

Cabot 400: The 1897 St. John's Celebrations

Jiri Smrz

Volume 12, Number 1, Spring 1996

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/nflds12_1art02

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Faculty of Arts, Memorial University

ISSN

1198-8614 (print)

1715-1430 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Smrz, J. (1996). Cabot 400: The 1897 St. John's Celebrations. *Newfoundland Studies*, 12(1), 16–31.

Cabot 400: The 1897 St. John's Celebrations

JIRÍ SMRZ

IN 1897 THE UPPER classes of St. John's organized a double celebration of Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee and of the 400th anniversary of John Cabot's discovery of Newfoundland. By saluting Victoria, they affirmed their loyalty to the British Empire; by celebrating Cabot they honoured their own land. At the time Britain was experiencing an era of heightened self-awareness as the arena of world politics became crowded with European and other rivals. The self-governing colonies became increasingly conscious of their own importance to the mother country, and started developing their own nationalisms within the imperial context. The prominent members of St. John's society were not untouched by these developments. Yet the controversy provoked by the decision of a part of this elite to celebrate Cabot together with Victoria suggests that some symbols found easier acceptance than others. While the evidence contained in the contemporary St. John's media does not allow for broad conclusions about the popular resonance of the Cabot celebration, it hints that it was not wide.

According to Bernard Porter, the end of the Victorian era was characterized by a growing siege mentality. The British Conservative government of the 1890s believed that a "scramble for the world" was taking place, and started preparing for "the war of the survival of the fittest."¹ It became necessary to define reasons for the continuing British supremacy. Racial traits were studied and racial hierarchies were constructed. Already in 1883 Cambridge history professor J. R. Seeley (1834-1895) published an influential book entitled *The Expansion of England*, in which he argued that the British Empire was a necessary result of the "peculiarly English" characteristic of expansion. By giving this national characteristic a space in which to express itself, the Empire activated the best the English people had to offer. The journalist Edward Dicey (1832-1911) proposed that this inborn expansionism gave to the English the sanction of Nature to subdue weaker peoples.²

Others believed that the Empire was an instrument given to the Anglo-Saxon race by Providence to be used as a civilizing agent.³

Similar ideas flourished in the self-governing colonies. The Australian politician, Sir Henry Parkes (1815-1896) stated that "the crimson thread of kinship" bound together all the Britons scattered around the world. The idea of a distinctly Australian ethos developed from such concepts, but always took second place to a more general "pride of race."⁴ Canadian polemicists, such as George Parkin (1846-1922), argued that the northern climate of their land attracted only strong races. Since it turned away weaker southern people, it ensured that Canada would become "the great Britannic Empire of the North." The country inherited British blood, and could prove a rejuvenator of that race, made sickly at home by urbanization and industrialization.⁵ The historian Suzanne Zeller puts such ideas into the context of the scientific developments of the mid-nineteenth century, which were marked by "a growing sense of the world as an organism in the process of historical change."⁶ She concludes that these evolutionary (but not necessarily Darwinian) concepts enabled many Canadians to see themselves as members of the British nation modified by life in North America, who could build a country loyal to the British heritage, while still finding natural their changing relationship with the mother country.⁷

The basis for patriotic discourse in Newfoundland was laid in the years following 1815 when the agitation for representative government started. Among a number of polemicists, two pamphleteers stood out: William Carson (1770-1843), a Scottish-born surgeon, and Patrick Morris (1789-1849), a merchant from Ireland. Keith Matthews suggests that their activities were simply an expression of the self-assertion of the British middle classes who happened to live in Newfoundland. To succeed in their political ambitions, they had to paint a bleak picture of the current system of government, and to present a rosy outlook for the island once the local elites took over.⁸ Accordingly, Carson and Morris isolated certain claims from the first history of Newfoundland, published by John Reeves in 1793, and used them to show that Newfoundland's potential had been continuously undermined by outside forces. They argued that the West Country merchants exploited the island economically, and that the imperial government retarded the country's social development by refusing to grant a proper form of government. At the same time, Carson and Morris were optimistic about the potential of British institutions when finally transferred to Newfoundland, and about the qualities of its inhabitants. Carson characterized Newfoundlanders as "a hardy race, fearless of danger, and capable of undergoing the greatest corporeal exertion."⁹ The image of the hardy Newfoundlander goes back to the writings of Louis Amadeus Anspach, an Anglican priest living on the island between 1799 and 1812¹⁰, but the two agitators helped to make it (along with Reeves' idea of victimization) an integral part of Newfoundland's patriotic discourse for the rest of the nineteenth century and beyond.

