

**“... to prevent confused or over-optimistic thinking and possible disappointment”:  
Brian Dunfield and the Slum Clearance Problem in St. John’s,  
Newfoundland, 1944**

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# “... to prevent confused or over-optimistic thinking and possible disappointment”: Brian Dunfield and the Slum Clearance Problem in St. John’s, Newfoundland, 1944

C.A. SHARPE

THIS IS THE THIRD AND FINAL EDITED DOCUMENT in a series relating to the development of the Churchill Park “Garden Suburb” in St. John’s, Newfoundland in the 1940s. The first (Sharpe, 2000) discussed the 1939 proposal by a city councillor for a municipal housing scheme that, had it been approved, would have constituted a direct attempt to improve the living conditions of some of the households in the inner city. The second (Sharpe, 2006) outlines the detailed proposals for the Churchill Park development. The Government at the time consisted of an English Governor and six commissioners, three English and three Newfoundlanders, all appointed by the British government. It accepted these proposals as a politically acceptable means of increasing residential mobility in the city, thereby indirectly reducing downtown densities and, perhaps, allowing the city to demolish some of the most dilapidated downtown houses. It was also seen as a way of providing both employment and housing for returning service personnel. The two documents presented below pick up the story in 1944 when the Chairman of the St. John’s Housing Corporation (SJHC) was forced by political and public pressure to defend the decision of the Corporation not to build houses for the poor.

A month prior to the outbreak of World War II, the Newfoundland Commissioner for Finance<sup>1</sup> wrote to one of his colleagues about the slum problem of St. John’s, describing it as “one of the most pressing which we have to meet” but noting that, unfortunately, “the re-housing of the lowest grade of the slum areas appears to be out of the question except on a purely eleemosynary basis.”<sup>2</sup>

St. John’s, like most other North American cities, faced two intractable housing-related problems in the 1940s: an overall shortage of accommodation leading to overcrowding, and a large area of “slum” housing in the downtown. The slum

was probably no worse than that found elsewhere in Canada, but it had been a source of municipal concern and embarrassment since before the turn of the century (*Evening Telegram*, 1925) and its continued presence in a city now overrun with service personnel from Canada and the United States was a source of embarrassment and concern.

Several reports had been written about the situation, two by leading Canadian town planners Arthur Dalzell (1926) and Frederick J. Todd (1930). After a 1929 investigation of land values and building costs, the housing subcommittee of the city's Town Planning Commission reported its conclusion that rehousing the population in new dwellings built *in situ* would be impossible. However, the report proposed a solution that became the basis of housing policy in many North American jurisdictions after World War II, despite the fact that it has never been shown to work effectively.<sup>3</sup> As explicated by the American housing economist Richard Ratcliff (1945), it became known as the "filtering" or "trickle-down" theory. It worked on the assumption that when new, good-quality dwellings are added to a city's housing stock, the people who move into them will thereby free up their former dwellings, which are presumably older and less expensive, for occupancy by another household that is also interested in improving their housing situation. Thus households filter up and vacancies filter, or trickle, down. A critical assumption was that eventually the downward-moving vacancy would end up in a dwelling so dilapidated that nobody wanted it and it would be demolished. The attraction of this theory was that it obviated the necessity of undertaking slum clearance and/or the construction of new dwellings for the poor. As long as the supply of houses continued to exceed the immediate demand, the market would ensure that everyone was decently housed, and the poorest-quality dwellings would be removed from the inventory. This option was attractive for governments that recognized the impossibility of investing municipal, provincial, or national resources in a program of direct housing provision for the poor. Such a policy would inevitably involve the politically explosive notion of subsidies on behalf of those whom many voters would consider undeserving. All the government had to do was ensure an adequate supply of new housing, which it could do by supporting the house-building industry by fiscal and other policies.<sup>4</sup>

The Planning Commission report concluded that by providing regularly employed men — an important caveat — with "new and better houses we should not only be benefitting them and their families, but also indirectly the other occupants of the congested areas. The tendency would be in the course of time that the worst houses would be abandoned. Indeed, if a few hundred houses were erected for those able ... to pay for them, it should render possible putting into operation a policy of condemning the worst dwellings on health grounds and thereby gradually improving the general state of housing from the bottom."

Unfortunately, the city was never able to find the money required to implement the recommendations of any of the reports. So, on the eve of World War II, the cen-

tral core of St. John's was still in such a bad way that a visiting British journalist wrote that a visit to Newfoundland was "like stepping back into the Middle Ages" (quoted in Neary, 1995: 5).

## JOHN MEANEY'S PROPOSED HOUSING SCHEME

St. John's was never lacking in eloquent and well-informed citizens. One of them was City Councillor John T. Meaney who, on 4 May 1939, proposed that the Municipal Council ask the Commission of Government to provide funds sufficient to build 500 new homes within the means of "wage-earning, industrious citizens" (*Daily News*, 1939; Sharpe, 2000). This would not directly improve housing conditions in the inner city. But it would be a necessary first step because the inability to demolish the worst houses in the city, many of which had already been condemned as unfit for human habitation, prevented the building of new, better-quality dwellings.

When the proposal arrived on his desk, the Commissioner for Finance dismissed it in scathing terms as unworkable, noting that nothing had changed in terms of the basic conditions of the city or its economy in the previous decade. On the basis of what he referred to as the "prevailing English rule" that rent should not exceed one-sixth of the income of a person of "small or moderate means," he estimated that a "relatively well off" mechanic or general labourer could not hope to carry a rent in excess of \$10. The cheapest grade of house proposed by Meaney would have required a monthly rental of \$16. Therefore the proposals "do not carry us very far from a practical standpoint [because] they would not provide houses even of the cheapest kind at rentals which would suit even the better class of family at present occupying the slum areas."<sup>5</sup>

It was easy for the Commission to dismiss the city's proposal because of the prevalent attitude among the affluent intelligentsia that there really was no effective or politically acceptable way of improving the housing situation of the poor. Showing the arrogance and paternalism that many Newfoundlanders properly resented, the Commissioner for Natural Resources (J.H. Gorvin<sup>6</sup>) warned that if new municipal housing was built for the unemployed and the casual labouring class "the danger is that new slums will be created in addition to the slums that have been vacated. The people must be taught new ways of living before they can take responsibility for the upkeep of a new neighbourhood."<sup>7</sup> Gorvin's opinion that direct, *in situ* rehousing of the inner-city poor was not a feasible policy was shared by his colleagues. To be fair, it should be remembered that their attitude was not very different from that held by many Canadian politicians and senior officials within the Central Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC) towards subsidized housing in the 1950s and 1960s (Dennis and Fish, 1972: ch. 5; Bacher, 1993: ch. 5).

In March 1941, City Council, having now waited almost two years for a response to its housing proposal, wrote again to the Government, asking for a decision. This time the Government responded quickly and rejected the proposal, arguing that it could not support any plan that did not directly provide better accommodation for the ill-housed. The Government certainly did not imply that new houses had to be built for them. Having obviously accepted the feasibility of relying on the filtering process, its reply to the city noted that “it might be possible to build new houses for existing households who are above the line of extreme poverty, the houses vacated by them being used to replace the houses unfit for further use.” However, since the Government believed that the city suffered from what it referred to as “a distressingly large number of families living in permanent poverty,” and not a lack of housing, therefore:

a scheme to provide them with better housing conditions independently of any increase in their earning power would be a scheme to superimpose upon the present scheme of public relief a further measure of relief in the form of housing at much less than cost.... Until the number of such impoverished families in St. John’s undergoes a substantial reduction as a result of either improved general conditions, or transfer of population, the financial problem involved in relieving the housing conditions of this class is of such magnitude that, in our view, it is quite out of the question to attempt to tackle it in a period of uncertainty created by war conditions.... Much as we regret having been forced to this conclusion, we apprehend that schemes for the re-housing of the people are only practicable at the present time in so far as they can be linked in some way with the existence of fairly steady employment for those who are to be re-housed. We consider that it is not unreasonable that the larger employers of labour in the City should be expected to recognize an obligation in this respect.... [and they] should make some contribution to the solution of the housing problem.<sup>8</sup>

The Government suggested that large employers be asked to gather data on the housing conditions of their employees so that a plan might be developed under which employees, employers, the city and the Government could co-operate in a “series of small but useful housing schemes for the lowest paid wage earners.”

