

Ronald Rompkey, éd. *Les Français à Terre-Neuve: un lieu mythique, une culture fantôme*.

Edwin Bezzina

Volume 27, Number 1, Spring 2012

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/nflds27_1rv02

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Faculty of Arts, Memorial University

ISSN

0823-1737 (print)

1715-1430 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Bezzina, E. (2012). Review of [Ronald Rompkey, éd. *Les Français à Terre-Neuve: un lieu mythique, une culture fantôme*.] *Newfoundland Studies*, 27(1), 143–147.

Floors”). The characters of these poems seem to circle the narrator’s consciousness, at times tempting and at times tormenting him. It is precisely this effect that Hynes accomplishes in the section’s strongest poem, “Safe Place,” where he travels into the haunted recesses of his past, symbolized by a retreat to an old family home only to encounter the fabled Newfoundland Hag who “jammed a dead mouse down my throat / and I woke up choking the scream back.” The Hag as a figure of folklore aptly signifies the psychological unrest that this collection continually confronts and retreats from. The uncertainty behind the culturally moderated experience of sleep apnea means that there’s a suspicion the fear is merely psychological, and an anxiety that it is in fact something more hostile and real.

Yet this fear of hostility is also what is at times cloying in the collection. The foremost concern of Hynes’s persona seems to be what others have done to him, whether real or imagined. While he jibes that “rumour has it he’s behaved in a ghastly manner / before the cultured ones” (“The Writer at the Bar”), his affective self-fashioning seems to betray a veritable concern with those rumours. While *Straight Razor Days* effectively conveys the traumas implicit in coming to terms with a haunting past and a troubled present, its shave at times slides too comfortably over the wounds that torment its persona.

Adam Beardsworth
Grenfell Campus, Memorial University

Ronald Rompkey, éd. *Les Français à Terre-Neuve: un lieu mythique, une culture fantôme*. Collection Gulf Stream. Pessac: Presses Universitaires de Bordeaux, 2009, ISBN 978-2867-815560.

READERS INTERESTED in the emerging understanding of the French historical penetration in Newfoundland, Labrador, and Saint-Pierre et Miquelon will certainly welcome this new addition to the field. This book represents a well-chosen and enlightening collection of texts that pertain to the various aspects of the French presence and interaction with others in the region.

The collection could not have been edited by a scholar more prepared for such an endeavour. Not only is Ronald Rompkey the recipient of many prestigious national and provincial awards for his scholarship, but he has also published extensively as a biographer and an editor of various texts and memoirs dealing with elements of the French in *Terre-Neuve*. The present collection complements these previous publications with a comprehensive sampling of the available textual material.

Rompkey perceives *Terre-Neuve* in a broad geographical sense, including Newfoundland but also Labrador and the islands of Saint-Pierre et Miquelon. In Rompkey’s view, too much of the narrative about Newfoundland and Labrador in particular has been told through English voices; this collection seeks to correct that imbalance. Implicitly, he is making an argument for the profundity of the French presence in the history of this region. Certainly, there are some visible contempo-

rary public reminders in Newfoundland and Labrador about that French historical footprint, but perhaps such manifestations still seem somewhat “ghost-like” (“une culture fantôme”), disproportionately unrepresentative of the extent of the French contribution to Newfoundland’s history. Rompkey’s book, therefore, seeks to move that history of a minority from the territory of myth, “un lieu mythique,” to a fuller and more tangible understanding of its historical reality. The French textual legacy is expressed in many ways, both literary and factual, from travel accounts, to the French impact on the cartography of the region and the naming of geographical places, to a strong and long-lasting foothold in the fisheries, to folklore traditions and customs, interaction with the Native peoples, and attitudes towards the natural environment.

The book sheds much light on the *franco-terreneuviens* and *franco-terreneuviennes*, those families and individuals who left their signature on the French Shore in various ways. Yet the book is also about the French themselves and their engagement with this “lieu mythique.” Here, the term takes on a different meaning, i.e., mysterious, exotic, something that piqued the French interest in *Terre-Neuve* in the same way that the South Pacific did in the eighteenth century. Rompkey’s collection, then, is about the French interaction with and perception of this place on the other side of the North Atlantic, so different and yet at times familiar. Some of those French writers only came to *Terre-Neuve* for a brief visit, often as part of a grand North American tour. Arguably, such observations are fleeting and have to be used with caution. Also, these excerpts are from printed, published texts rather than archival documents. Yet such texts contain fascinating insights about how their authors perceived and interpreted the culture, geography, climate, and peoples of this region, comparing and contrasting them with their own.

