

Introduction: The New Early Modern Newfoundland, the Eighteenth Century

Peter E. Pope

Volume 17, Number 2, Fall 2001

The New Early Modern Newfoundland: Part One

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/nflds17_2art01

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Faculty of Arts, Memorial University

ISSN

1198-8614 (print)

1715-1430 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Pope, P. E. (2001). Introduction: The New Early Modern Newfoundland, the Eighteenth Century. *Newfoundland Studies*, 17(2), 139–142.

Introduction: The New Early Modern Newfoundland, the Eighteenth Century

PETER E. POPE

THIS IS THE FIRST OF A PAIR of volumes which grew out of the idea of a special issue of *Newfoundland Studies* on the new early modern Newfoundland. This was to include recent essays on Newfoundland's history up to the British conquest of North America in 1763 — a convenient “fence post”, at least within the larger field of Canadian studies. In the end, we had too much for one issue. Incidental editorial factors have brought the later essays to the press first. This collection of essays on eighteenth-century Newfoundland thus precedes a forthcoming companion volume on Newfoundland before 1700.

This accidental rearrangement of history is, in a sense, unsettling. It surely makes more sense to deal with first things first. Of course we seldom do deal with first things first, not least in historical studies. Sometimes we glorify this with a theoretical terminology, as when archaeologists use what they call the direct historical approach and examine the ethnohistory of a region for ideas about how to approach its prehistory. Much history has, in fact, been written under the assumption that since we know how things turn out we ought to be looking for clues about how they came to be that way. This is true of many forms of history, in the idyllic or whiggish mode certainly, but also in the satiric or marxist mode. As we lose our sense of certainty about how things are turning out, we are perhaps more willing to contemplate less convoluted approaches.

As any archaeologist will be pleased to point out, the events of a later epoch can affect the evidence about an earlier epoch; but as any historian will tell you, later events cannot affect earlier events. This is the basic grain of historical studies and it suggests two things. First, it might sometimes make sense to ignore later periods in trying to understand earlier ones but, second, it will always be necessary to consider earlier periods in order to properly understand later ones. Archaeologists

seem more inclined to accept these implications than historians, judging at least by their research interests. Archaeologists, on the other hand, are prone to a symmetrical prejudice in favour of the oldest things they can lay their hands on and therefore sometimes underestimate the importance of research on what seems to them to be relatively late documented periods. The historians, historical geographers and archaeologists who have contributed to these volumes are engaged, then, in a minority interest: the early modern period – too early for historians eager to explain current affairs and too late for archaeologists interested basically in “origins”.

One of the essays published here is not, in fact, new. On the other hand, it could certainly be considered part of “the new early modern Newfoundland”. It can even be seen as the scholarly contribution which opened the door to a new kind of Newfoundland history, one less obsessed with the supposed injustices of the past and one more willing to look beyond the succession of political events to the social, economic and cultural history of what the celebrated scholars of the *Annales* call the *long durée* — towards a more anthropological history, if you will. The editorial board of *Newfoundland Studies* was at first reluctant to republish the late Keith Matthews’ essay “Historical Fence Building: A Critique of the Historiography of Newfoundland” because this journal does not normally reprint articles. They were open-minded enough, though, to attend to my argument that this was a seminal essay which needed re-editing and merited contextualization. And so this collection opens with a revised edition of Matthews’ brilliant article.

Not to say that it is perfect. To my mind, Matthews does not always follow through with the logic of his own argument. For example, like the older historians he is criticizing, he overemphasizes the transience of Newfoundland settlement. Some planters were mobile, of course, but in the context of other circum-Atlantic populations Newfoundlanders were actually fairly stable (Pope 2004). He is sometimes dismissive of Judge Prowse — who remains an important influence, at least on popular perceptions (Prowse 1895, Bannister 2002). He is exceptionally generous to Gillian Cell, implying that her excellent study of *Early English Enterprise* also challenges the conventional wisdom, when it could be argued that Cell’s acceptance of the inevitability of settler-fisher conflict is, in fact, the one major flaw in her analysis (Cell 1969). For one reason or another, Matthews does not discuss C. Grant Head’s extremely valuable study of eighteenth-century Newfoundland (Head 1976). And there are other potentially confusing minor ambiguities in some of his notes on the actual practice of fishing amongst residents, migratory bye-boat crews and “fishing ship” crews. It is perhaps worth pointing out that, until the eighteenth century, the latter did not fish from their ships but fished inshore from boats, like their competitors. These really are quibbles, though. This essay on “fence posts” was itself a turning point in the writing of Newfoundland history, because it exposed traditional conflict theory for the thread-bare *a priori* that it was and thereby challenged those interested in Newfoundland’s past to formulate new issues based on a wider range of evidence.

