

"A Species of Vassalage": The Issue of Class in the Writing of Newfoundland History

Jerry Bannister

Volume 24, numéro 1, autumn 1994

URI : https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/acad24_1re03

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

The Department of History of the University of New Brunswick

ISSN

0044-5851 (imprimé)

1712-7432 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce document

Bannister, J. (1994). "A Species of Vassalage": The Issue of Class in the Writing of Newfoundland History. *Acadiensis*, 24(1), 134–144.

“A Species of Vassalage”: The Issue of Class in the Writing of Newfoundland History 1

Every man in the neighbourhood was down in the merchant's books for almost everything he had ... With such a system ... the natural consequences must be, that each merchant or agent held his neighbourhood in a species of vassalage, and had more power over his dependents than it is safe to trust to the will or caprice of any man.²

THE ISSUE OF CLASS RELATIONS represents one of the most prominent themes in Newfoundland history. Historians have tended nevertheless to subsume class under the central questions of the Island's economic underdevelopment and the role of the merchant credit, or 'truck', system. In an influential review essay, Keith Matthews offered an incisive critique of Newfoundland historiography but did not address directly the problem of class.³ Over the last 15 years, Newfoundland history has experienced a remarkable development in areas such as historical geography, anthropology and labour studies. Yet, in spite of this rapid evolution, which has included a significant emphasis on class, there remains no comprehensive study of the literature since Matthews' article.⁴ The following review essay will assess the recent work in Newfoundland history, specifically the treatment of the problem of class relations. The theme which underlies this discussion is the need to incorporate an analysis of the relationship between class and popular culture into studies of 18th and 19th century Newfoundland society.⁵

- 1 For their comments on earlier versions of this article, I thank Allan Greer, James Hiller, Ian Radforth, Daniel Vickers and Vince Walsh. The paper was presented to the Maritime Studies Research Unit at Memorial University, and I thank those who participated for their criticisms and suggestions. I also gratefully acknowledge the funding provided by the Government of Newfoundland and Labrador, the Centre of Criminology at the University of Toronto, and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.
- 2 J.B. Jukes, *Juke's Excursions: being a revised edition of "Excursions In and About Newfoundland During the Years 1839 and 1840"*, R. Cuff and D. Wilton, eds. (St. John's, 1993), p. 105.
- 3 Keith Matthews, "Historical Fence Building: A Critique of the Historiography of Newfoundland", *Newfoundland Quarterly*, 74 (Spring 1978), pp. 21-29. Peter Neary provides an overview of the development of the field in "The Writing of Newfoundland History: An Introductory Survey", in James Hiller and Peter Neary, eds., *Newfoundland in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries: Essays in Interpretation* (Toronto, 1980), pp. 3-15.
- 4 This is not to discount recent review essays: my point is simply that they are too narrow in scope to provide an extensive historiographic study. See J.K. Hiller, Peter Narváez and Daniel Vickers, "Panel Review: Newfoundland's Past as Marxist Illustration", *Newfoundland Studies*, 3, 2 (1987); F.L. Jackson, "The Marxist Mystification of Newfoundland History", *Newfoundland Studies*, 6, 2 (1990); Stuart Pierson, "Review of Rosemary Ommer, ed., *Merchant Credit and Labour Strategies*", *Newfoundland Studies*, 8, 1 (1992).
- 5 I have chosen to focus on the question of class in 18th and 19th century Newfoundland because it forms a coherent and manageable theme in the historiography. As a general rule, the paper considers studies which either have made an important contribution to 18th and 19th century Newfoundland history or have appeared in major debates within the field. The discussion will exclude most of the work of social scientists on modern topics, as well as the general literature in maritime history.

Jerry Bannister, "A Species of Vassalage: The Issue of Class in the Writing of Newfoundland History", *Acadiensis*, XXIV, 1 (Autumn 1994), pp. 134-144.