## THE COMMISSION OF ENQUIRY INTO HOUSING AND TOWN PLANNING IN ST. JOHN’S

A year later, in April 1942, the city called the Commission’s bluff by writing to ask that it appoint a Commission of Enquiry “to enquire into the housing situation in St. John’s.” The city offered to pay all the Commission’s expenses. All they wanted the Government to do was to appoint the members and provide moral support. The mandate of the Commission would be to “make enquiry into and a survey of the

question of housing in the City ... with reference to some plan ... whereby houses may be erected for those who are unable ... to do so themselves, and for this purpose to enquire into the cost of houses, location of same, transportation, methods of financing ... and to consider, in relation to the foregoing the re-planning of the City.”<sup>9</sup>

The Government did as requested, and appointed the Commission of Enquiry into Housing and Town Planning (CEHTP) on 12 May 1942 under the chairmanship of Mr. Justice Brian Dunfield of the Newfoundland Supreme Court.<sup>10</sup> The CEHTP issued five so-called Interim Reports, all written by Dunfield, whose views on the situation facing the city were characteristically blunt. He wrote that the role of the CEHTP was “to get at the fundamentals which have made our city the dirty, congested, ill-built, planless and expensive thing which in great part it is, and was before the war influx took place” (CEHTP, 1943: 9). Enjoying the freedom of expression that came with his status in the community, he told the Rotary Club “we have ... probably the most backward town on the east coast of North America ... (which) we are still running ... like a fishing village” (*Daily News*, 1943b).

The *Third Interim Report* summarized the results of the Commission’s survey of housing and proposed a surprising remedy — the building of a “garden suburb” in the Northern Valley (Sharpe, 2006). The development, which came to be known later as Churchill Park, would serve multiple objectives: promote the clearing of the downtown slum; increase the housing supply in the city and thereby indirectly provide an opportunity for the rehousing of some of the ill-housed; introduce modernity in house design and town planning to the city; provide housing for returning veterans; facilitate the orderly future expansion of the city; and help restore the battered self-confidence of the people of the city. Most of these objectives were met. The eradication of the slum and the rehousing of some of its residents were not.

The Report recommended that the new development be built by a newly created, independent body. Blithely unaware of the consequences, the Government accepted this recommendation and established the St. John’s Housing Corporation (SJHC) on 19 July 1944 with Brian Dunfield as its first Chairman. Dunfield, who once had complained to a colleague that his judicial duties were rarely onerous enough to occupy him in the afternoon (Bartlett, 1999), threw himself into the project. He was suffused with a Victorian zeal to “do good works” and let nothing stand in his way. He incessantly badgered and cajoled the Government to get the resources he believed were necessary, and during the five years that he chaired the Corporation he was largely successful. Working with a speed unheard of in today’s world, the Corporation began work on the first major project, the laying out of Elizabeth Avenue, on 25 October 1944; laid the foundation of the first house on 6 July 1945; and offered the first 30 houses for sale on 5 June 1946.

Did the members of the CEHTP really believe that a suburban housing development would solve, or at least ameliorate, the downtown slum problem? Gordon Winter,<sup>11</sup> an original member of the Corporation who succeeded Dunfield as Chairman of the SJHC in 1949, didn’t think that anybody other than Dunfield believed it

(Winter, 1999). Dr. Leonard Miller, another member of the first Board, recalled that “the part about slums was put in for political reasons, although Brian Dunfield believed he could do it, in part” (Miller, 1981). A cynic might suggest that the reference to slum clearance was no more than a selling point in the Commission’s effort to get the Government to agree to establish and fund the SJHC so that a desire on the part of the well-meaning members of the CEHTP to do something to help the poor and downtrodden might be fulfilled.

Relations between the SJHC and the City Council were always poor and the growing realization that the new suburban development would have no short-term effect on housing conditions in the city made them worse (Collier, 2011: 45). Mayor Andrew Carnell bitterly resented the fact that the Corporation had been given significant financial support from the Government in order to build a suburb, which at that time lay outside the municipal boundary. That the city had also provided grants and loans to the Corporation exacerbated the situation, and although Carnell had originally agreed to participate in the sod-turning ceremony marking the beginning of work on Elizabeth Avenue, the Corporation’s first major undertaking, he pulled out at the last moment. He subsequently began to refer to the Churchill Park project as “The New Jerusalem.”<sup>12</sup>

Context is all-important in the explanation of townscape, and the absence of responsible government in Newfoundland between 1934 and 1949 is a critical part of this story. Had Newfoundland not been governed by a “benign oligarchy” in the form of the Commission of Government (Rowe, 1980: 417) it is unlikely that Churchill Park would have been built (Winter, 1999). Another important contextual element was the changing world view of Newfoundlanders during the 1940s. The traditional loyalty to Britain was replaced by an attachment to a more prosperous North America (Jackson, 1986). The presence in the small and impoverished country of large numbers of relatively affluent Canadian and American servicemen and the temporary prosperity brought to the country by the war meant that “a rising tide of expectation, of demands for a better life, swept across the country ... and a people who had known nothing but adversity and who had forfeited their self-government as the penalty for bankruptcy, regained their pride and determination” (Roberts, 1967: 102). They could never go back to what they had been (Neary and O’Flaherty, 1983: 147).

In considering the alacrity with which the Commission of Government and the St. John’s Municipal Council<sup>13</sup> accepted the recommendations of the CEHTP, created the SJHC, and poured money into it with a minimum of restrictions, it is important to keep in mind the newly acquired Newfoundland reverence for the lifestyle, the physical manifestations, and the “modernity” of life on the mainland.<sup>14</sup> The desire was widespread to replace the architectural motifs of the past with symbols of the new-found prosperity and self-confidence, to assuage a feeling of inferiority, and to prove that Newfoundlanders were just as capable, just as urbane, as anybody else in North America. The cultural landscape of Churchill Park cannot be read, nor

its significance assessed, if one does not understand this. If it was true that Newfoundlanders were resigned to the view that “they were an inept, helpless race, fated for nothing better than a life of bare survival and even capable of that only under the benevolent auspices of governors and entrepreneurs of other breeds more competent than they” (Jackson, 1986: 68), then Cook, Dunfield, and others wanted to show that this was no longer the case. As Dunfield reminded the Rotary Club (*Daily News*, 1943c):

remember we have had a disgrace to wipe off. We are the North American community which collapsed and threw its hand in, and that is a disgrace to us all.... Just think how nice it would be if it could go forth to the world in a year or two that down in Newfoundland they were reconstructing their capital city in a more thorough and wholesale way than had ever been done anywhere else. Why should we not be leaders? Let us get together and try.

## THE IMPACT OF MILITARY BASE CONSTRUCTION IN ST. JOHN'S

Another significant contextual element was the debate over whether the acute wartime shortage of accommodation in the city was caused by the influx of military personnel and their families or the migration of “baymen” to St. John’s in the hope of finding employment on one of the Canadian or American bases. It was commonly believed at the time that it was the former (*Evening Telegram*, 1943a, 1943b, 1943c, 1943d; *Daily News*, 1943a).<sup>15</sup> The city had suffered from a shortage of reasonable-quality housing for some time and the virtual cessation of house-building during the Depression had made an already bad situation much worse. The imposition of rent control on 30 December 1941 may have stabilized the expenditures of families already in possession of rented accommodation, but this did nothing to increase the supply. The 1942 CEHTP housing survey found that nearly 40 per cent of the houses from which responses were received could be classified as anywhere from tolerably bad (22 per cent) to bad (11 per cent) to very bad and in need of immediate demolition (5 per cent). And the situation may well have been worse than suggested by these incomplete results, since one might reasonably assume that the households living in the very worst houses might have made up the majority of those who did not return the survey questionnaire. The war brought prosperity to the country because of the millions of dollars spent by the Canadian and American governments on the building and maintenance of the bases. It brought employment opportunities to thousands of Newfoundland women and men. But it did not contribute directly to the city, as neither of the foreign governments was subject to municipal taxation. The war did, however, exacerbate the already serious housing shortage (Sharpe and Shawyer, 2010). The CEHTP was not convinced that the prosperity would outlast the war. In the words of the Third Report, “we have not thought



it our duty to attempt to deal with the temporary conditions in St. John's caused by the influx of war workers. These, bad as they are, are a passing phase, indeed a phase beginning perhaps to pass already" (CEHTP, 1943: 9). Dunfield took up this question again in the first document reprinted below.