I did not have the pleasure of knowing the late Professor Matthews and heard him lecture only once but my reading of his essay leads me to think that he might have been delighted by the work on eighteenth-century Newfoundland collected in this volume. Jerry Bannister takes on the traditional mythology of the fishing admirals, with a vigorous attention to the actual voices of the past, worthy of Matthews himself. Nicholas Landry offers us a fresh perspective on the French settlement of Plaisance, emphasizing the important role of resident merchants there. John Mannion has written the first comprehensive account of early Irish settlement in Newfoundland, indicating how limited this was, until the 1730s. Olaf Janzen gives us an economic analysis of the Newfoundland voyage of a Scottish (!) sack ship. These are fine examples of where Newfoundland history has gone, once freed from the mythic shackles of conflict theory. The same might be said for the incisive research notes contributed by Charles Martijn and Louis-Jacques Dorais on new evidence for Innu and Inuit presence on the Northern Peninsula and by James Hiller on French and British conceptions of imperial boundaries in early eighteenth-century Labrador. Planter-fisher conflict remains, of course, an arresting concept and it is still certainly possible to frame a vivid narrative of the island's history in this way (O'Flaherty 1999).

Newfoundland is an interesting locus for early modern history. The very special situation of the island and its history, between Europe and America, means that we have always had to grapple with an issue that North American "colonial" specialists are only beginning to engage: should we face east or west? In other words, can we best understand the development of the New World with reference to the dominant European economy to our east? Or with reference to what the New World would become, as European settlement transformed the continent to our west? Only in the last few decades, with an increasing tendency to try to understand the past in its own terms, have scholars turned a little from a whiggish fixation on the frontier to an interest in how New World colonies functioned as part of the European order. These are old questions in Newfoundland, the analytic tension often projected into the past as a perceived "conflict" between settlers, facing west as it were, and fishers, facing east. The early modern history of Newfoundland is not an esoteric topic but one fundamental to an understanding of the emergence of a North Atlantic world (Pope 2003).

The editor had considerable help with this collection and would thank reviewers for their useful comments on the original submissions; the authors, for their patience with the inevitable fits and starts of the production schedule; Richard Buehler, the retiring editor of *Newfoundland Studies*, for his relentless editorial work and advice; Geneviève Duguay of Parks Canada Quebec for her editorial work; and Janine Williams for editorial assistance, as a part of her internship with the Newfoundland Archaeological Heritage Outreach Program, supported by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

References

- Bannister, Jerry. 2002. "Whigs and Nationalists: the Legacy of Judge Prowse's *History of Newfoundland*". *Acadiensis* 23 (1): 84-109.
- Cell, Gillian T. 1969. *English Enterprise in Newfoundland, 1577-1660*. University of Toronto Press, Toronto.
- Head, C. Grant. 1976. *Eighteenth Century Newfoundland: A Geographer's Perspective*. Carleton Library, no. 99. McClelland and Stewart, Toronto.
- O'Flaherty, Patrick. 1999. *Old Newfoundland: A History to 1843*. Long Beach Press, St. John's, NF.
- Pope, Peter E. 2003. "Comparisons: Atlantic Canada," in Daniel Vickers, ed., *A Companion to Colonial America*, 489-507. Blackwell, Malden, MA and Oxford.
- . 2004. *Fish Into Wine: The Newfoundland Plantation in the Seventeenth Century*. Omohundro Institute for Early American History and Culture. University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, NC.
- Prowse, D.W. 1895. *A History of Newfoundland from the English, Colonial and Foreign Records*. Reprints: Mika, Belleville, ON, 1972 and Boulder, Portugal Cove, NF, 2002.