

Alan F. Williams. *John Guy of Bristol and Newfoundland: His Life, Times and Legacy*, edited by W. Gordon Handcock, and Chesley W. Sanger.

Richard Stone

Volume 27, Number 1, Spring 2012

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/nflds27_1rv04

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Faculty of Arts, Memorial University

ISSN

0823-1737 (print)

1715-1430 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Stone, R. (2012). Review of [Alan F. Williams. *John Guy of Bristol and Newfoundland: His Life, Times and Legacy*, edited by W. Gordon Handcock, and Chesley W. Sanger.] *Newfoundland Studies*, 27(1), 149–151.

matic potential here is high. There is a clash of cultures, with Solo the Druze in a Catholic world. There are personal griefs, with Solo marrying one sister and impregnating two more, and the accidental death of his babies. Yet, the play remains old-fashioned chronicle, with incident and reportage, but without investigation of emotion, without illustration of family trials.

In a similar way, the language is unsatisfying. It is functional, but tries too hard. It attempts to be both conversational, seen in its repetitions and broken rhythms, and colourful, seen in its puns and metaphors. There is neither the nakedness of real language nor the poetry of Walsh's idol, John Millington Synge. Walsh's characters have not kissed the Blarney Stone, but only waved a hand at it. A fair illustration is provided in a brief excerpt from the grandmother's lengthy opening monologue in *A Family of Strangers*:

What's here? A fish plant on crutches. And I don't mean stilts like the wharves and sheds all use to be years ago. That was lovely, growing up. To go out on the wharf or to your father's shed on the water in the morning and hang your bare legs over the wharf. The seagulls would be screeching and the waves rolling and rolling. So peaceful.

In short, the plays are designed for community theatre and probably work more satisfactorily in that community. The local allusions and history would have greater resonance there. Additionally, the plays are brief, have songs and the occasional joke, and, with lively performance, would be an acceptable evening out. However, despite admirable aims, for an outsider, even a Newfoundlander, particularly one only reading these plays, *Answer Me Home* does not call.

Michael Nolan
Memorial University

Alan F. Williams. *John Guy of Bristol and Newfoundland: His Life, Times and Legacy*, edited by W. Gordon Handcock, and Chesley W. Sanger. St. John's: Flanker Press, 2010, ISBN 978-1-897317-9-45

AS JOHN GUY was the driving force behind the first English colony in Newfoundland and its first governor, it is perhaps surprising that he is not a better-known historical figure. Guy's Cupers Cove colony was one of the earliest permanent European settlements in North America, founded in 1610, just three years after the first English New World colony in Virginia. Guy was, therefore, one of the pioneers of American colonization, and his efforts provided a lasting legacy for future Newfoundland settlers. This book represents the first full, modern biography of Guy, exploring his years in Newfoundland and his life as a merchant and political figure in his native Bristol. Unfortunately, when the author, Alan Williams, died in 2003, he left a manuscript that, while complete, required significant revision before it was ready for publication. Gordon Handcock and Chesley Sanger, former Ph.D.

students of Williams, are to be praised greatly for stepping in as editors and ensuring that this valuable work was not lost. The result is a significant scholarly contribution with an engaging narrative.

Guy's life and works are followed in chronological order, with some divergences into the wider development of Newfoundland colonization. The early chapters set the scene, describing the Bristol that Guy would have known in his early merchant career and examining English activities in the Newfoundland fishery before 1610. It also considers how Guy's experiences as a merchant, as well as contemporary ideas about colonization, would have influenced his tenure as governor. Williams then moves on to examine the founding of the Newfoundland Company, its goals, and the instructions given to Guy prior to his departure. The heart of the book, however, is Guy's years in Newfoundland between 1610 and 1613. Based on a detailed examination of the surviving documents, particularly letters back to England from Guy and from some of the other colonists, Williams paints a vivid picture of the perilous, but also hopeful, nature of life in those early days. Encompassing building work, harassment by pirates, a perilous voyage of exploration, and a touching account of first contact with the Native population, this section is a compelling read with fascinating insights into the first years of the colony under Guy's leadership.

Following Guy's abrupt return to England for the final time in 1613, the focus shifts back to Bristol and his political career — although the ongoing life of the colony and further land grants (including Guy's unexploited "Sea Forest" and the Bristol-based "Bristol's Hope") are briefly covered. With his reputation no doubt boosted by his time in Newfoundland, Guy became one of the leading members of Bristol's civic community, serving as mayor in 1618-19 and as a member of Parliament from 1620. Up to his death in 1629 Guy was a significant figure in Bristol and, although details on his mercantile activities are lacking, he was obviously successful, leaving his family a number of estates in the country. The penultimate chapter reflects on John Guy's life, his legacy to the Newfoundland colony, and how his achievements have been remembered in the 400 years since the founding of his colony. Finally, an examination of the archaeological evidence (updated to include work done since 2003) establishes the location of the Cupers Cove colony and evidence for ongoing occupation in the later seventeenth century.

Throughout, the text is supported by maps and images, all reproduced in the extensive central colour section. For those wishing to delve deeper, there are also a number of appendices. As well as transcriptions of related documents, these include supplementary sections of text providing more background detail, and an assortment of lists of relevant individuals, including the first colonists, members of the London and Bristol Newfoundland Company, Bristol Merchant Venturers, and John Guy's family. On the other hand, as the editors have readily admitted, it should be noted that as a result of Williams's untimely death the references are, in places, not as complete as would be desired.

One slight weakness is the relatively thin coverage of Guy's career as a merchant and of the overseas trade of Bristol as a whole in these years. It is unfortunate that Williams never had the chance to engage with recent work on Bristol's overseas trade in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, which has the potential to provide a more detailed background to the commercial world from which the Newfoundland ventures sprung, but also to furnish more information about Guy himself. The recently digitized 1600/1 Port Book (at: <http://hdl.handle.net/1983/1308>), for example, adds to the somewhat sparse information on John Guy's early merchant career. Further examination of the early seventeenth-century customs accounts will almost certainly reveal more details of Guy's trading activities.

In his preface, written in 2001, Williams said of the book that it "will have achieved its purpose if it explains Guy's remarkable but little-known activities in the New World to West Countrymen ... and satisfactorily reveals his life and achievements in England to Canadians." Both of these goals it certainly achieves with a great deal of success, and for those interested in the history of either Newfoundland or Bristol it is a very worthwhile read.

Richard Stone
University of Bristol