

## ***Violence and Public Anxiety: A Canadian Case.* Elliott Leyton, William O'Grady, and James Overton.**

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## REVIEWS

*Violence and Public Anxiety: A Canadian Case.* Elliott Leyton, William O'Grady, and James Overton. St. John's: Institute of Social and Economic Research, Memorial University of Newfoundland., xxvii, 355 pp., preface, intro., figures, tables, bibliog., softcover, French flaps, 1992, \$24.95, ISBN 0-919666-65-5.

## PETER HART

VIOLENCE AND CRIME serve to define Newfoundland for Newfoundlanders in two contrary ways. Our tiny murder rate, unlocked doors, and safe streets are worn as a badge of collective honour to distinguish between us and the mainland. On the other hand, these can also be portrayed as a fading part of a golden age, threatened or overthrown by some aspect or other of modern North American life.

This book, which reports on research carried out in the 1980s, matches these myths to social realities past and present. William O'Grady probes Newfoundland's official statistics on violent crime; Elliott Leyton looks at how crime has been presented and used in the media; James Overton examines the country's experience of collective and state violence in the 1930s. The salience of these rarely analysed issues makes this an important book. The skill with which the authors address their topics makes it successful.

O'Grady's essay, "Criminal statistics and stereotypes," is written in clear, unadventurous prose which suits his occasionally sensational topic admirably. His argument is a simple one: increases in official tallies of violent crime between the 1950s and the 1980s are due to changes in the collection and definition of the figures themselves, not to any real shift in criminal activity. The most reliable index of violence, the homicide rate, remained very stable, and murder is still largely

confined to people who already know each other. Some acts have become much more commonly reported, most notably domestic assaults and child sexual abuse. However, there is nothing to suggest this means they are actually more common.

Elliott Leyton's compact and typically convincing piece, "The theatre of public crisis", follows O'Grady's by deconstructing perceptions that a crime wave was in progress in the 1970s and '80s. From a survey of the St. John's *Evening Telegram* from 1975 to 1985, he argues that the (usually alarmist) discussion of crime in the media was driven by self-promoting interest groups or institutions who used it as a lever to gain public acceptance for their goals. His year-by-year account of newspaper stories and their origins further reveals some interesting continuities, especially in the case of the Royal Newfoundland Constabulary's Police Brotherhood's campaign to carry firearms. Both Leyton and O'Grady confirm the falsity of this rhetoric, with its illusory crises and unfulfilled predictions of police deaths.

James Overton's chapter, "Riots, Raids and Relief, Police, Prisons and Parsimony," is practically a book in itself and its subject matter is certainly rich enough to support further studies. Building on earlier work on Newfoundland in the 1930s, he takes aim at the image of a non-violent past by detailing the collective violence that erupted in St. John's and many outports in that decade over work, relief and food. This he shows to have been much more extensive than previously depicted, as was the response of successive governments who built up the police and filled up the prisons. The Commission of Government's surveillance of protesters and dissidents continued long after the riots ended, and included much suspicious commentary on such subversives as Richard Squires and Joe Smallwood. One fortuitous result of this political detective work is Overton's resurrection of a forgotten figure: unemployment activist Pierce Power, a hero worthy of a Mummers Troupe play. The essay also usefully puts the riot — the one we all know about that famously drove Squires from the Colonial Building in April 1932 — into a more complex and turbulent context.

Overton's archival and newspaper research is both solid and revealing. Unfortunately, he aggressively rejects the use of quantitative analysis and did not try to interview anyone, so we are left with little sense of what the protesters themselves thought, how the protests developed, or why some communities acted while others did nothing. Nevertheless, it is a measure of the whole project's success that it establishes the necessity of further research into the histories and structures of protest and conflict avoidance, both of which remain features of Newfoundland communal life.