The physical vigour of Newfoundlanders was celebrated in numerous sealing songs. As early as 1842 we find verses proclaiming that "hardy sons of Newfoundland wait not for season's change,/ mid ice and snow they'll dare go tho billows boldly rage."¹¹ Another British visitor, Sir Richard Bonnycastle (1791-1847), a colonel in the Royal Engineers, in his *Newfoundland in 1842* described the island as England's most ancient colony, and wrote that its fish resources were "vastly superior, in consequence of their effect upon man, to the ... precious stones of the Eastern and warm countries of the globe."¹² A poem traced to a Scottish lady resident in St. John's in the 1850s expressed similar ideas: "Let the sunny India her wealth proclaim, ... we envy not her gaudy show where death insidious steals ... [Y]our ice-girt Isle can claim the true, the brave, the leal, / for slave and tyrant we disdain in the land of fish and seals."¹³

All these ideas found their way into the writings of the two leading Newfoundland publicists of the later nineteenth century, D. W. Prowse (1834-1914) and Moses Harvey (1820-1901). Prowse was a native Newfoundlander of west-of-England extraction, educated in the mother country. In 1869 he was appointed judge. He was an amateur historian and a prolific essay writer. His major work, *A History of Newfoundland*, appeared in 1895.¹⁴ Harvey was born in Northern Ireland of a family of Scottish descent, and came to Newfoundland in 1852 to work as a Presbyterian minister. He promoted the colony abroad, contributing articles to the *Montreal Gazette* and numerous other North American publications.¹⁵ Both Prowse and Howley turned their attention to John Cabot, who allegedly came ashore in Newfoundland in 1497.

The fact that British imperialism had begun in North America was central to their thinking. In his publicity volume *Newfoundland in 1897*, Harvey listed the succession of English explorers following Cabot: "all those Raleighs, Davises, Gilberts, Grenvilles, Drakes, Hawkinses."¹⁶ He imagined the "hearty English cheers" that issued from Cabot's ship *Matthew* at the sight of the new land¹⁷, and praised "the energy and enterprise of the English-speaking race, whose way [Cabot] had pioneered."¹⁸ Prowse in his *History of Newfoundland* argued that Cabot's voyage "gave North America to the English by indefeasible right of discovery. How different might have been the future of this great continent ... had Columbus ... discovered [it]?" Newfoundland could have ended up a "great Spanish possession with chronic revolutions, disordered finances, pronunciamientos, half-breeds and fusillades."¹⁹

Harvey believed that Cabot's achievement surpassed that of Columbus for yet another reason: while the latter headed for balmy climates, the former (with his "bold West Country sailors"²⁰) had to fight "the North Atlantic, the stormiest sea in the world, strewn with icebergs and icefields."²¹ The fact that Cabot "conquered a new world for England,"²² made him "the real discoverer of North America."²³ His voyage "heralded the approaching supremacy of the English race,"²⁴ and thus opened "a pathway for a far nobler civilization than that of the south,"²⁵ and

"kindled" England's "passion for colonization." In Newfoundland, England was to "try her prentice hand inplanting colonies," where the "swarming tendency" (already observed by writers like Seeley and Dacey) developed, which made her great. "Never was it so productive of important results" as during the reign of Queen Victoria.²⁶ In a few paragraphs of Harvey's prose all the pieces of the mosaic come together: the mission of the British nation, Cabot and his crew its vanguard, the apotheosis of Newfoundland as "England's Oldest Colony" (a phrase so well entrenched by then that it headed every page of the book), and the current greatness of the British Empire in which Newfoundland also shared.

Harvey further elevated Cabot's heroic stature by incorporating him into the Newfoundland underdog tradition originated by Reeves and continued by Morris and Carson. He noted that Cabot had "been, till recently, almost forgotten, his great discoveries overlooked, and his services to England and humanity ignored."²⁷ In his lifetime he was treated shabbily by the English king, his reward being a paltry £10 gift. "Never did a monarch obtain a continent on such easy terms."²⁸ Henry VII's "penuriousness" foreshadowed the mother country's treatment of Newfoundland. The island gave England "something infinitely better than the gold mines of Peru and Mexico"²⁹ — its fishery. This proved a far more solid foundation for settlement, attracting hardy toilers who "have done an honourable stroke of work in the great business of the world" by paving the way for the colonization of the whole North American continent. Yet "much of [England's] debt to them is still unpaid, ... many of the wrongs ... of the past ... unaddressed, and the obstructions to [Newfoundland's] prosperity, created by ill-advised imperial treaties, are still operative in the year of Her Majesty's Jubilee."³⁰ Nevertheless, "at the present moment, under a wiser administration, England's colonies are as ... firmly bound to her by the ties of affection and sympathy ... as any other portions of the Empire."³¹

The adoption of Cabot by Harvey as a patriotic symbol happened amidst spirited discussion about whether his landfall took place on the island at all. Harvey himself subscribed to the Canadian theory that Cabot landed at Cape Breton, and then minimized the importance of the whole question by arguing that Cabot in any case gave the earliest reports of the island's fish-wealth. "The important point is that Cabot, by his discovery, united Newfoundland and England [and] that the tie has never been severed since."³² Others were less willing to give up the distinction of Cabot's landfall. Based on his study of old maps, place names, and especially Cabot's reports of an island abounding in fish, Prowse, "as a Newfoundlander," claimed for Cape Bonavista "the honour of being the first land seen in North America."³³ The most revealing defense of Newfoundland's claims to Cabot's landfall was mounted by M. F. Howley (1843-1914).³⁴ In his lecture "Cabot's Voyages," he painstakingly blasted the Cape Breton hypothesis, and came out in favour of Cape St. John. His purpose was two-fold. First, Cabot's landing on the east shore of Newfoundland demonstrated the island's "most important position — geographically, nautically and commercially — on the face of the globe."³⁵

Secondly, claiming Cabot as “our discoverer and our patron”³⁶ meant establishing a link with sturdy explorers of unknown worlds.

