Document généré le 5 juin 2025 03:01

Acadiensis

ACADIENSIS

A River Runs Through It:
Churchill Falls and the End of Newfoundland History

Jerry Bannister

Volume 41, numéro 1, winter/spring 2012

URI : https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/acad41_1pp01

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 ce document

Bannister, J. (2012). A River Runs Through It:: Churchill Falls and the End of Newfoundland History. *Acadiensis*, *41*(1), 211–225.

Résumé de l'article

« Présent et passé » : Avec ce numéro* d'Acadiensis*, nous présentons aux lecteurs une nouvelle série d'articles qui paraîtra à l'occasion et qui s'intitule « Présent et passé ». Faisant suite à la série « Forum » (qui continuera d'exister et de s'intéresser aux débats et aux perspectives complémentaires offertes par des groupes d'universitaires), la série « Présent et passé » offrira aux spécialistes de l'histoire régionale et aux universitaires de disciplines connexes l'occasion de faire part de leurs réflexions sur les enjeux actuels dans une perspective historique. Le principe selon lequel les connaissances universitaires peuvent approfondir notre compréhension des questions contemporaines n'a rien de nouveau dans les pages* d'Acadiensis*, comme l'illustrent les travaux de nombreux auteurs de la revue. La nouvelle série cherchera à rendre ce lien encore plus explicite.

All rights reserved © Department of History at the University of New Brunswick, 2012

Ce document est protégé par la loi sur le droit d'auteur. L'utilisation des services d'Érudit (y compris la reproduction) est assujettie à sa politique d'utilisation que vous pouvez consulter en ligne.

https://apropos.erudit.org/fr/usagers/politique-dutilisation/

érudit

Cet article est diffusé et préservé par Érudit.

Érudit est un consortium interuniversitaire sans but lucratif composé de l'Université de Montréal, l'Université Laval et l'Université du Québec à Montréal. Il a pour mission la promotion et la valorisation de la recherche.

https://www.erudit.org/fr/

PRESENT AND PAST/PRÉSENT ET PASSÉ

« Présent et passé » : Avec ce numéro* d'Acadiensis*, nous présentons aux lecteurs une nouvelle série d'articles qui paraîtra à l'occasion et qui s'intitule « Présent et passé ». Faisant suite à la série « Forum » (qui continuera d'exister et de s'intéresser aux débats et aux perspectives complémentaires offertes par des groupes d'universitaires), la série « Présent et passé » offrira aux spécialistes de l'histoire régionale et aux universitaires de disciplines connexes l'occasion de faire part de leurs réflexions sur les enjeux actuels dans une perspective historique. Le principe selon lequel les connaissances universitaires peuvent approfondir notre compréhension des questions contemporaines n'a rien de nouveau dans les pages* d'Acadiensis*, comme l'illustrent les travaux de nombreux auteurs de la revue. La nouvelle série cherchera à rendre ce lien encore plus explicite.

"Present and Past": With this issue of* Acadiensis*, we present to readers a new occasional series entitled "Present and Past." An outgrowth from the journal's "Forum" series (which will continue to exist, focusing on debates and complementary perspectives offered by groups of scholars), "Present and Past" will provide regional historians and scholars in related disciplines with the opportunity to reflect on current issues in historical perspective. The principle that scholarly insight can deepen our understanding of contemporary affairs is nothing new in the pages of* Acadiensis*, as exemplified by the work of many of the journal's authors. The new series will seek to make this connection more explicit.

A River Runs Through It: Churchill Falls and the End of Newfoundland History

OVER THE PAST DECADE, MUCH HAS BEEN MADE of the transformation of Newfoundland and Labrador. During his seven years in power, Premier Danny Williams presided over a dramatic rebranding of the province. This rebranding was both literal and figurative, for it included a new official logo complete with a different rendition of the province's name ("Newfoundland Labrador").[1] Danny Williams took his confrontational style further than any previous premier, and in late 2004 he ordered the Canadian flag hauled down as he engineered a showdown with Prime Minister Paul Martin.[2] Looking back on this event, what is remarkable is how unremarkable it has become: few commentators even bother to mention the flag incident any longer, let alone debate its significance. What is remembered instead is

1 "Brand Signature," Government of Newfoundland and Labrador, http://www.gov.nl.ca/brand/. The rebranding of Newfoundland and Labrador is discussed further in Jerry Bannister and Roger Marsters, "The Presence of the Past: Memory and Politics in Atlantic Canada since 2000," in *Shaping an Agenda for Atlantic Canada*, ed. Donald Savoie and John Reid (Halifax, NS: Fernwood Publishing, 2011), 111-31. This piece is based on a public lecture sponsored by the Newfoundland Historical Society in October 2011, and part of it also draws on "What do we do next?" from *The Telegram* (St. John's) (4 December 2010). For their comments on earlier versions, I thank Gerald Bannister, James Hiller, Ed Hollett, Tina Loo, Alex Marland, Sue Newhook, Shane O'Dea, John Reid, Andy Taillon, Russell Wangersky, and Mark Watton.