It is impossible to determine exactly how many workers moved into St. John's to take advantage of base-related employment. The building "boom" occurred in 1942, and by 1943, when about 9,250 were employed on bases in Newfoundland and Labrador with an unknown number in St. John's and vicinity, the workforce was already in decline. One source puts the number working at the American Fort Pepperrell at 5,000 in November 1941 (High, 2003: 87). An analysis of the data from the 1942 CEHTP survey shows that 472 (8 per cent) of the 5,803 gainfully employed people living in the houses that responded had base-related employment and of those only 67 (14 per cent of the 472 and just over 1 per cent of the 5,803) had moved into St. John's since the beginning of the base construction period.<sup>16</sup> Therefore, Dunfield concluded, there was no incontrovertible evidence that base workers contributed to the overcrowding problem in the city.

By the end of 1943 the main phase of the Battle of the Atlantic was effectively over and the threat of a successful invasion of North America had disappeared. One would think that this would have meant a major reduction in the size of the Canadian and American garrisons in Newfoundland. Certainly, the size of the Royal Canadian Navy establishment was reduced in early 1944 and many of the vessels redeployed to European ports in anticipation of the D-Day invasion. But the soldiers and airmen remained. The diplomatic *pas de deux* between the two nations for post-war supremacy in Newfoundland, and the inertia embodied in military logistical planning, ensured that large numbers of military personnel remained in the city for another year.

It is likely that at the peak of the military occupation there were as many as 13,500 foreign military personnel in the city: 8,500 Canadians (1,600 Army, 3,300 Royal Canadian Air Force [RCAF], and 3,600 Royal Canadian Navy [RCN]) and between 3,500 and 5,000 Americans. This would have amounted to about a third of the pre-war population of St. John's. The number of ship-borne RCN personnel would have ranged anywhere between 1,500 and 4,000 depending on how many ships, and of what type, were in port. Counting them would raise the total number of foreigners to as high as 40 per cent of the city's population. Most of the military personnel were housed inside the boundaries of the bases, but not all. Just over 2,000 RCN personnel had ration books at the end of 1943, indicating that they were living off-base. Some also had wives and other dependants vying for the scarce supply of food and accommodation. The Americans sent home all of their dependants within days of the Pearl Harbor attack, but the Canadians did not. The Air Officer Commanding No. 1 Group RCAF argued that since St. John's was a war zone, no dependants should be permitted to stay. However, the Flag Officer Newfoundland Force argued that the presence of wives in port was essential to the maintenance of morale among his crews. The Commission of Government unsuccessfully pressured the

service chiefs to send all dependants home. A compromise was agreed to in March 1944 whereby the number of dependants permitted in the city was limited to 740: 60 for the RCAF, 280 for the Canadian Army, and 400 for the RCN. So it does not seem likely that Canadian military dependants contributed in any significant or long-term way to overcrowding in the city's housing stock, although the number of off-base RCN officers and ratings was clearly an issue.

## AN ENDURING MYSTERY

Why the Commission of Government agreed to support the costly and risky enterprise of expropriating 800 acres of farmland and building a huge new suburb remains a mystery. The decision was presumably rooted in several factors, one of which was *noblesse oblige*. Three of the commissioners had backgrounds in colonial or British administration, and the Governor was a retired Royal Naval Admiral. It is easy to understand how the application of rigorous town planning principles, based on by now well-established British practice, would have appealed to them. The prospect of a "colonial" people being provided with a new suburban development founded on modern principles of hygiene and public health would have been irresistible. The collective administrative experience of the commissioners makes it likely they would have appreciated that the orderly and efficient accommodation of the post-war growth of St. John's was a high priority, and that this project would help ensure it (Lewis and Shrimpton, 1984). They also could not have been ignorant of the fact that by the 1940s the Commission was subject to severe and not-undeserved criticism for its failure to communicate honestly with and effectively engage the people, and for its ineffectiveness in solving the economic woes of the country (Rowe 1980: 417). Critics of the Commission, especially its English members, have always described them as little more than uninspired, time-serving administrators, unconcerned with the future of a country in which they had no intention of staying beyond the end of their appointment. There is undoubtedly some truth in this criticism.

But they were not stupid men, and by 1944 they were no longer looking for kudos or praise. They knew that no matter what they did they would not hope to get much in the way of credit, and they would never be popular. But they could, and did, evaluate the recommendations of the CEHTP on the basis of cold-blooded common sense. They were as concerned as others were by the fact that the capital city's housing shortage was about to be exacerbated by the return of Newfoundland veterans and that the glorious days of virtually full employment were about to end. They would have appreciated that the proposed new suburban development promised concrete results that would have perceptible benefits in the relatively short term, including many construction jobs and a substantial number of modern houses in a well-planned environment, which would help alleviate the anticipated post-war housing shortage. Perhaps it was this reasoning that led to the Govern-

ment's decision to proceed with the project, which represented a great leap into the unknown and placed a huge responsibility on Brian Dunfield.

## THE "SLUM CLEARANCE" PROBLEM

There were only two obvious solutions to the intractable problem of eliminating the slums in the inner core of St. John's: build new housing for the poor; or rely on the filtering up of households and the filtering down of housing. It was assumed that these countervailing movements would occur after an injection of new houses into the market. One thing was clear. As Thomas Adams, the Chairman of the Town Planning Branch of the federal government's Commission of Conservation told the Canadian Club of Montreal in 1914, it was an unwise practice to pull down dilapidated houses unless the facilities existed to erect new houses to replace them (Simpson, 1982). The City Council of St. John's, the Commission of Government, and Brian Dunfield all understood this basic reality. But they faced three fundamental questions: who was to be responsible for building the new houses, where could they be located, and how might they be paid for? Furthermore, the SJHC was not empowered to build units within the city boundary, and neither Dunfield nor the Government were in the least inclined to court public derision by suggesting that subsidized housing of any kind should be provided in the new suburb.<sup>17</sup> They were men of their time, and although Dunfield in particular seems to have been inspired by a genuine desire to "do good," he was not a revolutionary. As a Justice of the Supreme Court of Newfoundland it would have been ill-advised for him to appear as one. But he had obviously read and accepted the recommendations of the best minds of the day on how best to tackle the problems of slum housing.

Dunfield may truly have believed that the building of a garden suburb north of the city would lead to an improvement in slum conditions in the inner city. But he knew it would be a slow process, dependent on what he called the "general move-up process," which we would now call "filtering." In his own words (*Evening Telegram*, 1942):

The first step would be to build as many small houses as we could find purchasers for. When enough of these had been built to relieve the present terrific pressure on the city, the worst of the slum houses would begin to fall vacant, and the city could start condemning them and pulling them down.... How many houses will have to be provided before the pressure is eased, it is impossible to say. A thousand is the minimum, in order to free the thousand houses which ought to be condemned. It might need a good many more, because of the present overcrowding.

The detailed proposals and provisional cost estimates for Churchill Park were contained in the *Fifth Interim Report* of the CEHTP, published in January 1944. Nestled in its

30 pages was a critically important, four-page section that had been circulating within the Commission of Government a month prior to the publication of the complete report (Dunfield, 1943).<sup>18</sup> This brief section was a justification for the fact that the house-building activity of the SJHC was not going to have any direct, or even immediate, effect on the downtown slum. This is the first of the documents reproduced below.

However, by May of 1944, Dunfield was forced to go on the defensive as he prepared the ground he would soon be walking as Chairman of the new SJHC. Dis-may grew as the limitations of the mandate given to the SJHC came to be widely appreciated. So, using one of the most effective ways of spreading a message throughout St. John's (and indeed the country, as the proceedings were broadcast on the radio and published verbatim in the local press), he explained to a meeting of the Rotary Club (*Daily News*, 1945a) that:

... we hear at time a lot of loose talk about slum clearance. That is the ultimate object, but it cannot be the immediate object.... The money is public, it is limited; and we intend to get the utmost value for it. We shall not be a hand-out corporation, but as strictly business-like and hard-boiled as anyone on Water Street.... We have to do some slum clearance if and when we can, but in the meantime we first have to provide for those who can pay their way.

The following month the citizens of St. John's were riveted by accounts of the death of Mary Ellen Hutchings, a 10-year-old girl who had recently died in a squalid shack on Blackhead Road from a combination of starvation, exposure, and gangrene resulting from frostbite. The house in which Mary Ellen died lay outside the city boundary, but within the one-mile-wide zone over which it had jurisdiction. It was less than a mile from the offices of the newly instituted Child Welfare Division of the Department of Public Health and Welfare and the city's hospitals. Several letters to the editors of both St. John's daily newspapers argued that this incident was yet another indication of how civic authorities were neglecting their basic duty to provide care (*Evening Telegram* 1944a, 1944b, 1944c; *Daily News*, 1944).