The close association of Cabot with the idea of British imperialism is not surprising. Douglas Cole suggests that the nationalists in the self-governing colonies pursued goals that were essentially political, while their ethnic identification remained emphatically British. Principal G. M. Grant (1835-1902) of Queen’s University, for example, spoke of a “Canadian nation,” meaning the Canadian state, but saw it as of “British nationality,” tied to Britain and the Empire by “race and blood.”³⁷ Philip Buckner suggests that this common sense of Britishness and a desire to continue living within the framework of the Empire helped Canadian confederation in 1867. The feeling of being an extension of the British nation bound Anglophone Canadians together for the rest of the nineteenth century and gave them a pool of British images on which they could draw. Most of these people came to British North America between 1815 and 1865 as part of a huge wave of immigrants from the British Isles, and tended to swamp earlier settlers. They arrived with a sense of being British and saw no reason to abandon it.³⁸ As Cole writes, Canadian (and Australian) imperialists were “Britannic nationalists” and Canadian (or Australian) patriots, if we identify these words with their Latin roots “*natio*” (ethnic entity) and “*patria*” (country).³⁹

Prowse’s, Harvey’s and Howley’s concepts of Cabot fit this framework well. They established Newfoundland’s connection with the Empire by turning the island into its foundation stone. They forged the ethnic link with the Britannic family by emphasizing the prowess of Cabot’s West Country crew. And they laid out claims to a special position for Newfoundland within the Empire, since it had been the British spring-board to the North American continent.

It is therefore quite natural that when, in 1897, the 400th anniversary of Cabot’s voyage coincided with Queen Victoria’s Diamond Jubilee, the two anniversaries were observed jointly. Nevertheless, the plans for concurrent celebrations caused a controversy between those who believed that the two occasions reinforced and complemented one another, and those who thought that the Cabot commemoration deflected energy and scarce resources from the Jubilee.

In late 1896 Newfoundland experienced a deep economic slump, and was still recovering from a devastating bank crash. Politicians were preparing for what was eventually to become a particularly nasty election campaign, which toppled Sir William Whiteway’s Liberal administration in 1897. Yet a private committee was formed in St. John’s in November 1896 to organize the next year’s celebrations. It included prominent local personages, and spanned political and denominational barriers. The committee received the financial backing of the St. John’s business elite and also collected public donations, which the government proposed to match to a maximum of \$1250.⁴⁰ Most committee members were eager to ensure that the two commemorations were kept distinct, and to emphasize that “the Queen’s Diamond Jubilee was the more important matter.”⁴¹ On 13 April 1897 the commit-

tee passed a resolution (Prowse alone dissenting) to open separate subscription lists for the two events and to keep the funds "distinctly apart." They also agreed that funds for the Cabot celebration could be solicited abroad, but not those for the Jubilee. The colony was duty-bound to glorify the Queen using its own resources⁴², but the landfall was a matter in which the whole of the British Empire should feel an interest, since Cabot started that "Colonial Empire which is Britain's strength and glory today." Moreover, canvassing Cabot funds abroad would reduce the need to "trouble the poorer classes of Newfoundland with requests to contribute to a commemoration of the old mariner."⁴³

The most ambitious of the plans before the committee was the idea of building a signal station and meteorological observatory on Signal Hill to honour Cabot's landfall. It is not clear who came up with the project, but it might have been inspired by a rivalry between the citizens of Bristol (the starting point of Cabot's journey), who were building their own Cabot Tower. Prowse, because of his ardent championship of the cause, was popularly believed to have been the originator, but he gave credit to Edgar Bowring (1858-1943, director of a major St. John's firm).⁴⁴ In any case, the plan was controversial and the committee members were divided. The business community and the government clearly supported the idea. On 20 February 1897 the committee was notified, through the Colonial Secretary, Robert Bond, of the government's consent to the erection of the building.⁴⁵ Four days later the committee adopted a resolution supporting the project. But there were dissenters who argued that there was no "public feeling in favour of the suggestion," although "the proposal had been before the public for some considerable time."⁴⁶

The opposing factions of the committee did not hesitate to take their fight into the public arena of the St. John's newspapers. One of the main opponents, J. W. Withers (1843-1921), the Queen's Printer⁴⁷, wrote in the *Royal Gazette* (which he edited) that the observatory would not serve a purpose other-wise unfilled, and that it would not have any particular aesthetic value. The government had always maintained a signal station, and would no doubt improve it if the public demanded. "In the present state of the colony, with so many pressing needs ... it seems bordering on the insane ... to spend a large sum of money on a block house."⁴⁸ To counter such damaging criticism, Prowse, the foremost among the project's supporters and very much the ruling Liberals' man, had to restate over and over again that there was no means of communication between St. John's and the ships attempting to enter its harbour at night. This exposed sailors to unwarranted danger. Several disasters might have been prevented had a signal station existed. Although insinuations had been made that the building would only serve the interests of "the trade" (that is, of the people sitting on the committee), it would, in fact, benefit "every fisherman that own[ed] a decked vessel."⁴⁹ The supporters eventually saw themselves vindicated when the foundation stone was laid during the celebrations in June.

