

Lawrence Mathews. *The Sandblasting Hall of Fame.*

Wayne Grady

Volume 19, Number 2, Fall 2003

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/nflds19_2rv10

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Faculty of Arts, Memorial University

ISSN

0823-1737 (print)

1715-1430 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Grady, W. (2003). Review of [Lawrence Mathews. *The Sandblasting Hall of Fame.*] *Newfoundland Studies*, 19(2), 403–404.

tion in the postwar era. The argument looms larger in some articles than others; he occasionally reads like a literary scholar struggling to locate the unifying motif in an eclectic mix of stories. But it is there, most powerfully, in MacLeod's half-regretful indictment of *The Atlantic Provinces in Confederation* for its failure to integrate Newfoundland more successfully into the book's portrait of the region. That well-known piece, first published in *Acadiensis*, provides a fitting bookend for the present collection. But it is in an earlier essay, connecting Newfoundland to the Halifax Explosion, that MacLeod best articulates his credo: "I study Atlantic Canada, or more precisely, Newfoundland's adherence and membership in the region. At present, historians and others debate to what extent there was an Atlantic region including Newfoundland prior to the second half of the twentieth century. One approach suggests before that time, Newfoundland's constitutional separateness signals how aloof from the mainland the big island was, how unconnected, in the important spheres of life. A contrary approach expects that the confederation of 1949 was the culmination or product of numerous strong linkages — social, economic, cultural — which already bound Newfoundland to the mainland" (221). MacLeod, clearly, is a contrarian.

It seems that historians of our region have begun to take heed of MacLeod's arguments. One need no longer rely on Joe Smallwood's Prince Edward Island ancestry to posit Newfoundland's inter-connectedness with the mainland. Whether to the extent that MacLeod would prefer, the historical literature of our region increasingly recognizes Newfoundland's North American roots. After a lifetime of persuasion, perhaps Malcolm MacLeod can rest his case.

Edward MacDonald
University of Prince Edward Island

Lawrence Mathews. *The Sandblasting Hall of Fame*. Oberon Press, Ottawa, 2003, ISBN 0 7780 1234 4 (cloth), ISBN 0 7780 1235 2 (paper)

AT THE END of "Proof," one of the nine stories in Mathews's impressive debut collection, the narrator crosses a bridge: "it seemed, oddly, despite the gradually increasing brightness in the sky, that I was passing from one kind of darkness to another ..." Most of Mathews's characters are similarly caught in a surreal, Arnoldian universe, merely existing between two equally dead worlds. In "The Fjord," for example, Hanrahan (who appears in three stories), though a graduate student, is working as a night clerk in a cheap Vancouver motel; he's "the right age and class to know that sooner or later the right job will come along, at more or less the right money. Hanrahan's is perhaps the last generation of Canadians to be able to luxuriate in this belief." The belief, however, is unfounded, as Hanrahan in the other stories is no less unfulfilled. At the end of "Fjord" he is "moving deeper into a continent, no doubt toward some archetypal dead end." And at the end of the ironi-

404 Reviews

cally titled “Hanrahan Saved” he knows that his attempts to find Sharon, an enigmatic former student, “will hit dead ends.”

Few of Mathews’s characters, however, succumb to the bleakness of their condition. They are “saved” from despair by a merciful bent for self-deception. Blind to their own foibles, they are nonetheless trenchant observers of the idiosyncrasies and possibilities of others: the rogues’ gallery of characters in “Proof” is a delicious case in point. Silas Berry “never spoke of any desire to get a better job, to complete his degree, to make for himself a life better than the one he was living.” He is a “cheerful robot,” and so is the narrator. In “Flower Heaven,” Crystal is “salvageable.” In “The Sandblasting Hall of Fame,” Angela Oregano is “redeemable.”

Two stories stand out from the others; they are gentler, less clothed in irony, and somehow sadder than the rest. In both “An Absence” and “Baseball” the narrator recalls time spent with his father. In the latter, the two travel to Montreal to watch an Expos game (the Expos win, “sure sign of an apocalypse”); in the former, the same narrator sleeps in his father’s apartment in Vancouver, after his father has died. The narrator is himself a father by now, and the two stories present a deeply contemplative essay on the nature of the father-son world, an examination of the place “where absence begins.”

The Sandblasting Hall of Fame is about absence. Existence is about all there is to hope for. Mathews’s characters are uniformly “disoriented and uncertain.” They are advised to “Love not the world.” They are convinced that “There is no present.” And yet they survive. They are always stepping back to take stock, to see to what extent some kind of analysis will help them through an impossible impasse. “I have to make sense of my life,” says Hanrahan in “Hanrahan Agonistes.” “That justifies pretty much anything these days.” It even seems to justify the dead ends.

Wayne Grady
Writer, Kingston, ON

Robert Mellin. *Tilting: House Launching, Slide Hauling, Potato Trenching, and other Tales from a Newfoundland Fishing Village*. Princeton Architectural Press, Princeton, 2003, ISBN 1-56898-383-2

THE HISTORICAL AGGREGATION of architecture and material culture in particular places intimately weaves a community’s social fabric and mediates its relationship with the natural world. At the dawn of the twenty-first century, this premise prominently grounds a well-established tradition of architectural, landscape, and community studies. Understandably, a broad and sometimes daunting cohort — ranging from academe to community members themselves — share in the outcome of such work. Robert Mellin’s *Tilting* admirably embraces this challenge. Inspired by the palpable texture of Tilting’s (on Fogo Island) enduring cultural landscape, Mellin invites readers to follow his quest to better understand the collective ethos