

Robert C. Thomsen. *Nationalism in Stateless Nations: Selves and Others in Scotland and Newfoundland*

Ivan Savic

Volume 30, Number 1, Fall 2015

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/nflds30_1rev07

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Faculty of Arts, Memorial University

ISSN

1719-1726 (print)

1715-1430 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this document

Savic, I. (2015). Robert C. Thomsen. *Nationalism in Stateless Nations: Selves and Others in Scotland and Newfoundland*. *Newfoundland and Labrador Studies*, 30(1), 173–175.

Robert C. Thomsen. *Nationalism in Stateless Nations: Selves and Others in Scotland and Newfoundland*. Edinburgh: John Donland, 2010. ISBN 978-1906566203

Robert C. Thomsen's analysis of nationalism in Scotland and Newfoundland is an excellent comparative study of two cases involving stateless nations. But these two cases are not the first to come to mind when thinking of stateless nations. For Scotland, this was certainly true until the buildup and attention given to the 11 September 2014 vote on Scottish independence (which was defeated 55.3 per cent to 44.7 per cent). In the case of Newfoundland it is still true, even among Newfoundlanders and the rest of Canada. Thomsen's book is very useful for understanding not only the circumstances in Scotland and Newfoundland, but also nationalism and separatism in stateless nations in other advanced, industrialized democracies. Still, despite originality and insights, the book is not without its weaknesses. In particular, Thomsen's analysis fails to adequately discuss important aspects of these two cases and their broader implications.

The book presents a very general model of nationalism in stateless nations. In fact, it might better be called a general framework for understanding separatism in advanced democracies, rather than a specific model. The author presents an interesting argument about the creation of national consciousness and national aspirations. However, he does not specify his argument in enough detail and he does not clearly define the hypothesis that might follow from this framework. He examines two nations with a strong separatist element in their national and political cultures, rather than exploring one aspect of the formation of separatist movements or their strategies. The framework is particularly interesting and useful because it incorporates both elites and the general public in explaining the creation and recreation of a national consciousness. It also explores how and when this might lead to the development of separatism rather than to other paths of defining a nation and its cultural and political goals.

This framework is not without its shortcomings. Two in particular stand out: the role of elite competition and the impact of exogenous economic shocks. First, the book frames the formation of a national consciousness as a dynamic process in which elites — primarily politicians and newspaper editors — try to define the nature and goals of the nation to the general population and then redefine it with respect to popular responses. The model does not spend much time examining how elites compete for public approval and acceptance in regard to their view of what the nation is and where its future lies. This is problematic because the case studies in the book specifically look

to those competing elites. As the author successfully argues in the case studies, these elites quite literally compete through elections and newspaper sales. Politicians and newspaper editors comprise the two groups that play the most important day-to-day role in shaping the political awareness of a nation. (We can, of course, debate the continued relevance of newspapers, but for the period covered in this book, the 1960s to the 1990s, they were still eminently important in shaping national consciousness.) Nonetheless, neither elections and newspaper sales nor alternative strategies are discussed in the context of the theoretical framework.

Second, while economic shocks have played an important role in the development of national consciousness and goals in both Newfoundland and Scotland, they are not discussed in much detail in the theoretical framework. This omission is surprising given that modern states, especially in advanced democracies, are assumed to be responsible, in one way or another, for the economic prosperity of the nation. In fact, the question of national determination in most advanced democracies is a question of the economic viability of the proposed sovereign nation. This issue certainly was important during the 2014 Scottish referendum.

Thomsen does a fine job of justifying his case selection. This is necessary since these two cases are not obvious choices for a comparative analysis of stateless nationalism. (There is even the odd fact that while Canada has the second-largest population of Scottish heritage — after the US and before Scotland itself — Newfoundland has a relatively small population of Scottish Canadians.) The case studies, focused on the politicians and newspaper editors, are meticulously researched and persuasively presented. Still, several important aspects of these two cases are not explored in enough detail. The first is that the UK is a unitary state, while Canada is a federation. This means that in Scotland political consciousness has taken the form of “Scotland versus London.” In Newfoundland, national consciousness has often been shaped by a two-dimensional struggle: not simply “Newfoundland versus Ottawa” but, just as often, “Newfoundland versus other provinces, particularly Quebec.” This very different dynamic is not explored in depth. In addition, Thomsen does not discuss the different impacts that the European Union and NAFTA had on the calculations of Scots and Newfoundlanders, respectively. He acknowledges the economic importance of outside options, especially of the EU for Scotland; however, the different economic relationships in Europe compared to North America, and their implications, are not set forth. Finally, the analysis does not take into account the influence that other separatist movements, in some in-

stances violent movements, have had on these cases. Both the UK (via Northern Ireland) and Canada (via Quebec) have had much stronger separatist movements than the ones the author examines. What impact did these other movements have on nationalism in Scotland and Newfoundland?

While it might be unreasonable to expect Thomsen to delve fully into all of these topics, he could at least have acknowledged them more explicitly. He also could have devoted more time in the conclusion to discussing the implications of these cases for separatism in other advanced democracies. Nonetheless, Thomsen's book is well-researched and well-argued, and offers a number of important insights for understanding modern separatism and nationalism in advanced democracies. His framework provides an interesting way of conceptualizing the process by which a nation and its aspiration are constructed. It is also very useful and could provide a better understanding of nationalism in developed democracies. Finally, the case studies are insightful and will be valuable to anyone with a particular interest in Scotland and Newfoundland as well as to those with a more general interest in modern separatist movements.

Ivan Savic
Memorial University of Newfoundland, Grenfell Campus

Ed Kavanagh. *Strays*. St. John's: Killick Press, 2013. ISBN 978-1771030205

This delightful collection of 10 short stories was a finalist for the 2014 Newfoundland and Labrador Book Awards, and also for the 2014 Thomas Raddall Atlantic Fiction Award. The jurors for the latter described the book as follows:

In Ed Kavanagh's *Strays*, readers are treated to a rare breed of storyteller — a natural, one who spins yarns as effortlessly as he breathes. These stories feature a striking variety of characters who invite you inside their minds, only to provoke you with their outcast laments as they grasp for meaning and a place to call home. They start with the easy familiarity of an old friend, enchant throughout, and like an aged Scotch they finish with a soft burn.

Four of the stories have been previously published; four were winners in the Newfoundland and Labrador Arts and Letters Competition. Obviously, the topic of strays has occupied Kavanagh for some time.