. Copes, the economist from British Columbia whose statistics, twenty-five years ago, informed us that the

province was overpopulated by a couple of hundred thousand people, and that this third or two-fifths of Newfoundlanders should exercise what is now being called the "mobility option" as an alternative to unemployment. Both mention Copes: Gwyn calls him Parzeval C.; Horwood (correctly) calls him Parzival in the text but omits him from both index and bibliography. These are minor points, perhaps, and might be ignored if such failings were not so numerous. The above examples are drawn from a long list. If the authors cannot get the small things right, should we trust them on the major things?

I don't want to labor the point, but it is hard to resist relating one more telling comparison. At the end of 1945, according to RG, Smallwood went off to Guelph, Ontario, to investigate the possibility of writing a manual on raising pigs. Horwood, on the other hand, sends him to Toronto to find out whether a feed mill would work back home. He was considering cattle farming. The two biographers agree that he stopped in Montreal on the way back. It was December 11, 1945, Gwyn says. Twelfth, says Horwood. To continue with Horwood: he checked into a hotel. He bought a newspaper, the Montreal Gazette. The headline on the front page read Self Rule is Plan for Newfoundland: Colony Soon to Have Own Government after 12 Years of Commission. So that's what happened. Well, not quite, if Gwyn is to be believed: Smallwood bought the Montreal Star (for three cents), and though Gwyn does not say the headline was on the front page, he does imply it. As Smallwood "idly picked up the paper . . . 'the headlines leapt at him': Old Colony to Regain Self-Rule. Newfoundland Program Given in British House." From there, the two accounts converge more or less. What is going on here? Have they both decided to embroider some vague tale each had from Smallwood? There are a number of possibilities, but it is not important enough to worry about. One is struck, however, by the frequent similarity between anecdotes in the two narratives. Here is Gwyn on the Icelander boat scandal:

On Christmas Eve, 1949, four men emerged from a blizzard to knock at the door of Canada House. They were, they explained, Icelandic herring fishermen, and had come because "Iceland is going down and Newfoundland is coming up." Newfoundland could go way up, they suggested, if Smallwood bought herring boats for them and inaugurated a new industry. The quartet left with . . . a contract . . . They returned [in] spring with four purse seiners [which] seemed uncommonly aged . . . Nine months and \$412,000 in government funds later, the Icelanders had caught six barrels of herring. They were never seen again. The boats remained unsold for three years. A buyer . . . paid \$55,000 for them — a sum he was able to afford by way of a government loan of \$55,000. (142)

Horwood's version is surely not independent:

a group of smooth-talking foreigners arrived . . . explaining that they were from Iceland, the skippers of herring seiners, and that they were anxious to move to Newfoundland where everything was on the rise, and opportunities for expansion seemed limitless . . . With [money] they could . . . organize a great new herring industry

in Newfoundland... The Iceland boats arrived, looking like candidates for the scrap heap... Nine months later, with six barrels of herring to show for their efforts, and \$412,000 in government funds gone down the drain, the Iceland skippers disappeared... The ships lay around for three years. Then the government "loaned" a local operator \$55,000 to "buy" them. (176)

Given similarities of this kind, we may ask whether Horwood's book is needed at all. Of course it comes twenty years later and therefore is able to deal with the end of the Churchill Falls development, the spiteful, grimly comical-farcical Liberal Reform Party and the post-political achievements such as the *Encyclopedia*. But all of this Horwood covers in fifty-odd sketchy pages: the bulk of his book — the 275 pages through sixteen chapters — covers the same ground as Gwyn's twenty-four chapters (297 p.), and with points of contact, as just noted.

