Newfoundland Studies

Newfoundland and the Pattern of British Decolonization

Robert Holland

Volume 14, Number 2, Fall 1998

Special Issue on Confederation

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/nflds14_2art02

See table of contents

Publisher(s)

Faculty of Arts, Memorial University

ISSN

1198-8614 (print)
1715-1430 (digital)

Explore this journal

Cite this article

Holland, R. (1998). Newfoundland and the Pattern of British Decolonization. *Newfoundland Studies*, *14*(2), 141–153.

Newfoundland and the Pattern of British Decolonization[1]

ROBERT HOLLAND

IN LOOKING BACK — whether in celebration or with more mixed feelings — on Newfoundland's accession to the Canadian confederation fifty years ago, the tendency surely is to focus on what Newfoundlanders were becoming (their future as Canadians), not on what they left behind as citizens within a British Empire. As such citizens, of course, they enjoyed a special, sometimes unique and not always enviable status: as the foundation settlement; as that curious quasi-legal beast, a half-colony, half-Dominion; as the only one of the self-governing colonies ever to go completely bust; as a possession ruled directly by Commissioners of Government holed up in a hotel like travelling salesmen. Because leaving this behind in 1949 was a decolonization, of a sort, it may be fruitful to survey very broadly the way in which the British brought their empire to an end, and in so doing to evoke parallels and analogies which link the case of Newfoundland to other examples of the genre. Because although all the cases involved are unique in some way, none are so unique that they exist entirely apart from a more general and often profound experience.

Decolonization was not a steady constant after 1945, something happening all the time.[2] That would have been hard for the British body politic to handle. It came rather in concentrated and sporadic bursts. The first phase, essentially South Asian, (India, Pakistan, Burma, Ceylon) came in the late 1940s under Clement Attlee's Labour government. The second burst, essentially Afro-Caribbean, came in the few years after 1959 under Harold Macmillan's Conservative government. The third rush was largely Arabian — the retreat from Aden and the Gulf after 1968. That left the odds and the sods, of which the biggest sod was Rhodesia, and the most odd — the most unique — Hong Kong, the transfer of which to China in 1997 is really the end of our story.

NEWFOUNDLAND STUDIES 14,2 (1998)
0823-1737

But it was the first of these bursts of decolonization which was the most historic, and into which Newfoundland's own demise as a colony partially fits. Putting on the historian's widest-angle lens, what is striking about this juncture — say, from 1946 through to 1949 — is that for so many and such different societies outside Europe it constituted a lynch-pin, a pivot, on which very contrasting futures hinged. As the power of the old west European empires began to crack, some colonial societies were able to scramble, not always easily and at some cost, onto a conveyor-belt to an independent, or at least non-dependent, and democratic future. India in August 1947 is only the most important instance. Others, for a multitude of reasons, were instead to be caught in the backwash and then propelled into a future deformed by conflict and violence — a glaring case being Indo-China, where the hopes of the Fontainbleau conference in the summer of 1946 were dashed, and the long years of fighting began with the French occupation of Hanoi in February 1947. These years of the late 1940s, then, were marked by the peculiar extent and intensity with which many places and peoples decided their own future, or had it decided for them; there were to be many complex gradations on this latter spectrum. Newfoundland's "decision" — whoever's decision that really was — to enter the confederation has to be seen, then, not only in a localized context, but in a world where choices and fates were fluctuating in a bewildering fashion. Where you ended up when the music stopped was as much a matter of luck as of political leadership, let alone one's true deserts.

For the British, it was perhaps significant that the potentially most difficult *rite de passage*, the loss of the Indian *Raj*, came very early on in the process of decolonization, and was able to be treated very much on its own merits, and in a way which did not get impossibly entangled with other problems and dilemmas. Compare this with the situation of the French, whose travails in Indo-China came to overlap those in her troubled North African territories, with highly combustible effects on metropolitan politics in the 1950s. Considering all the controversy that had always surrounded Indian political reform, the quiescence in Britain which attended the decision to abandon the great sub-continent in 1947 was striking. Winston Churchill as Opposition leader did not even attend the crucial parliamentary debates. Indeed, a desire to keep imperial and colonial issues out of the parliamentary arena — not "pitched into the party warfare of England", as Stanley Baldwin had once put it — was to be a consistent feature of official British psychology in decolonization. The careful handling and screening-off of the National Convention delegation from Newfoundland to London in April and May 1947, and the deflection of the Responsible Government League petitioners when they visited London in November 1948, fits this same pattern.

