

Jeff A. Webb. *Observing the Outports: Describing Newfoundland Culture, 1950–1980*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2016. ISBN: 978-1-4426-2894-6 (paper)

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actual marriage, nor does anyone care what happens to the winners of any of the countless singing, dancing, ninja warrior-ing “talent” shows once the season finales have aired. There is only the performance of the now, a thought that preoccupies Matt at the end of the narrative: “In sport you learned there was no future. There was a past, a record, a matrix of statistics that marked your trail. There was the electric present. But there was no future.” What is the future for someone who sacrifices everything for the explosive and exploitable now? And what is the future for a province once the present’s “ravenous hunger for content” has consumed and commercialized all aspects of past and place?

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Jeff A. Webb. *Observing the Outports: Describing Newfoundland Culture, 1950–1980*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2016. ISBN: 978-1-4426-2894-6 (paper)

In *Observing the Outports*, Jeff Webb explores the interdisciplinary collaboration of scholars at Memorial University who “invented Newfoundland studies” (4) in the period from the 1960s to the 1980s. He traces the intersecting paths of linguists and folklorists, historians and geographers, anthropologists and sociologists as they sought to capture the essence of traditional Newfoundland culture in the moment that Newfoundland was transitioning to a modernized province. Some were local people; others were newcomers, swept up in a wave of new hiring as the university expanded in the 1960s. For some, the research was a labour of love; for others, it primarily offered an opportunity to examine change in a clean laboratory: a rural, isolated population just on the cusp of transformation. Their work,

Webb argues, coalesced into a movement that would have profound effects on the province and its culture.

Each chapter covers a piece of this scholarly endeavour — central departments and research institutes, as well as significant innovators and their intellectual backgrounds. Drawing from social knowledge theorists such as Neil Gross and Scott Frickel, Webb argues that it is just as important to look at the day-to-day practices of the creation of knowledge as it is to attend to theoretical foundations. Thus, although he positions his book as an intellectual history, he presents the movement not so much as a “school of thought” with its major influences, but rather as a “school of activity” with its key actors (318). While members engaged with international theories and methods in their own fields, they focused their research activities on the local and specific, forging interdisciplinary connections: some, as a result of careful planning; others, quite serendipitously. But as they were drawn more closely together in similar scholarly tasks, they formed a community of colleagues, sometimes even friends, in what Webb deftly calls the Newfoundland “crowd” (12). And that crowd, he argues, developed a cohesive intellectual vision.

Timing was critical in terms of institutional support for their work. Memorial University was embarking on an era of expansion, common in North America in the 1960s, and was seeking to develop a strong research profile. The federal government had recently launched the Canada Council for the Arts, which would provide early funding for Newfoundland studies research. And although provincial Premier Joseph Smallwood envisioned Memorial as central to his plans to urbanize, industrialize, and modernize Newfoundland, as an amateur historian and folklorist he also advocated “conserving the remaining fragments of Newfoundland’s human story” (171) in order to lay the foundation for cultural renewal. Thus, while there were sometimes (although not always) tensions between the agendas of scholars and governments, there was common ground in the desire to record as much of Newfoundland’s traditional culture and history as possible before the wave of modernity hit rural communities.

At the epicentre, says Webb, was an exploration of Newfoundland's oral culture and the evolution of the iconic *Dictionary of Newfoundland English* (*DNE*), first published in 1982. In the late 1950s, E.R. Seary and George Story of the English Department approached then university president Raymond Gushue with a proposal to study the language, literature, folklore, and history of the province — not for romantic, nationalistic purposes, but to focus scholarly inquiry on a place that was undergoing rapid change. As Webb notes, Seary was an “unlikely . . . godfather” (33) of the project, being rather contemptuous of the Newfoundland education system and denigrating “the quality of the English spoken by many of our students” (37). But Story had a stronger appreciation of the value and nuance of the language, and both men felt the urgency to conserve elements of a culture that would soon be eroded by increasing contact with the rest of North America. Gushue supported the proposal, convinced that this work could place Memorial on the map as a significant centre of social science research. Phonologist William Kirwin and folklorist and linguist John Widdowson came on board to help codify what they saw as a “legitimate” language. By 1968, they were underway, with funding from Memorial and the Canada Council, collecting words from both written and oral sources, and drawing from fieldwork performed by hundreds of students from English, Folklore, History, and Anthropology in what Webb describes vividly as a striking example of what today we would call “crowd sourcing” (65). While some Newfoundlanders decried the effort for reinforcing stereotypes of ignorance and lack of sophistication, says Webb, many Newfoundlanders felt validated by the publication of their vernacular in a scholarly book, and the project fed into a Newfoundland cultural renaissance in the 1970s and 1980s.

