

Stuart Pierson. *Hard-Headed and Big-Hearted: Writing Newfoundland.*

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ally invested in the outcomes of each character. While this is the author's debut novel, it is certainly one of the finest works that I have read.

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Stuart Pierson. *Hard-Headed and Big-Hearted: Writing Newfoundland*. Edited by Stand Dragland. St. John's: Pennywell Books, 2006, ISBN 1-8944-6391-9

STUART PIERSON WAS NOT, at first glance, a charismatic teacher. He spoke quietly, avoided theatrical gestures, and rarely made eye contact. He wore the same outfit to every class — dark jeans, a turtle neck of some bland colour, black shoes — and he almost always brought a cup of the abysmal coffee that the Arts cafeteria brewed. He did not encourage conversation outside of class: though his door was often open, he did not welcome students to drop by for chit-chat. He insisted on calling us only by our surnames. He was not an excellent lecturer: he was neither a fluid nor an animated speaker; he was apt to become bogged down in minutiae; and his lectures could be far from edifying. I remember one lecture on Gibbon that, as I discovered when I got home, he had cribbed almost entirely from the introduction to the Penguin edition of *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. When asked a question or pausing to consider a point, he often touched his glasses in a manner that suggested shyness. He taught two generations of undergraduate students, but only a handful knew of his large life outside the classroom. Most of his students (myself included) were part of the first post-Smallwood generation, caught between outport culture and suburban St. John's. We were only dimly aware that there was an arts community, let alone that Stuart was a major figure in it.

But Stuart Pierson was the best teacher I ever had. He inspired me to become a historian, and not a week goes by that I don't think of him. For those of us fortunate enough to take one of his seminars, Stuart opened up not only a new world of intellectual history, but also new ways of thinking. He was, as Stan Dragland explains in *Hard-Headed and Big-Hearted*, a tremendous intellectual who had mastered the Western canon. But, unlike many of his colleagues, he was not a pedagogue. He may have towered over us intellectually, but he never tried to intimidate or belittle his students. In a Department known for its nastiness, Stuart's intellectual generosity stood out. He offered a type of meta-knowledge (a knowledge about knowledge, if you will), rather than a demonstration of how much he himself knew. For Stuart, history was about questions rather than answers. He is the only professor I have met who was willing to admit publicly that he did not know something important. Not only did he ask students open-ended questions, but he actually listened to their answers. He may have been friends with Gerald Squires, the Pratts, and numerous other cultural luminaries but, in the classroom, he was *our* Pierson.

*Hard-Headed and Big-Hearted* is a fitting tribute to Stuart Pierson. Stan Dragland provides just the right balance of editorial comment and contextual exegesis, while James Hiller's thoughtful forward echoes Pierson's own tribute to David Alexander [Eric Sager, Lewis Fischer, and Stuart Pierson, eds., *Atlantic Canada and Confederation: Essays in Canadian Political Economy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1983)]. Both Dragland and Hiller suggest that Pierson was in some respects an intellectual conservative, and, while contrarian may have been a more apt description, their sensitive analyses avoid slipping into mere homage. Dragland and Hiller remind us that there were many Stuart Piersons, both inside and outside academia. Though the collection omits Pierson's work on the Scientific Revolution, it captures the diversity of his interests and the intensity of his judgements. Despite this diversity, the Western canon forms a type of unifying backbone to the collection. Pierson used writers such as Collingwood or Eliot as touchstones, quoting liberally in an unfashionable style that demanded the reader's attention. Although these touchstones could weigh down his prose, they serve as a stimulating subtext. In Pierson's essay on Newfoundland photography, for example, the reader ends up learning as much about R.G. Collingwood as the photographers under review.

Dragland divides Pierson's writing into three principal categories. The first, "Fitting Newfoundland In," contains Pierson's essays on history and historical geography, including his unpublished review of the *Historical Atlas of Canada*. The second section, "A Dodge To Cheat Death," comprises reviews of writers, poets, novelists, and songwriters. It includes his extensive commentary on Wayne Johnston's novels, particularly his rather infamous review of *The Colony of Unrequited Dreams*. The third section, "The Community's Medicine," consists of Pierson's reviews of photography and visual art. Although Dragland's habit of inventing titles for some of the reviews can be irritating, he has supplemented Pierson's references with thoughtful notes, and he successfully avoids intruding too much on the original essays. Pierson lamented the decline of editorial standards, but I suspect that he would have been pleased with the quality of Dragland's work (I failed to find a significant typographical error).

What is striking about Pierson's writing is the powerful amalgam of personality and intellect. Pierson's voice — his mixture of irony, passion, sarcasm, earnestness — is always on or very near the surface. Some of the essays manage, in just a few pages, to impart both a chatty, informal tone and an unforgiving, imperious severity. Reading through the essays brought to mind Cardinal Wolsey's description of how, in his relationship with Henry VIII, he had tasted both the sweet and the sour in each degree [George Cavendish, "The Life and Death of Cardinal Wolsey," in William Roper, ed. *Two Early Tudor Lives* (New Haven: Yale University, 1962), p. 192.] If we take the sour first, the obvious candidates are Pierson's reviews of the *Historical Atlas of Canada* and *Colony of Unrequited Dreams*. The former, titled "A Diatribe," was so provocative at the time that no academic journal would publish it, and Dragland gives a pithy account of the controversy. Pierson's review is

more indulgent than mean-spirited and, in retrospect, it is hard to see why it provoked such an uproar. Pierson's assessment is certainly harsh in many respects, holding historical geographers to an unstated ideal — what is a national atlas supposed to be, if not national? — but it is no nastier than many typical reviews published in respected journals. It is certainly far more amusing than most academic reviews; perhaps that was the problem. I think it would have worked better as satire, as Pierson's thick mixture of colloquialism and erudition — of wise-cracks and put-downs — contains a heavy dose of dyspepsia.