But, in India's case, how was this exemplary metropolitan quiescence encouraged and manipulated? When Attlee's formidable Foreign Secretary, Ernest Bevan, at one point raised doubts in Cabinet as to whether Indian independence really was inevitable, Attlee looked him squarely in the eye and asked "What is the alterna-

tive?"[3] Bevan had none to offer, and nor did anybody else, and so India was not only made independent, but was also partitioned, because there was, seemingly, no alternative to that either. This framing of the matter of alternatives, their squinting in certain preferred directions, goes to the heart of many decolonizations. It assists governments to do things that otherwise might not be done so easily. It affected the very rhetoric of the end of empire. The most famous such tag surely was that of Harold Macmillan's "Winds of Change" which heralded an acceleration of African tempo in 1960 — the metaphor was selected precisely because there is no alternative to bending before a heavily blowing wind. Newfoundland's transition in 1949 did not, thankfully, involve the turbulence of the Punjabi partition not many months before. But the finessing of the alternatives — the apprehension that in the end there was no real alternative to the one really decisive move available (partition for India, Confederation for Newfoundland) — is clearly relevant to each.

It is interesting that the British and the French have always talked about and rationalized decolonization in different ways. French historians talk about the "drama" of decolonization. The British speak sedately about a "transfer of power", a piece of phraseology which has no meaningful counterpart in French. The controversial British politician, Enoch Powell, once saw a significance in this for national political development. Writing in 1970, he noted that it was the very drama of the French departure from Algeria which acted as a kind of laboratory in which France successfully re-examined and reinvented herself.[4] Powell in his masochistic way regretted the fact that, in casting aside their Empire, the British had conveniently chosen to go so quietly that they avoided facing up to their own national transformation. One might, however, add that the British had in recent history gone through an Algerian-type experience — Ireland before 1922 — and learned that it does not pay dividends. Whatever the truth of this, it is the discrete separation of metropolitan from imperial and colonial questions, the containment of decolonization so far as possible within its own restricted sphere, which is a hallmark of the British style in the ending of empire. Perhaps it may equally be said that Newfoundland slipped into Confederation, no real questions asked, in James Hiller's words without "a full discussion of how Newfoundland and Labrador...might best have fitted into the Canadian Confederation"[5], just as the British were before long to slip finally out of their remaining empire. Who can say where the balance of advantage lay between French drama and British *sang froid*? But the example of Newfoundland in 1949, and the larger instance of the United Kingdom's exit from empire, have this in common: they were very British transitions in their evasiveness, and in a capacity to absorb change without showing too many marks.

At the risk of overstretching comparisons with France, it is sometimes argued that the problem for the French, when it came to post-1945 decolonization, was that they lacked the advantage the British possessed in an earlier, nineteenth-century transition to responsible government within their overseas possessions. In French imperial conceptions, there were no subtle halting-places between old autocracy

and new reform. A recent writer on what happened to Madagascar after 1945 tells the story of how, after the shipwreck of a new colonial dispensation in the French empire, policy-makers were shocked by a local crisis all the way back to outright repression, with the most bloody consequences.[6] In a more anecdotal vein, one is reminded of what was said of Admiral d'Argenlieu, at the head of post-war French administration in Indo-China — that he was equipped with one of the most brilliant minds of the 12th century. In contrast, after dangerous riots in Accra in 1948, a new governor, Sir Charles Arden-Clarke, was swiftly sent out to the Gold Coast (today's Ghana) with explicit instructions to do for that territory what Lord Durham had once done for the Canadas. Perhaps Colonial Office officials were just showing off their knowledge of imperial history. Still, the Gold Coast did indeed subsequently become a model of African decolonization, though if you look at the details of that colony's advance to independence, just as if you look at the details of Durham's mission 100 years or so before, the cracks are plain enough to see.[7] But it is surely important that the official British mind of empire was instinctively attuned to the idea that change was something to survive, not always to resist, and that it could be guided with the help of all sorts of devices and tricks. The very indeterminacy of constitutional notions, their plasticity, was an advantage here. Newfoundland again could serve as a paradigm for the point we are making. Was it just a colony, or a Dominion, or some sort of glorified municipality? You could read lots of documents and still not be any the wiser. Its status could shift back and forth, and seem to be one thing in some respects, and something else in other respects, and finally tip over into a waiting Confederation. This might all be very infuriating, especially for lawyers, but nobody was much hurt by the uncertainty along the way. The point here is that the flexible constitutional culture of the British Empire was reflected in the way that Newfoundland, like many other colonies, was able to be ferried from one status to another in the decolonization process.

