

Place and Persistence in the Lives of Newfoundland Women.
Marilyn Porter.

Ann Marie Powers

Volume 11, Number 1, Spring 1995

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/nflds11_1rv02

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Faculty of Arts, Memorial University

ISSN

1198-8614 (print)

1715-1430 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Powers, A. M. (1995). *Place and Persistence in the Lives of Newfoundland Women*. Marilyn Porter. *Newfoundland Studies*, 11(1), 154–156.

Place and Persistence in the Lives of Newfoundland Women. Marilyn Porter. Aldershot, Hants., U.K.: Avebury, 1993. v, 197 p. U.S. \$59.95

ANN MARIE POWERS

MARILYN PORTER's *Place and Persistence in the Lives of Newfoundland Women* is a welcome and much needed addition to the social science literature on Newfoundland women. It is simultaneously an important contribution to Newfoundland ethnography, feminist discourse and the Atlantic maritime region, in general.

Porter's book is actually a collection of essays written over a twelve year period, beginning in 1980. Several of the essays document and describe women's lives in Newfoundland communities (primarily fishing); while others focus on the methodological and theoretical approaches and problems that have beset feminist researchers in recent years, especially in view of the legacy of *malestream* ethnography and research which has characterized the region since the 60's. Indeed, when Marilyn Porter first came to Newfoundland in 1980, there was not only a paucity of data on Newfoundland women — but what did exist, existed within a Marxist framework. Therefore, the second essay in this collection, "Peripheral women: Towards a Feminist Analysis of the Atlantic Region," critically examines earlier interpretations. In so doing, Porter is quick to point out that in Newfoundland we *are* dealing with the political economy of a people on the periphery of a capitalistic society and that, as such, women always have been a source of cheap labour who, along with other members of the household, have contributed significantly and equally to its maintenance. But since so much attention has been focused on the male head of household and the "authoritarianism" of Newfoundland men, the contributions of women and others in the household often have been ignored. This has not only created an incomplete picture, but a very biased one. Therefore, in subsequent essays Porter poses several questions designed to broaden the ethnographic record.

First, we need to collect data on what it is that women do both inside and outside the home, especially with regard to how women's contributions (economic

and non-economic) are mediated through the family. Second, how does what women do subordinate them when it is often acknowledged (at least in the economic unit of the family) that what they do, they do as nearly equal partners? Third, there is a need for a theory of patriarchy which can perhaps explain when the sexual division of labour leads to oppression and when it is that women have created "... its boundaries in such a way as to confirm their control over at least their own spheres." (p. 53).

With these goals in mind, we are taken on a journey across the Province and through history — from Aquaforte to Catalina, and from Grand Bank to Grand Falls (and places in between). A consistent thread in much of the data is that historically, as today, men are absent from the household for considerable periods of time. Regardless of the reasons for this, it is apparent that in most cases women take on men's roles in their absence, while the reverse does not seem to occur. This was equally true in cases where there were families with all boys or all girls. Yet many of the women (especially in Grand Bank) were quick to point out that often what appeared to be gender based differences in opportunities was a result of birth order as well as of sex and familial circumstances. Overall, it is clear that Newfoundland women are caught in a maze of expectations and obligations which leave them economically necessary to the household, yet quite vulnerable.

Several of the articles are based on team research undertaken by Porter and research assistants. In "'Secondhand Ethnography': Some Problems with Feminist Methodology and Community Studies," Porter gives a critical account of the pitfalls and problems of doing research under guidelines imposed by external funding agencies, ranging from the low fees which research assistants receive to the problems of co-ordination and organization of fieldwork. More importantly, however, it takes a look at issues of native anthropology, the relationship between the observer and the observed, the value of qualitative research and the benefits of feminist research methods, especially as they apply to understanding the economic lives of women and how the role of caring for others (in various situations) mediates that life.

This collection of essays on women in Newfoundland exemplifies Porter's commitment to her work and to feminist research. But she sometimes entangles herself in her web of data and weaves a somewhat confusing theoretical frawework. Perhaps this is partially a function of the different time periods when the data was gathered and the essays written, and simply demonstrates the changing historical and social constructions of gender in Newfoundland. Perhaps it is a reflection of the author's coming to terms with this very rich and complex material.

One rather puzzling aspect is why Porter is so resistant, in the light of data to the contrary, to analyze women's assertions of egalitarianism or claims of how individual personalities accounted for differences (rather than class or gender or age). Surely to look beyond these explanations would not be silencing women's voices; rather it would enable us to see, and perhaps share with them, just how the

156 *Reviews*

circumstances they see as their personal responsibility are themselves culturally constructed.

These and a few other minor problems (typographical errors, for example) do not detract from the book as a whole. It provides a rich, comparative base for further study and it closes with a reminder that regardless of our postmodern theories and explanations, the women of Newfoundland now face a new struggle to survive, and theories which say "nothing about the fish" do not address this crisis. "We have much to learn from Newfoundland women, about the complexity of their lives and about their strategies. The relevance of their knowledge about how to survive in a harsh world has never been greater" (182).