Well, Gwyn's book is out of print, and many of the yarns about Smallwood are worth retelling and rereading. I would have been grateful, however, for fewer pat phrases like "eke out a living" (HH 60), "speeds in excess of one hundred miles an hour" (4), "Of all sad words of book or pen" (278) and "The best-laid plans of mice and men" (279); fewer redundancies like a jury's "swift and unanimous" verdict (245); and less Smallwoodistic hyperbole, as, for example, this about London bookstores: "They were mines of used and remaindered books from all over the Empire, some with tens of thousands of titles in stock" (49), or this, about the Barrelman broadcasts, "No program in the history of radio ever achieved greater popularity. He had absolutely 100 percent listenership" (64). Also, Horwood is a bit ruthless with his dramatis personae. He killed off Kenneth Brown (1887-1955) in 1946 immediately after the stroke that crippled him. More seriously, he has done away with Joey himself. Throughout the text and in the jacket copy our hero is spoken of in the past tense. I found no clue to the fact that while the writing was underway and after the result was published. JRS was still alive. And how is this for studied ambiguity — it is the book's last sentence:

[JRS] would leave life the way he had left office — not in any sudden and dramatic fashion, but so slowly and reluctantly that you could hardly see when it happened. (330)

As I write this in 1990, Smallwood is still with us.

Horwood and Gwyn have more serious differences. They disagree about Smallwood's origins, his outlook, his career, and his achievement. This means of course that they differ about the character of recent Newfoundland (and perhaps world) history. We shall take these in turn, presently. But let us first take note of an almost inevitable similarity, the biographer's occupational hazard of investing overweening importance, influence, and inventiveness to the biographee. It is a tendency as old as Plutarch, whose Numa, Lycurgus, and Solon, acting all alone, transformed the lives, societies, laws, and

economies of their respective polities of Rome, Sparta, and Athens, just as Smallwood "Virtually single-handed . . . dragged Newfoundland into the twentieth century" (RG 112). Even Horwood, in general less bullish on Smallwood than Gwyn, alleges himself to have predicted in 1946 that:

He's going to win . . . He's going to make it. He's going to get confederation, and he's going to become the first premier of the province of Newfoundland. (75)

Despite long and careful attempts to explain the social setting from which Smallwood came and in which he acted, his biographers assign him too much credit for the events of 1946 and afterwards, and blame him too much as well. Talk of absolute or "near-absolute" power (HH 1) obscures the fact that Smallwood, like other public men and women, worked amongst people who had habits, who, even in situations as unsettled as postwar Newfoundland, were used to having things work a certain way. No one invents a new world. The most powerful of leaders must operate in the midst of other wills, other oppositions, other permissions. Once these wills say "no further," once these oppositions find their voices, once these permissions are withdrawn, things can change fast, as we all, standing agape, have seen in eastern Europe in the last year. The idiosyncrasies of individual leaders provide only a part of the explanation for events in the public political world, even when the plebiscitary success of such men as Napoleon II, Napoleon III, and J.R. Smallwood are at their highest.

Gwyn and Horwood inhabit different Newfoundlands, past and present. For Gwyn, Newfoundland before Confederation was long-suffering, backward, and (quoting novelist Paul West's choice phrase) a "community of Irish mystics cut adrift on the Atlantic." Poor, yes, but worse, "a society that was archaic and ultimately decadent" (125), whatever that means, with the "most backward fishery in the Western World" in 1948 (117). Full of nice people, to be sure, Newfoundland was "at once cosy and cruel," and a "breeding ground of character"; still the "struggle for survival exhausted ambition and creativity" and the wretched place "during four hundred years of recorded history . . . produced few exceptional men" (xii) — until Smallwood, that is, who, unlike his exceptional compatriots E.J. Pratt and Maurice Cullen, "chose to stay in Newfoundland. It was there," Gwyn continues, "that he became an exceptional man. He is the only Newfoundlander to have done so" (x). It was a society without an organized labor movement, i.e., it had no trade unions; the one serious effort to organize the fisherman, Coaker's Fishermen's Protective Union in the first part of this century, failed because "The fishermen were offered the opportunity to express their wishes, but centuries of economic peonage and political subservience had made them incapable of taking advantage of it." These incisive remarks harmonize with Gwyn's contention that Smallwood revolutionized Newfoundland nearly all by himself. The revolution was not over in 1968, when Gwyn published his book, but its outlines were clear.