The texts are organized into seven parts according to the most prominent theme in each text. Part One groups a number of excerpts dealing with French involvement in “discovery,” exploration, and the mapping and cartography of *Terre-Neuve*. Here, considerable focus is given to the French contribution in the nomenclature of places and in the development of the fisheries through the sixteenth century. The second part mostly encompasses several intriguing texts on the French capital of Plaisance (Placentia, on the western Avalon Peninsula), reconstructing this significant, year-round French settlement (far different from the French Shore), but also showing how the French colonial port was a strategic point in the early struggle between the English and the French for control of the Americas. Much of this section is quite gripping, such as D’Iberville’s harrowing siege of St. John’s. Part Three takes the reader to the French in Labrador, an area that most represented to the French the exotic in this region. Particularly significant in these particular texts is the theme of French interaction with the Native peoples of Labrador, relations characterized by evangelization and mutual assistance, but also conflict and mistrust. The texts in Part Four explore facets of Saint-Pierre et Miquelon. What is most notable here are the sharply contrasting views of the natural environ-

ment held by the Romantic Christian apologist François-René de Chateaubriand and the artist and writer Maurice Sand, son of the nineteenth-century feminist author George Sand. Part Five comprises two texts that depict the often bizarre and even amusing rituals associated with the fishery in *Terre-Neuve*, ceremonies that combine innocuous buffoonery with elements of European Catholic religious traditions and French popular culture.

Part Six (“La vie à Terre-Neuve”) is quite a long section that groups together a large number of captivating but sometimes disparate excerpts. This section contains texts describing the fishery, fog, the hunt for seals and caribou, the fate of the Beothuk, the independent spirit in the government in St. John’s, in addition to older French historiography on this region and an endearing portrait of the famous Newfoundland dog and how one such resourceful quadruped cooled the wrath of a much smaller contender. The last section, Part Seven, focuses uniquely on diplomacy, especially the delicate negotiations between England and France regarding fishing rights and the French Shore in the later nineteenth century. These two texts offer divergent views about the nature of the problem, but one finds here an awareness of the problem’s complexity and the difficulties inherent in applying former treaty clauses in a context that has seen considerable demographic and political change.

The documents date from the early sixteenth century to the Entente Cordiale between England and France in 1904. One might wonder why Rompkey decided not to include texts from the subsequent period (although he mentions them in the concluding paragraph of his introduction). The focus on the period before 1904 conveys a belief that the French presence in *Terre-Neuve* was very much a contested one through the course of its history. One can admire his relative objectivity. Rompkey steers clear of stating a definite position on whether the anglophone settlers marginalized and dispossessed the French along the shifting boundaries of the French Shore. Rompkey’s introduction suggests an awareness of the complexity of that francophone–anglophone interaction, a complexity that goes beyond the more one-dimensional positions espoused in some of the texts.

There is much in the scholarly infrastructure of the compendium to assist the reader. Rompkey begins the book with a cogent introduction that surpasses mere summary of the texts, interweaving his own insights with a history of the French in *Terre-Neuve* and a clever discussion of the texts themselves. The book lacks an index, but this is not uncommon in primary source compendia. Moreover, that deficiency is offset to some degree by the highly useful maps and the generally intelligent organization and categorization of the excerpts. As these texts are sure to inspire the reader to delve further, the bibliography offers a fairly comprehensive list of possibilities. Rompkey also provides footnotes to explain obscure terms and less well-known individuals.

What is also praiseworthy about this book is that the excerpts are often fairly lengthy. Being longer and more detailed, the excerpts afford a notably in-depth

gateway to the lives and lifeways of francophone visitors and residents. The compendium would be strengthened by a section or series of texts devoted to descriptions of the *terreneuviennes*, one that would delve into elements of women's history and gender history.¹ On another note, the brief biographical sketches at the beginning of each excerpt are undoubtedly helpful, although sometimes quite short; one could wish for a bit more detail on the French historical context in some cases. For example, Chateaubriand bore the mark of early nineteenth-century Romanticism, so noted for its glorification of the unpredictable, untamable power of nature. Such inclinations are manifest in Chateaubriand's exuberant observations on the natural environment of Saint-Pierre. Rompkey has largely left it to the reader to determine the connections between author, context, and text, an approach that does have merit because it allows for considerable flexibility and imagination in the reading of the collection.