Some things are so complicated and contain such potentially clashing elements that they do need to be written down in some form. This is where federations and confederations come in. As John Kendle has recently noted in his book, *Federal Britain*, "if the federal idea had ever had much encouragement in British political life it had been in the imperial setting".[8] British North America was naturally the optimal example of this tendency in the 19th century. It was logical too that the British turned to the federal conception again after 1945 when the need for solutions to imperial and colonial quandaries intensified once more. They did so in the West Indies, where John Kendle remarks that "the mid to the late 1940s marked the high point of the federal commitment" in the British Caribbean (the Montego Bay Conference met in September 1947). Federation came readily to hand as a mechanism to bring about what was defined in Parliament by the then Colonial Secretary in early December 1948 as the central purpose of British policy — to "guide the colonial territories to responsible self-government within the Commonwealth in conditions that ensure to the people concerned both a fair standard of living and

freedom from oppression from any quarter". (No mention yet of consent.) The National Convention in Newfoundland therefore, suggestively, met at a time when the federal-cum-confederal spirit was on one of its periodic upturns in Whitehall. Furthermore, entry into Canada promised to underpin wartime gains in prosperity, and it was difficult to believe that in the future one Canadian was going to oppress another Canadian. Whether it was what Newfoundlanders really wanted was not so important as meeting these basic criteria, sturdy rather than sophisticated in any moral or practical sense, so typical of the later 1940s.

Experiments in federation were often linked at a variety of levels. Sir Kenneth Wheare, constitutional adviser to the National Convention in Newfoundland, was partly on the basis of that experience, employed by the Colonial Office to help craft a new Central African Federation in the early 1950s. In fact, just as the making of the Dominion of Canada marked the climax of British imperial federationism in the 19th century, so Newfoundland's entry into Canada in 1949 — so rounding out that earlier achievement — represented the peak of successful federal construction in the British ending of empire. After that there was a lot of downhill. The West Indian Federation was doomed before it began in 1956, collapsing in 1962; the Central African Federation involved endless complications and duplicities before succumbing in 1963; the South Arabian Federation always verged on farce — exemplified by the fact that it had the only capital in the world, Ittihad, without a population; whilst the Nigerian federation issued ultimately into civil war, and continues to live on the edge of a volcano. The lesson might be that if you have to live in an ex-British federation, live in Canada, warts and all. Meanwhile, John Kendle concludes his own survey on federalism and decolonization by remarking that "so long as the British were playing with other people's sovereignty, and not their own, the federal idea held little fear for them".[9] There is an acid truth in this, though it is perhaps also a little harsh, at least viewed from where we stand today. The United Kingdom is about to be tipped (or to tip itself) into a *de facto* federation of its own, including multiple parliaments, and the English at least have not had a vote on the matter. At least in Newfoundland there was a National Convention, modest affair though it may have been.

