

## Kevin Major. *As Near to Heaven by Sea: A History of Newfoundland and Labrador.*

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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

Sheila marrying a pirate, or Farley Mowat's Albans, but he includes each of these fictions all the same, because they make good stories.

Even when writing straightforward history, Major does not cite his sources. This decision no doubt reflects the publisher's belief that readers do not like footnotes, and that their inclusion could harm sales. Informed readers will recognize the work of many of the authors upon whom Major has drawn, and a bibliography is included, but the absence of notes prevents a full evaluation of his work. For instance, I would have liked the source for the suggestion that the Beothuks chose to reject Norse technology in favour of their own material culture traditions. The only place where I have seen this conjecture is in Bernard Assiniwi's *The Beothuk Saga* (McClelland and Stewart, 2000; translated from *La Saga des Béothuks* by Wayne Grady), a non-scholarly work of fiction which is not in Major's bibliography, but which is nevertheless included in the list of suggested readings. Are there reputable scholarly sources which support this belief?

The emphasis on story-telling does not substitute for an interpretative framework, and as a result the book is choppy, consisting of ill-digested bits of narrative. The areas in which published scholarship is weak are, by necessity, treated poorly. Major has not bridged gaps in the literature with his own research, and more seriously, he does not provide a critical stance, an individual point of view. And he has not always done his homework. For instance, Major accepts the standard, yet debatable view that nineteenth-century society and politics was overwhelmingly sectarian in nature, and presents the 1861 election violence at Harbour Main and St. John's as an example of the Protestant-Roman Catholic schism. In fact, the riots involved rival Catholic factions. The Protestants were not involved. There are a number of other factual errors.

This popular history is in some ways a success. It is accessible to the non-specialist, and may encourage readers to seek out more scholarly treatments. Many readers will no doubt find colourful anecdotes more engaging than the approaches usually taken by academic historians. Yet genuine historians can write accessible, readable history, and one has to question why the publisher chose an author whose expertise lies elsewhere. Writing good history takes training and experience. Kevin Major has given us a good yarn, perhaps; but in the end, readers will understand Newfoundland and Labrador no better than before.

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