The SJHC was drawn into the discussion of the tragedy, perhaps inadvertently, by City Councillor James Spratt. The Corporation had not yet held its first meeting — that didn't occur until 24 July, but by now both the city and the Government had approved the reports of the CEHTP, which called for the creation of the Corporation and the building of a new suburb. In a letter to the editor (*Evening Telegram*, 1944d) Spratt wrote:

Many proposals have been made to improve housing conditions in this community by the building of new homes for the poor, and the clearing out of slum areas now existing. Much time has been spent (perhaps I should say "lost") by public bodies in discussion, without bringing about the results so necessary and so much to be desired. However, Utopian ideas have been accepted, and it has been decided to create Villages "A," "B" and "C" in our nearby suburbs, to accommodate those who can afford

to pay for modern, well-equipped and expensive homes. When is something to be done — even by this Council, of which I am a member — which will directly benefit the poor of our city, and remove forever from our midst conditions which may bring about a repetition of the terrible suffering of little Mary Ellen Hutchings?

Spratt's letter is easily interpreted as a criticism of the mandate of the SJHC, and of the two governments that had approved of its establishment. The impact of this criticism was heightened by a renewal of public concern about the proliferation of "shack towns" on the unregulated periphery of the city. Dunfield may well have been caught by surprise at the ferocity of the public response to the death of the Hutchings girl, and would probably have taken much of the criticism personally. By November he was concerned that he might be losing the battle for public opinion at a very inopportune time, just as he was about to breathe life into the SJHC and commence what he must have thought would be his major contribution to the future well-being of his native city. In an effort to justify and defend the mandate he and the SJHC had been given, he crafted a carefully-argued memorandum "suggesting effort to improve the condition of 'shack' dwelling houses before the coming winter" (Dunfield, 1944). This document is the second one reproduced below.

## THE "WIDOWS' MANSIONS"

Despite the widespread aversion to the idea of subsidized housing for the poor, it was generally accepted that there would always be some households in need of housing assistance from the government and that it was appropriate to provide it. As Dunfield noted during the first meeting of the CEHTP, "a housing programme inevitably implies some degree of public aid towards the housing of the lowest-income-quarter of the population" (*Evening Telegram*, 1942). The abiding concern of some members of the City Council for the most disadvantaged residents led to a meeting with the Government in December 1944 at which the possibility of a joint city-Government housing project for indigent widows and their children was discussed. The Government had, for some months, been holding firm to its position that the responsibility for rehousing the inhabitants of dwellings condemned by the city and demolished lay with the municipality. But perhaps there was a thought that involvement in a project designed to assist a few of the city's most severely disadvantaged women would redound its credit.

It is interesting to note how completely some of the commissioners had accepted the arguments that Dunfield had incorporated into the reports of the CEHTP, and which drove the policy of the SJHC.<sup>19</sup> The Commissioner for Public Utilities and Supply noted that "it was not within the realm of practical politics to build houses for everybody, but the problem of finding accommodation for the poorest classes was usually solved by the wealthy and middle-class people acquiring new

and better homes, which resulted in a general move-up on the part of the lower classes.” The Commissioner for Finance disagreed, saying that he didn’t see why the 100 houses that were under discussion couldn’t be made part of the scheme for the Corporation. Councillor Oliver Vardy, who would later serve for 20 years (1951-71) as the third chairman of the SJHC, took the opportunity of expressing disappointment at the failure of the Housing Corporation to solve the slum housing problem. While this might now be considered an unfair criticism, given that the Corporation had only been in existence for five months, Vardy’s understanding of its limited mandate was correct.<sup>20</sup>

The necessity for direct action was discussed at a subsequent meeting a week later. J.C. Puddester, Commission for Public Health and Welfare, noted that he was:

aware that the St. John’s Housing Corporation had not provided in their programme for the building of houses for the classes of people now under consideration, i.e. widows and orphans, the destitute, the sick, etc. ... and he thought that very few of the destitute widows and those in similar circumstances, for whom the Government is now paying rent, would move into houses vacated by citizens who would occupy the new dwellings erected in the Housing Area.<sup>21</sup>

At this meeting Dunfield offered to have the Corporation build the 100 houses if the city were to provide a suitable site, and if the Government were to give him the power to operate within the present city limits. In the end, the Corporation had nothing to do with the project — Dunfield wrote to the Government in January 1945 asking to be “released from the building of these structures if the Government can see its way to it.” He said that the Corporation was already having trouble with local contractors who objected to the fact that it was insisting on building its houses using its own workforce, and that in any case he was afraid of “biting off more than we can chew.”<sup>22</sup> However, the city and the Government proceeded with the “Widows’ Mansions” project, which saw 17 concrete block buildings, each containing four, five-room apartments, built on Cashin Avenue in 1947 — the first public housing in the city.<sup>23</sup>

## FIGHTING A REARGUARD ACTION

Dunfield’s brief flirtation with the idea of making this small, direct contribution to the problem of slum clearance, and the enduring power of the rhetoric that had served him so well for so long, wasn’t enough to convince the doubters that the Corporation was doing all it could, or should. Two years later he was still trying to convince the Government and the people of the city that, in time, the work of his Corporation would have an impact on the city’s housing problems, but that time

was not yet. In his year-end report for 1946 (*Daily News*, 1946) he continued to defend his reliance on the filtering process, repeating arguments he had made previously to both the Government and the public. He wrote:

The Corporation is sometimes asked why it does not build houses for the labouring classes or the “slum dwellers”. The answer is that it is not possible to do so within their means at present prices or material and labour.... the Corporation considers that at present it can only seek to increase the supply of houses by building for buyers of as modest an income as possible; this in itself eases matters for the poorer classes by taking away some of the competition for the houses already in town, and reducing the scarcity which leads to high rents.

Unfortunately, some of the extravagant predictions Dunfield made during the campaign to get the SJHC created came back to haunt him. At the end of 1945 the editor of the *Daily News* reminded his readers of the claim that the building of the new houses up in the northern valley would have a positive impact on the housing conditions in the core of the slum. His year-end review illustrates how the cautions that Dunfield usually attached to this bold prediction got lost in the retelling of the story. He wrote (*Daily News*, 1945b) that:

... the idea behind the (housing) scheme was that many persons would move out of second and third grade housing to the new area, leaving their vacated homes for the use of persons even more inadequately housed, who would move up a grade or two. The objective was ultimately to get the people in the worst slum areas into better homes vacated by migrants to the suburbs, leaving their own areas to be cleared in a general municipal housing scheme.

Dunfield had never guaranteed that this would happen. He had merely suggested that this is what might be expected. The fact that “filtering” was not an effective mechanism to effect slum clearance would not be known for at least two decades — too late to influence the debate in St. John’s.

In October 1946 Dunfield had one last public opportunity to defend the record of the SJHC when he was called before the Finance Committee of Newfoundland’s newly elected National Convention (Hiller and Harrington, 1995). Knowing that he was in a hostile environment, facing implacable opposition from several of the members, he gave a bravura performance that cannot be faulted in terms of the logic of the argument. He said:

unless the Government, or somebody is able to find, say, 15 million dollars or so ... which is out of reach (and they would have to kiss most of that money goodbye) we cannot clear the slums directly; therefore we say let us apply the Canadian or American system, seek out the man, going as low down the scale as we can, who, if he gets a long term mortgage at low interest rates, can at last afford the house he wants and he



will move out and everybody else will move one place up. That seems the method best suited to our conditions, and the only method the financial situation will enable us to apply.

Having outlined some of Dunfield's thinking about slum clearance and the dynamics of the housing market in 1940s Newfoundland, we can now turn our attention to two documents he wrote when trying to explain his stance to those who were going to pay the bills.

\* \* \*

## DOCUMENT ONE DISCUSSION REGARDING SLUM CLEARANCE

### 1. The "Slum Clearance" Problem

Members of the Commission of Government have asked us what we can propose about "slum clearance." By this they mean, as we understand it, what can we do about the immediate pulling down of the worst slum houses and the rehousing of the people now living therein. Our scheme, as they see it, involves the building of many houses, but to a large extent for those who can afford to pay for them, at once or by instalments, and a great deal of this may have to be done before the people in the worst slums, many or most of whom cannot afford to pay much, get relief. Let us discuss the pros and cons of this question.