Among the attractions of studying imperial and colonial history are the unexpected parallels and analogies between places otherwise at some sort of polar opposite to each other. This observation arises from the pamphlet published in 1944 under the auspices of the Fabian Society by the Labour M.P, Charles Ammon, entitled *Newfoundland: The Forgotten Island*. Empires have many forgotten places, and they are often islands. At that same time Cyprus was also called forgotten, "orphaned", the Cinderella colony. Connections go deeper than chance nomenclature, a roughly similar population, and a tradition of salt-fish exports to Mediterranean markets. In 1933 Newfoundland ceased to be self-governing and lost its constitution; but two years before this Cyprus had had its representative constitution taken away, not because of financial, but political misbehaviour (some

Greeks had rather injudiciously burned down Government House literally over the governor's head). Local politics was suspended in disgrace, and for the rest of a distinctly seedy decade many Cypriots would have identified with the exact terms of one Newfoundland protestor about their Commission that "... we are subservient to an autocracy that has no material interest in us...We are worse off than the Kaffirs of Africa and a people without any political status in the Empire."[10] But in both islands the war induced a return to what S.J.R. Noel terms a system of open politics. Just as local politicians in Newfoundland crept out of their confinement and began to appeal tentatively to their old constituencies, so they did in Cyprus; and although this aroused in both cases the suspicion of a grumpy local governor, (so that Governor Walwyn in St. John's, like Governor Woolley in Nicosia, complained that the locals seemed interested above all in making a fast buck out of the emergency) in Whitehall it was recognized that Britain could not much longer tolerate the embarrassment of the transparent constitutional inferiority of European populations. So it was that, the war over, national conventions took place in both islands in 1947. There the similarities ended. The Newfoundland Convention led somewhere, even if it was not where most delegates had intended. The one in Cyprus fed into a lasting impasse. Newfoundland got swallowed up into Canada, something most of its inhabitants accepted, if without enthusiasm. Cyprus, on the other hand, was not allowed to be swallowed up into Greece, which most Cypriots devoutly wished. Peter Neary's balanced conclusion is that "Arguably, Newfoundland found greater independence within the loose structure of Canadian federalism than it could have ever achieved on its own."[11] Little, vulnerable Cyprus, by contrast, did come to "stand alone" in the world, and in some profound ways has suffered for it. The risks these island societies faced were different — the one primarily financial, the other above all political. The comparison is selected largely on purely personal and incidental grounds. But it is perhaps worth making in our context today because it underlines the uncanny and surprising echoes across continents and seas given off in the transitions with which we are dealing.

There is another general echo of decolonization in the Newfoundland context which is worth evoking in these remarks. This concerns the critical question also asked by Peter Neary: "What explains the political failure of the Newfoundland elite from 1934 to 1949?." He finds the answer in a lack of vision, common purpose and systematic organization, so that, for example, Newfoundland critics of the Commission of Government and the Dominions Office were outclassed at every turn by superior metropolitan tacticians. This judgement evinces a confidence in the thoroughbred quality of Whitehall personnel which few Britons would readily share today; who knows, maybe it is justified with regard to the period concerned. More broadly, however, it may be appropriate to identify an analogy with the fate of the white settler community in East Africa. If the latter group had been able to provide a coherent and astute leadership there is little doubt that decolonization in that region would have followed a rather different path. In Tanganyika (today's

Tanzania), it was the local governor's sudden change of advice to London in 1958 — that the European politicians in his colony were moribund and unsophisticated, frankly useless in fact — which led to a major shift in approach. Britain turned to moderate African, not immoderate European, partners. Subsequently, the local European political class proved relatively easy to sideline, though this left a bitter taste in some mouths and many cries of betrayal. Failed political leadership — an absence of vision and supple tactical awareness — in some quarters is as prevalent in the way colonial systems come to an end, as is success in other quarters. Indeed, the terminal history of empires is littered with the corpses of political classes and groups, victims of their own inadequacies and rigidities, or more likely, simply left behind by events. In this manner, too, the political history of Newfoundland cuts across, if it does not slavishly follow, a shared pattern with very different places and cultures.