2 Christopher Dunn, "Why Williams walked, why Martin balked: The Atlantic accord dispute in perspective," *Policy Options* 26, no. 2 (February 2005): 9-14.

Jerry Bannister, "A River Runs Through It: Churchill Falls and the End of Newfoundland History," *Acadiensis* XLI, no. 1 (Winter/Spring 2012): 211-225.

triumphalism. As with every aspect of the Williams era, the premier succeeded in branding himself, his party, and the province as heroic. With the achievement of "have status" due to resource deals signed by his predecessors, Williams took the province to the promised land of provincial politics. He embraced a type of ethnic nationalism, invoking the term "race" to describe the people of Newfoundland and Labrador,[3] and his relentless personal attacks on enemies and rivals created new standards of incivility in public debate. The result was a wave of media commentary on how Williams had altered the political culture of Newfoundland and Labrador.[4]

Underneath this wave of political change surged a strong current of historical continuity. Like every premier since J.R. Smallwood, Williams was obsessed with natural resource development in general and Churchill Falls in particular. He saw himself as breaking with the past because he would succeed where they had failed. Far from attempting to take the province's economy in a new direction, Williams wanted to fulfill Smallwood's dream and make Newfoundland and Labrador a regional energy powerhouse. Like most people of his generation, Williams viewed Churchill Falls as the holy grail of provincial politics; development of the Lower Churchill represented not just economic development but cultural redemption. For 40 years, the Lower Churchill has been the ultimate prize in provincial politics. When Bill Rowe prophesied in his book that brokering a deal to develop the Lower Churchill would make Danny Williams "the greatest of our premiers," he was repeating a conventional wisdom older than many of his readers.[5] The fact that Williams chose to resign in December 2010, right after he signed a tentative agreement to develop Muskrat Falls (part of the Lower Churchill river system), illustrates the power it wields over the provincial psyche.

Danny Williams's premiership did not alter the province's political culture so much as it culminated it. For two generations that culture was predicated on the politics of anticipation, as Newfoundlanders waited for deliverance from the injustices of the past – especially the infamous 1969 Churchill Falls deal. This anticipation created a political teleology so deeply ingrained that it is hardly recognized, let alone questioned. The unspoken assumption has always been that Newfoundland and Labrador is not just a place but a time: it is forever on the cusp of going somewhere, becoming something, fighting someone. To be a Newfoundlander is to know in your bones that the next big resource deal is just around the corner, because one day the sun will surely shine and "have not" will be no more. When Kathy Dunderdale took over from Williams in 2011, she stated that her government would follow Williams's policies faithfully while being a "different act."[6] Over the past year she has presented herself as a kinder, gentler version of Williams, and has studiously avoided getting drawn into conflicts with Ottawa. Premier Dunderdale now finds herself facing a heated public controversy over the

3 "Tories offer baby bonus to turn around NL population," CBC Newfoundland and Labrador (18 September 2007), http://www.cbc.ca/canada/newfoundland-labrador/story/2007/09/18/.

4 On Danny Williams's use of populism and nationalism, see Alex Marland, "Masters of Our Own Destiny: The Nationalist Evolution of Newfoundland Premier Danny Williams," *International Journal of Canadian Studies / Revue internationale d'études canadiennes* 42 (2010): 155-81.

5 Bill Rowe, *Danny Williams: The War with Ottawa* (St. John's, NL: Flanker Press, 2010), 266.

6 Jerry Bannister, "A different act," *The Telegram* (8 January 2011).

merits of the Muskrat Falls deal signed by Williams. The Public Utilities Board asked for more time to review the submission from Nalcor Energy (the crown corporation behind the project), and a series of respected scholars and public figures, including Brian Peckford, have argued that the current Muskrat Falls proposal is not in the province's best interests.[7] Jerome Kennedy, the provincial natural resources minister, has dismissed the criticism as "political white noise," but the growing debate poses the first serious challenge the Progressive Conservatives have faced in the province since Williams's resignation.[8]

The debate over Muskrat Falls offers an important opportunity to assess the province's political culture and the role of history in it. With so much change in such a relatively short period of time – from the end of "have-not" status to the demolition of the iconic "overpass" that demarcated St. John's – there is a pressing need to situate the campaign to develop the Lower Churchill within the context of the ebb and flow of Newfoundland nationalism since 1949. In the wake of the disastrous Churchill Falls deal in 1969, the nationalist narrative of Newfoundland became focused on loss; by the turn of the 21st century, it had become a public memory of bereavement. This memory commemorated battles against nature by remembering events such as the *Newfoundland* disaster of 1914 and the sinking of the *Ocean Ranger* in 1982. It mourned national tragedies by remembering Beaumont Hamel in 1916, the loss of democracy in the 1930s, and the referenda of 1948. And it grieved the loss of traditional culture by remembering the re-settlement schemes of the 1960s and the cod moratorium of the 1990s.[9] Like all public memory, this view of Newfoundland's past was contested, negotiated, and reconstituted in many different ways. Regardless of how many different ways the story was told, its heart remained essentially the same: a history of struggle. When the struggle for "have" status was won, that history of Newfoundland ended.