Prowse was anxious to publicize Cabot in the name of Newfoundland patriotism. He believed that, "in honoring the Queen we express our loyalty to Her Majesty in common with the whole Empire; in honoring Cabot we are doing honor to our own country and to ourselves."⁵⁰ The general public, though, seemed baffled by the whole Cabot business. The *Evening Telegram* urged the committee to give some explanation to the public of the "varied purposes" of the observatory it planned to build, and issued a warning: "How is it possible to feel an active sympathy with a movement the true purpose of which one does not understand?"⁵¹ The committee did take some steps to remedy the situation. They set up a competition for the best plan for the signal station, open to all Newfoundland schoolboys (girls were not invited to participate), and Prowse made sure the committee sent fireworks packages for the June celebrations to the major outports.⁵² The government voted to allow free entry to any fireworks ordered by the committee.⁵³ The committee also organized a Cabot dance, attended by the entire St. John's society.⁵⁴ Yet the *Telegram*, so full of trivia, recorded only one spontaneous action in Cabot's honour — a billiard tournament at the Mechanics' Hall, the issue of which was to decide Cabot's landfall. The contest was decided by fifty-seven points in favour of Bonavista.⁵⁵

Only two indications of an outport interest in the Cabot celebration reached the St. John's papers. One was a practical matter: a suggestion from Catalina proposing a new dollar coin, featuring Victoria and Cabot, which would be "easier to pay out and to receive than the ragged and clumsy dollar note."⁵⁶ The other was a report of a "grand dinner and ball" in Cabot's honour in Bonavista; a neighbourly affair featuring a series of toasts, a speech and a performance by an *ad hoc* musical ensemble.⁵⁷ Government records contain documents of two further efforts to capitalize on Cabot's name outside of St. John's: a short-lived initiative to build a commemorative lighthouse at Bonavista⁵⁸, and a petition by fourteen inhabitants of Birchy Cove in the Bay of Islands, asking for a new name for their community — Cabotville. In the latter document's margin Governor Herbert Murray scribbled acidic comments to the effect that the population of the place, which boasted some 205 inhabitants during the last census, must have decreased dramatically.⁵⁹

On the other hand, the question of public holidays marking the double anniversary created a good deal of interest. The press suggested declaring a holiday to foster "a national and local spirit of patriotism among our people,"⁶⁰ but the Importers' Association wanted to grant only a half-day in addition to the usual holiday in June. The opposition newspaper *The Daily News* picked up in a predictable way the defense of "the labouring classes" and exhorted the employers to allow an entire free day extra: "Come, gentlemen, allow your clerks and assistants to unite with yourselves and the general public in celebrating these great events. If you cannot enthuse about Cabot, give the two days in honour of the noblest Queen and woman the world has witnessed. We are the most ancient colony, let us not be behind in our loyalty."⁶¹ The Importers' Association's reluc-

tance to make the celebrations benefit their employees moved one J. E. Dempster to express what could well have been the general opinion of the working people on the whole question of the ceremonies: "I most sincerely hope that the young men generally in the city will not be foolish enough to subscribe to the expenses of a holiday born under false pretences, and which will end up in the smoke of Judge Prowse's fireworks, paid for by the government out of the hard earned money of the fisher-men, and to our eternal shame."⁶² He was even more direct in an earlier letter: "It should be perfectly understood by this time that the employees as a body as well as the people at large care as little for the landfall of Cabot as they do for Judge Prowse's discussion as to its location. What we want is that Her Majesty's Jubilee should be fittingly celebrated in St. John's, not by the importers granting the usual commercial holiday ...but by setting apart one or two days ... for the celebration of the ... Jubilee alone. The money which had been collected would have never been given had it been understood from the first that it was to be 'Hail' Cabot and Prowse and not hail Victoria."⁶³ J.E. Dempster may have been a *nom de plume*: this sniping took place in an opposition paper, and implications of misuse of government funds and of special pleading by one of the most prominent supporters of the ruling party were surely convenient in an election year. Yet such charges often do stick.

Queen Victoria's Jubilee, too, was to be commemorated by a public building. This project, like the whole idea of celebrating the Queen, was noncontroversial. The responsibility for it devolved upon the society women of St. John's (the celebrations committee was all male). The original initiative came from the ladies of the Cowan Mission, a charitable association organized in St. John's to help needy women throughout the island. In late February 1897 they issued a circular exhorting "the women of Newfoundland" to pay tribute to the Queen by subscribing to a new wing of the General Hospital in the capital, devoted to the uses of women and to training nurses. It was to be named after Victoria, being a perfect commemoration of her anniversary, since she had indicated that she preferred to be celebrated by "works of mercy."⁶⁴ On 26 February a ladies' committee was set up to direct the fund-raising activities, which continued until 8 June, and met with fair success.

After all these preparations the appointed days finally arrived. The spiritual powers were the first to honour the Queen. On Sunday, 20 June 1897 Jubilee services were held in every church in St. John's. The major events took place at the two cathedrals. The Church of England held a morning prayer of thanksgiving. Canon Browne preached, pausing to consider "how low the British monarchy had fallen [in the days of George IV and William IV], how great was the strain put upon the noble loyalty of our people by such kings as these," and that we "should thank God for the advent of Victoria ... the crowning glory of the Empire and that Imperial sway which with all its faults and defects has ruled for the good of the world." Then he turned to the contemplation of the heavenly kingdom. The music provided for the occasion mirrored the Canon's sermon: the choir and the soloist, the Twillingate

soprano, Georgina Stirling (1867-1935) mixed hymns with several reprises of the national anthem. Miss Stirling, whose professional name was Marie Toulinguet, had studied in Paris with the legendary Mathilde Marchesi and made a modest career in Italy and the USA. Throughout the 1890s she returned regularly to concertize in St. John's.⁶⁵ Governor Herbert H. Murray (1829-1904), who served on the island from 1895 to 1899 and has been described as "one of Newfoundland's most difficult and interfering governors"⁶⁶ attended the evening service. Bishop Howley celebrated a solemn pontifical mass in the morning. In the afternoon he led a Corpus Christi procession which ended at the cathedral, where another service followed.⁶⁷