The successes also require comment. In this connection, success may be said to equal a new kind of political leadership. Joe Smallwood pushed his way from fairly inconsequential margins into the centre of events in Newfoundland. In his career he had thrashed around for some means of getting lucky. In presuming to link himself with the swift change of tempo in determining Newfoundland's future from 1946 onwards he, to again quote Peter Neary, "chanced onto a winner". It just so happened that Smallwood's vigour and energy in propagating the confederate case were exactly what the Dominions Office needed. They could hardly have done it themselves. Elsewhere in the British-run world new-mint politicians were pushing themselves into their local centres. An energetic and unblushing presumptuousness, not skill or intelligence, was what they all shared in common, and allowed them to catch the future by the forelock. Kwame Nkrumah in the Gold Coast was the classic African example. He rushed hotfoot from his southern American college campus to throw himself into the politics of his homeland. The British needed a bright young chap like him, and it was said that in the districts British colonial officers discreetly shovelled out registration forms for Nkrumah's party. The fact that the British needed him, and he needed the British, was the basic formula of the Gold Coast's advance to independence in 1957. The methodology of British decolonization hinged on the convenient coming into prominence of lots of "big little" men, and viewed from this angle at least, Smallwood might be said to fit a very recognizable period type. Technology helped. The present author recalls over twenty years ago an Oxford seminar in which that remarkable blue stocking of so many visits to African government houses, Margery Perham, remarked in her own naturally booming voice that without the proliferation of loudspeakers African nationalism in the 1950s would not have been the same animal. What at a slightly earlier point would Smallwood have been, and how differently might the balance of opinions have swung in Newfoundland in 1947-8, had it not been for the projection of his views and dominant personality on the now ubiquitous radio?

We cannot say anything original or interesting here about the Canadian role in bringing about Newfoundland's accession. But again in the light of imperial history certain parallels rise naturally to the surface. It is quite clear that what galvanized thinking in Ottawa about Newfoundland, apart from the initial imperatives of defence, was the possibility that the Americans might be getting their blow in first, following of course the Leased Bases Agreement in 1941. It was fear of an American permeation, if hardly invasion of Newfoundland which subsequently drove the policy process in Mackenzie King's government. This gels with a British imperial tradition — shared no doubt with many other empires — that what lies behind the acquisitive impulse, the habit of snapping up one territory here, another territory there, is not so much the desire to possess the places concerned, but to deny them to other people. Fear and jealousy of fellow-men, sometimes intense, sometimes moderated as in the case of Canada and Newfoundland, not some irresistible and primal need to expand, is the key to events. Be this as it may, just as it has been said that the British acquired their 19th century empire in a fit of absence of mind, so Canada absorbed Newfoundland in an occasional fit of interest. Perhaps that absorption was one of the last expressions of Canada as a potentially major new factor in world affairs, something so redolent of the later 1940s, before that country settled down in later years to purely internal disputes, and the compensation — by no means to be sneezed at — of being a middle-rank power with impeccable, if slightly self-preening, liberal credentials.

For the United Kingdom, it was much to be preferred that Canada, not the United States, should be the inheritor of colonial Newfoundland. At least some of the reasons are basic to imperial psychology. Very generally, there were two highly undesirable scenarios which occasionally confronted British policy-makers when it came to the ending of empire. The first was defeat at the hands of an internal rebellion, in which power was snatched by Britain's local enemies, or people who were not exactly friends. Again, the later 1940s offered a grim example in the way that Britain exited from mandatory Palestine. Here, the British Army was effectively defeated. British power was not transferred; it disintegrated, and was for the most part replaced by Zionist power. Avoiding another Palestine — defeat by terrorism — was fundamental to British policy in the 1950s and 1960s. They largely if not wholly succeeded.

The second highly undesirable scenario was to have a colony filched by some competing power. This was just as humiliating, perhaps more so. Clouds of this kind overhanging the British end of empire were more common than one might think. There were continuing scares about a Spanish grab at Gibraltar — in fact, they continue today in mooted form. What made the Cyprus situation so psychologically contorted for the British in the 1950s was the fact that Greece seemed to be at the bottom of it all. Just how visceral the emotions touched off in this context might be were shown when the Argentines snatched the Falklands Dependency in 1982. Even the transfer of Hong Kong to China in 1997 had to be carefully finessed

— this was where Governor Patten's role was important — so that the United Kingdom was not at any point too obviously humiliated before the rising Chinese ascendancy. Newfoundland, however, could be handed over to Canada without bruised feelings, after some kind of due democratic process, precisely because the latter was not a foreign country — still, in 1948, a recognisably "British" country. Had Newfoundland been drawn into the American orbit, this would not have been quite so easy. There is, then, a triangular category — containing its own sub-species — of British decolonization in which third parties enter the reckoning in very complicated ways, as inheritors or would-be inheritors. The example of Newfoundland was simply at one end — the acceptable and respectable end — of this particular spectrum.