The Trans-Canada Highway, Memorial University, centralization, an industrialized fishery, Churchill Falls. (He might have added the Arts and Culture centres and Long Harbour.) Gwyn accepted Smallwood's interpretation of his own achievement: Newfoundland "had . . . broken out of the prison that history, economics and geography had locked it in . . . For close to half a century, Smallwood virtually alone in Newfoundland had dared to hope; now his people [!] began to share his confidence in them and in their potential" (278-9). In the resettlement of "dying fishing villages into new growth centres, he was as imaginative and as daring as the most impatient of his advisers, or critics" (279). Even though the province could not be said to have industrialized, still there was hope, for example in efforts to replace the "archaic, inefficient, and low-paying" traditional fishery with "deepsea trawlers and draggers," to "scrap inshore dories and trap boats," to make good on the "promising development of a deep-sea fishery, heralded by the arrival of major international companies such as Bird's Eye, the Ross Group of Britain, B.C. Packers, and Atlantic Sugar" (171, 287). It sounds, in 1990, a mixture of blessings, white elephants, curses, carpetbaggers, and overinflated hopes.

Meanwhile Horwood, having grown up here, and also having experienced a different 1960s from Gwyn's, has another view of both sides of the great Smallwood divide. He maintains, for example, that outport Newfoundlanders "had always lived off the land, and they continued to do so, right through the 1930s" (59), so that the poverty evident everywhere was if anything less demoralizing than the post-Confederation influx of mainly American consumer and cultural crap. He also points out, more sensibly, that at least in cities the Newfoundland workforce was indeed organized: "At confederation more than 45,000 Newfoundlanders were members of trade unions - most of them locals of American 'internationals' - which represented one of the highest levels of organization in North America . . . At confederation Canadian labor organizations sent representatives . . . to begin the process of gathering the new province's workers into the fold, and found to their amazement that there was virtually no gathering left to be done" (148). Similarly, Horwood does not go on about moribund "villages" (cf. RG 279, 289) but instead asserts that during the Smallwood years a fishery, already better "developed" than that in Atlantic Canada, entered "the greatest era of prosperity it had enjoyed in three centuries." He attributes this to the extension of UI benefits to self-employed fishermen ("The most important development in the Atlantic Coast fisheries after the building of the freezing plants"). Whereas Gwyn, speaking of rural Newfoundland after ten years of Confederation and Smallwood, pulls a long face and intones:

Ever since the twenties, employment in the inshore fishery had been dropping. Now, driven from the towns where they could no longer subsist, men flocked back to

the bays. Between 1958 and 1963, the number of fishermen increased from 15,000 to 23,000. But they returned to an outport society that had changed beyond recall. Instead of the old proud self-reliance on home-grown vegetables, home-stitched clothes, and home-made fishing gear, there was only the disguised dole of unemployment insurance. (183)

Horwood, on the other hand, has it that it was not the push but the pull: "The truth was that former fishermen returned to the outports at the first opportunity because that's where they wanted to be, in places where life was productive and had meaning" (220). To be sure, Horwood gives the credit for this "greatest economic and social change in the history of the island" to J.W. Pickersgill, whose clout in Ottawa brought pots of money into his adopted province for roads, bridges, wharves, and so on. Thus the inshore fishery flourished in spite of Smallwood. However the credit is apportioned, Horwood, it is plain, does not regard the outport as an obsolete institution.

Gwyn and Horwood agree that Smallwood had no affection for the sea, and repudiated the fishery as the economic foundation of Newfoundland. The reasons given, however, are not the same. Gwyn, while tut-tutting about Smallwood's "latent and unwise passion for farming" (56) and tracing his obsession with the land to his "first glimpse of the green and gentle farmlands of Britain" on his 1927 visit, nevertheless for the most part simply assumes with Smallwood that the fishery, like everything else, required to be industrialized, modernized, pulled forcibly up to date. Horwood, on the other hand, seems to believe in family destinies:

By instinct Joey was neither a bayman nor a townie, but a farmer, as the Smallwoods of Prince Edward Island had been for countless generations. Unlike Newfoundlanders, they came not from the fishing parts of western England and Ireland and the Channel Islands, but from the sheep-raising country of the Cotswolds. (4)

In consequence, Smallwood "never ceased trying to run a farm," even after repeated failures; also, when he was able to build, he built inland — witness the sites of the Confederation Building and the house on Roache's Line. More seriously, his "genuine, deep-seated mistrust of the sea" caused him to believe that "Newfoundlanders only went to sea out of necessity, that they would quit fishing and flock to the production lines to earn 'good cash wages' in factories at the first opportunity" (7).

Other differences appear, some of them, like the two authors' views on Smallwood's political trajectory, being explicable perhaps by the twenty years that separate the two books. Gwyn caught Smallwood at what neither author nor subject regarded as close to the end, and of course both were spared the ignominy of the Liberal Reform Party campaign of 1975 — history repeating itself as farce. But greater distance also permitted Horwood to see — I think he is correct in this — that the International Woodworkers of America (IWA) strike of 1959 was truly the beginning of the end. There could be no doubt after that about whose sensibilities counted. Smallwood's quest

for development capital required, in his own estimation, a docile, indeed supine, labor force (cf. RG 130). After such knowledge, what forgiveness? The votes continued to come in during the 1960s, but the "populism" of the regime no longer carried conviction.

Both authors know this but still treat the loggers' strike in relative isolation from Smallwood's vision. Gwyn quotes a statement Smallwood made in 1950 on amendments to the Labour Code: "I would like to be associated with labour legislation that would be a model for the world [but] we must temper that desire with our urgent desire to attract capital to Newfoundland" (130). Yet in the 1959 IWA strike "the revolutionary grown accustomed to power had faced his moment of truth. And he had ducked" (222). Horwood too seems to think there was something anomalous about Smallwood's "betrayal of the loggers"; it was his "one unforgiveable act . . . He destroyed the one effective union the loggers ever had, not because he regarded capital as sacred and organized labour as poor white trash, but because he lost his nerve. Having lost his nerve, he abandoned everything he had stood for. And he knew it" (247).

I doubt that. It wasn't sacred capital and unwashed laborers, I admit, it was rather that capital was what he did not have and labor was what he did have, or thought he had, in the form of a grateful, loyal army of exfishermen ready to line up for the jobs that he could get capital to offer if labor behaved itself. Smallwood didn't think he could afford a militant working class. He reckoned that a North American wage scale (at the start, at least) would price Newfoundland out of the market. He also reckoned that local working people would accept his judgment and leadership on this. When the loggers didn't, he blew up. I don't know whether tough unions frighten away capital or not; they certainly do not attract it. Anyway, it was economic wisdom in the 1950s that development came out of the sweat of a labor force having few choices, whether in Manchester in 1840, New England in 1850, or Novgorod in 1930. Smallwood, it is alleged, did not know economics, but he listened to economists.

One scene in the National Film Board film about Smallwood, A Little Fellow from Gambo, shows a number of journalists sitting in a bar trying to extricate, from all their knowledge and experience on the Hill and elsewhere, the essence of Smallwood. Cut to Smallwood himself, viewing those very rushes on the movieola and scoffing: the six blind men and the elephant, what do they know, I elude these scribblers and their simplistic slogans. This is the delicious luxury of political power, the ability (nay the necessity) to be many things to many people, and always to know more than you disclose. On the other side of the barricades, journalists search for the phrase, the formula that will encapsulate the public man and put him, tagged, on the museum shelf forever. And of course biographers often start, or end, with that central image or that apt or pat insight which captures the inner

spring of the subject's whole character. Norman Mailer, with whom we started, once unforgettably linked the names Richard Nixon and Uriah Heep. It seemed to me to explain a lot. Our present biographers have such controlling tropes, though these hover as it were behind the scenes, rather than swoop into center stage. For Gwyn:

At heart, Smallwood is an engineer who has used the opportunities political power has given him to build the foundation of the new Newfoundland he dreamed of. The weakness of an engineer is to be concerned with structures rather than the people who will use them. It is a weakness that has characterized Smallwood's record as Premier. (138)

In his early chapters, Gwyn, consistently with this central identification, describes Smallwood as enterprising, optimistic, drunk on progress, technology, the powerful, the most; as he moves into the years of power he emphasizes the engineering ventures and feats — the roads, the dams, the mills, the trawlers — that punctuated the regime and the regime's propaganda.