Two days later, on 22 June at 10 a. m., the foundation stone of the Cabot Tower was laid. A grand procession of societies and dignitaries marched up Signal Hill. There they took their places and listened to "God Save the Queen" performed by the united city choirs and, once again, La Stirling. The assembly had to do without the presence of the highest state authorities. Premier Whiteway was participating in Jubilee events in London. Governor Murray refused to "lay the foundation stone of the Signal Station, on the grounds that it [was] not in accordance with Her Majesty's express wishes as to the method in which her Jubilee [was] to be celebrated."⁶⁸ His attitude probably obliged the first speaker, Edgar Bowring, to harp on the ingenuous argument that "in erecting the proposed signal tower we were carrying out, in a very special manner, the wishes of Her Majesty, as it was pre-eminently a work of mercy, inasmuch as it would preserve the lives of our fishermen and seamen."⁶⁹ Then he read out a telegram from Victoria (the same cable she sent to all her possessions), blessing her subjects. The announcement was greeted with cheers and a repeat of the national anthem. Then it was Prowse's turn. After reminding the assembly that they stood on the "classic ground" of Newfoundland history, he informed them of a depository to be placed under the foundation stone and of its contents, which included a Latin inscription by Bishop Howley.⁷⁰ There Howley had extracted the essence of what was honoured in Cabot that day: "Four hundred years ago the illustrious navigator John Cabot, plowing the treacherous deep in a small bark, and after many long and doubtful wanderings over unknown seas, first struck our shores, and gave Britain a new world, the source of future greatness and wealth of Empire."⁷¹

After Prowse's talk, Bishop Howley delivered the main oration. He elevated Signal Hill to a hallowed place of Newfoundland history. "The associations connected with this spot are such as to strike with a thrill of the deepest love and patriotism the heart-strings of every son of Newfoundland ... From this point ... we can read, as a living panorama, the whole history of our brave-hearted people" — their progress under Victoria's reign, the memories of the wars with the French, the echoes of Humphrey Gilbert's ceremony taking possession of Newfoundland, and finally, the images of "the staunch little ship *Matthew* with her brave crew and noble Captain Cabot On that day the brave old Cabot gave to Britain the New World, her first and most ancient and most loyal colony, the brightest gem in her

crown, the foundation of her future greatness.”⁷² Then the Reverend A. Robertson, a Presbyterian minister, read a paper by Moses Harvey, its aging author “not being equal to the task of delivering an oration on a hill-top in the open air.”⁷³ This read like a précis of *Newfoundland in 1897*. Two more speeches followed and “God Save the Queen” was sung for the last time.

The rest of the day was given over to activities connected with the Diamond Jubilee — gun salutes, foundation stone rites at the hospital, fireworks, and a grand review of the naval forces. The Governor, having gratified his sensibilities by boycotting the Signal Hill ceremonies, graced all these events with his presence. The *Herald* described the event at the hospital as “truly a women’s undertaking.” The cornerstone was lowered by the widowed Governor’s eldest daughter, and the main speeches were made by the ladies who had organized the fundraising for the project. Everything in the women’s enterprise went so well that the *Herald* wondered “why the ladies’ sentiments were not more fully and freely expressed on matters of daily and vital importance.”⁷⁴

The *Daily News* summed up the day as “Terra Nova’s outburst of loyalty.” *The Royal Gazette* engaged in a bit of obligatory imperial rhetoric: “We can safely say that no holiday in Newfoundland’s history has brought to her people such perfect enjoyment or been celebrated by them with such intense enthusiasm. The exhibition of our loyalty to and reverence for our Queen was the *motif* of our actions ... [Newfoundlanders’] hearts stirred with the thought that they too were denizens of a great empire”⁷⁵ The *Herald* emphasized that St. John’s was not the only Newfoundland community to celebrate Victoria. “All over our island home there has been a similar enthusiastic display of affection for the Queen ... [who] has no more loyal subjects ... than those who people her oldest colony.” They gave a revealing reason for this: “There was something heart-stirring in the thought that we were taking part in a celebration that girdled the globe.”⁷⁶

Twenty-four June was set apart to honour Cabot. The day was filled with parades and races, and a grand ball took place in the evening. On the lawn of Government House, Miss Murray distributed medals for bravery to the members of “our splendid body” of constabulary, proving that it was not “a force merely ornamental, but one that suggest[ed] the idea of social order and safety to life and property.”⁷⁷ While the whole city, including most private houses, was decorated for the Jubilee, Cabot had to do with bedecked ships, public buildings and “several private houses.”⁷⁸ The fireworks closing that day were organized by Prowse, and so it is not surprising that they featured, *inter alia*, a set piece, “Cabot Bonavista.” But “the display was much shorter than [on the Jubilee day], and in consequence the spectators were a little disappointed.”⁷⁹