Money, naturally, cannot be kept out of this account. It is more or less true to say that the British obtained their empire on the cheap, ran it cheaply and got rid of it as cheaply as possible. Its cheapness was one of the British Empire's more redeeming if not endearing features, because it meant it was not so oppressive as more luxurious empires sometimes are. When Harold Macmillan became Prime Minister in January 1957 one of his first acts was to order the Treasury to make a "profit and loss account" of the residual colonial empire — which bits were worth having, and which bits could be abandoned. There is some debate about the importance of this as a marker in the road to the final climax of British decolonization. What is, however, becoming clear as the documents are published is how the Treasury was on the constant look-out to ward off financial obligations in the course of late colonial policy-making. Just as it had once been floated that Newfoundland might be integrated, like Northern Ireland, into the United Kingdom, only for the proposition to be sidetracked because of its expense, so the same suggestion was made and swiftly abandoned about Malta — yet another "garrison country" — in 1955.[12] The British Treasury's role in constraining the options for Newfoundland after 1945 were in line with a long-standing parsimony which was all too obviously embedded in the Commission of Government regime. But it also had a particular edge, shaped by the dollar-starvation of the immediate post-war years, which looked, not just backwards, but forwards to the financial necessities — decolonization on the cheap — which gave a certain cheese-paring flavour to the British departure from other territories at a slightly later period.

British decolonizations were also characterized by a particular configuration of power which also affected developments in Newfoundland. Neary conjures this up when he writes that "what the British eventually did was not to propose a particular constitutional solution for Newfoundland...but to establish a timetable and a procedure for political change there. To outward appearances this put them above the fray; but in truth, by asserting their right to establish how political change would occur in Newfoundland, they positioned themselves brilliantly to influence strongly what that change should be".[13] This is the heart of the matter in imperial terms. It was in the act of going that the British became more powerful than in the

act of staying. It was a terminal form of power, but a decisive one when it came to shaping other people's futures. Let us come back to India, the case of this *par excellence*. By the 1940s, the more the British tried to stay in India, the more doomed they were to futility, and the more in hock to local politicos. But once they said they were going — once Mountbatten went out in March 1947 so transparently as "the last Viceroy" — then they became the powerful ones, and the local Indian politicians had once more dutifully to attend the viceregal court (the boot, that is, was almost instantly transferred to the other foot). The accelerated time-tables (in the June Plan, independence to come within a matter of weeks) and procedures (above all, the procedure of partition) drove this point home. Only the British, then, could ensure who ruled in Delhi after August 1947; or a bit later to "upgrade the Canadian ticket" in Newfoundland. One did not need to be unusually brilliant to exploit this position and grasp its possibilities, only capable of a certain ruthless decision. The theme could be illustrated many times over in different places and contexts. It shows why decolonizers are able most of the time to keep the show on the road long enough to get out in one piece, if not always with dignity and honour wholly intact. India and Newfoundland 1947-1949 have this in common at least: their futures were being shaped, partly by themselves, but partly by other people, and at least some of the same factors and formulas operated in both cases.

The vigorous death-rattle of imperial power often evident in the ending of empire has implications for the purity of self-determination. From the point of view of the decolonized, in all their varieties, as opposed to the decolonizers, it is self-determination which is the heart of the matter. Newfoundland, or at least its coast, looms large here insofar as it was in Placentia Bay that Roosevelt and a somewhat less enthusiastic Churchill framed the Atlantic Charter, which let loose a new impulse of freedom into the world. This may have been a rhetorical freedom, but rhetoric has its place as a determining factor in history. There was a certain ambivalence from the start about the scope of the Atlantic Charter. Was it really just intended to apply to the circumstances of occupied Europe, as Churchill's subsequent disclaimer contended, or was it truly universal in its ambit? Ambiguity was later part and parcel of the ending of empire, and not least with regard to self-determination. The idea has come about — indeed was meant to come about after a certain point — that simple self-determination was a guiding principle of British decolonization. But the more you look into it, the more qualified this has to be. Most Punjabis and Bengalis probably did not wish to be partitioned, but they were. Most Cypriots certainly did not want their own puny republic, but that is what they got. Palestinian self-determination was obviously a joke. And if one starts talking about Africa, the qualifications are legion — in fact it was precisely to suppress real questions of self-determination that decolonization was rigidly limited to the old colonial frontiers drawn up with remarkably straight rulers. In many, or even most of these cases, it was probably as well. In the Balkans we can see what the price of an endlessly permed self-determination can be. The spirit of self-deter-