The traditional view of Newfoundland history embraced class issues implicitly within the fundamental conflict for control over the Island's development. The roots of this 'liberal' school grew from the 19th century reform movement in Newfoundland. Historians grafted a political history culled from official records onto an uncritical study of earlier reformers' polemics on the colony's problems.⁶ In the first modern history of the colony, D.W. Prowse pitted the humble settlers against the reactionary West of England merchants and their government allies. Later writers attempted to modify Prowse's thesis, but the simple model of oppressor and oppressed, merchant and settler, has exerted a profound and lasting influence over the way historians conceptualize the structure of Newfoundland society.⁷ Although the emphasis on conflict and oppression appears Marxian, the liberal approach defined class only in the vaguest terms and eschewed any socio-economic analysis. The result was a crude portrait, infused with moral overtones, of honest fishermen suffering in virtual serfdom under despotic merchants.⁸ Despite references to a "class war" between the "suppliers and the supplied", liberal historians failed to delve into class issues.⁹ Class did not represent a subject of study in its own right but served instead as a tool to explain Newfoundland's underdevelopment by laying the blame at the merchants' feet.

Keith Matthews, *Lectures on the History of Newfoundland, 1500-1830* (St. John's: Breakwater, 1988), broke from this orthodoxy in his study of the Newfoundland fishery. Following Innis' staple thesis, Matthews viewed the fishery as the determining force in the Island's history. The fish merchants were not, he argued, the cause of Newfoundland's economic problems. Interdependence characterized relations between the different groups involved in the fishery: the credit system worked to insulate both merchants and planters from cyclical

Also, though I recognize that "fishermen" is a gender-biased term, I will continue its usage to avoid confusion and to reflect accurately the historical writing under study. For reviews of recent work in other fields, see Gerald Thomas and J.D.A. Widdowson, "Introduction", in G. Thomas and J.D.A. Widdowson, eds., *Studies in Newfoundland Folklore: Community and Process* (St. John's, 1991), pp. xvii-xxiii, and M.A.P. Renouf, "Introduction," *Newfoundland Studies* (special issue, "Archaeology in Newfoundland and Labrador"), 9, 2 (1993), pp. 155-62.

- 6 Sean Cadigan examines the reform movement's legacy in "The Staple Model Reconsidered: The Case of Agricultural Policy in Northeast Newfoundland, 1785-1855", *Acadiensis*, XXI, 2 (Spring 1992), pp. 52-60. The reform movement is discussed further in Jerry Bannister, "The Campaign for Representative Government in Newfoundland", *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association*, 5 (1994), pp. 19-40.
- 7 D.W. Prowse, *A History of Newfoundland from the English, Colonial and Foreign Records* (London, 1895), pp. 93, 113, 136, 424-30. For a discussion of later attempts to refine Prowse's thesis, see Matthews, "Historical Fence Building", pp. 21-6.
- 8 One famous example is Prowse's caricature, copied from a political pamphlet written by Patrick Morris, of the fishing admiral as "besmeared with pitch, tar and fish slime, his head adorned with an old sealskin cap robbed from an Indian... The sacred temple of law and equity was a fish store, the judicial seat an inverted butter firkin. Justice was freely dispensed to the suitor who paid the most for it". See *History of Newfoundland*, p. 226.
- 9 W.S. MacNutt, *The Atlantic Provinces: The Emergence of Colonial Society* (Toronto, 1965), pp. 204, 206. See also A.H. McLintock, *The Establishment of Constitutional Government in Newfoundland: A Study in Retarded Colonization* (London, 1941), pp. 174-85; Gertrude Gunn, *The Political History of Newfoundland, 1832-1864* (Toronto, 1966), pp. 184-8. MacNutt even alleged that "a society close to a state of nature is indicated by missionary accounts of naked women smoking corn-cob pipes".

economic depressions. Though Matthews stressed the role of the middle class in the colony's reform movement, he concentrated on the structure of the fishery. Market forces, resource endowment and commercial policies comprised the vital factors in Newfoundland's development.¹⁰ Matthews' work acted as a catalyst for numerous other historians, most notably Shannon Ryan, and the quantitative approach has become an established field in Newfoundland history.¹¹ In *The Ice Hunters: A History of Newfoundland Sealing to 1914* (St. John's: Breakwater, 1994), Ryan illustrates the formative role which the seal fishery played in Newfoundland's economic and political development.

