

## Six Degrees of Film, Social, and Cultural History: The Fogo Island Film Project of 1967 and the "Newfoundland Renaissance"

Susan Newhook

Volume 39, numéro 2, spring 2010

URI : [https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/acad39\\_2art03](https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/acad39_2art03)

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

The Department of History at the University of New Brunswick

ISSN

0044-5851 (imprimé)

1712-7432 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer cet article

Newhook, S. (2010). Six Degrees of Film, Social, and Cultural History:: The Fogo Island Film Project of 1967 and the "Newfoundland Renaissance". *Acadiensis*, 39(2), 48–69.

Résumé de l'article

*Le partenariat en cinéma formé par l'Office national du film (ONF) et le Memorial University of Newfoundland Extension Service à l'île Fogo a aidé à l'établissement d'une coopérative de pêche dans l'île Fogo et, par la même occasion, à la création d'un modèle de référence pour le programme Société nouvelle, de l'ONF. Les films de l'île Fogo ont acquis un sorte de statut mythique dans les études cinématographiques et l'histoire du cinéma comme un beau coup de l'ONF, mais on a largement ignoré le rôle des partenaires terre-neuviens. Cet article veut corriger cette lacune dans la documentation et relate comment le projet et le processus qui y a mené ont contribué à déclencher la « révolution culturelle » des années 1970 à Terre-Neuve-et-Labrador.*

# Six Degrees of Film, Social, and Cultural History: The Fogo Island Film Project of 1967 and the “Newfoundland Renaissance”

SUSAN NEWHOOK

*Le partenariat en cinéma formé par l'Office national du film (ONF) et le Memorial University of Newfoundland Extension Service à l'île Fogo a aidé à l'établissement d'une coopérative de pêche dans l'île Fogo et, par la même occasion, à la création d'un modèle de référence pour le programme Société nouvelle, de l'ONF. Les films de l'île Fogo ont acquis un sorte de statut mythique dans les études cinématographiques et l'histoire du cinéma comme un beau coup de l'ONF, mais on a largement ignoré le rôle des partenaires terre-neuviens. Cet article veut corriger cette lacune dans la documentation et relate comment le projet et le processus qui y a mené ont contribué à déclencher la « révolution culturelle » des années 1970 à Terre-Neuve-et-Labrador.*

*The Fogo Island film partnership of the National Film Board and the Memorial University of Newfoundland Extension Service helped establish a fisheries co-operative on Fogo Island and, in the process, a template for the NFB's Challenge for Change program. The Fogo Island films have achieved near-mythic status in film studies and film history as a coup for the NFB, but the role of the Newfoundland partners has been largely ignored. This article addresses this gap in the literature, and traces how the project and the process behind it helped to spark the “cultural revolution” of the 1970s in Newfoundland and Labrador.*

A 1976 FEATURE STORY in *Saturday Night* magazine is credited with first describing what was going on in Newfoundland and Labrador as “The Newfoundland Renaissance.” Only the headline, though, used that term; the body of the piece, by the Ottawa bureau’s Sandra Gwyn, went further – calling it a cultural revolution. “Newfoundland artists are discovering, as their Quebec colleagues did before them, that their life force flows out of their folk tradition,” she wrote, adding that, like some Québécois artists of the Quiet Revolution, “many Newfoundlanders are spiritual or practical members of the populist activist movement in the province that attempts both to celebrate the past and to build a democratic future.”<sup>1</sup> The article, in a magazine that was an important arbiter of what was “au courant” in English Canada at the time, introduced mainlanders to a lively and diverse arts community whose mere existence

1 Sandra Gwyn, “The Newfoundland Renaissance,” *Saturday Night* (April 1976), 40.

– in Newfoundland, for goodness’ sake – would have been seen as news at the time by much of the rest of Canada.

“The Newfoundland Renaissance” is both a primary and a secondary source for any study of the period. Despite its highly personalized, New Journalism style, Gwyn’s essay was steeped in more personal relationships and experiences than it acknowledged. Today it reads a bit like a dispatch from the front, and as the reader is guided through a long list of people and groups on both sides of the battlements it is clear that Gwyn was backing the revolution. The revolutionaries were mostly young, steeped in ’60s counterculture, and fuelled by a brash cultural nationalism; they were part of the first generation of Newfoundlanders to attend university in large numbers, and the first to come of age as Canadians. Consequently, they challenged and questioned the social and political status quo. Gwyn called them “intense and political,” living “closer to the nerve ends of their own history than any other artists in Canada.”<sup>2</sup>

Amid the rich jumble of ideas, personalities, and issues, Gwyn also mentioned the Memorial University Extension Service and its “internationally recognized Fogo Process, the technique of using film and videotape as tools for community development.”<sup>3</sup> More than 40 years later the Fogo Island films may be rightly said to belong both to Canada and to the world; their importance and influence closer to home, however, have received little attention. This article will attempt to reframe and reclaim the films as important artifacts and elements of Newfoundland and Labrador’s social and cultural history.

Drawing on the films themselves, primary documents, the work of film studies writers, and some of the literature around social and cultural history in Newfoundland and Labrador and Atlantic Canada, this article advances the argument that the importance of the films as historical documents has suffered from a limited and sometimes-uninformed reading of their contents. A wider reading from outside the film studies/NFB program framework shows that as well as providing an important, if sometimes murky, case study of the time, the film project contributed to the early stirrings of what would be described as both a renaissance and a revolution in the culture of Newfoundland and Labrador. The film project’s grassroots approach, in which success was measured by community engagement; its harnessing of traditional culture to help make the case for change; and its adherence to professional-quality artistic standards would echo in, and sometimes directly inform, the work of the renaissance revolutionaries who followed in its wake. There are a few direct cases of cause and effect, and a much larger number of connections worth noting, between the Fogo Island film project and the culture boom that began in the province during the 1970s and continues to the present day.

### **The Fogo Island film project**

In 1966, Fogo Island’s future was uncertain. Its small-scale inshore fishery was swamped by new technologies demanding capital the fishermen could not access through commercial lending and the government would not provide. The island’s ten communities also did not have a history of interaction, let alone collective action, with

2 Gwyn, “Newfoundland Renaissance,” 45.

3 Gwyn, “Newfoundland Renaissance,” 41.

one exception: in 1964 a group looking for road improvements became the Fogo Island Improvement Committee. With the help of Fred Earle, the local field officer for the Memorial University Extension Service, they had had some limited success in encouraging greater co-operation.<sup>4</sup> The Extension Service and its director, Donald Snowden, already had had some experience in using film for community development when Snowden entered into a unique partnership with the National Film Board of Canada in early 1967.<sup>5</sup> Known as the “Newfoundland Project” at the NFB, and the “Fogo Experiment” at the Extension Service, the exercise was a pilot for the NFB program called “Challenge for Change” (“Société nouvelle” in French). Challenge for Change would become one of the NFB’s best-known initiatives, producing approximately 140 films over a period of more than a decade. From the start its goals were lofty – “to help eradicate the causes of poverty . . . [and] to provoke fundamental social changes” by using film to improve communication within and among rural communities, and to raise awareness of poverty problems among the general public and people in centres of power.<sup>6</sup>

In the late summer of 1967, the NFB/Extension Service crew filmed interviews, meetings of the island’s improvement committee, and other events on Fogo Island and nearby Change Islands. Some of the board’s most accomplished documentarians were part of this project, including the prominent director Colin Low. Their mission was to explore the pressing social and economic problems facing the island’s ten communities: outmigration and resettlement; welfare dependency; and technology, capital, and marketing crises in the inshore fishery. The filmmakers’ guiding principle was “process over product,” meaning that the films were unimportant as films; their value lay only in their ability to facilitate a search for solutions. The crew made 27 short films, which were a mix, on the one hand, of challenging interviews and topics intended to kick start the often-difficult public discussions about the island’s future (the “process films”) and, on the other hand, of lighter “entertainment films” reflecting various aspects of community life.<sup>7</sup> The latter would be used, for the most part successfully, as buffers to

4 For more on the genesis of the Fogo Island films, please see Susan Newhook, “The Godfathers of Fogo: Donald Snowden, Fred Earle and the Roots of the Fogo Island Films, 1964-67,” *Newfoundland and Labrador Studies* 24, no. 2 (2009): 172-97, and Stephen Crocker, “Filmmaking and the Politics of Remoteness: the genesis of the Fogo Process on Fogo Island, Newfoundland,” *Shima: The International Journal of Research in Island Cultures* 2, no. 1 (2008): 59-75. The extent of the late Fred Earle’s work with the Fogo Island Improvement Committee is clear from his office files from the period. I am indebted to his nephew, Mr. Don Noble, for access to Mr. Earle’s papers.