### 2. The Ideal Position as to House Occupation

We are told in British and American books by housing experts that a town is in the ideal position as regards housing when about five per cent of houses are vacant. This keeps rents and land prices at a reasonable level, and gives the population a chance to shift about. The tenant will then pay and the house owner will get the fair value of accommodation; but the house owner will not get a scarcity value for his house, which he ought not to get, and the tenant will not be in the position that he is desperate and can be "held up" for an unreasonable price or rent.

### 3. Our Actual Position

There are, at a guess, about 8,000 houses in the community, including the close-in suburbs. We have no exact count on the suburbs, except in the "Housing Area" (275 dwellings), but we guess that there are about 1,000 in all in the close-in suburbs. There are exactly 7,005 dwellings in the City Limits (City Assessor's figures). Of these we examined 4,613 in our survey. But, so far are we from having 5 percent of houses vacant that we have apparently not less than 1,500 families in excess of the houses in the community. It is no wonder that houses have a scarcity value.



#### 4. How Far Have We to Go?

That seems to mean that we must put up at least 1,500 houses in order to get to the position of one family per house. But if we have also to pull down about 1,000 houses unfit for habitation, we must put up at least 2,500 houses to get one family per house. The worst slums, then, cannot all be pulled down until at least 2,500 houses have been built.

#### 5. Outsiders Now in the Town

We cannot get accurate figures on this without a census. But it looks as if the effect of the influx of outsiders is not as great as is often supposed. For example, families of naval ratings stationed here are 242; not a great proportion. Naval ratings living out of barracks are under 2,000 (out of a total population of 65,000) and these are lodgers, not family men, so far as this City is concerned. The St. John's Carpenters' Union is stated to have about 900 members at present, of whom 300 to 400 are the old-standing carpenters of St. John's. Of the 500 to 600 others, presumably outport men in the main, most would be lodgers only, and probably most outport men now in town are in as carpenters. Again, construction in town for foreign armed forces is long past its peak. These indications, the only ones we have available, go to confirm our view that our overcrowding problem is largely a permanent local one.<sup>24</sup>

#### 6. Problem of Temporary Accommodation

If then we are asked today to pull down slum houses and rebuild for their occupants, supposing that could be done, we should have to find temporary accommodation for the occupants. But that cannot be found except by building, and any decent temporary accommodation would cost to build nearly, if not quite, as much as the new houses themselves. And on what land is it to be put? And what price would today be asked for that land? Where is there any sewered land that could be got for the purpose in the City Limits? (After the war we might get some disused military barracks cheaply for this purpose. But there would still be some expense in adapting them for even temporary family use. They are not designed for that.) The real problem is shortage of sewered land. That is why we are proposing an extensive new sewerage system in the Northern Suburb.<sup>25</sup>

#### 7. Problem of the Classes of Accommodation

But there is still this further problem. The 4,613 houses which we roughly graded come out as follows:

Class A. Excellent	260
Class B. Poor	736
Class C. Fair	1,867
Class D. Tolerable	1,000 (but poor, and better replaced)

Class E. Bad	525 (ought to be condemned at an early date)
Class F. Very bad	225 (ought to be condemned at once)

But consider the position here shown as regards bathroom and sanitary accommodation. If we describe these classes in plainer terms they would be as follows:

A. Luxury	5.6% (100% bath and sewerage)
B. Good	15.9% (100% bath and sewerage)
C. Fair to Poor	40.5% (99.9% water and sewerage, 38.5% bath)
D. Semi-slum	21.7% (92.8% water and sewerage, 10% bath)
E. Bad slum	11.4% (44% water and sewerage, 0.8% bath)
F. Wrecks of houses	4.9% (21% water and sewerage, 0.4% bath)

In other words, 38% of our housing is in the semi-slum or slum class.

Now, the poorest house a modern housing authority could build would have good design, good layout, good light and air, sound foundations and walls, some sort of heating, some insulation for heat economy and comfort, plastered or insulating-board inside walls, a complete bathroom with hot and cold water, clean, decent and attractive surroundings, with some grass and trees. No authority could build otherwise. To build cheap, crowded shacks is merely to make a new slum in a few years.

But the trouble is that, on account of our very low all-over standard of housing, this house, though small, would be practically equal to Class B, better than Class C, and better than 75 percent of the population have today. Could a housing authority, therefore, set about a wholesale process of jumping the 16 percent of people now in Class E and F houses over the heads of the much larger numbers now in Class C and D houses?<sup>26</sup> It would hardly seem just. The widow and orphan, the crippled and sick, who have no money, we have always with us. They are a separate problem. The "unlucky" able-bodied are, in times of good employment, sometimes responsible for their own "bad luck". Broadly speaking, the working man to whom the world is willing to pay \$2,000 is a better man in some way than those to whom the world will pay only \$1,200 or \$800. He has earned more and desires more, or he would not be getting it. And anyway, he pays more of the taxes which have to finance these things. He cannot be passed over. (Of course it must always be remembered that not all those in Class E and F houses are there because they cannot afford anything better; some are there because they cannot get anything better, though they could pay for it. Some of these will apply for new small houses in the suburbs.)

#### 8. The Housing Corporation Must Pay Its Way

Then further, the Housing Corporation, though not seeking or making profit, must pay its way. It will be working on borrowed money. It must pay its bond interest. It must operate in a businesslike way. It will set its rents as low as it can; but tenants who fail to pay their rent must be kindly, firmly, and promptly thrown out. It will not be, and cannot be, a charity organization, unless someone pays for the charity. The widow and orphan, the crippled and sick must have their rent paid for them by the Government, the City or somebody; the Corporation could not pay it or give houses for nothing. The best it could do would be to run a mutual insurance scheme among its tenants against unexpected family disaster.

#### 9. No Miracles to be Expected

In brief, the Housing Corporation will not inaugurate a wonderful era of free houses for everybody. It will not find a way whereby a person with no income can have a good house unless other people, through their Government, pay for it. It will not set all the injustices of this world right. These things are beyond a Corporation operating on borrowed money. It will merely seek to build a great many houses, because there are not enough; and as there come to be enough, after pulling down the worst, the people will shuffle and deal for themselves all the houses, new and old, according to their own means and fancy finding their own level.

#### 10. Division into Classes Undesirable<sup>27</sup>

It is necessary, or at any rate most desirable, for a Housing Authority to avoid a division into classes; if it can provide grades of accommodation at different prices and let the people shuffle and deal for themselves, that is best. For example, suppose you put up two apartment buildings. One is subsidized by the Government, that is, partly paid for, for what we call the poor. The other is somewhat better and is not subsidized, and its rents pay its way. A young man and his wife, who are poor, live in the subsidized building. He gets a raise in salary, or begins to do a bit better. You have then to turn him out and say "this building, helped by Government funds, is not for such as you. You can pay your own way." He may be quite content to stay, but he is penalized because he has done well. This is not good. Besides, you have to be continually enquiring into the income of your tenants, and this again is very undesirable. Again, suppose you build a few streets of small houses partly with Government funds, and other streets with ordinary commercial borrowed funds. Is the first lot to be known as the pauper district? And are you to enquire yearly into the income of the tenants, and turn those who have improved their financial position out to find a place elsewhere? This is one of the acute problems of public housing and this state of affairs must be avoided at all costs. The strongest efforts must be made to obtain, by construction, reconditioning and private enterprise, accommodation at all levels of cost, including the lowest, and leave the people to find their own levels in these as independent citizens. And if the lowest priced accommodation which

can be found by any of these methods is still too dear for a few, then the public, through its Government funds and its taxes, must assist them to pay their rent. There is no other logical solution except to allow them to build shacks, as they do now, in the outskirts of the town, and live under unhygienic conditions which it is our aim to abolish.

#### 11. Policy for the Poorest Classes

What then can we do for the poorest classes in the worst houses, those whose condition is most urgent and most appealing?

FIRST, if we build enough houses for those who can afford to pay, now or by instalments, more houses in town in the lower grades will become available for rent and rents, now based on scarcity, will tend to fall. Even if a rich man builds for himself, on his own funds, a house in the suburbs, that sets free one more house in town. Everybody can, so to speak, move up one step.<sup>28</sup>

SECOND; many of the poorer houses in town can be brought up to a decent standard if their owners can obtain cheap long-term reconditioning loans from the Corporation.<sup>29</sup>

THIRD; The Corporation will make sewered building land much cheaper than at present, thus encouraging private buildings.