The third major contribution to Newfoundland history came from historical geography. Grant Head, *Eighteenth Century Newfoundland: A Geographer's Perspective* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1976), pioneered the field with a reconstruction of the patterns of settlement and resource use in the 18th century. Head argues that the limitations of the physical environment and dependence on external food supplies stunted Newfoundland's development. Like Matthews, he concludes that merchant credit provided vital assistance for settlement on the Island. Other works in historical geography, such as John Mannion's studies of Irish immigrants, opened up issues of ethnicity, yet class analysis remained beyond the scope of Newfoundland studies.¹² Nonetheless, Gordon Handcock's monograph on English settlement in Newfoundland offers a number of important insights. Handcock, *Soe longe as there comes noe women: Origins of English Settlement in Newfoundland* (St. John's: Breakwater, 1989), points out that the immigrants, comprised predominantly of young single males, belonged to three main social groups: maritime tradesmen, general artisans, and labourers. For those studying 18th and 19th century Newfoundland, "class" served as a means to categorize a population. Descriptive rather than analytical, this approach largely overlooks class relations between different socio-economic groups.¹³

With the work of anthropologist Gerald Sider, however, the issue of class relations became the focal point of study. While Sider's work formed part of the 1970s wave of 'new cultural history', it was also heavily indebted to the earlier work sponsored by the Institute of Social and Economic Research at Memorial

10 Keith Matthews, "History of the West of England - Newfoundland Fishery", D.Phil. thesis, Oxford University, 1968; "The Class of '32: St. John's Reformers on the Eve of Representative Government", *Acadiensis*, VI, 2 (Spring 1977).

11 Shannon Ryan, "Fishery to Colony: A Newfoundland Watershed, 1793-1815", in P.A. Buckner and David Frank, eds., *The Acadiensis Reader, Volume One: Atlantic Canada Before Confederation*, 2nd ed. (Fredericton, 1990), pp. 138-56; Shannon Ryan, *Fish Out of Water: The Newfoundland Saltfish Trade, 1814-1914* (St. John's, 1986).

12 See J.J. Mannion, *Irish Settlement in Eastern Canada* (Toronto, 1974); and the seminal essays in J.J. Mannion, ed., *The Peopling of Newfoundland: Essays in Historical Geography* (St. John's, 1977).

13 For many social historians this represents a fundamental omission. E.P. Thompson argued that "class" can be defined "only in terms of relationships with other classes...class is not a thing, it is a happening". See "The Peculiarities of the English", in *The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays* (London, 1978), p. 295; *The Making of the English Working Class*, 2nd ed. (London, 1980), pp. 8-12.

University.¹⁴ In *Culture and Class in Anthropology and History: A Newfoundland Illustration* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), Sider uses Newfoundland to illustrate a Marxian model of the connection between social relations of production and exchange and concurrent popular customs. Following Marx's discussion in *Capital*, Sider's definition of class emphasizes two points: first, in addition to material factors, class must have a political dimension; second, one cannot draw a single line of cleavage to separate the three groupings (labourers, capitalists, landowners) into a neat system of two antagonistic camps because alliances continually change or break down and then re-form in new ways.¹⁵ Sider envisions "culture" as the point where class becomes dynamic and thus where lines of antagonism and alliance come together and apart. In order to reveal how culture forms and shapes social relations, Sider chooses to examine Newfoundland when it was "in the grip of merchant capital". And for Sider, like the liberal historians before him, this grip meant that merchants completely dominated the working population (pp. 8-10, 27-30).

Although Sider refers to structural changes in the Newfoundland economy, he focuses predominantly on the family fishery. He explores the truck system's operation and points out that the fishermen sold the products of their labour, not the labour itself: domination of the fishing communities therefore occurred not during production, but at the point of exchange. Merchants dictated the price paid for the catch and, after deducting its value from the fisherman's account, decided whether or not to extend credit to the fishing families for the upcoming winter. Sider argues that the credit system suppressed capital formation and prevented the emergence of local alternatives to merchant credit as well as an outport middle class. As a result, "modern" social relations failed to develop in the colony. To describe this quasi-capitalist, or traditional, society Sider offers the "schematic suggestion" that 19th century fisherfolk oscillated between the polarities of tribespeople and peasants (pp. 20-33, 85-6, 94).¹⁶ The primary effects of the truck system materialized in acute social tensions. Outport villages became split into two

14 Two of the important ISER monographs are John Szwed, *Private Cultures and Public Imagery: Interpersonal Relations in a Newfoundland Peasant Society* (St. John's, 1966); Melvin Firestone, *Brothers and Rivals: Patrilocal in Savage Cove* (St. John's, 1967). See also the essays in Herbert Halpert and G.M. Story, eds., *Christmas Mummings in Newfoundland: Essays in Anthropology, Folklore, and History*, 2nd ed. (Toronto, 1990).