5 The Extension Services-produced television program on fisheries issues, called *Decks Awash*, first aired on the private television station CJON in 1961. Field officers such as Fred Earle circulated copies of the programs to remote communities for screenings, in a simpler but similar system to that of the NFB.

6 “Challenge for Change: Proposal for an Action-Programme of film activities in the area of poverty,” 16 January 1967, p. 1, NFB Archives, Montreal.

7 Among the many inconsistencies in the literature around the films is the number of films produced (see Newhook, “Godfathers of Fogo”: list p. 190 and details p. 191n6). My count of 27 is consistent with the list in Thomas Waugh, Michael Brendan Baker, Ezra Winton, ed., *Challenge for Change: Activist Documentary at the National Film Board of Canada* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s, 2010). There were also four more films made (four years later), but that total excludes a number of related films and videos found in the Memorial University Libraries catalogue and online at its Digital Archives Initiative (<http://collections.mun.ca/cdm4/>). These films may or may not have been recorded during the same period.

lighten the sometimes-tense mood during the public screenings and debates held in the early winter within and among the island’s communities.<sup>8</sup>

The professional quality of the films likely had an effect on the “general reaction [of] overall approval and enjoyment of the films. This was expressed by applause when statements were made on which there seemed to be a consensus such as the need for a fish plant, the arbitrariness of certain government actions, and the inherent value of life on Fogo Island. There was also laughter and warm approval for the many human qualities presented in the films. Whether we presented local characters . . . or special events like a wedding party . . . people derived a tremendous enjoyment from just seeing themselves, or their friends and relatives, on film.”<sup>9</sup> Each public screening featured fewer than a half-dozen of the short subjects. In setting the program for each public screening, it was important for the filmmakers to achieve the right lineup and mix of films for the audience in question. They found it was important, for instance, to start and end on a lighter note, and not to overload the agenda with films on sensitive topics. Some of the conversations recorded for the films, particularly those regarding welfare and relations between fishermen and merchants, contained extremely provocative comments; one meeting where there was a lack of such a balance ended with people walking out.<sup>10</sup>

After people on Fogo Island had had their say, the films were played for politicians and bureaucrats in St. John’s and more feedback collected. The overall process was somewhat evocative of a slow-motion, pre-Internet video conference in which people spoke frankly about the issues at hand rather than exchanging petitions, letters, and briefs.

The overall approach became known as the “Fogo Process.” On Fogo Island, it helped to achieve sufficient consensus for the establishment of a fisheries co-operative, which in turn has been credited with allowing many people who would otherwise have left to remain on the island. Memorial Extension Service officers, as well as Low, practiced and propagated the Fogo Process widely in the years that followed. Projects would reach into other parts of Newfoundland and Labrador, the Canadian north, as well as the United States, Afghanistan, India, and parts of Southeast Asia. But even as the Fogo Process spread, most of the original Fogo Island films faded from view. It would have been a challenge under any circumstances to maintain circulation of six hours of short films, but there were other reasons as well. The tradition of showing short subjects in Canadian movie theatres was falling out of practice, and the following year, 1968, would see the introduction of affordable, portable video recorders and cameras. Many future community development projects would be recorded using these easily operated devices, and the operators’ rudimentary training in camerawork would yield results that were worthy but of limited aesthetic value. Moreover, the advent of

8 Newhook, “Godfathers of Fogo,” 187-8.

9 Bill Nemtin and Colin Low, “Fogo Island Film and Community Development Project,” n.d. [but early 1968], p. 5, file #4335 A-96, “Fogo Island Project,” NFB Archives. There are several versions of this report, likely circulated among the members of the production team. What appears to be a draft version is also found in the files of Fred Earle.

10 Bill Nemtin, handwritten screening notes, [1967-68], n.p., Colin Low fonds, box 253-28, Library and Archives Canada. For a more detailed discussion of this incident, see Newhook, “Godfathers of Fogo,” 187.

videocassette players and colour television left people little reason or opportunity, even on Fogo Island, to see a collection of black and white shorts of odd lengths that would not fit easily into any programming schedule. Finally, the project mantra of “process over product” meant that the films’ most logical promoters – the filmmakers – were ideologically disinclined to promote them, except insofar as they might be used to encourage similar processes in other communities.

By the early 1990s, most of the films related to the project were no longer being distributed by the NFB.<sup>11</sup> Despite their iconic status, they were largely lost to all but the most determined viewers until the last few years. Memorial University’s Digital Archives Initiative posted a number of the films online in 2007, when it was still well-nigh impossible to find a complete set in Canada’s libraries and extremely difficult to find one through the NFB itself. In 2010, however, the NFB has given the films an impressive facelift and added most of them to its website, a move occurring in concert with the release of a collection of essays on Challenge for Change and with the NFB’s partnership with Fogo Island’s Shorefast Foundation to launch a screening venue, or e-cinema, on the island.<sup>12</sup>

### **Film studies and the Fogo Island films**

The older academic literature relating directly to the Fogo Island films and the Fogo Process comes mainly out of community and international development studies as well as film studies. Most of the first category is principally interested in the Fogo Process and its later iterations, rather than the films themselves, and will not be addressed here. The older film studies literature situates the films almost exclusively inside the National Film Board of Canada’s nationwide Challenge for Change program and how this program fit within the policy considerations of both the NFB and the federal government. Between 1977 and 1991, for instance, three histories of the NFB describe the development process from the perspectives of the NFB and the Ottawa bureaucracy involved in developing Challenge for Change. However, each makes only the most passing references to the interests, influence, or involvement of the participants in Newfoundland.<sup>13</sup> A number of other writers have also discussed the ensuing debate over quality and content control in the overall Challenge for Change program. These debates revolved around such topics as the role and effectiveness of film and video as a “mirror machine” in reflecting groups and communities back to themselves as they attempted to effect social change, the Challenge for Change program’s relationship to contemporary federal social policy, and the longer-term cost and social effectiveness of the Challenge for Change/Fogo Process.<sup>14</sup> And Stephen

11 Peter K. Wiesner, “Media for the People: The Canadian Experiments with Film and Video in Community Development,” in Waugh, Baker, and Winton, *Challenge for Change*, 73.

12 “Remote Fogo Island to get e-cinema,” CBC.ca (posted 17 June 2009), <http://www.cbc.ca/technology/story/2009/06/17/fogo-island-cinema.html>.

13 Rodney C. James, *Film as a National Art: The National Film Board of Canada and the Film Board Idea* (New York: Arno Press, 1977); D.B. Jones, *Movies and Memoranda: An Interpretive History of the National Film Board of Canada* (Toronto: Canadian Film Institute, 1981); Gary Evans, *In the National Interest: A Chronicle of the National Film Board of Canada from 1949 to 1989* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991).

14 Of particular note among these discussions are Janine Marchessault, “Amateur Video and the Challenge for Change,” in *Mirror Machine: Video and Identity*, ed. Janine Marchessault (Toronto:



Crocker’s discussion of the films’ role in the development of participatory media draws on film studies research while paying closer attention than most to sources and circumstances in Newfoundland and Labrador.<sup>15</sup> With the exception of Crocker, virtually all of those writing in the area of film studies and film history are interested primarily in the work of the NFB and its documentarians as the main drivers of both the film project and the process; their discussions view both the project and the films through that lens. Detailed discussions of the individual films are fairly limited, due no doubt at least in part to the unwieldiness and limited access to the full six hours’ worth of films. The recent re-release online is sure to go some way towards changing this.