Horwood's account is haunted by two authors, whom he just barely acknowledges. The first is Lord Acton, whose fatuous dictum "Power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely" you will not find in the book, though Horwood did quote it at Shirley Newhook when he appeared on CBC television's "Coffee Break" late last year. At the outset of *Joey* he tells us that he has not tried to hide the man's "weaknesses, his failures, or the tragic changes in his personality brought about by the prolonged experience of near-absolute power" (1; the dust-jacket, also, is pointed and exact about Smallwood's power and its longevity: "twenty-one years and eight months"). By the 1960s, Smallwood

was surrounded by an imperial guard of ministers, would-be ministers, and self-serving business associates and heirs apparent who flattered and cajoled him and pretended to be dazzled by the sheer luminosity of his presence, just as every tyrant has been surrounded throughout history. (257)

In 1950, Smallwood and Horwood were in Ottawa, where they caught All the King's Men, Robert Rossen's film from Robert Penn Warren's novel inspired by the career of Huey Long, governor of and later senator from Louisiana, the "Kingfish," populist, or, as Horwood puts it, "Populist-turned-dictator." Warren and Rossen concocted a dramatization of Acton's principle; their narrator was a newspaperman-turned-novelist. Smallwood was moved by the film and insisted that Huey Long had been misunderstood. Horwood, like the narrator, assumes the Olympian, or Parnassian, position of being clear-headed and above it all: Smallwood "could dimly foresee that his own career might take such a course" (168). Huey and Joey were tempted, and fell.

Working alongside Acton, however, in Horwood's mental universe, is the late Marshall McLuhan, whose generational and stylistic analyses of practically everything furnish another explanation of Smallwood's decline and fall. Whereas Gwyn has Smallwood hauling Newfoundland into the

modern age, Horwood thinks he brought us into the 19th century, the era of the "First Industrial Revolution" (217). Joey was a "radio man" and did not twig to the fact that his time had passed, that the "television men" (like Frank Moores) were taking over:

Joey had come out of the period of hot jazz, hot mammas, and hot politics. He looked upon the cool style of [Ed] Roberts and Moores as pure incompetence, and was quite unable to understand that it appealed to the new generation that had "grown up under the Bomb, and the influence of Jack Kennedy." (314)

The contrast in "hot" and "cool" is pure McLuhan. Poor Smallwood, the man of the "Booming Fifties," never took in "that the world of Huey Long and Richard Squires was now ancient history." And the final Horwoodian condescension, the evocation of the chasm of recent times, sheep and goats on either side of 1968: "Joey never accepted that the change in society that took place in the sixties was fundamental" (315). The ordinary parables of a tyrant's career, thus, versus the before-and-after course of epochal change.

Neither author takes very seriously Smallwood's self-proclaimed "socialism." Gwyn thinks that he equated socialism and populism: for him, to be a socialist was to be a "man of the people." He says that Smallwood extracted from socialism "its moral core: the conviction that a better life was possible for everyone, whatever his rank or origin" (34). I leave it as an exercise for the reader to decide whether that defines socialism. Horwood comes all over dismissive and sniffy when it is a question of Smallwood's knowing anything or having read anything or, for that matter, having initiated anything. Here is Smallwood's education, c. 1914, in the principles of socialism:

(already calling himself a socialist among his schoolmates though he had but the vaguest idea what socialism was all about), [he] had met Coaker's éminence gris, the intellectual George Grimes, in a dentist's waiting room, and had received from Grimes two books that purported to explain socialism for blue-collar workers. Written at a grade three reading level in a series of punchy slogans, they made a deep impression on Joey, who continued to think in slogans for the rest of his life. Having digested — indeed memorized — them, he considered himself an instant expert on the coming revolution. (21)