15 See also Gerald Sider, "Christmas Mummings and the New Year in Outport Newfoundland", *Past and Present*, 71 (1976); "The Ties That Bind: Culture and Agriculture, Property and Propriety in the Newfoundland Village Fishery", *Social History*, 5 (1980). Sider refers to the passage in *Capital*, before the manuscript breaks off, where Marx notes the "infinite fragmentation of interest and rank into which the division of social labour splits labourers as well as capitalists and landlords". See "Capital, Volume Three", in R.C. Tucker, ed., *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 2nd ed. (New York, 1978), p. 442.

16 Curiously, Sider includes elements of both a collective, culturally vibrant moral economy and a wholly dominated, culturally fragmented lumpenproletariat. The evolution of Sider's work reflects this apparent paradox. Whereas "Christmas Mummings" stresses collectivity, "Ties That Bind" emphasizes fragmentation. On this point see Ian McKay, "Historians, Anthropology, and the Concept of Culture", *Labour/Le Travailleur*, 8/9 (Autumn/Spring 1981/82), pp. 207-9.

communities, one geographic, the other comprised of those who continued to receive merchant credit and supplies. Sider asserts that local customs, specifically mumming and scoffing, arose as a means to adapt to this strained environment through the reorganization of social relations and redistribution of certain resources within the fishing class (pp. 70, 74-85, 190). Yet in terms of *inter-class* relations, the fisherfolk again enter history as victims.

As the first serious attempt to examine class issues explicitly, Sider's work has elicited a barrage of criticism which can be reduced to five main points. First, Sider exaggerated the negative role of merchant capital: the merchants had some genuine popular support; the credit system was only potentially, not necessarily, exploitive and cannot be held solely responsible for the Island's underdevelopment. Second, by denying fishermen their active, historical place within community development, Sider inflated the degree of fragmentation of outport society. Further, he employed a narrow view of culture and inaccurately portrayed outport popular customs which, in fact, had little to do with class relations. He also oversimplified the structure of the fishery and ignored vital elements, such as the role of religion, state institutions and environmental factors. Finally, Sider failed to support his arguments with adequate evidence and employed a fallacious *a priori* model of the correlation between class relations and popular customs.¹⁷

Another important field of study, economic history, both preceded and responded to Gerald Sider's work. In an explicit Marxist rejection of "geographical determinism", Steven Antler cites indicators of economic performance to argue that the conservatism of merchant capital precipitated Newfoundland's economic underdevelopment. The onset of capitalist relations of exchange in the early 19th century stifled semi-independent planters' operations, arrested class differentiation in fish production, and engendered the emergence of the small-scale family fishery. In a sophisticated revision of both Marxian and staple-model perspectives, David Alexander maintained that the available resource base, and the resulting dependence on a single staple, had established "natural limits" to Newfoundland's economic development. Alexander's essays relegated capital and class to a relatively minor role and emphasized instead the myopic policies of politicians and merchants.¹⁸ Most recently, Rosemary Ommer's work on the Jersey-Gaspé fishery

17 McKay, "Concept of Culture", pp. 207-9; Hiller, Narváez and Vickers, "Panel Review", pp. 266, 268, 270, 275; Sean Cadigan, "Battle Harbour in Transition: Merchants, Fishermen and the State in the Struggle for Relief in a Labrador Community during the 1930s", *Labour/Le Travail*, 26 (Fall 1990), pp. 135-6; Patricia Thornton, "The Transition from the Migratory to the Resident Fishery in the Strait of Belle Isle", in Rosemary Ommer, ed., *Merchant Credit and Labour Strategies in Historical Perspective* (Fredericton, 1990), pp. 138-42, 164-6; Cadigan, "Staple Model Reconsidered", p. 49; Sean Cadigan, "Planters, Households and Merchant Capitalism: Northeast-Coast Newfoundland, 1800-1855", in Daniel Samson, ed., *Contested Countryside: Rural Workers and Modern Society in Atlantic Canada, 1800-1950* (Fredericton, 1994), pp. 154-6.