The St. John’s celebrations were not unique. The Jubilee fetes in Halifax paralleled the events in Newfoundland’s capital, but were on a grander scale: Halifax organized an entire Jubilee week between Monday, 21 June and Saturday, 26 June 1897. The activities and the rhetoric were identical to those in St. John’s:

gun salutes, bunting, flags, unveiling of a commemorative edifice (on a more modest scale than the Victoria Wing — a Jubilee Fountain in the Public Gardens)⁸⁰, and headlines like “The Glorious Jubilee of an Unparalleled Reign,” or “A World-Wide Empire Pulsating With Joy in Honoring its Empress-Queen.”⁸¹ The organizers of the Halifax ceremonies also incorporated Cabot into their program, setting 24 June aside for him. On that day a Cabot tablet was unveiled in the Provincial Legislature, and in the evening the Royal Society of Canada held a commemorative meeting.

The driving spirit behind the Halifax Cabot celebrations was Cornelius O'Brien (1843-1906), the Roman Catholic archbishop of Halifax between 1883 and 1906, and a man of sufficient reputation as a scholar to be elected President of the Royal Society for the 1896-97 term.⁸² So it was under his leadership that the society held its first ever meeting in Halifax for the express purpose of remembering Cabot.⁸³ The Lieutenant Governor of Nova Scotia (who clearly did not share Murray's scruples about joining Cabot and Victoria) unveiled the Cabot plaque during a ceremony attended by the provincial premier, the Italian consul, and a delegation from Bristol. The tablet was draped in the Union Jack. O'Brien gave a short speech, saying that the monument would “mark the fact that John Cabot and his glorious voyage were not forgotten either by the people of Halifax, the people of Bristol, the government of the country and the Royal Society of Canada.”⁸⁴ This location is significant. In Halifax, as in St. John's, Cabot's achievement was seen in the imperial context. Moreover, perhaps because of the uncertainty about the landfall, and because Nova Scotia was one of the original Canadian provinces, his local connections were de-emphasized in favour of showing his significance for Canada as a whole. So O'Brien married a slight geographical vagueness with imperial rhetoric, using expressions like “four hundred years ago today the flag of England was first raised on these western shores,” “the man who has discovered this country and raised the English flag thereon,” and “the distinguished voyager who gave us title to this country.”⁸⁵ The inscription on the tablet was in a similar vein, and, aside from a reference to Venice, was in essence identical to Howley's epigraph and Harvey's conception of Cabot. It read in part: “This tablet is in honor of John Cabot, who ... first planted the flags of England and Venice ... on the north-eastern seaboard of North America and by his discoveries ... gave England a claim upon a continent which the conquering spirit of her sons made good in later times”⁸⁶

A Canadian perspective is also apparent from the headline to *Halifax Herald's* account of the ceremony: “In honor of good old John Cabot who was the first to reach the mainland of this continent.”⁸⁷ Similarly, the “revelations” that O'Brien made in his lecture to the Royal Society effectively incorporated Cabot into the Canadian, rather than narrowly Nova Scotian, heritage, and situated this heritage squarely with the imperial context. O'Brien claimed he had reconstructed from surviving documents the original chart of Cabot's journey, and produced this “as

the title deed to our vast and glorious inheritance," and as the proof that Cabot was the first navigator of the American Far North and the discoverer of Hudson Bay.⁸⁸

The Cabot commemoration in Bristol was relatively modest. The account in the *London Times* leaves the impression of a provincial affair, centred on a distinguished visitor from the metropolis, the ex-Governor General of Canada, Lord Dufferin (1826-1902). Early in the day a luncheon was held. The Mayor of Bristol began the proceedings with a toast to the Queen, which he found "a natural commencement" to the Cabot commemoration. "The first thought that came into our minds during [the Jubilee celebrations of] the last few days, had been a constant sense of wonder at the extent and the greatness of [our] Empire," but we would be unworthy of its inheritance had we not honoured "those heroes of the past who had laid its foundation."⁸⁹ Thus the Mayor of Bristol tied Cabot up with Victoria in a manner identical to Harvey's, offering again an optimistic vision of Victoria's reign as the apogee of British imperialism, which had started with the Renaissance explorers. Lord Dufferin then expounded upon similar themes. He drew his audience's attention to the fact that England was indebted to Cabot for two of her most precious possessions: "the great Dominion of Canada and the island of Newfoundland with its magnificent fisheries." He imagined the sight of Cabot preparing to leave on his journey with his Bristol sailors, who, by virtue of participating in his discoveries, became the "principal founders of British sea power." Cabot's exploit was not as original as Columbus', but "the importance and the beneficence of the results flowing from Cabot's more northerly expedition were infinitely superior," since he "acquired for the Anglo-Saxon race ... a permanent footing on a vast theatre peculiarly fitted for the development of the best forms of human energy."⁹⁰ These ideas are identical to those of the British and Canadian imperialists, and in line with Harvey's and Prowse's thinking. Dufferin's speech shows once more how closely integrated the imperialist rhetoric — whether coming from the mother country or from the colonies — was.