More recent examinations of the Fogo Process films have taken different approaches. Jerry White, for instance, has examined some of the Fogo Island films more closely, first in a history of Canadian cinema, with a focus on the highly staged and stylized, post-Fogo Process film, *Winds of Fogo*. Revisiting the films as a whole, he has made the case more recently that, despite the fact that they have frequently “been remembered (by historians, by the NFB, and by those involved in the production of the films) as dry exercises in community building,”<sup>16</sup> they are also “an aesthetically sophisticated form of non-narrative, poetic cinema.” White’s recent writing also takes note of the contributions by Memorial University – casting Fred Earle “as a sort of Virgil to Low’s Dante. It is [Earle’s] life (and his life’s work) that makes it possible for Low and his collaborators to aspire towards a *cinéma vécu*.”<sup>17</sup> For her part, Marit Kathryn Corneil has looked back on the Fogo Island films 40 years later and argues that the films should be evaluated by looking at “the entire cycle” and its “broader context” in that the whole project should be seen “as an approach to documentary that contained a multiplicity of practices: aspects of narrative, *cinéma direct*, performance, participatory and reflexive modes, as well as interview and testimony. In this sense it was a documentary project that matched the scale and scope of the IMAX prototype in the Labyrinth project of Expo ’67.”<sup>18</sup>

Yet to date film studies writers have drawn on relatively few sources outside the NFB, the national archives, and other film studies literature, and they have shown little familiarity with the entire six hours of film, Fogo Island, or Newfoundland and Labrador in general.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, none show any awareness of either the identities of

YYZ Books, 1995); Marie Kurchak, “What Challenge? What Change?” in *A Canadian Film Reader*, ed. Seth Feldman and Joyce Nelson (Toronto: Peter Martin Associates, 1977); and Zoe Druick, *Projecting Canada: Government Policy and Documentary Film at the National Film Board* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2007).

15 Stephen Crocker, “Filmmaking and the Politics of Remoteness.”

16 Jerry White, “Guys with Brylcreem Discussing Fish Processing: Form, Community and Politics in the NFB’s Newfoundland Project,” in *Rain/Drizzle/Fog: Film and Television in Atlantic Canada*, ed. Darrell Varga (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2009), 103.

17 Jerry White, *The Radio Eye: Cinema in the North Atlantic, 1958-1988* (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2009), 57, 61.

18 Marit Kathryn Corneil, “Winds and Things: Towards a Reassessment of the Challenge for Change/Société nouvelle Legacy,” in Waugh, Baker, and Winton, *Challenge for Change*, 402. Interestingly, and no doubt known to Corneil, is the fact that Low’s project previous to Fogo Island was *In the Labyrinth*.

19 Corneil offers a tempting hint of what may be out there by her citation of Swedish research that suggests that, contrary to NFB lore, “Low was initially not very inspired by the films.” A quotation in the same source from Carl Henrick Svenstedt says that Low “made his first ingenious maneuver

the people who appear in the films or the details of the issues to which they refer. While such shortcomings are understandable in discussions focused on film theory and the history of Challenge for Change, these oversights can complicate or even derail a consideration of the films as historical artifacts within a Newfoundland and Labrador context. A major example of this is the persistent myth throughout the literature that the Fogo Island films saved the island from a government plot to force resettlement of the entire island; this is not the case, though the films did help promote alternatives to the rocks and hard places of welfare, outmigration, and resettlement.<sup>20</sup> A number of writers also assume, perhaps because the island's total population was around 5,000, that it was more or less one community when in reality a theme in the island's recent history was the struggle to overcome "inter-community jealousies, suspicion, and even violent conflict."<sup>21</sup> Other mistaken assumptions include the idea that the discussions about a co-op grew out of the film project (the island's ad hoc improvement committee, supported and gently encouraged by ex-officio member Fred Earle, had been discussing it for some time), and that the largely anonymous speakers on camera constituted a cross-section of the island's population (only two women spoke at any length while there were no social assistance recipients or anyone in favour of resettlement or against the establishment of a co-op – and most of those who did speak had some connection to the Fogo Island Improvement Committee).<sup>22</sup> Those familiar with Newfoundland's history and geography will also note myriad

(when) he stepped back and listened, let Earle and the Islanders steer the work themselves and made himself available for technical advice." However, there is no primary source cited for this. See Corneil, "Winds and Things," 397.

- 20 The politics of resettlement is a complicated thread in the life and history of Newfoundland and Labrador; see also Newhook, "Godfathers of Fogo," 178-9. There was a widespread belief on the island that such a plot existed; see, for instance, Robert L. DeWitt, *Public Policy and Community Process: The Fogo Case* (St. John's, NL: Institute of Social and Economic Research, Memorial University of Newfoundland, 1969), although there are records to the contrary cited in Newhook, "Godfathers of Fogo" (180, 181), and the legislation did not allow for forced moves. Evans's account, in his *In the National Interest* (164), is attributed indirectly to Low, and while improbable, may come close to the truth: "[Low] arrived to discover the government freezing out services in hope that the people would partly resettle themselves." Other more general references to this belief have become entrenched in the narrative over the years. Jones, in *Movies and Memoranda* (161-2), states "the islanders were resisting an attempt by the federal government, in conjunction with the Newfoundland government, to relocate them." White, in *Radio Eye* (58), asserts "the government in St. John's was considering evacuation and resettlement." And Wiesner, in "Media for the People" in *Challenge for Change* (84), cites Sandra Gwyn in referring to "the relocation scheme." Perhaps the most direct reference is on the NFB website: "After seeing the films, officials scrapped the relocation plan and helped in the creation of a co-operative fish-processing plant." See [www.nfb.ca/filmmakerinresidence](http://www.nfb.ca/filmmakerinresidence). Neither of these assertions is accurate.
- 21 DeWitt, *Public Policy and Community Process*, 50-1. This study offers excellent context, and sometimes counterpoint, to the on-camera discussions in the Fogo Island films.
- 22 This last issue is among those discussed in a film assessing the Fogo Island project entitled *The Experts at Memorial Discuss the Fogo Films*, dir. Colin Low (Montreal: National Film Board of Canada, 1968). Coincidentally, the research by DeWitt for his *Public Policy and Community Process* covered the year ending with the filmmakers' arrival; he found fear of resettlement, but also a fair degree of apathy – he called it "anomie" (30) – leading to qualified support for resettlement: "Almost 62 per cent of those interviewed (or 186 heads of households) stated that they would move from Fogo Island if the government could provide them with both jobs and housing" (33). At the same time, however, he noted "it is suggested that the 'favourable' resettlement attitudes on Fogo Island are due to ambivalence over the [resettlement] Program" (45).



minor errors such as misspelled or misidentified names, places, and terms.<sup>23</sup>

In discussing individual films in the series, moreover, the literature has focused for the most part on the light entertainment films, and scholars have had virtually nothing to say about the real people, issues, and events portrayed over six hours of moving pictures. Social and cultural historians, for instance, have paid little attention to the films’ value as artifacts of a tumultuous time in the social and political history of Newfoundland and Labrador, or to the influence the project may have had on later developments within the province. As a result, the province’s claim and connections to them have been obscured. The irony here is that the filmmakers believed strongly that the process chronicled by the films was more important than the films themselves, and that those on camera should retain control of the agenda. By focusing on the NFB crew’s work and ignoring that of the others involved, film scholars leave the reader with the sense that the NFB was the prime mover in the entire project and that the other participants, both in front of and behind the camera, played a passive part in this great and innovative filmmaking experiment. While the NFB’s role was extremely important, and its later propagation of the Fogo Process approach influential, each of the three partners in the Fogo Island project – the NFB, the Extension Service workers, and the people on the island – played integral and active roles in the project’s design and success.<sup>24</sup>

Indeed, to cast the people in the films as subjects for the director and crew – to focus on the filmmakers’ strategies without attending to the local issues – is to contradict the very point of the exercise itself. Portrayal of local agency is further compromised because commentators have focused much more on the lighter, less “talky” entertainment films instead of the more workmanlike process films, in which people speak – to Fred Earle, to Colin Low, and to each other – about Fogo Island’s problems. These were the films designed to reflect community attitudes back to the community, and to spark and guide discussions in the public meetings that followed the filming and editing processes. The best-known and most-discussed films connected to the Fogo Island project are *Billy Crane Moves Away*, *The Children of Fogo*, *A Wedding and a Party*, *Jim Decker’s Party*, *An Introduction to Fogo* and *Winds of Fogo*. Of these, only one – *Billy Crane* – can be described as one of the process films. *Winds of Fogo* was not part of the film project at all (having been shot

23 Andrew Brett is forever enshrined in the Fogo Island catalogue as Andrew Britt, due no doubt to a misunderstanding of someone’s accent. Elsewhere, local MP Charlie Granger is misidentified as Charlie Granter; the local MHA (Member of the House of Assembly) is called an MPP (the Ontario version of the term), and so on. Rodney James, in *Film as a National Art*, says the films were made in 1968-69 – not 1967 – and asserts that the “government has made some efforts at resettlement and industrialization with limited success” (198) – true on both counts for the province as a whole, but not for Fogo Island. Jerry White repeatedly conflates the Funk Islands bird sanctuary with a 1970s rock band, referring to it as the Grand Funk islands; see White, “Guys with Brylcreem,” 114, and White, “Winds of Fogo,” in *The Cinema of Canada*, ed. Jerry White (London: Wallflower Press, 2006), 77. And there is widespread (and understandable) confusion about the island’s complicated denominational educational system and half-dozen school boards. Lastly, photographs seem particularly susceptible to this kind of problem: stills are misidentified in White, “Winds of Fogo” (72) and White, “Guys With Brylcreem” (102). The former uses a still from “Children of Fogo” on the first page while in the latter an image that is clearly of the Battery in downtown St. John’s is identified as taken from “Children of Fogo.”