18 Steven Antler, "Colonial Exploitation and Economic Stagnation in Nineteenth Century Newfoundland", Ph.D. thesis, University of Connecticut, 1975; Steven Antler, "The Capitalist Underdevelopment of Nineteenth-Century Newfoundland", in R.J. Brym and R.J. Sacouman, eds., *Underdevelopment and Social Movements in Atlantic Canada* (Toronto, 1979); David Alexander, "Newfoundland's Traditional Economy and Development to 1934", in J.K. Hiller and P. Neary,

has added a further dimension to the field by transcending the staple model's determinism. In *From Outpost to Outport: A Structural Analysis of the Jersey-Gaspé Cod Fishery, 1767-1886* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1991), Ommer argues that the organization of the fish trade by capitalists within the imperial commercial system siphoned off the fishery's wealth into urban merchant's accounts, and induced economic underdevelopment in the outports.

These economic approaches culminated in a 1987 conference and published volume, Rosemary Ommer, ed., *Merchant Credit and Labour Strategies in Historical Perspective* (Fredericton: Acadiensis Press, 1990). In the first of three essays which bear on class in Newfoundland history, David Macdonald challenges the view of merchant credit as a necessarily unequal exchange. Macdonald argues that the truck system included non-capitalist elements, such as barter, which mitigated against exploitation: the reliance on credit continued because it served the interests of both planters and merchants. Next, Robert Lewis asserts that merchants did not suppress the planter fishery, for the main division was between merchant/planters and fishing families, and small-scale capitalist production continued into the 20th century. The truck system thus produced neither an exploited family fishery nor an underdeveloped economy. Finally, in a study of the Labrador fishery which disputes Lewis' thesis, Patricia Thornton argues that the transition from the migratory ship fishery to a resident operation occurred when planters *chose* to rely on family labour and merchant credit. Thornton concludes that the move away from wage labour started with the growth of larger settlements in the early 19th century.¹⁹

Although the collection refers to "labour strategies", these economic studies are not about the fishing class. The overriding focus remains on the structure and operation of the merchant credit system. Specifically, the studies array evidence to support a value judgement on the relations of exchange, and therefore pinpoint the definitive cause of Newfoundland's underdevelopment. Still in the shadow of the older liberal tradition, scholars want to show the merchants as either 'bad' or 'good', merchant credit as exploitive or beneficial, and the answer usually betrays a Marxist or neo-classical economic paradigm. As Stuart Pierson comments:

Between those who think that someone or some one group is in charge and those who think that one studies ineluctable and impersonal processes in history ("logic of truck"), little ground for agreement on the questions we have been examining is likely to be forthcoming.²⁰

Notwithstanding complaints about the ahistorical quality of recent economic

eds., *Newfoundland in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries: Essays in Interpretation* (Toronto, 1980); E.W. Sager, L.R. Fischer and S.O. Pierson, eds., *Atlantic Canada and Confederation: Essays in Canadian Political Economy*, by David Alexander (Toronto, 1983).

19 David Macdonald, "They Cannot Pay Us in Money: Newman and Company and the Supplying System in the Newfoundland Fishery"; Robert Lewis, "The Survival of the Planters' Fishery in Nineteenth and Twentieth Century Newfoundland"; Patricia Thornton, "The Transition from the Migratory to the Resident Fishery in the Strait of Belle Isle", in Ommer, ed., *Merchant Credit*, pp. 102-13, 125-8, 136, 138-66.