These texts also invite the reader to consider the greater historical contexts and questions of which the texts form a part. Many of the selections were written in response to the greater imperial struggle between England and France: the Early Modern phase of that conflict served the interests of those writing in the nineteenth century. Many of the French authors arguing the French side in the French Shore dispute enlisted into their cause the history of the French presence in *Terre-Neuve*, providing evidence to challenge anglophone encroachment. For example, nineteenth-century texts discussing sixteenth-century French cartography and exploration in *Terre-Neuve* imply the importance of the French historical penetration to solidify the continued claim to the fisheries. History in this case is used to inform nineteenth-century political concerns.

The texts in the collection also speak to larger comparative questions about the French and English in this part of the Atlantic World. Why did the French population not expand in this region as much the English did? How can that dichotomy be connected to the desire held by the central government in *ancien régime* France to focus its military ambitions mostly on the European continent, at the expense of protecting the French colonies? Many of the selections raise thoughts about the relationship between metropole and colony in the French colonial empire: What happened to the French colonial presence in *Terre-Neuve* once the paternalistic hand of the central government receded?

The texts also invite reflection on anthropological and cultural-historical questions relevant to other contexts in the Atlantic World. One finds in these excerpts clues about the ways in which French culture and traditions were transplanted to *Terre-Neuve*, cross-breeding with local customs, manifesting the imprint of environmental and climatic factors. Environmental historians also would find Rompkey's collection a useful starting point in a possible comparative study. The texts are replete with underlying attitudes about the natural environment, whether that view is life-affirming, exotic, or dangerous. Readers interested in the history of Native-newcomer contact in North America will discover potential case study ma-

material in the texts that document the relations between the French and such ill-fated Native people as the Beothuk.

In general, this is an excellent compendium for the reader or scholar possessing a sound knowledge base of European and Newfoundland history. As such, the book would work perfectly in a senior French-language course on Newfoundland history or as a foundational text in a field of research that very much beckons its historian. Rompkey's work stands as a highly valuable and carefully edited contribution to this field.

Note

¹Source material can be found in Henri de La Chaume, *Terre-Neuve et les Terre-Neuviennes* (Paris: Librairie Plon et Hachette, 1886), esp. 95-106; Joseph Arthur de Gobineau, *Voyage à Terre-Neuve* (Paris: L. Hachette, 1861), 293-302.

Edwin Bezzina
Grenfell Campus, Memorial University

Agnes Walsh. *Answer Me Home: Plays from Tramore Theatre*. St. John's: Breakwater Books, 2011, ISBN 1-55081-348-X

TRAMORE THEATRE was created in 1999 to record and promote the oral history and cultural traditions of the Cape Shore of Placentia Bay, Newfoundland. To help do so, Agnes Walsh, co-founder of the company and its artistic director, wrote a number of plays incorporating these aims. *Answer Me Home* is a collection of seven of these plays, all but one produced at the home-base Cuslett Community Arts Centre.

The earlier plays are the most explicit in their adherence to the cultural agenda of Tramore Theatre. Slim plots are the framework for lectures about the history of the Cape Shore, its Irish past and present, its roll call of family names, and its stories and songs. *To the City of Point Lance* tells of a naive girl who moves from one small outport to another, disappointed initially, but who warms to her new town's ways and to a local man. The last half is a succession of storytelling, including one about the abuse of a man, Mr. Careen, at the hands of the law, evidently taken from life (and repeated in a later play); the others are princess tales. *A Man You Don't Meet Everyday*, about the life of Bride and Patsy Judge, Cape Shore singers, celebrated in the mid-twentieth century and subjects of folklorists, is naturally full of folk tunes. *Just Ask Rosie* centres on two lifelong friends who are being interviewed by a young folklorist, with resultant history, folk tunes, and recitation.

None of these plays has fully developed characters, primarily because these characters function as presenters of stories and songs rather than as people with independent lives and relationships. The brevity of the plays, all under 50 minutes,