24 This author explores those roles at some length in “Godfathers of Fogo.”

under entirely different circumstances a year later), *An Introduction to Fogo* is an overview of the project – a trailer of sorts – intended for a general audience, and the other three are among the entertainment films.<sup>25</sup>

This focus on the entertainment films has meant that the provocative editorial content and overall sophistication of the process films, which form the core – and heart – of the Fogo Island project, have received short shrift. Despite the time and logistical pressures during the project, all of the 1967 films bear the hallmarks of the production crew's skills. Low's choices as a director, for instance, were made in consultation with his Fogo Island and Extension partners, but also clearly reflect his experienced eye and ear for subjects, topics, and the editing of conversations and interviews. While the occasional quick pans and on-the-fly focusing may have grated the more formalist tastes of the time, cinematographer Robert Humble's camerawork is elegant and subtle in both the entertainment and process films. Process films such as *Andrew Britt at Shoal Bay*, *Billy Crane Moves Away*, *William Wells Talks About the Island*, and *The Founding of the Co-operative* feature a number of points at which the camera anticipates a small action and moves to it before it happens (a response to a comment, a coil of rope being tossed on the wharf) or pans away near the end of a thought; in each case this allows for a smooth transition into the next section of film. Even the basic elements such as reaction and cutaway shots – shots used to cover edits by cutting away from the action – illustrate the cinematographer's experienced eye. In *The Songs of Chris Cobb*, for example, the camera moves and the editor cuts between Mr. Cobb and his unnamed, mostly silent wife to tell their story; though she murmurs only a few words, the film paints a portrait of two people who have been together for many years. This kind of thoughtful and intuitive cinematography was and still is extremely difficult; at its best, though, it is so naturalistic that many viewers may not notice edits at all, despite the fact that virtually all the films involve dozens of visual and audio cuts.

It is true that the entertainment films are more accessible to viewers unfamiliar with the issues under discussion or with the speech patterns of the often-unnamed speakers. It is also true that the entertainment films have a particular value in that they portray real community events without the Sunday-best sheen found in travel and tourism films from that time up until the present day.<sup>26</sup> Yet it is in the process films that one finds the activist – even revolutionary – stirrings that go far beyond taking

25 Most writers, but not all, refer to *Winds of Fogo* as part of the series. An example of this ambiguity is in the recent *Challenge for Change* anthology, where there is a list of the Fogo Island films that does not include *Winds of Fogo* (510); however, it is included in the annotated filmography of all *Challenge for Change* films. This inclusion is qualified by an accompanying note, which states that although this film is “not officially part of the CFC or the Newfoundland Project . . . [it] should not be overlooked in the context of the program because of its obvious link to both place and project director Low.” See Waugh, Baker, and Winton, *Challenge for Change*, 507.

26 Again, *Winds of Fogo* is a different kind of film. The highly staged opening scene sends the family out in their Sunday best, and a central activity in the film – a trip to the Funk Islands bird sanctuary – is not likely to have been the Wellses' idea. The stunning, if malodorous, beauty of a bird sanctuary can be experienced legally only with advance permission. Fred Earle's files show that he organized the permits and fees for this trip some time before Low's arrival in the summer of 1968. His files also show that another scene, of children flying kites, is likely part of an Extension Service-sponsored kite competition, which was also planned for the NFB's 1968 visit.

the camera off the tripod, and that are the heart of the exercise. Islanders are blunt in their views of government policy, to a degree that was daring in an era when public criticism of the Smallwood government could lead to political reprisals.

After a meeting of the improvement committee is told of a patronizing comment about their efforts by an official in St. John’s, for instance, area merchant and committee member Dan Roberts fumes “there was no bullshit handed out by the people on Fogo Island” at a fisheries conference earlier that year and that “if there was any, it was handed out by the government bull.”<sup>27</sup> One unidentified man accuses the government of keeping islanders on welfare because it was easier and cheaper than helping to create jobs.<sup>28</sup> And fisherman Billy Crane is quietly furious as he prepares to abandon his life in the fishery: “No, I don’t, sir, think the inshore fisherman has got a square break” from the government, and as much as calls Smallwood a liar. Crane worries that the centuries-old cod fishery “can’t take” the new bottom-dragging trawler technology – and this was more than 30 years before that same technology would be given much of the blame for the fishery’s collapse.<sup>29</sup>

The people who appear on camera are also plain spoken in their concerns about welfare dependency and its effect on their neighbours, and consistently eloquent in their descriptions of life on Fogo Island. The speakers are not all fishermen, and many are affiliated in some way with the local improvement committee. No women sat on this committee; members, in fact, told DeWitt that they would quit if one ever presumed to get involved in men’s business. But high school principal Dr. Elizabeth (Russell) Miller tells the Extension Service field officer Fred Earle in one film that “once a person gets used to living off government relief, it’s going to be hard to get him out of it, and pull him back to the old feeling of independence and the desire to succeed.”<sup>30</sup>

A deep-seated pride and love of place pervades most of the process films, without the help of any staged visual metaphors or other production help from the filmmakers. With the dramatic flair that would draw Low back the next year to make a traditional short feature, *Winds of Fogo*, William Wells calls Fogo Island “the gem of Notre Dame Bay . . . There’s something about the way of life here gets into a person’s blood, that belongs here; and there’s no way getting it out.”<sup>31</sup> Says a forceful Andrew Brett: “There’s people on Fogo Island who considers that we’re too small to apply for a thing like (a government loan to support the local fishery), but I say no. We are a people worth recognizing . . . [We should] protest to the government that we want this thing and we must have it.”<sup>32</sup>

Even *Two Cabinet Ministers*, a process film described by Jerry White as exemplifying “particularly dry . . . footage” of politicians talking about fisheries policy and outport petitions, has its own drama.<sup>33</sup> An awareness of the players and the

27 *Citizen Discussions*, dir. Colin Low (Montreal: National Film Board of Canada, 1967).

28 *Some Problems of Fogo*, dir. Colin Low (Montreal: National Film Board of Canada, 1967).

29 *Billy Crane Moves Away*, dir. Colin Low (Montreal: National Film Board of Canada, 1967).

30 *Discussion on Welfare*, dir. Colin Low (Montreal: National Film Board of Canada, 1967).

31 *William Wells Talks About the Island*, dir. Colin Low (Montreal: National Film Board of Canada, 1967).

32 *Andrew Britt at Shoal Harbour*, dir. Colin Low (Montreal: National Film Board of Canada, 1967).

33 White, “Guys with Brylcreem,” 101.

context reframes this film for students of Newfoundland and Canadian political history as a telling and sometimes funny moving-image portrait of John Crosbie, neophyte Smallwood cabinet minister and future federal politician. In the conversation between Crosbie and Fogo MHA Eric Jones, Crosbie's gaze is usually averted, and he seems reticent and even bored. But as this son of the St. John's merchant class warms to his topic, his characteristic bluntness begins to show in praise (perhaps backhanded) for the Fogo Island Improvement Committee. Crosbie states that as a cabinet minister "you often have irate groups of citizens in a committee about something or other and you put up with them, but you don't think what they're advocating is justified. But this committee, you're immediately sympathetic with [it] . . . they're not just a nuisance committee . . . they don't just . . . hang around the table and abuse you, as many groups like that would do."<sup>34</sup>

The last film in the project, shot in December of 1967, required a return visit from the NFB as the process of community discussion showed its first concrete result. *The Founding of the Co-operative* also offers an example of the counterpoint between the perspectives of film studies and social history. White describes it as "fairly dry" except for "a very lyrical opening sequence of men dry-docking boats, one that recalled the opening sequence of Pierre Perrault's *Pour la Suite du Monde*."<sup>35</sup> From an historian's point of view, however, *The Founding of the Co-operative* is one of the richest films in the series. Not only does the opening sequence provide a unique demonstration of the combination of pulleys, rolling logs, and brute force required to pull a boat ashore in the absence of more modern facilities, but also more generally the film documents the culmination of years of work by the Fogo Island Improvement Committee as well as an important moment in Newfoundland and Labrador's labour history. The co-operative movement had struggled for decades to establish a foothold, and the packed meeting shown on camera, with its unanimous final vote, marks one of its few triumphs ever. The film's structure suggests there was the intention as well to offer an incitement and a how-to guide for other communities that might benefit from starting co-operatives of their own. Furthermore, the footage of the meeting deciding on the island's future shows that the crowded, smoky room is filled entirely with men. As one modern-day audience member demanded immediately after viewing part of the film, "Where are the women?"<sup>36</sup> Indeed, Miller, apparently undaunted by the conservatism of the time and place, is the only woman to play a prominent role in the series.<sup>37</sup>

The scholarly focus on the lighter, cheerier films, combined with a general inattention to the individual people who appear on camera (who are, for the most part, unidentified in the films), offers an oblique commentary on the analyses of authors

34 *Two Cabinet Ministers*, dir. Colin Low (Montreal: National Film Board of Canada, 1967).

