

## Gordon Inglis. *Death and Breakfast: A Mystery.*

Derek Yetman

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Will readers recognize that the “Overview” of the *Quarterly* by Percy Janes in the closing pages first appeared in the 85th-anniversary volume and has not been updated to cover the subsequent years of publication?

In short, this volume is an opportunity missed. Though the *Quarterly* has, over its many years, published an enormous volume of material of inestimable worth to historians, geographers, sociologists, folklorists, literary scholars, and specialists in many, many other disciplines, this particular collection will disappoint those who might have turned to it as a research tool. “But the *Quarterly* has never aspired to be a scholarly publication,” some might quickly insist; “this is more a time capsule of what the *Quarterly* has had to offer for the past century.” True. Yet even a time capsule can be assembled and its contents organized, and at the very least *explained*, so that those who examine its contents end up with a better understanding of the legacy contained therein. Such an anthology would have provided a stronger sense of the role that *The Newfoundland Quarterly* has played in the past century in defining not only who we are today but truly revealing where once we stood.

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Gordon Inglis. *Death and Breakfast: A Mystery*. Killick Press, St. John’s, 2001, ISBN 1-894294-38-6

TAKE ONE LARGE country house, one disabled telephone, and blend with a dark and foggy night to thicken. Throw in an awkward parson, an amateur sleuth, a curmudgeon, a retired detective, a couple of doddering sisters and a few colourful types from the neighbouring village. Season with an apparent murder and a well-aged Mountie (Corporal Cameron preferred, trusted by literary cooks since 1912). Stir gently over a low heat until murky pasts and hidden motives bubble to the surface. Skim and discard red herrings until only the solution remains. Serve cold.

Ah, yes! A cherished recipe, passed down by dear Aunt Agatha and others. It has been a staple of the murder-mystery diet for longer than many care to remember. Served too often or with inferior ingredients, however, it tends to curb the appetite.

Gordon Inglis treads a well-worn path here, excepting the fact that his parlour drama is set in rural Newfoundland. Aside from discourse on icebergs, a lamentation on the plundering of outport antiques, and the defining of dinner versus supper, the premise is all too familiar. A murder mystery weekend is organized for a group of genre aficionados and, surprise! an actual murder takes place. Or at least that appears to be the case. As the loathsome Browne says with a barking laugh, “You’ve really covered the clichés.” Inglis is quite conscious of his creative direction. His characters are fully versed in the methods of Marple and Poirot and there is frequent allusion to writers like Dorothy Sayers and Anne Hart. Still, all is not tongue in

cheek. Some of the characters might support the idea of a parody but most are merely stereotypical.

The novel is, ultimately, a minor variation on the murder-mystery formula. This in itself might be enjoyable, forgivable at least, but for the problems of plodding pace, insipid dialogue and lack of real suspense. The reader is left to wonder whether the author is describing himself through one of his characters: "He was an avid fan of the British mysteries that played weekly on American public television, and he was excited by his own inspiration."

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Kevin Major. *As Near to Heaven by Sea: A History of Newfoundland and Labrador*. Penguin Books, Toronto, 2001, ISBN 0140278648

WRITING A HISTORY of Newfoundland and Labrador is a daunting task. One might, as Judge Prowse did over a century ago, wade through volumes of Colonial Office records to create a narrative. Or one could follow Senator Rowe, who reviewed the scholarly literature and wrote a summary — which some scholar at Memorial University could have put together, but had not. The advantage of this approach is that one need not reinvent the wheel, and in writing comprehensive survey histories it is difficult, even impossible, for even the most erudite of scholars to use primary historical and archaeological evidence.

A novelist deeply interested in the history of his province, Kevin Major is neither Prowse nor Rowe. He knows that one can no longer master the correspondence of the Colonial Office and call it the history of Newfoundland, but neither is he interested in mere synthesis. His strategy is to make use of other scholars' work, and to mine it for the telling, colourful anecdote. This is Newfoundland and Labrador history as a collection of stories, rather than a unified narrative.

A significant advantage of this approach is that Major is able to write a history which pays greater attention to rural Newfoundland and Labrador than to the political and clerical elites of St. John's. In this age we expect a decentered history which gives attention to the multiple histories of natives, women, working people, and so on. But there are serious disadvantages as well. Major seems to select episodes neither for their significance nor their explanatory value, but for their colour or quirkiness. Thus we are told of cannibalistic lawyers (60-61), to take one example, without any justification for the story's inclusion other than its lurid nature.

Major has a novelist's interest in individual characters, and seems most comfortable when imagining people and scenes such as Sir Humphry Gilbert's pretentious performance in St. John's harbour in 1583, and the reactions of the foreign fishers looking on. Major even includes people who did not exist. He admits that historians do not believe such legends as St. Brendan dining on a whale, or Princess