mination in British decolonization was sometimes Augustinian — please, but not yet — and sometimes like the now long-gone chambermaid, who soothed her indignant employer with the assertion that she was, after all, only a little bit pregnant. If the degree to which Newfoundlanders — as opposed to just Smallwood — freely "chose" Canada as a way of leaving their own colonial past behind is problematical, the same vibrations of uncertainty concerning desires and consents are felt in almost all experiences of decolonization.

There is, it follows, if necessarily nebulously, a "now you see it, now you don't" strain in the end of the British empire which applies to many aspects of it, including the matter of self-determination. For the British, the most important thing of all about it was that everything should seem *pukka* and above board. It was felt to be very important in London, as David MacKenzie notes, that in putting Confederation on the ballot following the National Convention, the United Kingdom did not leave an impression of forcing it on the local population.[14] Impressions were always crucial to the management of decolonization. The extremely careful stage-handling of the transfer to China of Hong Kong in 1997 was nothing new here, except that we live in a world where the resources for manipulating impressions are now virtually infinite. One is hardly surprised to learn that the very final choreography of the Hong Kong hand-over was put by Government House, and of course Downing Street, into the hands of a production company[15] — but then empire had always been a thing of smoke and mirrors. Meanwhile, no one really asked Hong Kongers what they wanted for themselves — there were just a few vigorous nods in that direction. The British liked their decolonizations neat and tidy if at all possible, but if you look under any carpet you never know what you might find. "When it came to Confederation" Peter Neary concludes "the United Kingdom led, Canada followed, and Newfoundland consented".[16] Every element here is true, and yet not quite what it seems. This is in keeping with the elusiveness of the particular story of Newfoundland in 1949, as well as the generalities infusing the British end of empire.

It was because impressions about decolonization were so critical that the day of independence, or in Newfoundland's case the day of transfer, had a special significance of its own. There would be an interesting article to be written about such days and the degree to which they could be orchestrated to the required effect. Suggestively, they varied enormously in type and texture. At one end of the spectrum there is the joyous, for example, Delhi on August 15, 1947. Hundreds of thousands jammed the streets, with the British, if anything, gathering most plaudits. As one observer put it, "At last, after two hundred years, England has conquered India". The mood in the Punjab and some other places was rather different, but it was Delhi that mattered for that instant. But other days of decolonization were not joyous, nor yet despairing, but just plain flat — a day almost, if not quite, like any other day. David MacKenzie again describes that in St. John's on 31 March, 1949 there were few celebrations to welcome the new province, no noisy parades, and

at some places the unofficial flag of Newfoundland flew at half-mast.[17] Amongst the population of Hong Kong, both Chinese and expatriate, there was, on their own "day of transfer", a kind of inscrutable waiting for what might come next. These contrasts merely indicate that there were many ends in the end of empire, and any one case has to be analysed in its local complexity, but also as part of a wider category.

In turning towards a conclusion, let us start, curiously, with Smallwood's much-loved Gander piggery. In his memoirs Smallwood notes his displeasure when, despite the impeccable cleanliness of his pigs, five Chinese statesmen appeared to be offended by the smell when being shown the splendid barn. "Anthony Eden," Smallwood notes, however, "true English gentleman that he was, showed great and intelligent interest in the pigs" when his turn came to view this striking scene.[18] There are not many gentlemen left in Britain today, it must be said, but there is a great interest in gentlemanliness. Theories about it abound, and quite recently an interpretation about "gentlemanly capitalism" and empire in the 19th and 20th centuries made a much-noted appearance.[19] There should be a gentlemanly theory of decolonization. It was very much as an English, essentially Edwardian, gentleman that Harold Macmillan depicted the end of British rule as an "act of grace" performed with due solemnity and gentlemanly decorum — something handed down from above, not grabbed (or at least too obviously grabbed) from below. Perhaps a key to understanding Macmillan's basic views on this great change may be found in his love of the novels of Anthony Trollope, which he continued to read voraciously throughout his premiership. In *Phineas Finn* we find the following description of a fictional Prime Minister's approach to the dominating issue of suffrage reform in the mid 19th-century.