35 White, "Guys with Brylcreem Discussing Fish Processing," 119-20.

36 This occurred when I screened an excerpt from this film during a public talk in St. John's, NL, on 4 October 2007.

37 Miller speaks in *Discussion on Welfare, Some Problems of Fogo*, and in *A Woman's Place* with her island neighbour, nurse Margaret Cobb. She is also featured prominently in *Jim Decker's Party*. Miller's father was Ted Russell. As well as being a well-known playwright and storyteller, he worked in co-operative development under the Commission of Government and briefly as a member of the first Smallwood government (post-Confederation).

such as James Overton and Ian McKay regarding the romanticization and commodification of traditional culture. Overton has argued that the image of the “Real” (as opposed to real) Newfoundland is constructed for tourism advertising, and that the effect “is to not deny the unevenness of capitalist development, the extremes of poverty and wealth, but to depoliticize and mythologize them.”<sup>38</sup> Drawing on examples from Nova Scotia, McKay argues in his *Quest of the Folk* that collectors and preservationists of traditional “folk” culture in Atlantic Canada are motivated variously by the desire for self-aggrandizement, corporate profit, and tourist appeal, and that they fail to give serious consideration to the deprivation and oppression within that history.<sup>39</sup>

In the prologue to *Quest of the Folk* – his critique, as its subtitle states, of “anti-modernism and cultural selection in twentieth-century Nova Scotia” – McKay parses a turn-of-the-century tourist postcard showing a group of people in front of what appears to be a small house by the sea in Mill Cove, Lunenburg County, and reflects on how a viewer of the photograph would “read” the picture differently if the caption – “A Simple Life” – were changed to “The Heathen Poor Upon Our Coasts” or “Starvation and Suffering Through Capitalist Underdevelopment.”<sup>40</sup> This kind of reading cannot be imposed on the Fogo Island films as a whole (and neither McKay nor Overton addresses them), but if a viewer were only to watch the entertainment films and *Winds of Fogo*, she might well think otherwise. This limited reading can see a celebration of the traditional “Simple Life,” but the broader view is much harder-edged. In fact, it is easier to read the process films as a central strategy in fighting *against* suffering at the hands of capitalist underdevelopment and government neglect. It is the after-the-fact and selective readings of the films, rather than the filmmakers’ motives and goals or the films themselves that turn the people in them into “Folk” and make individual speakers and characters become interchangeable. No one seems ever to have noticed, for example, that the wedding and the party in *A Wedding and a Party* feature two different happy couples at two different weddings. The people for whom the films were made would have noticed, and no doubt thought of the film as two wedding albums for the price of one, rather than the scholar’s romantic stereotype or archetypal narrative.

The entertainment films such as *A Wedding and a Party* were designed and used for their familiar, straightforward, and far from antimodern appeal to the people in the community – as a tool to remind audiences of their shared heritage and to encourage grassroots community activism. The filmmakers used these films to engage viewers already acutely aware of the real-world push and pull of tradition and modernity, and to invoke a sense of community and common (if not exactly shared) history as a reason to try new solutions to old problems. To discuss the Fogo Island films 40 years after the fact is certainly to join White in rejecting “the assumption that these films are unimportant as films, or that they must be read as purely functional tools whose

38 James Overton, “Promoting the ‘Real’ Newfoundland: Culture as a Tourist Commodity,” in Overton, *Making a World of Difference: Essays on Tourism, Culture and Development in Newfoundland* (St. John’s, NL: Institute of Social and Economic Research or ISER, 1996), 123.

39 Ian McKay, *The Quest of the Folk: Anti-modernism and Cultural Selection in Twentieth-Century Nova Scotia* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1994), xiv.

40 MacKay, *Quest of the Folk*, xiv.

aesthetic properties are entirely an afterthought.”<sup>41</sup> But to focus on the style of some without taking the substance of all into account may lead one too far in the other direction. A wider reading of the films as a whole reveals that those involved in the creation of these cultural products included local people who may well have had agendas, but who did not count personal or corporate profit among them. Moreover, the project was not supported by the Department of Tourism or any other arm of the provincial government – quite the contrary; and while the funding for Challenge for Change and the NFB came from Ottawa, the specific project was of no particular interest to the federal government. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the films were not made in the first, or any, instance for outsiders. They were intended for local use, and no one on Fogo Island, or in Newfoundland and Labrador, had ever seen anything like them before.

Of course, the Fogo Island film project coincided with a time of social transition and tension in Newfoundland and Labrador as a whole. Enormous changes had been packed into the space of a single generation. Confederation with Canada; the government push to educate, industrialize, and centralize; the tools and programs of the modern welfare state; and the baby boom were all part of the mix that, as Smallwood is said frequently to have put it, would “drag Newfoundland kicking and screaming into the twentieth century.”<sup>42</sup> The relationship between these changes and the cultural evolution of Newfoundland and Labrador has been debated in a historiography that has grown enormously since the early 1970s, in concert with and perhaps as part of the cultural revolution itself.<sup>43</sup> Shane O’Dea, for instance, has argued that “Newfoundland’s history is Newfoundland’s culture,”<sup>44</sup> meaning that the narratives of settlement and survival in an inhospitable environment – from the Vikings and the Beothucks to the fishing admirals, from 19th-century sealing disasters and Judge Prowse’s *History of Newfoundland* to the privations of the 1930s and the Commission of Government (with the cod fishery woven throughout) – are the touchstones from which Newfoundlanders and Labradorians draw their collective identity. Such a history had little room for a large body of formal poetry, paintings, and literature, and certainly historic settlement patterns, economics, and geography in Newfoundland and Labrador were not conducive to concert or exhibition circuits. Thus, historians’ discussions of public or regionally known artists and entertainers

41 White, “Winds of Fogo,” 75.

42 Joseph R. Smallwood, cited in Patrick O’Flaherty, *The Rock Observed: Studies in the Literature of Newfoundland* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1979), 162. O’Flaherty’s footnote for this quotation, in part, states “Smallwood acknowledges having applied this common tag to Newfoundland, and many writers attribute it to him.”

43 A key turning point in the evolution of the more general historiography of Newfoundland was Keith Matthews’s presentation in 1971 of the essay subsequently published as “Historical Fence Building: A Critique of the Historiography of Newfoundland,” *Newfoundland Quarterly*, 74 (Spring 1978): 21–30. The development of a growing literature on more recent history stems from the work of a number of authors publishing in *Acadiensis* and, after 1985, in *Newfoundland and Labrador Studies* as well, in addition to the work put out by the Institute for Social and Economic Research (ISER), which had been founded at Memorial University in 1961. The academic work was, of course, complemented and propagated by the more populist projects of the Extension Service, particularly the Extension Arts division, and beyond the university by local publishers such as Breakwater.

44 Shane O’Dea, “Newfoundland: The Development of Culture on the Margin,” *Newfoundland Studies* 10, no. 1 (1994): 73.



often draw on the same short list of examples, and many writers refer more generally to a long tradition of simple but happy fisherfolk struggling to survive in a harsh environment. As Overton writes, “Whether it is viewed in negative or positive terms the assumption of most observers is that there is a single, distinct Newfoundland ethos, character or culture.”<sup>45</sup>

Although, as Ronald Rompkey notes, “the attribution of specific racial or national qualities is always a risky business,”<sup>46</sup> it percolates through much of the cultural historiography of Newfoundland and Newfoundlanders. The commodification of this notion for tourist purposes can be exemplified in such government initiatives as the 1966 “Come Home Year,” which drew heavily on the antimodernist archetypes and stereotypes of outport life at the same time as they were intended to draw expatriates’ and other visitors’ attention to the benefits of Confederation.<sup>47</sup> But the Fogo Island process had entirely different origins, and became an influence in turn that would affect the image and culture of the young Canadian province. The birth of “Newfult,” as Sandra Gwyn would describe it, involved a shift not just of personalities or style but also of fundamental direction and thinking about the place and role of culture in Newfoundland and Labrador. In this, it drew on many of the approaches and principles illustrated by the Fogo Island film project. While in its early days it showed an antimodernist streak, the cultural revolution of the 1970s drew on contemporary techniques, references and media. It was not a process in which urbanites trawled the hinterland for stories or music and left nothing behind. Rather, in focusing on community stories – traditional and modern – it sparked a degree of indigenous pride that would prove contagious.