FOURTH; The Corporation, while building for those of limited means who can afford it (not, of course, for the well-to-do) will experiment and see what is the very best that can be done in building the very small house on the most economical basis for the lowest-income classes; and if this cannot be got low enough at present it should be possible to squeeze it down lower when costs begin to fall, as we hope, after the war.

FIFTH; The monthly cost of houses worked out in the Third Interim Report contains five parts or factors: a large factor for rental, a large factor for instalment purchase, and three small factors for taxes, insurance and repairs. If we cut out the instalment purchase factor in some cases, and charge a cost for rent only, with insurance, taxes and repair, we can make the monthly cost lower.

SIXTH; We are advised, on the basis of foreign experience, that we can build a family living unit for rental purposes more cheaply in the form of a flat or "apartment" in a block than as an individual separate house. Here is a further saving. Out-right purchase does not, of course, apply where there is not a separate house; in those cases we must rent.

SEVENTH; If the system of building plenty of houses and leaving the people to find their own level turns out too slow, as it may do, in helping those in the worst houses, or if, as usually happens, those worst off tend to get pushed aside or trampled upon in the shuffle, we can perhaps attack the slum problem directly after the war by getting hold of some of the disused barracks<sup>30</sup> and using them as temporary summer accommodation while we endeavour to re-house the occupants of condemned houses on the spot or elsewhere by the means, either of low-cost individual

houses for rent or apartment flats for rent, indicated under the preceding paragraphs.

By that time we shall have experimented and seen at what cost we can build this lowest priced accommodation, and what prospect there is of cutting down that cost with falling prices.

#### 12. This Policy Not New

Those lines of policy will be found indicated in the Third Interim Report, but they are here more fully explained, partly to answer the Government's question, partly to prevent confused or over-optimistic thinking and possible disappointments. However, no policy need be too rigid; and to attempt to lay down every detail in advance is unnecessary and even a mistake. Policies can be changed if necessary as experience is gained. At any rate the poorest classes, whose position is largely the cause of this whole movement, are bound to be better off if there is an organized body seeking ways to meet their needs than now, when they are left to their own devices. Some answer can be found to every problem as we go along.

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### DOCUMENT 2 MEMORANDUM SUGGESTING EFFORT TO IMPROVE THE CONDITION OF "SHACK" DWELLING HOUSES BEFORE THE COMING WINTER (1944-5)

1. There is undoubtedly a strong desire in the minds of the public that something must be done without delay in relation to the housing of the extreme poor whose position has received advertisement in the recent Hutchings case.

2. The programme proposed by the Commission of Enquiry on Housing and Town Planning, approved by the authorities concerned and now commenced by the St. John's Housing Corporation, is one designed to deal with the housing situation on a large and long-continued scale, and based upon an attack on fundamentals. The scheme will, for example, provide:

- (1) an abundance of relatively cheap building sites with sewage and other facilities.
- (2) a resultant degree of control by force of competition over the cost of sites in the town and other suburbs, and a tendency to discontinue building on unsewered sites.
- (3) finance for home building at low interest rates.
- (4) long-term amortizing loans.
- (5) a measure of mass production of small houses, which should reduce cost.
- (6) a measure of education in the matter of design, layout, surroundings and other housing standards.

3. The indicated need of the community is about 2,500 houses, if we are to get to the level of one family per house, besides destroying houses unfit for habitation. This programme will eventually represent an expenditure of ten or eleven million dollars, to be secured in the main by long-term self-liquidating loans to the purchasers. This is a large sum but not beyond the means of the public, given cheap finance and ten or fifteen years of operation. Obviously, however, it is not a programme which can be carried out overnight. It will take a considerable number of years.

4. This scheme will benefit the lower-income classes, down to, it is hoped, the labourer in steady work; that is to say all classes whose income contains a margin out of which a home can, however slowly, be purchased; but it cannot directly benefit those whose income does not contain any such margin or whose income is altogether absent or insufficient for living.

5. It will be the object of the Housing Corporation to produce a proportion of dwelling units (houses or apartments) at the very lowest cost, consistent with adequate quality, and probably some of these for rental, instead of for rental-purchase, which will make them cheaper still; but even so there will be a class which cannot reach them.

6. If a couple of thousand houses are added to our total stock and a corresponding number of families vacate existing houses, rents of the inferior class of house will have to drop and, to a certain extent, the poorest class may be able to move up to those houses which are a shade above the slum; but only to a certain extent. A good many of them cannot pay rents which would warrant the up-keep of even these very poor houses.

7. This subject has been fully gone over in reports of the Commission of Enquiry and it has been pointed out that decent housing can be provided for the lowest-income or very poor classes only if the government subsidizes either by paying all or part of the cost of the houses, or better, by paying all or part of these people's rent.

8. The Commission of Enquiry has already pointed out that slum clearance as such is impracticable at the moment because no slum can be cleared unless the people have somewhere to go, and at present they have not. Pressure on accommodation must therefore be reduced before any slum clearance can take place.

9. The question has been asked why the people cannot be accommodated somewhere while houses are built for them. The answer is that temporary accommodation costs almost as much as permanent. We may after the war be able to avail of some temporary military buildings, but even then there will be considerable expense in converting them for even temporary family use.

10. Again, it has been pointed out that the population is divided somewhat as follows:

Living in luxury and good houses 21%

Living in fair and semi-slum houses 62%

Living in bad slum houses 17%

It cannot be expected that public funds should be used to jump this 17 percent at the bottom of the list into what would be Class B houses over the heads of 62 percent who are in houses much lower than Class B, especially when the latter can carry their own loans whereas the former would have to be housed by government expenditure.

11. We have spent generations in putting together a town which is 60% sub-standard and it is quite useless to hope or expect that this situation can be curbed in anything less than a considerable number of years and without an expense so great that, unless it is for the most part financed by householders themselves, it cannot be faced. Therefore it is as well to face here and now that no immediate relief can be hoped for those classes of which the Hutchings-Drover case has given us an example, except by the general raising of the standard of accommodation over a long period of years.

12. In the meantime their condition is what we have seen and humanity demands that some palliative measures be taken to tide them over while general improvement is coming about.

13. For this particular year it is very late but something might yet be done, and the suggestion is as follows: the Government, which is at present well in funds, might set aside a sum of, say, \$25,000 for this purpose. A responsible person should be obtained, provided with a car and some help, and asked to produce within about a week, more or less, a complete list of those shacks or small houses in the city and surroundings which are not tight against wind and rain. It is suggested that a sergeant or a couple of sergeants of Constabulary would be the best for this purpose. They know the town and people; are not likely to be imposed upon and are economically minded and accustomed to exercise authority.

14. These supervisors should then be given an open order for board, clapboard, roll roofing, tarred paper, glass and nails, and provided with or authorized to find necessary labour to have such minimum rough repairs done to walls, roofs and floors of shacks and very poor houses as will keep out the rain and wind, with a limit of \$100 on any one structure, unless the supervisors permit this to be exceeded for any special reason. Where the people are capable of putting on the material themselves, they should be required to put it on. The sum indicated would be sufficient to do the rudiments of repair to say 200 to 250 of the worst structures, sufficiently to protect the occupants from the elements. This would tide the people over for a time until the situations begins to clear itself, and at the same time will give us a survey which may reduce the very acute part of the problem to smaller proportions than is popularly supposed [emphasis in original]. This measure will at any rate quiet the public mind and there is no time between now and when the snow comes for any more elaborate scheme.

15. Where the occupants are in the opinion of the sergeants, supplemented if necessary by consultation with the Welfare Division, able to provide repairs for themselves and should do so, there is nothing to be done.

16. Where the recipient is a tenant, there is nothing to be done unless the sergeant is of the opinion that the landlord cannot reasonably be expected to do it, (for example, where he is getting no rent and merely letting the people remain) and after the landlord has signed a note undertaking not to raise the rent to this or a later tenant.