Invoking Francis Fukuyama and the notion of an end to history will, no doubt, raise eyebrows. In the wake of *The End of History and the Last Man*, Fukuyama became widely derided as a symbol of everything that was wrong with the neoconservative movement. Yet it is important to keep in mind that his scholarship was neither as simplistic nor as reactionary as critics portrayed it during the 1990s, while the American neoconservative movement that once championed Fukuyama has

7 See James Feehan, "Newfoundland's Electricity Options: Making the Right Choice Requires an Efficient Pricing Regime," C.D. Howe Institute Research Paper (11 January 2012), http://www.cdhowe.org/pdf/ebrief_129.pdf; Ron Penney and David Vardy, "Muskrat Falls must have full review," *The Telegram* (12 January 2012), http://www.thetelegram.com/Opinion/Letters-to-the-editor/2012-01-12/; J.F. Collins, "Muskrat questions continue," *The Telegram* (24 January 2012), http://www.thetelegram.com/Opinion/Letters-to-the-editor/2012-01-24/; Gerald O'Brien, Cabot Martin, Edward Hearn, Richard Cashin, Ches Crosbie, Richard Rogers, Dennis Browne, Philip Buckingham, Bernard Coffey, and Stephen Fitzgerald, "A partial PUB review is unreliable," *The Telegram* (2 February 2012), http://www.thetelegram.com/Opinion/Letters/.

8 James McLeod, "PUB criticism just 'white noise': minister," *The Telegram* (19 January 2012), http://www.thetelegram.com/News/Local/2012-01-19/.

9 This point is developed further in Jerry Bannister, "Making History: Cultural Memory in Twentieth-Century Newfoundland," *Newfoundland Studies* 18, no. 2 (Fall 2002): 175-94.

long since disowned him.[10] Fukuyama's positions on modernity and globalization remain highly contentious, but his ideas on the potential linearity of history and the myopia this creates are useful tools for understanding the political culture of Newfoundland and Labrador. Powerful socio-economic continuities from the 1990s remain in Newfoundland and Labrador – from high unemployment and rural depopulation to persistent crises in the fishery – but the current provincial zeitgeist is fixed on the present, rather than the past or the future. This trend is epitomized in the Conservatives' slick "new energy" public relations campaign, which boasts "Something extraordinary is happening in our province. There's new energy all around us and it's changing how we see ourselves and our place in the world."[11] Whereas political rhetoric before prosperity had been locked in debates about the past, it is now focused on breaking free from history. This change was powerfully underscored in a highly anticipated public lecture on Muskrat Falls given by economist Wade Locke in January 2012. At the conclusion of Locke's lecture, which attracted an unprecedented level of media attention for a university presentation, he affirmed that "we should learn from our history but not be slaves to it."[12]

Emancipation proclamations have become commonplace since the Conservative party assumed power in Newfoundland and Labrador. According to the conventional wisdom, 2003 is Year One because it signalled the end of defeatism and the beginning of a new polity based on pride, strength, and determination. Danny Williams built on a resurgent Newfoundland nationalism that was already prevalent in the political culture, even in the Liberal government of Roger Grimes; but Williams took this nationalism in a new direction. Williams's first task was to make a rhetorical break with the past: far from being trapped by their history, Newfoundlanders were now going to break free from the shackles of federalist oppression. He took power as the price of oil shot up dramatically, and commentators started talking about "the Williams effect" – which drew a sharp line between the allegedly weak Liberal past and the strong Tory present.[13] This rhetoric reached an apex in the Speech from the Throne in 2007: "Our people are proud nationalists who believe it is only by affirming our identity as Newfoundlanders and Labradorians that we will realize our goal of economic equality within the federation. Our people are ready to take charge of our future and, under My First Minister's leadership, our province will achieve self-reliance by becoming masters

10 Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Free Press, 1992); Francis Fukuyama, "Second thoughts: the last man in a bottle," *The National Interest* 56 (Summer 1999): 16-44. For a balanced assessment of the debates over Fukuyama's theories, see Louis Menand, "Breaking Away: Francis Fukuyama and the Neoconservatives," *The New Yorker* (27 March 2006).