### **“The Newfoundland Renaissance” and six degrees of Fogo Island**

By the time Sandra Gwyn’s article, “The Newfoundland Renaissance,” appeared in *Saturday Night* in 1976, the events it described had been going on for several years. Among the dozens of artists and groups named or profiled in her article are the CODCO comedy troupe, the Newfoundland Independent Filmmakers’ Co-op (NIFCO), and trad-rock musicians Figgy Duff. To those involved in it, “cultural revolution” may well have seemed the better descriptor; whatever it was called, most of the province’s governmental and business establishments neither had nor wanted anything to do with it. The revolutionaries questioned the benefits of giving up Newfoundland’s nationhood, and they poked and provoked the government relentlessly. Their plays and comedy shows were not invited to the main stage of the St. John’s Arts and Culture Centre, and instead found venues at Memorial University’s Little Theatre, in the Arts and Culture Centre’s Basement Theatre, and at the ramshackle Longshoremen’s Protective Union Hall in the downtown core. Even then, as actor/director Chris Brookes recalls, the city cracked down on building code violations, a move he saw as politically motivated as it occurred after a play critical of city planning policies.<sup>48</sup>

45 James Overton, “A Newfoundland Culture?” in Overton, *Making a World of Difference*, 52.

46 Ronald Rompkey, “The Idea of Newfoundland and Arts Policy Since Confederation,” in *Literature and Identity: Essays on Newfoundland and Labrador*, ed. Ronald Rompkey (St. John’s, NL: DRC Publishing, 2006), 65.

47 Rompkey, “The Idea of Newfoundland and Arts Policy Since Confederation,” 68-9.

48 Chris Brookes, *A Public Nuisance: A History of the Mimmers Troupe* (St. John’s, NL: Memorial University of Newfoundland Institute for Social and Economic Research, 1988), 145.

Gwyn's cast of characters also included such locally bred academics as Wilf Wareham, who told her he became a folklorist after he began work on an education degree, and "the first thing he was told to do was to get rid of his heavy Placentia Bay accent." She described Wareham's goal of reviving "'kitchen music' . . . [songs and recitations] that, not to be rude about stuff like 'Aunt Martha's Sheep' or the well-intended but insane attempts to mount a full-scale symphony orchestra in St. John's, are the real musical tradition of the island."<sup>49</sup> Among other counter-revolutionary influences, wrote Gwyn, was "the province's director of cultural affairs, who shrugs off Codco and the Mummerys as not part of his priorities and invests instead in retread productions of *Gypsy* and *The Music Man*." A number of artists have since recalled their differences with the director of cultural affairs, John Perlin; Chris Brookes castigated provincial bureaucrats in general, and particularly Perlin at the Arts and Culture Centre, for their disinterest in Newfoundland-based productions and performers.<sup>50</sup>

There are clear battle lines in Gwyn's essay, but the sides were not always well defined (either at home or in the diaspora). Helen Peters's short history of CODCO describes tours to communities that "had never seen a play before. . . . Everywhere the audiences turned out in droves and applauded the actors who showed them that comedy could be made from the fabric of their everyday lives."<sup>51</sup> Audiences in Toronto were often full of cheering expatriates, but while critics loved CODCO in Philadelphia one audience there, "consisting of people who were mostly second-generation emigrants from Newfoundland, was horribly disappointed that CODCO dramatized the stuff of Newfoundland life which their parents had left to escape and forget." There were tears and boos, Peters wrote, and, "as Mary Walsh describes the night, . . . 'People said things to us like, 'Why didn't you show all the new buildings and the roads and all the progress?' We broke their hearts by celebrating everything that they had tried to rid themselves of.' The group was surprised and upset by the encounter."<sup>52</sup>

Gwyn's article ascribed the cultural revolution to factors that have been cited frequently since its publication. Principal among these factors were the post-Confederation rush to develop the economy, with large industrial projects and the resettlement program leading to an "overpowering sense of loss and betrayal," as well as the times themselves – not just internationally but in the province itself. As painter Gerry Squires told Gwyn: "You see, in 1949, Newfoundlanders were made to feel the most inferior people in North America. But now we're starting to get our identity back. And our dignity." Gwyn also noted the influence of "one of the province's most creative institutions, Memorial University's Extension Service" as well as the "crossroads and command post for Newfoundland's cultural revolution . . . Memorial's Art Gallery," which was run by Edythe Goodridge.<sup>53</sup>

49 Gwyn, "Newfoundland Renaissance," 45, 42. "Aunt Martha's Sheep" was a popular novelty song by Newfoundland country singer Dick Nolan. The Newfoundland Symphony Orchestra is well established today.

50 See Roger Bill, "Culture vs. Policy vs. Culture," *Newfoundland Quarterly* 426 (online feature) (Spring 2008), <http://www.newfoundlandquarterly.ca/online.php>.

51 Helen Peters, "Introduction," in *The Plays of CODCO*, ed. Helen Peters (New York: Peter Lang, American University Studies Series XXVI, 1992), xiii.

52 Peters, "Introduction," in Peters, *Plays of CODCO*, xv.

53 Gwyn, "Newfoundland Renaissance," 43.

The article’s passing reference to the Fogo Island films made no direct connection between them and the developments in the arts community. However, many of the people mentioned, and the writer herself, were part of a web of individuals and groups who either contributed, or owed some intellectual and creative debt, to the work of the original 1967 Fogo Island project. These connections came generally through people who had encountered the films as a result of their work with the Extension Service, and more specifically through the internship and training sections of the original production agreement between the Extension Service and the NFB. Under the agreement, a group of about a half-dozen young Newfoundland interns would be hired to work with the production crew during the principal photography period. The idea was that the experience would encourage them to become filmmakers themselves. A second section of the agreement provided continuing training and support for the existing film unit at Memorial University’s Extension Service offices in St. John’s.

A year after the work on Fogo Island, though, an NFB report concluded that the field internship program had been a failure; with one exception, the interns did not show an interest in continuing to work in film: “We felt that their youth and inexperience did not allow them to involve themselves and respond to the complexity of problems and the cultural differences of the people.”<sup>54</sup> Eventually, three of these interns would do both, though not as filmmakers. More generally but less directly, the NFB’s relationship with, and continued support for, the Extension Service’s film unit would help to encourage the very thing at which the internship program was thought to have “failed”: the development of a local and locally rooted film community.

The Newfoundland Independent Filmmakers’ Co-operative (NIFCO) was founded in 1975 by a group of young filmmakers, and included Michael Jones (brother of CODCO’s Andy and Cathy Jones), John Doyle (a charter member of the Mummars Troupe), brothers Paul and David Pope, and Derek Norman, who worked at the Extension Service film unit. They started out, in office space borrowed from the NFB, with a small amount of cash and borrowed equipment from MUN Extension.<sup>55</sup> Jones, Doyle, and Paul Pope all became well-known directors and producers, with a body of work ranging from independent shorts to television mini-series. In 2008-09, film production contributed almost \$20 million to the economy of Newfoundland and Labrador;<sup>56</sup> it is a safe guess that most of the people working today as filmmakers in the province either started or refined their practice at NIFCO’s rambling facilities in downtown St. John’s.

Most of the interns on the Fogo Island film project were young men from St. John’s, who had had little experience of life in the outports. Only one, Randy Coffin, was from the island, and his experience that summer led him to work at the Extension

54 “Fogo Island Film and Community Development Project, submitted by Bill Nemtin and Colin Low,” file #4335 A-94, p. 17, NFB Archives.

55 Jamie Fitzpatrick, “Early Days: film and video,” Newfoundland and Labrador Heritage website, [www.heritage.nf.ca/arts/early\\_days.html](http://www.heritage.nf.ca/arts/early_days.html). A search of NIFCO’s film database suggests earlier, less formal connections, such as the little-known *And Now for Something Completely NIFCO*, which is listed as a joint production of NIFCO and MUN-TV and directed by Fred Hollingshurst. See <http://www.nifco.org/film7.html>.