In the late 1890s some members of Newfoundland's urban elite (then concentrated in St. John's) adopted Cabot as a symbol of their country. The concept of the oldest colony as a result of Cabot's discovery could be used to claim a distinct place for Newfoundland within the British Empire. The sheer courage of Cabot's enterprise (and that of his sailors) represented moral and physical qualities bestowed upon Newfoundlanders by their forefathers. Cabot secured the island for the British, who established a superior social, political and economic system there. He represented a symbolic connection with this heritage — its transplantation from the Old World to the New. Newfoundland in its turn benefitted Britain by its fish, exploited through the hard labour of its inhabitants, whose loyalty turned to good account the colony's strategic geographical position.

The actual celebration of Cabot was full of ambiguities. St. John's was a highly partisan community, where ideas were closely associated with personalities. A significant opposition existed to enlarging the family of patriotic symbols by adding

new elements to the established loyalty to the British Crown. But some of the most influential members of that community kept up with their counterparts throughout the Empire by pursuing more ambitious ideals.

Notes

¹Bernard Porter, *The Lion's Share* (London: Longman, 1984), 119-139.

²H. John Field, *Toward a Programme of Imperial Life* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1982), chapters, 2, 3.

³C.C. Eldridge, *Victorian Imperialism* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1978), 192.

⁴Douglas Cole, "The Problems of 'Nationalism' and 'Imperialism' in British Settlement Colonies," *Journal of British Studies*, 10, 2 (1971), 169-179.

⁵Carl Berger, "The True North Strong and Free." In Peter Russell, ed., *Nationalism in Canada* (Toronto: McGraw-Hill Co. of Canada, Ltd., 1966), 3-25.

⁶Suzanne Zeller, *Inventing Canada: Early Victorian Science and the Idea of a Transcontinental Nation* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987), 4.

⁷*Ibid.*, 271.

⁸Keith Matthews, *Lectures on the History of Newfoundland 1500-1830* (St. John's: Breakwater Books, 1988), 183-184; for a recent evaluation of Carson's and Morris' political activities see part IV of Sean T. Cadigan, *Hope and Deception in Conception Bay: Merchant-Settler Relations in Newfoundland, 1795-1855* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995).

⁹Patrick O'Flaherty, *The Rock Observed* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1979), 52-59.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, 60-62.

¹¹Shannon Ryan and Larry Small, *Haulin' Rope and Gaff: Songs and Poetry in the History of the Newfoundland Seal Fishery* (St. John's: Breakwater Books, 1978), 18; see also Shannon Ryan, *The Ice Hunters: A History of Newfoundland Sealing to 1914* (St. John's: Breakwater Books, 1994), 368 ff.

¹²O'Flaherty, 67.

¹³Ryan and Small, 25.

¹⁴O'Flaherty, 79.

¹⁵F.A. Aldrich, "Moses Harvey." In *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, vol. XIII (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994), 455-57.

¹⁶Moses Harvey, *Newfoundland in 1897* (London: 1897), 2.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, 11.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, 4.

¹⁹D.W. Prowse, *A History of Newfoundland* (London: 1895), 6.

²⁰Harvey, 6.

²¹*Ibid.*, 5-6.

²²*Ibid.*, 6.

²³*Ibid.*, 6.

²⁴*Ibid.*, 7.

²⁵*Ibid.*, 18.

²⁶*Ibid.*, 6.

²⁷*Ibid.*, 3.

²⁸*Ibid.*, 17.

²⁹*Ibid.*, 40.

³⁰*Ibid.*, 47-8.

³¹*Ibid.*, 40.

³²*Ibid.*, 33.

³³*Ibid.*, 10.

³⁴Alphonsus L. Penney, "Howley, Most Rev. Michael Francis." In *Encyclopedia of Newfoundland and Labrador*, Vol. II. (St. John's: Newfoundland Book Publishers, Ltd., 1984), 1095-6.

³⁵M.F. Howley, *Cabot's Voyages* (St. John's: 1897), 38.

³⁶*Ibid.*, 38.

³⁷Cole, "The Problem," 160-82.

³⁸Phillip Buckner, "Whatever Happened to the British Empire?" *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association*, n.s. 4 (1993), 3-32.

³⁹Douglas Cole, "Canada's 'Nationalistic' Imperialists," *Journal of Canadian Studies*, 5, 3 (1970), 44-9.

⁴⁰"Minutes of the Executive Council," vol. 11 (19 May 1897), Newfoundland Provincial Archives, GN 9/2.

⁴¹*Evening Telegram*, 14 April 1897.

⁴²*Daily News*, 14 April 1897.

⁴³W.W. Blackall in the *Evening Herald*, 19 April 1897.

⁴⁴*Daily News*, 14 January 1897; Ettie L. Gordon Murray, "Bowring, Sir Edgar Rennie." In *Encyclopedia of Newfoundland and Labrador*, Vol. I (St. John's: Newfoundland Book Publishers, Ltd., 1981), 233.

⁴⁵*Evening Telegram*, 22 February 1897.

⁴⁶*Royal Gazette*, 2 March 1897.

⁴⁷Allison C. Bates. "Withers, John W." In *Encyclopedia of Newfoundland and Labrador*, Vol. V (St. John's: Harry Cuff Publications, Ltd., 1994), 602-3.

⁴⁸*Royal Gazette*, 2 March 1897.

⁴⁹*Daily News*, 24 February 1897.

⁵⁰*Evening Telegram*, 14 June 1897.

⁵¹*Evening Telegram*, 17 April 1897.

⁵²*Evening Telegram*, 24 April 1897.