17. The sergeants to have final authority to deal with each case.

\* \* \*

## CONCLUSION

Unfortunately, Dunfield was wrong in his assumption that the SJHC would help to find a solution to the problem of the downtown slum. When he stepped down as Chair of the Corporation in 1949, compelled by the Dominion Judges Act to do so — much against his will — the downtown area was much as it had been when the CEHTP was created in 1942. At the same time most of the original members of the Corporation's Board were replaced by the new provincial government and the role of the Corporation changed from that of a developer and house builder to a seller of lots. During the first five years of its life the Corporation built 233 houses and 92 apartments and made 250 serviced lots available to private builders. Unfortunately, a combination of a Board inexperienced in dealing with a project of this size, the administrative costs involved in creating such a complex organization from scratch, the scarcity of skilled tradesmen, and the staggering shortages and resulting high cost of every type of building material and fitting all made the houses extraordinarily expensive. The first 30 houses offered for sale on 5 June 1946 ranged in price from \$9,500 to \$13,000, with an average of \$11,500, at a time when a good house in St. John's could be had for \$7,000 (Winter, 1999). These apparently exorbitant prices caused a flood of letters to the editors of both daily newspapers and some acerbic editorial comment as well (*Evening Telegram*, 1946a, 1946b, 1946c). It was a public relations disaster, and the SJHC responded by modifying the specifications of the second batch of 50 houses, stripping them of every possible "extra" feature (including the furnace) in the hope that the price could be reduced by \$2,000 (*Evening Telegram*, 1946d). The reduction turned out to be less than this, hardly enough to satisfy the critics, one of whom referred to Churchill Park as "the Mecca of citizens in search of homes and not in the least associated with residents of the condemned areas" (*Evening Telegram*, 1950).

The city had contributed a substantial amount of its limited funds towards the new housing project and "was greatly disappointed in the manner in which this money had been used. Council's understanding at the time they agreed to the Housing Report was that their money would be spent on "removing the unsightly hovels in which people were living," and it was very dissatisfied with the failure of the Corporation to do anything to relieve inner-city housing congestion (Minutes of the St. John's Municipal Council, 22 May 1947). The city's lack of support for the



operation of the Corporation was undoubtedly one of the key reasons for its reorganization in 1949.<sup>31</sup>

The St. John's Housing Corporation was absorbed into the Newfoundland and Labrador Housing Corporation (NLHC) in 1981. During its 37 years it acquired and serviced 2,200 acres of land, built 233 houses, 334 apartments, and provided 4,100 serviced building lots to private house builders, families, and co-operatives. But its most significant legacy was that it made possible the post-Confederation construction of the public housing that finally created the necessary and sufficient conditions for the eradication of the downtown slum and the rehousing of many of its former inhabitants. In 1949 the new provincial government inherited a large, serviced land bank at the same time as it gained access to the new federal/provincial partnership programs offered by Central Mortgage and Housing Corporation. It made quick and effective use of these programs. Between 1950 and 1955, 584 units of public housing were built in St. John's under the new federal/provincial program. Four of the projects, containing 538 units, were in Churchill Park. By 1961 St. John's contained 5 per cent of Canada's public housing stock, although it had only 0.5 per cent of the country's population. In many Canadian cities, opposition to public housing was too strong to permit substantial use of the generous federal grants (75 per cent of the cost of building and of the operating deficit). But in St. John's the case for state intervention in the housing market had already been readily accepted by the Commission of Government and, apparently, by the people. This is the legacy of the St. John's Housing Corporation. The Corporation didn't manage to build housing for the poor or to clear the slum. But the fact that CMHC was able to do so, and so quickly, was the unintended but fortunate outcome of the groundwork laid by Brian Dunfield and his Corporation.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Penson to Puddester, 1 Aug. 1939. PANL, GN38, 55-2-1. Box 1, File 9. J.H. Penson (21 Jan. 1893–1 June 1979) has recently been described as a "little-known British botanist," about whom nothing is known of his early life or education (Foley, 2006). He served in a Signals unit of the Royal Engineers between 1916 and 1919 and was awarded the Military Cross in 1918 and a bar in 1919 during his service in Russia. Around 1923 he moved into government finance and in 1928 was appointed Assistant Secretary to the Commission on Museums and Galleries. In 1930 he wrote an article on "The Financing of Russian Industry" in the *Journal of the Royal Institute of International Affairs* and the next year was appointed a member of the Newfoundland Royal Commission and in 1934 became Commissioner for Finance in the Commission of Government. He was replaced in 1941. During his time in Newfoundland he put together a collection of botanical specimens that he later donated to the Université de Montréal. In 1942 he was awarded the CMG (Order of St. Michael and St. George) for his past services. In 1944 he was appointed Secretary-General to the British

Supply Mission in Washington and in 1953 was awarded the CB (Order of the Bath) for his services in that post.

<sup>2</sup>Eleemosynary means supported by or dependent on charity; gratuitous or free.

<sup>3</sup>This report, written by the chairman of the subcommittee, Major W.F. Ingpen, dated 7 Oct. 1929, and all the other records of the Town Planning Commission chaired by the Hon. Mr. Justice Kent have disappeared. Fortunately, the report was reprinted verbatim in the *Evening Telegram*, 30 Jan. 1930.

<sup>4</sup>There is an extensive literature on the potential role of filtering in housing market operations. See Grigsby (1963); Kristof (1965, 1973); Altshuler (1969); Lansing et al. (1965); Ratcliff (1945); Sands and Bower (1974); Sharpe (1978a, 1978b); Smith (1970); Watson (1974).

<sup>5</sup>Penson to Puddester, 1 Aug. 1939, PANL. GN38, S5-2-1, Box 1, File 9.

<sup>6</sup>John Henry Gorvin, C.B.E., was born in 1896 in Bideford, Devon. He served twice as Britain's Minister of Agriculture and Fisheries, 1906-14 and 1926-28. In 1918 he was appointed Assistant Secretary of the Royal Commission on Wheat Supplies and in 1921, General Secretary of the International Relief Credits Committee in Paris. In 1920 he was awarded the Order of St. Sava, Third Class, by His Majesty the King of the Serbs, Croats and Slovenes in recognition of his services as Chief of the British Transport Committee for the Relief of Devastated Countries. He was highly regarded as both competent and conscientious. In 1938 he published two works relating to reconstruction and economic development in Newfoundland in which he suggested that the Great Depression was a good time to introduce new industry and economic and social reforms in order to tackle the problem of unemployment. See Ommen (2001: 28); Cadigan (2001).

<sup>7</sup>Gorvin to Puddester, 17 Aug. 1939, PANL, GN38, S5-2-1, Box 1, File 9.

<sup>8</sup>Commissioner for Public Utilities to Clerk of the City Council, 8 May 1941, PANL, GN38, S5-2-1, Box 1, File 9.

<sup>9</sup>Carnell to H.A. Winter, 11 Apr. 1941, GN38, S3-1-1, File 3.

<sup>10</sup>Brian Edward Spencer Dunfield, B.A. (1909, University of London), K.B., Q.C., was born in St. John's in 1888. After being called to the bar in 1911 he had a brief, unspectacular career in private practice before joining the Department of Justice in 1928. He became Secretary for Justice in 1932 and was appointed to the Supreme Court of Newfoundland in 1939 where he sat until his retirement in 1963. He chaired the Commission of Enquiry into Housing and Town Planning in St. John's (1942-44), the St. John's Housing Corporation (1944-49), and the St. John's Town Planning Commission (1949-51). He served a three-year term as President of the Community Planning Association of Canada and at the time of his death in 1968 was Chairman of the Corner Brook Housing Corporation. He was made a member of the Order of Knights Bachelor in 1949 in recognition of his outstanding public service.

<sup>11</sup>Gordon Winter served as the sixth Lieutenant-Governor of Newfoundland, 1974-81.

<sup>12</sup>The southern boundary of Churchill Park (along Empire Avenue, formerly the Old Railway Road) was less than a mile from the heart of the downtown, but some were dubious about the possibility of attracting people and businesses to an area so far away. Hence the nickname "Dunfield's Folly" (Shrimpton and Lewis, 1983: 10). Mayor Carnell's characterization of the development as "The New Jerusalem" has been confirmed by both Gordon Winter (personal communication) and Leonard Miller (interview with Mark Shrimpton).

Written references include Vardy (1967: 393), who is then quoted in Baker (1983: 31) and Denhez (1994: 100).

<sup>13</sup>During the 15 years when Newfoundland was governed by the appointed Commission of Government, the Municipal Council of St. John's was the only democratically elected body in the country.

<sup>14</sup>The Commission of Government contributed both loans and grants to a total of \$5.3 million (\$58.2 million in constant 2002 dollars) and the city, \$1.2 million (\$13.2 million in constant 2002 dollars).

<sup>15</sup>The *Daily News*, 16 July 1943, reported that "St. John's these days turns a hard and inhospitable face to the single young lady seeking a place to live.... most people prefer to rent their rooms to men, preferably for some reason Canadian Officers, or Construction men, and will refuse to rent a room when they learn that the prospective tenant is female."