56 The 2008-09 estimated contribution was \$19,348,547. See Newfoundland and Labrador Film Development Corporation, e-mail to author, 13 July 2009.

Service for most of his career. One of the “townies” was Greg Malone. He would become a founding member of the legendary CODCO theatre troupe and one of the leading lights of the Newfoundland Renaissance. Frequently compared to Monty Python, CODCO worked close to home and close to the bone: its ribald and edgy humour drew on archetypes and issues easily recognized by Newfoundlanders, but it was successful in other parts of Canada and the United States as well.<sup>57</sup>

Malone was already involved in drama at Memorial University when he applied to the internship program. His summer’s experience included directing a sequence in *Children of Fogo*, which was not without difficulties: “I took the cameraman out to the [homemade] seaplane and the boat filled up with water – we barely made it back!” And when it was over, he concluded documentary filmmaking was not for him: “I had other things to do.” He notes that the Extension Service itself played a larger role in the 1970s explosion of cultural projects than did the Fogo Island project per se; but Malone also admits that he “did use (the Fogo Island) experience extensively in CODCO” – from characters’ names to family scenes in *Cod on a Stick* (one of CODCO’s first stage shows). The filmmakers from the mainland would also find themselves caricatured in an early CODCO TV special, *Festering Forefathers and Running Sons*.<sup>58</sup>

Another intern from St. John’s, Bryan Hennessey, began his own Fogo Process with “little understanding of how [changes in the fishery, resettlement and so on] were affecting people living in rural Newfoundland.” It was as he travelled with the film crew that he began to have “the faintest glimmering of what was happening to outport Newfoundland.”<sup>59</sup> He recalls thinking of the film shoot as “drudgery” as the training period in Montreal, in the midst of Expo ’67, held more appeal for the teenager who had never been off the island: “I didn’t really grasp what the whole thing was about until (years) later.” Hennessey became an actor, author, and co-founder of a theatre company in St. John’s. When he was hired for the Fogo Island project, he was already a musician and, like Malone, already gravitating toward life as an artist; but “a lot of the mindset that grew out of the (film project) helped create things like CODCO and Figgy Duff . . . I wouldn’t say the Fogo films were the beginning of that, but I think they were part of it.”<sup>60</sup>

When director Low needed incidental music for the films, he asked Hennessey to call on some of his fellow musicians, who included Sandy Morris and Noel Dinn.<sup>61</sup> Although her name appears nowhere in the records, singer Laverne Squires’s voice is

57 Malone’s later projects included the Wonderful Grand Band, a unique rock /traditional/sketch comedy group whose CBC network program at one point in its 1980-83 run outdrew the national news. See “Wonderful Grand Band is coming back to TV screens,” *Telegram* (St. John’s, NL), 29 August 2008, <http://www.thetelegram.com/index.cfm.cfm?sid=166740&sc=79>.

58 All information in this paragraph came from the telephone interview with Greg Malone, 17 July 2009, except the list of interns (which came out of the NFB files), as well as Bryan Hennessey, “Memoir – Challenge for Change: Working on the Fogo Project,” *Newfoundland Quarterly* 99, no. 4 (2007): 22-3. The title of this piece on pp. 22-3 is different than the table of contents for this issue of *Newfoundland Quarterly*, as the title for the Hennessey piece is listed as “Working in a Fledgling Industry.”

59 Hennessey, “Change for Change: Working on the Fogo Project,” 22-3.

60 Bryan Hennessey, telephone interview by author, 14 July 2009, transcribed notes in possession of author.

61 Hennessey, “Challenge for Change: Working on the Fogo Project,” 23.

also clearly recognizable at the beginning of the film *An Introduction to Fogo Island*.<sup>62</sup> Later that year, Dinn, Hennessey, and others formed a rock band that, by 1974, would form the core of the electric/folk/traditional group called “Figgy Duff.” Dinn was Figgy Duff’s “leader, arranger, manager, booking agent, inspiration . . . drummer and pianist.”<sup>63</sup> Dinn and the other members of Figgy Duff collected and showcased ballads that had gone almost unheard for generations, laying much of the groundwork for the popularization of Newfoundland traditional music beyond its traditional (older, rural, and tourist) audiences. As with many of the groups in the cultural revolution, the membership of Figgy Duff would overlap with that of other arts groups – a pattern that continues to the present day.

Perhaps no one player in the cultural revolution’s early days was so directly influenced by the Fogo Island project as was the Mummers Troupe, or saw so many artists enter and exit. Mummers co-founder Chris Brookes was one of the artists profiled in the *Saturday Night* article, and he took pride in the accusation – which he said came from a provincial government complaint to the Canada Council – that the Mummers’ work was “anarchist . . . agit-prop, political warfare type productions.”<sup>64</sup> He told Gwyn that he had moved home to St. John’s after theatre school and other travels, where he came across “some of the community development films the people from Memorial Extension had made on Fogo Island, and it struck me that maybe theatre could be used to the same kind of end.”<sup>65</sup> The Mummers Troupe’s adaptation of the community development process to the creative process is clear: in August of 1972, during the creation of *Gros Mourn*, a play about communities resettled to make way for a new national park, Brookes wrote “we are becoming a workshop for these kids (in Sally’s Cove, one of the towns being relocated) . . . a dozen are trooping down the road with Mary Walsh, videotaping everything in sight with our borrowed portapak camera.”<sup>66</sup>

Before it closed down in 1982, the Mummers Troupe would produce a range of work, from traditional Christmas mummers’ plays and a biography of 19th-century bard Johnny Burke, to highly political pieces on such topics as the Buchans miners’ strike, the nascent offshore oil industry, and development plans for the downtown core of St. John’s. The troupe offered a home and experience to scores of actors, writers, and musicians, and established the former Longshoremen’s Protective Union (LSPU) Hall as a vibrant and innovative theatre centre in downtown St. John’s.

Edythe Goodridge, who at the time was the director of Memorial University’s Art

62 It is difficult to know for sure how many musicians worked on the films. Squires’s name, for instance, does not appear in the NFB’s files of honoraria paid to musicians on the project; in keeping with the times and the institutional cultures of both the NFB and the Extension Service, the arrangements seem to have been somewhat ad hoc.

63 See profile of Noel Dinn at [www.ambermusic.ca/artist\\_noel.htm](http://www.ambermusic.ca/artist_noel.htm).

64 Chris Brookes, *A Public Nuisance*, 97. The term also appears in Gwyn, “Newfoundland Renaissance,” 44. The Mummers Troupe drew its name from its first productions, which revived the centuries-old practice of mummering in Newfoundland. Mummers go door-to-door in disguise during the twelve days of Christmas, performing for householders in return for food and drink.

65 Gwyn, “Newfoundland Renaissance,” 44.

66 Brookes, *A Public Nuisance*, 84. Mary Walsh later became a co-founder of CODCO. Among her many later projects, she was a producer, writer, and performer on the CBC network program *This Hour Has 22 Minutes* as well as the creator of the concept for the series.

Gallery, was another major figure on Gwyn's list of cultural revolutionaries. To illustrate the flamboyant ways in which Goodridge promoted Newfoundland artists of all stripes, Gwyn recounts a couple of famous Goodridge gambits: flying CODCO to an art opening in Ottawa, where a network film crew just happened to be in attendance, and convincing federal Secretary of State bureaucrats that the Newfoundland actors of the Mummers Troupe "had as much claim to multiculturalism funds as Ukrainian folk-dancers."<sup>67</sup> During the 1960s Goodridge had brought her force-of-nature energy to work as an Extension Service officer; among other things, she helped Fogo Islanders to start a newsletter for the co-op. By the 1980s she would be head of visual arts at the Canada Council.