⁵³"Minutes of the Executive Council," vol. 11, 19 May 1897, Newfoundland Provincial Archives, GN 9/2.

⁵⁴*Evening Telegram*, 27 January 1897.

⁵⁵*Evening Telegram*, 22 January 1897.

⁵⁶*Daily News*, 15 February 1897.

⁵⁷*Evening Herald*, 2 March 1897.

⁵⁸"Minutes of the Executive Council," vol. 11, 18 February 1897. Newfoundland Provincial Archives, GN 9/2.59. "Governor's Office — Incoming Correspondence." Newfoundland Provincial Archives, GN 2/22/A 1897, 817.

⁶⁰*Evening Telegram*, 29 May 1897.

⁶¹*Daily News*, 29 May 1897.

⁶²*Daily News*, 29 May 1897.

⁶³*Daily News*, 21 May 1897.

⁶⁴*Evening Telegram*, 20 February 1897.

⁶⁵ An unreliable biography of Georgina Stirling is available: Amy Louise Peyton, *Nightingale of the North* (St. John's: Jespersion Press, 1983).

⁶⁶ J.K. Hiller, "Sir Herbert Harley Murray." In *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, vol. XIII, 749-51.

⁶⁷ *Evening Herald*, 26 June 1897.

⁶⁸ *Evening Herald*, 24 June 1897.

⁶⁹ *Evening Telegram*, 24 June 1897.

⁷⁰ *Daily News*, 28 June 1897.

⁷¹ *Evening Telegram*, 25 June 1897.

⁷² *Evening Telegram*, 25 June 1897.

⁷³ *Evening Herald*, 24 June 1897.

⁷⁴ *Evening Herald*, 24 June 1897.

⁷⁵ *Royal Gazette*, 29 June 1897.

⁷⁶ *Evening Herald*, 24 June 1897.

⁷⁷ *Evening Herald*, 26 June 1897.

⁷⁸ *Daily News*, 25 June 1897.

⁷⁹ *Daily News*, 25 June 1897.

⁸⁰ *Halifax Herald*, 1 June 1897.

⁸¹ *Halifax Herald*, 1 June 1897.

⁸² Terrence Murphy, "Cornelius O'Brien." In *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, vol. XIII, 772-4.

⁸³ *Halifax Herald*, 25 June 1897.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

⁸⁹ *Times* (of London), 25 June 1897.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

References

Aldrich, F.A. "Moses Harvey." In *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, vol. XIII. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994. 455-7.

Bates, Allison C. "Withers, John W." In *Encyclopedia of Newfoundland and Labrador* vol. 5. Harry Cuff Publications, Ltd., 1994. 602-3.

Buckner, Phillip. "Whatever Happened to the British Empire?" *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association*, n.s. 4, (1993), 3-32.

Cole, Douglas. "Canada's 'Nationalistic' Imperialists." *Journal of Canadian Studies*, 5, 3 (1970), 44-9.

———. "The Problem of 'Nationalism' and 'Imperialism' in British Settlement Colonies." *Journal of British Studies*, 10, 2 (1971), 160-82.

Daily News. (St. John's), January-June 1897.

Eldridge, C.C. *Victorian Imperialism*. London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1978).

Evening Herald. (St. John's), January-June 1897.

Evening Telegram. (St. John's), January-June 1897.

- Field, H. John. *Toward a Programme of Imperial Life: The British Empire at the Turn of the Century*. Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1982.
- Halifax Herald*. June 1897.
- Harvey, Moses. *Newfoundland in 1897*. London: 1897.
- Hiller, J.K. "Sir Herbert Harley Murray." In *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, vol. XIII. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994. 749-51.
- Howley, M.F. *Cabot's Voyages*. St. John's: 1897.
- Matthews, Keith. *Lectures on the History of Newfoundland 1500-1830*. St. John's: Breakwater Books, 1988.
- Murphy, Terrence. "Cornelius O'Brien." In *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*. vol. XIII. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994. 772-4.
- Murray, Ettie L. Gordon. "Bowring, Sir Edgar Rennie." In *Encyclopedia of Newfoundland and Labrador*, vol. 1. St. John's: Newfoundland Book Publishers, Ltd., 1981. 233.
- Newfoundland Provincial Archives. "Governor's Office — Incoming Correspondence." GN 2/22/A.
- _____. "Minutes of the Executive Council." GN 9/2.
- O'Flaherty, Patrick. *The Rock Observed*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1979.
- Penney, Alphonsus L. "Howley, Most Rev. Michael Francis." In *Encyclopedia of Newfoundland and Labrador*, vol. 2. St. John's: Newfoundland Book Publishers, Ltd., 1984. 1095-6.
- Porter, Bernard. *The Lion's Share*. London: Longman, 1984.
- Prowse, D.W. *A History of Newfoundland*. London: 1895.
- Royal Gazette*. (Newfoundland). January-June 1897.
- Russell, Peter, ed. *Nationalism in Canada*. Toronto: McGraw-Hill Co. of Canada, Ltd., 1966.
- Ryan, Shannon and Larry Small. *Haulin' Rope and Gaff: Songs and Poetry in the History of the Newfoundland Seal Fishery*. St. John's: Breakwater Books, 1978.
- Times* (of London). June 1897.
- Zeller, Suzanne. *Inventing Canada: Early Victorian Science and the Idea of a Transcontinental Nation*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987.