20 Pierson, "Review of *Merchant Credit*", p. 102.

studies, the literature contains innovative work. The issue of the exact nature -- or 'quality' as opposed to 'quantity' -- of merchant-fisherfolk relations at times surfaces as a significant issue. For example, Jacob Price examines the transition, in early modern New England, from credit to cash payment and calls the process a "considerable shift in *mentalité*".²¹

The final school which relates to this discussion is labour history. Born in the past decade with the arrival of Gregory Kealey at Memorial University, Newfoundland labour history has followed the path blazed earlier by Kealey and Bryan Palmer.²² The first published work in the field, Bill Gillespie's *A Class Act: An Illustrated History of the Labour Movement in Newfoundland and Labrador* (St. John's: Newfoundland and Labrador Federation of Labour, 1986), reflected the established model. Beginning with the pre-industrial craftsmen, the narrative moves into the transitional "rise of the industrials", i.e. the onset of industrial capitalism and wage labour in the late 19th century, through nascent labour organization at the turn of the century, and, finally, to the establishment of the modern union. Newfoundland social history developed further with the expansion of the graduate programme in history at Memorial University. In 1986 a number of papers presented at a conference on Newfoundland history addressed issues surrounding labour organization, strikes and the role of women.²³

The results of the growth in labour history appeared in a 1990 volume of *Labour/Le Travail*, dedicated to Newfoundland studies. In the first essay Linda Little applies a model of plebeian protest, adopted from English social history, to a variety of incidents in Conception Bay during the 1830s. Little argues that these disparate actions, ranging from individual violence to mass strikes, formed an active culture of resistance through which the labouring classes asserted ideals of justice and worked for their common good. Next, Jessie Chisholm examines the early organization and development of the St. John's Longshoremen's Protective Union. Chisholm illustrates how the LSPU managed, through the medium of frequent strikes, to establish itself and win important concessions. She also uses informative comparisons with other regions to illustrate that class solidarity in Newfoundland was stronger than previously thought. Finally, Peter McInnis offers a detailed account of the Newfoundland Industrial Workers Association and its previously neglected battles with the Reid Newfoundland Company in 1918. A product of the pressures surrounding World War I, the heightened labour militancy constituted, McInnis concludes, a major step in the struggle against capitalist

21 Jacob Price, "Conclusion", in Ommer, ed., *Merchant Credit*, p. 370. See also C. Clark's comments in "Discussion", p. 137.

22 For a recent overview see Bryan Palmer, *Working Class Experience: Rethinking the History of Canadian Labour, 1800-1991* (Toronto, 1992), pp. 11-32.

23 Linda Little, "The 1832 Sealers' Strike in Newfoundland's Tradition of Resistance"; Jessie Chisholm, "Strikes in Newfoundland: 1890-1914"; Nancy Forestell, "Working Women in St. John's, the 1920s"; Peter McInnis, "Newfoundland Labour and World War I: The Emergence of the Newfoundland Industrial Workers Association", in Shannon Ryan, ed., *Newfoundland History, 1986* (St. John's, 1986), pp. 210-35.

enterprise.²⁴

Sean Cadigan's essay in the same volume forms part of a substantial contribution that demands separate attention. In *Hope and Deception in Conception Bay: Merchant-Settler Relations in Newfoundland, 1785-1855* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995), Cadigan examines Newfoundland's socio-economic evolution into a settled colony and the establishment of the "modern liberal order". He employs a revised staples model which includes four main elements: the available resource base, the political and legal infrastructure, the fishery's overhead and operating costs, and the periodically antagonistic class interests. He targets specifically the myth of fish merchants as the "chimera of Newfoundland history", and repudiates the view that merchant conservatism caused the Island's economic underdevelopment. Cadigan argues that a dynamic class relationship based on accommodation between fish merchants and fishing families characterized the economic and social relations of production. Fishing families needed merchant credit which, in return for the ability to manipulate prices, the merchants extended under uncertain circumstances. For Cadigan, merchant credit represents the "nexus" of the fishery. Truck permeated and defined relations at every level within a society divided basically into two classes: merchants and fish producers (pp. vi-x, 60-3, 101-4, 119-20, 160-5).

Cadigan's work addresses several pivotal developments that shaped class formation. First, struggles between servants and planters in the civil courts contributed to the decline of wage labour, the rise of the family fishery and the domination of the truck system. Second, the inability of the physical environment to sustain substantial agriculture precluded the emergence of a class of prosperous farmers. Further, Cadigan charts the rise of the St. John's bourgeoisie, as well as developments within the working classes, and illustrates the concurrent effects on economic policy.²⁵ With the entrenchment of the reform (subsequently 'liberal') agenda, he concludes, Newfoundland governments largely neglected the fishery in favour of agricultural development and other related schemes (pp. 92-99, 103-29, 156-70). Finally, in a study of a modern Labrador community, Cadigan examines the deterioration of credit-based relations and illustrates how the fishing community used direct action to undercut the local merchant monopoly.²⁶ Thus, where Sider and Antler see Newfoundland's underdevelopment as a result of merchant conservatism, Cadigan stresses the twin problems of the Island's limited agricultural resources and the legacy of ill-conceived economic policies.