Sandra Gwyn's credentials as a cultural revolutionary were no less impressive than those of her lifelong friend Goodridge.<sup>68</sup> They had both grown up in St. John's, and both had worked with the Extension Service. Gwyn's most direct connection to the Fogo Process was in 1972, when she acted as rapporteur for a weeklong symposium revisiting the original Fogo Island project. Her report, entitled *Cinema as Catalyst*, echoes in the *Saturday Night* essay of four years later. In the 1972 report, Gwyn wrote that for Newfoundlanders the "act of seeing ourselves on the screen . . . strengthens our sense of self; emphasizes our sense of dignity . . . It is only a step to self-respect, a quality which has been defined as the willingness to accept responsibility for one's own life. Often that willingness is the foundation on which consensus for social change can be built."<sup>69</sup> Similarly, in "The Newfoundland Renaissance," she describes the "intense psychological experience" of watching a Mummers Troupe play about the 1959 woodworkers' strike among an audience of people whose own stories had formed the script: the experience "moved me profoundly and gave the women sitting next to me a sense, possibly for the first time in their lives, of *having been important*."<sup>70</sup>

The ideas expressed in the Fogo Island films and in the early days of the "Newfoundland Renaissance" shared that "sense of self . . . of dignity" and of being "important" after years of poverty and Newfie jokes. But the shift would not be entrenched in the mainstream until Brian Peckford, running on a strongly nationalist platform, became Progressive Conservative leader and then premier in 1979. Brookes's history implies that the cultural revolutionaries had a role to play there as well. He describes, for example, his 1978 efforts to lobby provincial politicians: "One who seemed particularly interested was the Minister of Mines and Energy . . . a hungry looking guy by the name of Peckford."<sup>71</sup>

Through the 1970s and 1980s, the province's arts community seemed to achieve a

67 Gwyn, "Newfoundland Renaissance," 41.

68 In later years, Sandra Gwyn became one of the country's better-known writers and popular historians through many books, articles and awards. She died in 2001, but her mentorship of Newfoundland and Labrador artists continues through the Winterset literary awards, established in her memory, and the annual Winterset literary festival on the Eastport peninsula, near the summer home the Gwyns shared with Goodridge.

69 Sandra Gwyn, *Cinema as Catalyst: film, video-tape and social change* (St. John's, NL: Memorial University Extension Service, 1972), 1-2.

70 Gwyn, "Newfoundland Renaissance," 44 (emphasis in original).

71 Brookes, *A Public Nuisance*, 209.



sufficient critical mass in that people who might not otherwise have considered careers in the arts joined the community as well. A large number – perhaps the majority, though an empirical measure would be difficult – of 21st-century artists and arts groups in the province can trace their practices in some fashion to the work of such people as Sandra Gwyn, Edythe Goodridge, Chris Brookes and the Mummers, Noel Dinn and Figgy Duff, NIFCO, and the members of CODCO, who were influenced in their own careers by the example of the Fogo Island project.

At first glance the strong presence of traditional culture in the contemporary popular culture of Newfoundland and Labrador again evokes Ian McKay’s description of urban bourgeois collectors of traditional culture, whose sense of ownership over what they have “found” leads to the commodification of the materials collected. However, the actual connections are nowhere near as clear or premeditated as his framework suggests. While some were middle class “townies” from St. John’s, such well-known collectors and performers as Figgy Duff and Kelly Russell invited their musical elders to join them on stage. It is true that, early on, some of the young people’s tone could verge on pious or preachy. Crocker notes the locally famous story of a Figgy Duff bar gig at which, when the audience became too noisy, a band member told them to “shut up – we’re preserving your fucking culture!”<sup>72</sup> And yet the cultural revolutionaries did not try to trap their artifacts in amber; they added electric instruments to the bodhrans, spoons, accordions, and fiddles. They went to some lengths to credit their sources, and their collaborations with such traditional musicians as Emile Benoit, Rufus Guinchard, and Art Stoyles made the older musicians well known in folk and traditional music circles. The folklore department at Memorial, established in 1968, offered a home and a structure for the growing collections of songs, dances, and recitations of the “kitchen music” described in Gwyn’s *Saturday Night* article – examples of Newfoundland culture that were still part of daily life in *The Songs of Chris Cobb*, *The Mercers at Home and Fishing*, and *A Wedding and a Party*.

While the young artists drew on community experience, they also looked to their sources for feedback and validation – a parallel, sometimes but not always conscious or intentional, to the Fogo Process spirit of offering the option of editorial approval to the people interviewed in the original films. Gwyn describes a Mummers Troupe cast as “having a bad case of the jitters” when they took their play about the International Woodworkers’ Association (IWA) strike to the people who had lived through it, in the mid-island town of Badger, Newfoundland. Badger had been

the union fortress . . . the guts of IWA come straight out of interviews the Mummer conducted with people in Badger. “I keep thinking,” says Donna Butt, “of the last thing one of those people said to me. ‘Now for God’s sake, missus, don’t make fun of us’.”<sup>73</sup>

## Conclusion

The film studies literature counts the short films of the Fogo Island film project as part

72 Stephen Crocker, “Hauled Kicking and Screaming into Modernity: Non-Synchronicity and Globalization in Post-War Newfoundland,” *Topia: Canadian Journal of Cultural Studies* 3, no. 1 (1981): 90.

73 Gwyn, “Newfoundland Renaissance,” 38.

of the national cinematic canon, but little attention has been paid to the films as historical documents in, and influences upon, the social history of Newfoundland and Labrador. The Fogo Island film project was a success for the National Film Board, the Memorial University Extension Service, and the communities of Fogo Island, but it affected other people as well in ways the original partners could not have predicted. Young artists and writers drew on its examples of innovative public discussion and national pride to reframe both the basic Fogo process and its product. They took elements of a process intended to address local development problems and turned them into widely accessible, and often provocative and political, art. The films were unusual for their time in that they were outspoken on matters of government policy and focused on individuals and community life instead of touting the benefits of economic and industrial development or a hunting and fishing holiday. They were also produced and prepared by filmmakers whose talent and experience made the films compelling and memorable – this despite their rule that the “process” recorded by the camera was of paramount importance and that the final “product” did not matter.

The influence of the films spread into a nascent arts community in several ways. Internship and legacy training programs exposed young Newfoundlanders to this form of artistic expression, and encouraged the development of independent filmmaking beyond the intended community and educational focus. More generally, people such as Chris Brookes who were tangentially connected to or aware of the film project – principally through Memorial’s Extension Service – took its small-is-beautiful, grassroots, and sometimes nationalist approach and adapted it to artistic creation and administration. This is one of the ways in which the phenomenon Gwyn describes in *Saturday Night* as a cultural revolution does not conform to any framework of top-down, bourgeois, and corporate commodification of culture. The cultural revolution in its early days was a pushback against government and tourist stereotyping, and the frictions were real and sharp for a number of years. And it was not until the election of 1979 that the political establishment in the province took a sharp nationalist turn; throughout the next decade, “Brian Peckford was without question the leading political figure in the nationalist movement.”<sup>74</sup>

While many of the “revolutionaries” were from or based in St. John’s, and some were affiliated with the university (particularly the Extension Service), the audience they sought to reach was not visitors or other outsiders but people within the province itself. Though many (not all) of the young artists were from St. John’s, they worked with outport elders, rather than simply appropriating their knowledge. Some of those elders developed careers of their own as a result. Contrary to the frameworks put forward by McKay and others regarding traditional or folk culture, but in keeping with the example of the Fogo Island project, the cultural “revolution” of the 1960s and 1970s in Newfoundland and Labrador spoke first and foremost not to visitors or outsiders but to Newfoundlanders themselves in a flood of theatre, film, music, visual arts, and writing that is now well into its second and third creative generations.

When we look at the 21st-century marketing of Newfoundland culture by the

74 Jerry Bannister, “Making History: Cultural Memory in Twentieth-Century Newfoundland,” *Newfoundland Studies* 18, no. 2 (2002): 181.

provincial government and the tourism industry, much of what we see could be described as commodified and invented – from the province’s slick tourism commercials to the corny “kiss the cod” screeching-in. But that is only one thread of the cultural fabric. Others are mainstream and everyday; in the wake of the cultural revolution, the 21st-century fabric of Newfoundland and Labrador’s homegrown, tradition-rooted art and culture does not sit comfortably in any theoretician’s gaze. For the most part, it is not woven for visitors to wear and discard, and it started out as controversial, confrontational, innovative, and often antithetical to the provincial government’s vision of the province’s future.

No one factor holds responsibility for the birth of a movement or social trend; in the case of Fogo Island even the “godfather” of the project, Donald Snowden, said “films did not do these things: people did them. There is little doubt, however, that film created an awareness and self-confidence that was needed for people-advocated development to occur.”<sup>75</sup> The title of Gwyn’s report, *Cinema as Catalyst*, is apt in more ways than one: the Fogo Island project was among the factors that encouraged and accelerated the actions that would become a cultural revolution.

75 Don Snowden, 1983, quoted in the editors’ introduction to Donald Snowden, “Eyes see, ears hear,” in *SD Dimensions* (United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization, Sustainable Development Department), <http://www.fao.org/WAICENT/FAOINFO/SUSTDEV/CDdirect/CDre0038.htm>.