Pierson's review of *Colony of Unrequited Dreams* also sparked controversy, but here he maintains an earnest engagement with his target. Though Aristotle makes his habitual appearance, Pierson keeps a sharp eye on the text, cataloging Johnston's factual errors and inconsistencies. The problem with the review is not, as some would have it, that Pierson is unfairly pedantic. Pierson himself muses about the limits to historical accuracy and admits, at one point, "I am of two minds, as I suppose most are, about the language police" (227). The problem with the review is that Pierson does not grapple effectively with Johnston's idea of history and his heavy use of Jewish metaphors. Pierson tells us where the novel went wrong, but he never gets around to telling us what Johnston was trying to accomplish. Johnston's tale of how Newfoundlanders had broken with their own past seems to have eluded Pierson, who places too much stock in Johnston's preoccupation with father figures. *Colony of Unrequited Dreams* is as much a meditation on Newfoundland history as it is a fictional biography of Smallwood. Pierson claims that Smallwood is too large a memory for Newfoundlanders to suspend disbelief; however, I suspect that it was precisely the cultural weight of this memory — iconography and all — that propelled Johnston to invent an alternate Joey. Pierson is on to something important when he comments on Smallwood's appearance in Julian Bigg's film *A Little Fellow from Gambo*: "Here the camera (to which JRS is completely oblivious) stays on that Mr. Magoo face; behind those familiar black-rimmed glasses the eyes glitter with murderous glee, the face smirks, the head nods slowly in ferocious satisfaction ..." (243). In excising the ghost of this Mr. Magoo, Johnston was, I think, trying to do more than play literary tricks on the past.

If those reviews leave a sharp taste, the collection offers ample examples of the sweet. As a reviewer, Pierson was at his best when he wrote like he taught. As a teacher, Pierson could have a remarkably light touch, gently guiding students to find their own solution to a historical problem. Much of Pierson's writing exemplifies this generosity of spirit, this desire to pursue elusive questions rather than narrow answers. In both his writing and his teaching, Pierson demonstrated the power of uncertainty in ways that always reminded me of Sheldon Kopp [Sheldon Kopp, *If You Meet the Buddha on the Road, Kill Him* (New York: Bantam, 1976)]. Like Kopp, Pierson conveyed a sense that the journey was more important than the destination, and certitude was not going to get us very far. For example, in his review of Kevin Major's *No Man's Land*, Pierson comes close to offering a harsh

critique of Major's treatment of morality and war, but at the end he pulls back to pose a question:

Major cannot rise to this level of moral clarity, for he has not made up his mind whether he is celebrating or deploring, whether Beaumont Hamel was tragedy or farce, whether the soldiers from Maxse Street, Hayward and Martin, were victims or heroes. I do not ask him to vote, pro or con. I ask him to explore more carefully the relation between cliché and experience, then and now (165).

This gentle, almost sweet evisceration is as difficult to write as it is easy to read, and it is no wonder that no other literary critic in Newfoundland can match it.

Pierson's best book reviews are not reviews in the conventional sense. They use a subject — a book, poem, or painting — like a diving board and, like a diver, Pierson compresses a series of feats into a short space. For example, his review of Rosemary Ommen's *Merchant Credit and Labour Strategies in Historical Perspective* is still the best single essay on the history of economic culture in Newfoundland and Labrador. To this specialized collection of economic studies, Pierson brought his usual piercing gaze and disarming wit. "I think that the only reason I got the job," he states at the outset, "was that nearly everyone competent to do it was in on the conference" (31). Pierson starts with definitions and first principles — what do "merchant capital" or "credit" really mean? — and he adopts a wonderfully ruthless process of selection: not a single word of the review is wasted. Pierson moves the reader smoothly yet briskly through arcane material and, at just the right moment, springs this on the reader: "I hate the on-the-one-hand, on-the-other-hand place in which I now find myself. Also, I am not sure how to finish this review, by now already too long. Let me make a few observations in no logical order on what I suppose I think after living with credit and truck and its literature for a time" (44). He then launches into a brilliant five-point summation, followed by this gem: "Between those who think that someone or some one group is in charge and those who think that one studies ineluctable and impersonal processes in history ("logic of truck"), little ground for agreement on the questions we have been examining is likely to be forthcoming" (48). "Is there a way," he ends, "to decide who is right?" (49).

It is impossible to do justice to this collection. In trying to convey the scope and depth of Stuart Pierson's work, I have had to employ my own idiosyncratic process of selection. While his essays vary widely in substance and style, not one of them, not even for a moment, fails to enlighten and to entertain. They are incomparable in the exact meaning of the word: together they constitute a unique book to which nothing can be compared. The only thing missing from the collection is what Stan Dragland could not provide: a sense of Stuart's legacy as a teacher. Reading the essays will give you an idea of what we have lost.

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