> Let us be generous in our concession....Let us at any rate seem to be generous. Let us give with an open hand — but still with a hand which, though open, shall not bestow too much. The coach must be allowed to run down the hill. Indeed, unless the coach goes on running, no journey will be made. But let us have the drag on both the hind wheels. And we must remember that coaches running down hill without drags are apt to come to serious misfortune.[20]

This seems to catch almost exactly, not only Macmillan's cast of mind and outlook on the demise of empire, but an instinctive British policy over a much longer period. Maybe attaching Newfoundland, with a credible show of consent, to Canada in 1949 was such a drag, to stop the island again running downhill into the sort of misfortune which had occurred in 1933. But above all, it seems perfectly natural and logical that the British survived the end of empire by practising the same codes and principles that had allowed them to navigate successfully through the shoals of suffrage reform a century before. Both problems could be discussed with a superior and aristocratic concern for the education of new masters, who might not

be quite what one would want, but who had to be accepted for all that. In this way decolonization may be related to the continuities of British history, of which Newfoundland too is a part.

Notes

[1]This paper was delivered as the David Alexander Lecture on 18 March, 1999, at Memorial University. The lecture was part of the Encounters With the Wolf Symposium organized by the Newfoundland Historical Society.

[2]See N. Mansergh (ed.). *Constitutional Relations Between Britain and India: The Transfer of Power, 1942-47.* Vol. IX. London: H. M. S. O.,1976, p. 236.

[3]Roy Lewis. *Enoch Powell: Principle in Politics.* London: Cassell 1979, pp. 78-80.

[4]James K. Hiller. *Confederation: Deciding Newfoundland's Future, 1934-1949.* St. John's: Newfoundland Historical Society, 1998.

[5]Martin Shipway. "Madagascar on the Eve of Insurrection, 1944-47: The Impasse of a Liberal Colonial Policy." *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History.* Vol. 24, No. 1 (Jan. 1996), pp. 72-100.

[6]For the Gold Coast see John D. Hargreaves. *Decolonization in Africa.* New York: Longman, 1996, pp.121-31.

[7]John Kendle. *Federal Britain: A History.* New York: Routledge, 1997, p. 123.

[8]*Ibid.*, p. 149.

[9]S. J. R. Noel. *Politics in Newfoundland.* Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1971, p. 237.

[10]Peter Neary. *Newfoundland in the North Atlantic World. 1929-1949.* Kingston, ON: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1988, p. 345.

[11]For this instance see Dennis Austin, *Malta and the End of Empire.* London: Frank Cass & Co. Ltd., 1971.

[12]Neary, p. 239.

[13]David MacKenzie. *Inside the Atlantic Triangle: Canada and the Entrance of Newfoundland into Confederation. 1939-1949.* Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1986, p. 193.

[14]See Jonathan Dimbleby, *The Last Governor: Chris Patten and the Handover of Hong Kong.* Toronto: Doubleday Canada, 1997.

[15]Neary, p. 354.

[16]Mackenzie, p. 229.

[17]Smallwood. *I Chose Canada: The Memoirs of the Honourable Joseph R. "Joey" Smallwood.* Toronto: Macmillan of Canada, 1973, p. 217.

[18]P. J. Cain and A. G. Hopkins. *British Imperialism: Innovation and Expansion, 1688-1914.* New York: Longman, 1993 and *British Imperialism: Crisis and Deconstruction, 1914-1990.* New York: Longman, 1993.

[19]Anthony Trollope. *Phineas Finn: The Irish Member.* London: the Trollope Society, 1989, pp. 291-2.