The same story, minus the superciliousness, is in Gwyn (20-21). Nevertheless, I think Horwood has it about right when he writes that Smallwood's

concept of socialism was "being on the side of the toiling masses," and his concept of what the toiling masses needed was jobs in factories owned by free enterprise helped out with large government loans if necessary. (145)

Horwood also notes wryly that whereas Frank Moores, the Tory, did not hesitate to nationalize the Burgeo fish plant and the Stephenville linerboard mill, Smallwood, the Socialist, "never nationalized so much as a trucking service in his entire life" (312).

What we have then, in Horwood's new biography, is a rewrite of Gwyn's book with some angles of vision shifted, with a few new anecdotes

and a few sharp statements such as the one just quoted. The last word is not in on Smallwood, or maybe we should say final words, since public opinion is still sharply divided on his historical legacy. Sean Cadigan thinks the opposite historical analogue to Smallwood is Mussolini, the ex-socialist whose corporate organic state (with strong single leader) seems to be something like what the ex-Premier thought he was defending when he broke the loggers' strike. Others admit the defects and then say: and yet, and yet . . . As for me, I have played with historical and literary *Doppelgängers*, most of them short in stature: Edward G. Robinson in Key Largo, James Cagney in one of his ruthlessly ambitious streetkid-to-gangland-czar roles, Sammy Glick in Budd Schulberg's badly written but affecting novel What Makes Sammy Run? This may be just the fevered literary imagination of a crazed moviegoer gone wild. Yet apart from the historical record, a mixed one to say the least of it, there is something enigmatic about Smallwood's mix: his furious energy; his singleminded passion for politics; the streak of Puritanism in him combined with a cavalier disdain for mere money; shrewdness amongst Newfoundlanders and utter gullibility about the likes of Alfred Valdmanis, John C. Doyle, and John Shaheen; his bookishness; and finally, his charm. In 1971 I heard him address an audience of Canadian academics. Before he began I looked around and saw a lot of superior smirks. These intellectual persons had come to be amused by a walking Newfoundland joke. In about ten minutes Smallwood, relaxed, affable, reflective (in short, working the crowd), had them hanging on his every word. What made Joey run?

Notes

'See Parzival Copes, The Resettlement of Fishing Communities in Newfoundland (Canadian Council on Rural Development [!], 1972) 153: "There is a historical solution to the problem of diminishing labour productivity in local economies that are confined to the exploitation of a limited resource base. That solution is to allow the movable factor, labour, to seek employment in another location where its returns are greater." S.G.R. Noel's classic study of local politics was published by the University of Toronto Press in 1971. A deft summary of recent work on political history is J.K. Hiller's review essay "Twentieth Century Newfoundland Politics: Some Recent Literature," Acadiensis 19, 2 (1989): 181-92.

²RG 58; HH 67-8. Well, the great Casey Stengel said, you could look it up. And, when you do, you find that if the newspaper was the Montreal Star, as RG alleged, then the date was 11 December, the cost three cents, and the headline (the very one RG reported) poised in that key slot at the right edge of page one, ready to leap. On the other hand, if it was the Gazette, then Horwood is right to place this highly charged event on the 12th. Horwood also has his headline right, does not mention the price (5¢), and gets the placing wrong — the item was not on the front, but on the penultimate page 21. JRS himself reported (1967) that he was in Toronto looking at some pig farms or (1973) that he was investigating feed-mill possibilities; that he arrived in Montreal on the 12th (1967) or the 11th (1973); that the paper was the Gazette and that the item was headlined on page one. See J.R. Smallwood, ed., The Book of

Views of Smallwood 121

Newfoundland, vol. 3 (St. John's, 1967) 4ff. and J.R. Smallwood, I Chose Canada (Toronto: Macmillan, 1973), 225-7.