Taken together, then, the labour studies make an invaluable contribution to our understanding of class issues in Newfoundland history. Class no longer forms

24 Linda Little, "Collective Action in Outport Newfoundland: A Case Study from the 1830s"; Jessie Chisholm, "Organizing the Waterfront: the St. John's Longshoremen's Protective Union (LSPU), 1890-1914"; Peter McNis, "'All Solid Along the Line': The Reid Newfoundland Strike of 1918", in *Labour/Le Travail*, 26 (Fall 1990), pp. 7-9, 31-3, 36-9, 58-9, 82-4. I have omitted the article by Jim Overton because it is beyond the scope of this discussion.

25 See also Sean Cadigan, "Artisans in a Merchant Town: St. John's, Newfoundland, 1775-1816", *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association*, 4 (1993), pp. 95-119.

26 Cadigan, "Battle Harbour in Transition", pp. 148-50.

simply a category or passive ingredient in a larger economic model. Instead, class dynamics emerge as a principal topic of study and, in the process, the fishing families break out of the mould of simple victims to enter history as active participants. Moreover, Cadigan, in particular, situates his analysis within the context of both the developments in other British North American colonies and the broader international debate over the transition to capitalism. Recent studies have also dealt with the long-neglected issues of gender and the household economy in Newfoundland.²⁷ Cadigan has also, in a reappraisal of the "Lundrigan affair", completed a case-study of the regulation of patriarchy.²⁸ The social history of women has, in fact, emerged as a prominent field in its own right.²⁹ The work in economic and labour history has, above all, illuminated the socio-economic structure of Newfoundland's past.

Nonetheless, there remain problems which constrict the horizons for Newfoundland history. The labour school has itself faced charges of relying on a set of *a priori* assumptions.³⁰ The relevant concern centres not on ideological grounds but, rather, on the limitations imposed by focusing on structural changes, particularly the transition to industrial capitalism.³¹ The result is a rich discourse on Marxist dialectics and long-term economic changes, yet a dearth of commentary on many other relevant issues. Although Newfoundland scholars have attacked Gerald Sider's work, they have yet to explore popular culture or local custom in any real detail, despite a strong tradition of cultural studies in Canadian labour history.³² And while the flaws in Sider's methodology have effectively been

27 Marilyn Porter, "'She was Skipper of the Shore-Crew': Notes on the History of the Sexual Division of Labour in Newfoundland", *Labour/Le Travail*, 15 (Spring 1985); Nancy Forestall and Jesse Chisholm, "Working-Class Women as Wage Earners in St. John's, Newfoundland, 1890-1921", in P. Tancred-Sheriff, ed., *Feminist Research: Prospect and Retrospect* (Kingston and Montreal, 1988), pp. 141-55; Dona Lee Davis, "'Shore Skippers' and 'Grass Widows': Active and Passive Women's Roles in a Newfoundland Fishery", in Jane Nadel-Klein and Dona Lee Davis, eds., *To Work and To Weep: Women in Fishing Economies* (St. John's, 1988), pp. 211-29; Cadigan, *Merchant-Settler Relations in Newfoundland*, ch. 4.

28 Sean Cadigan, "Whipping Them into Shape: State Refinement of Patriarchy among Conception Bay Fishing Families, 1787-1825", in Barbara Neis and Marilyn Porter, eds., *Their Lives and Times: Women in Newfoundland and Labrador* (St. John's, forthcoming).

29 Marilyn Porter, *Place and Persistence in the Lives of Newfoundland Women* (London, 1993); Linda Kealey, ed., *Pursuing Equality: Historical Perspectives on Women in Newfoundland and Labrador* (St. John's, 1993).