<sup>16</sup>The distribution of these 472 employees was: U.S. base contractors, 45%; E.G. Cape and Company, 27%; U.S. Army, 11%; U.S. engineers, 10%; Canadian contractors, 6%; Royal Canadian Engineers, 3%; and the Royal Canadian Navy, Canadian Army, and Royal Canadian Air Force, less than 1% each.

<sup>17</sup>Dunfield's philosophy did incorporate the belief that "sub-economic housing is an experiment that must be tried, even if only on a moderate scale" (CEHTP, 1943: 67) but that "such an experiment . . . can be carried out only by a public non-profit corporation."

<sup>18</sup>A typescript of this document is in the files of the Commissioner for Justice and Defence: PANL, GN38, S5-2-1, Box 1. The printed version appear in the Fifth Interim Report of the CEHTP (January 1944), pp. 30-34.

<sup>19</sup>In February 1945 the Governor wrote to the Secretary of State for Dominion Affairs responding to a number of rather pointed questions that the latter had sent to him about the proposed activities of the SJHC. One of these had to do with the question of whether there was any intention of attempting to deal directly with the downtown slum. The Governor's reply relied heavily on what Dunfield had told the Government. He wrote: "In Chapter IV of the Fourth (*sic*: this should have read Fifth) Interim Report of the Commission of Enquiry particular reference was made to the problem of rehousing the poorest classes who occupied the worst houses and whose condition was recognized as being the most urgent. It was, however, emphasized in this Report that the Housing Corporation, which it was proposed to establish, must operate on a sound economic basis and that it would not be in a position to subsidise the provision of accommodation for the poor who were unable to pay an adequate rental. In the view of the Housing Commission the process of stepping up from lower grade houses to houses of higher grade vacated by families which could afford still better houses, or new houses to be erected by the Corporation, would in time do much to relieve the problem at the bottom of the scale and could be supplemented by the reconditioning of existing dwellings." He also noted that "the St. John's Municipal Council has expressed concern that the plans of the Housing corporation are unlikely to be adequate or to provide any immediate remedy to alleviate the appalling slum conditions in which large number of the people live." Telegram No. 34, Governor Sir Humphrey Walwyn to Viscount Cranborne, 8 Feb. 1945, PANL, PRC 14, Box 15-5-3-1; File-Housing, General-Indigent Persons. Dunfield's influence was pervasive and remained the party line until after Newfoundland entered the Canadian confederation and new policies and programs became available to the new province. In 1944 John Bland, the Director of the School of Architecture at McGill University in Montreal, was invited by the Commission of Town Planning — chaired by Brian Dunfield at the

same time as he was the Chairman of the SJHC and a Justice of the Supreme Court — to prepare a proposal for land-use planning in the city. Bland visited the city in the summers of 1944 and 1945 before writing the report. Its foreword was written by Dunfield, and his influence is apparent in several sections. In the brief section on housing, Bland (1946: 22) referred to the suburban development that was then under construction and noted that “this will undoubtedly relieve pressure on accommodation in the city by making available an ample supply of building land with services.”

<sup>20</sup>PHW 71-’44, 16 Dec. 1944, PANL, PRC 14, Box 15-5-3-1, File: Housing: General: Indigent Persons.

<sup>21</sup>PHW 71(a)-’44, Minutes of meeting held December 22nd between a Committee of the Commission of Government and the St. John’s Housing Corporation, PANL, GN38, S5-2-1, Box 1, File 9.

<sup>22</sup>PHW 16 (b)-’45, Dunfield to Wild, Commission for Finance, 21 Apr. 1945, PANL, GN38, S3-5-3, File 5.

<sup>23</sup>The records of these meetings provide interesting insights into the philosophy that inspired some of those involved. An *aide-memoire* prepared by Dunfield after the 22 December meeting and circulated to the Government criticized the city’s idea to put all the proposed units on a single piece of land on Campbell Avenue — the only suitable site that had been found inside the city limits. Dunfield’s note indicates that “the question of segregation or dispersal was argued. It was pointed out by us that it was very undesirable for all these widows and their families to be segregated in what would come to be known as pauper buildings. This would be bad for the children’s morale. We were very desirous of having them dispersed among the other working class tenants. Everybody agreed that this was desirable in principle.” What is even more interesting is the note recording an observation made by A.E. (Ed) Searles, the Housing Corporation’s resident engineer. He “observed that in the United States it had been found desirable to finish the interiors of apartments for the lowest-income classes in a stronger style than those built for the self-supporting classes, the reason being that as these people have not the funds to make good small dilapidations as they occur, as is done by the economic tenant, deterioration tends to take place more rapidly. Thus it has been found best to go to a little more capital expense at the outset with a view to the saving of maintenance later. To take one example, he would suggest cement plaster instead of ordinary plaster or wallboard as being more resistant to small damage.” The implicit class-based assumptions underlying this apparently neutral observation were shared by housing administrators in many other jurisdictions, including the Canadian Central Mortgage and Housing Corporation. (Note circulated to the Commission of Government on 4 Jan. 1945, PANL, PRC 14, Box 15-5-3-1, Miscellaneous. File: Housing-General-Indigent Persons.)

<sup>24</sup>Dunfield was nothing if not well informed. The statistics in this section suggest that he was privy to the letter that E.C. Price, the Newfoundland Food Controller, sent to the Commissioner for Public Health and Welfare on 2 Dec. 1943. In it he noted that there were 400 RCN officers and 1,650 men “being fed as civilians. There is reason to believe that the Naval Forces here will be shortly reinforced and that about 350 ratings will be added to the total number now being fed otherwise than in barrack areas.” GN38, S6-1-7, File 4A.

<sup>25</sup>According to both Gordon Winter and Paul Meschino, the architect for the SJHC, the construction of the main collector sewer through the previously undrained valley in which Churchill Park would be built was the most important single contribution the SJHC made to the future development of the city. Winter (1998); Meschino (2000).

<sup>26</sup>Here is the crux of the problem — and the reason why it took so long to create policies permitting the construction of subsidized housing for the poor. It was one thing to provide housing specifically targeted for groups that most people would consider deserving and unable to help themselves. Thus, there was no serious opposition to the joint project undertaken by the city and the Government in 1947 to build the 140 “Widow’s Mansions” on Cashin Avenue that were expressly intended to house indigent widows and their children. But it is never easy for politicians to support policies that many of their constituents would characterize as helping the “undeserving poor” at their expense. This rationale underlies the rest of this paragraph.

<sup>27</sup>This section contains the classic argument in favour of allowing the market to find a solution, on the assumption that interventions would inevitably introduce inequities.

<sup>28</sup>Here is a clear statement of Dunfield’s belief in the efficiency and fairness of the “filtering” model of housing provision.

<sup>29</sup>These would now be called “home improvement” loans and they were a long time coming in both Canadian and Newfoundland legislation.

<sup>30</sup>Only Canadian barracks would have been available, since the Americans continued to occupy Fort Pepperrell for another 20 years. However, there were plenty of those — the Army barracks at Lester’s Field, the RCAF No. 1 Group barracks on Kenna’s Hill, most of the RCN barracks in Buckmaster’s Circle, and the new and unused RCN quonset huts on the South Side Hills, with a potential capacity of over 2,000 people in their original configuration. However, this noble idea was made impossible by the insistence of the Newfoundland Commission of Government that all the Canadian wartime buildings be demolished as quickly as possible at the end of hostilities.

<sup>31</sup>The Government had lost faith in the basic premise of the Corporation in 1946 and it was decided that no new funds would be allocated to support its operation. The Commissioner for Finance expressed concern that some of the Corporation’s houses had been sold to people from the outports, and “to the extent that this practice is followed, the Corporation are defeating the main object of the scheme which is to relieve the existing congestion in St. John’s (F111-’46, 24 Oct. 1946). Home Affairs and Education Commissioner H.A. Winter wrote to his colleagues that the cost of the Churchill Park houses was “much greater than forecast in the Commission of Enquiry reports and few, if any, have been disposed of to the middle class and poorer worker in whose interests the scheme was originally adopted.... While it is desirable to have a garden suburb for St. John’s it seems to me that the conditions described by the Housing Commission in its Third Interim Report are not likely to be remedied for many years by building houses at the cost at which they are being built by the ... Corporation. The Corporation has built 102 better class houses and 51 cheaper houses are in the course of construction. They will cost between \$7,000 and \$8,000 and are really out of the reach of the middle class workman” (HAE 126-’46, 13 Nov. 1946).

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