As the *DNE* was in the planning stages, folklorist Herbert Halpert established the Department of Folklore at Memorial. Halpert was a master of crowd-sourcing, deploying students as boots on the ground in hundreds of communities to gather oral and material culture from families and friends as part of their course work. As Webb observes, this method had its critics, especially students who felt that they were

being used as free labour for the greater glory of senior scholars; but their fieldwork would become the foundation of the renowned Memorial University of Newfoundland Folklore and Language Archive under the directorship of Neil Rosenberg. Halpert and Story, with Widdowson as a contributor, also collaborated with post-doctoral fellows from Memorial's Institute of Social and Economic Research (ISER) to examine the Christmas tradition of mumming or janneying in *Christmas Mumming in Newfoundland* (1969), edited by Halpert and Story, an interdisciplinary publication that explored the function and meaning of mumming and disguise in Newfoundland communities, as well as the texts of three extant Newfoundland mumming plays. It was received very well internationally and, like the ongoing *DNE* project, fed more broadly into an anti-modern critique and cultural revival in Newfoundland.

ISER itself was another key player in the movement. Established in 1961, the Institute was intended to inform government policy with "fundamental research" on traditional communities. Its first director, sociologist Ian Whitaker, viewed rural Newfoundlanders as conservative, mired in occupational pluralism, and lacking in innovation, a situation that could only be rectified by better education and communication with the rest of North America. ISER co-founder, economist Parzival Copes, was even bleaker about Newfoundland's prospects, arguing that the inshore fishery was no longer sustainable and that extensive out-migration was the only solution to the province's economic backwardness. Ironically, Webb argues, while they saw themselves as objective social scientists, free of government influence, their research agenda was based on assumptions about modernity and progress that guided federal and provincial governments of the period. In 1965, ISER hired a stable of post-doctoral fellows from English and American universities who carried out sociological and anthropological studies in Newfoundland outports. Ultimately, their ethnohistories would demonstrate that Newfoundland was far less homogeneous than many had supposed. As a further irony, they also sparked (intentionally or unintentionally)

critiques of modernity among many Newfoundlanders rather than rallying them to the cause of change. Under Whitaker's successor, "academic entrepreneur" Robert Paine, these ethnohistories would be published as ISER books and would reach an international academic audience. Paine also expanded ISER's agenda into Labrador and focused more on studies of broader themes and issues.

Webb has uncovered substantial material on these actors, as well as others in disciplines such as History and Geography, through extensive archival work on personal manuscript collections at Memorial's repositories and careful reading of draft and published works. He has also conducted oral interviews with a significant number of the scholars who were part of the movement, adding nuance to the written record. His diligence is to be commended. I would have welcomed more discussion of the idea of scholarly "dialogue with the culture of the place" (13). Although his chapter on the fieldwork of "come-from-away" post-doctoral fellows describes some intriguing moments when local people talked back to the academics, Webb could have deepened his analysis of a collaborative production of knowledge between the academy and community — a process in which researchers were so dependent on thousands of rural Newfoundlanders for material and interpretations, and in which scholarly analyses were often contested by local knowledge. I also wonder whether, in an attempt to demonstrate the movement's cohesion, the book sometimes underplays tensions between academic agendas. In addition, I would have liked Webb to push his conclusions harder on the grey area between the academic as scholar and as agent of change.

I have a couple of quibbles about content and organization. The chapter "Writing History" pays less attention to scholars such as Matthews, Alexander, Hiller, McDonald, and Ryan, who were so clearly engaged in Newfoundland studies, than to earlier generations of historians at Memorial who seemed to have very little interest in Newfoundland other than as one more colony in the far-flung corners of the Empire. And I was puzzled that the discussion of ISER's post-doctoral fellows (Chapter 4) preceded the chapter that actually

described the genesis of ISER (Chapter 6). However, I appreciate the difficulty in grappling with material that does not follow tidy chronologies, and Webb has managed very well in creating a coherent analysis of a multivalent process.

*Observing the Outports* is a significant and engaging book that will appeal to students of intellectual and cultural movements as well as a broad, general audience, especially in Newfoundland. For those who lived through those not-too-distant times, there will be a feast of familiar personalities and community projects that will stir both nostalgia and controversy. Some readers will not see the cohesiveness of vision that Webb discerns within this Newfoundland studies movement, but many will remember well the heady days when everyone was talking about these scholars' activities and output. As Webb observes, the movement has had its share of detractors from both the left and the right, particularly about the creation of "Newf-cult" as either a strategy by which power enlisted the political support of the marginalized, or as an over-romanticization of a primitive culture that was contrary to the interests of the people of the province (340). But there can be little doubt that what was happening at Memorial attracted the attention of scholars internationally, stirred long and profound conversations locally, and deeply problematized the modernization process in the province itself, particularly in relation to resettlement programs, resource development, and the state of the province's fisheries. I suspect that this book will revive some of these discussions, and I look forward to taking part in them when I return to the province.

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