30 F.L. Jackson, "The Marxist Mystification of Newfoundland History", *Newfoundland Studies*, 6, 2 (1990), pp. 267-81.

31 For insights into the debates among Marxist historians over the transition to capitalism in the North Atlantic world, see the exchange between Sean Cadigan and Marcus Rediker in "Reviews of Marcus Rediker, *Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea: Merchant Seamen, Pirates and the Anglo-American Maritime World, 1700-1750*, with a Response by Marcus Rediker", *International Journal of Maritime History*, 1, 2 (Dec. 1989), pp. 322-6, 337-41.

32 Newfoundland political culture has received attention: see Cadigan, *Merchant-Settler Relations in Newfoundland*, pp. 162-9; Phillip McCann, "Culture, State Formation and the Invention of Tradition: Newfoundland, 1832-1855", *Journal of Canadian Studies*, 23 (1988), pp. 86-103. On studies of popular culture within Canadian labour history, see Palmer *Working Class Experience*, pp. 13-14, 102-6, 426-7.

exposed, many of the provocative questions raised in his work remain unanswered.

Given the evolution of Newfoundland historiography, there is a need to transcend models of economic underdevelopment and pre-industrial paternalism. As E.P. Thompson and other social historians have insisted, social relations of production and exchange are simultaneously economic, political, cultural and moral.³³ Put simply, behaviour and values are symbiotic: in order to study the fishery, and, in the process, grapple with why fishing families and merchants acted as they did, one cannot ignore the cultural environment. We must, therefore, consider the interaction of the Newfoundland immigrants' cultural expectations with a frontier maritime environment: how was the culture of the fishing communities affected by, and how did it, in turn, affect, the Island's socio-economic development?³⁴ Two main avenues for exploring such questions emerge from other fields of social history: a survey of the formation of and relations between different social groups or classes over a period of change, or an analysis of the role of specific cultural attitudes and practices within broader social developments.³⁵ However the historiography develops, scholars should heed the warning by Keith Wrightson to avoid narrowly-defined studies.³⁶

The relationship between culture and class represents a crucial issue for the history of 18th and 19th century Newfoundland. Though there was a graded scale of status within communities, a fundamental class division existed between the merchants and those who worked in the fishery.³⁷ The dominant position of the credit system engendered inherent social tensions, both between merchants and fishing families, and within communities themselves. These tensions surfaced in cultural attitudes and practices. Popular culture acted as a means through which incipient conflicts were mediated, and informed the decisions made when problems arose, e.g. when and how to consult local authorities or go to court, when to use violence or community sanctions, or when to emigrate. The value system which evolved in a social environment laden with the endemic frustrations of a capricious

33 Harvey Kaye, *The British Marxist Historians* (Cambridge, 1984), pp. 236-7. Within North American historiography, Daniel Vickers stresses the role of cultural inheritance in *Farmers and Fishermen: Two Centuries of Work in Essex County, Massachusetts, 1630-1850* (Chapel Hill, 1994), pp. 27-9, 326-7.

34 Rosemary Ommer comments on the connection between cultural expectations and economic development in "One Hundred Years of Fishery Crises in Newfoundland", *Acadiensis*, XXIII, 2 (Spring 1994), pp. 17-19.

35 Two excellent examples of the former approach are Keith Wrightson, *English Society, 1580-1680* (London, 1982); T.W. Acheson, *Saint John: The Making of a Colonial Urban Community* (Toronto, 1985). For the latter see Daniel Vickers, "Competency and Competition: Economic Culture in Early America", *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd series (January 1990); E.P. Thompson, *Customs in Common: Studies in Traditional Popular Culture* (New York, 1991); Allan Greer, *The Patriots and the People: The Rebellion of 1837 in Rural Lower Canada* (Toronto, 1993).

36 Keith Wrightson, "The Enclosure of English Social History", in Adrian Wilson, ed., *Rethinking Social History: English Society, 1570-1920, and its Interpretation* (Manchester, 1993), pp. 61-8.

37 On the class differentiation within fishing communities, see Thomas Nemec, "Trepassey, 1840-1900: An Ethnohistorical Reconstruction of Anglo-Irish Outport Society", *Newfoundland Quarterly*, 70, 1 (July 1973), pp. 18-20.

economy has had a profound effect on the Island's development. While the maturation of Newfoundland historiography has provided a wealth of information and ideas, numerous important questions remain to be taken up. The relationship of class to popular culture and local customs is one subject worth further study.

JERRY BANNISTER