11 "New Energy," Dunderdale 2011, http://newenergynl.ca/.

12 Wade Locke, "Muskrat Falls: The Best Option?" (presentation to the Harris Centre), http://www.mun.ca/harriscentre/policy/memorialpresents/2012a/. Quotation is from slide 47 of the accompanying PowerPoint presentation on the website.

13 Alex Marland, "The 2007 Provincial Election in Newfoundland and Labrador," *Canadian Political Science Review* 1, no. 2 (December 2007): 75-85; Christopher Dunn, "The Williams Effect: 2007 Election in Newfoundland and Labrador," *Policy Options* 28, no. 10 (November 2007): 35-41.

of our own house."[14] The allusion to the Quiet Revolution was lost on no one, and the CBC noted that the phrase "maîtres chez nous" had been invoked by Quebec premier Jean Lesage in the early 1960s and prefigured the sovereigntist movement.[15]

The connection between the language of Lesage and Williams entailed more than nationalism. In 1962 Premier Lesage used "maîtres chez nous" in a speech that called for the nationalization of all privately owned electric power companies in Quebec. Lesage argued, as Williams would 45 years later, that state-sponsored resource development, particularly hydroelectric power, was absolutely essential for the province to prosper and stand up to Ottawa. As Tina Loo and Meg Stanley point out in their recent study of dams in British Columbia, such faith in hydroelectric projects represented the influence of "high modernism."[16] While provincialist and even nationalist language shaped the selling of hydro projects politically, dams were seen as feats of engineering that used knowledge to conquer wilderness. Captured in an iconography of bulldozers and hard hats, dams became secular temples of modernity. This is also the case in Newfoundland and Labrador, where progress and hydroelectricity remain twinned in popular imagination. When a group of New England governors toured Churchill Falls in August 2011, the provincial government hailed it as a "great opportunity to showcase Newfoundland and Labrador as an energy super warehouse."[17] Churchill Falls was shown off as a responsible alternative to fossil fuels.

In terms of the politics of hydroelectricity across Canada, Newfoundland and Labrador differs from other provinces in two important respects. First, unlike most dams in North America, the original Churchill Falls facility became a monument to futility.[18] Although Brinco rather than Premier Smallwood signed the infamous deal that sees Labrador power sold at fixed prices to Hydro-Québec until 2041, it became known as the singularly most egregious giveaway in provincial history. More than other similarly controversial development projects in Atlantic Canada – such as the Bricklin car factory or the Point Lepreau nuclear power plant in New Brunswick – the Churchill Falls dam became internalized provincially as the ultimate political failure. Twenty years after Smallwood's death, the spectre of Churchill Falls haunts not only the public memory of the post-1949 era but also the current debate over Muskrat Falls.[19] Exorcizing the ghost of Smallwood and avoiding a repeat of 1969 is an idée fixe that crosses regional and party divisions.[20] As a result, unlike the

14 Speech from the Throne, Fourth Session of the Forty-Fifth General Assembly of the Province of Newfoundland and Labrador (24 April 2007), http://www.exec.gov.nl.ca/thronespeech/2007/.

15 "'Masters of our own house,' N.L. throne speech declares," CBC Newfoundland and Labrador (24 April 2007), http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/newfoundland-labrador/story/2007/04/24/.

16 Tina Loo and Meg Stanley, "An Environmental History of Progress: Damming the Peace and Columbia Rivers," *Canadian Historical Review* 92, no. 3 (September 2011): 399-427.

17 "Visit by New England Governors Focuses on Potential of Lower Churchill, Government of Newfoundland and Labrador" news release (22 August 2011), http://www.releases.gov.nl.ca/releases/2011/exec/.

18 On the national contexts, see Karl Froschauer, *White Gold: Hydroelectric Power in Canada* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1999).

19 Steve Bartlett, "How Joey Smallwood is remembered 20 years after his death," *The Telegram* (10 December 2011), http://www.thetelegram.com/News/Local/2011-12-10/.

20 Martin Connelly, "Upper Churchill Repeat? Not on my watch," *Natural Resources Magazine* 21, no. 6 (November/December 2010), http://www.atlanticbusinessmagazine.ca/wp-content/uploads/2010/11/.

failed deal to sell most of New Brunswick's power generation to Hydro-Québec, local politicians dare not oppose Muskrat Falls unequivocally. This has left politicians and commentators outside Newfoundland and Labrador relatively free to invoke Nalcor Energy's project to suit their own goals. Since the term sheet agreement between Emera and Nalcor to develop the Lower Churchill project was announced in November 2010, it has become all things to all politicians. While Premier Darrell Dexter has hailed it as a "nation-building project,"[21] *Atlantic Business Magazine* went a step further in a dramatic "Lower Churchill Triumph" cover story in early 2011. It not only declared that the Emera-Nalcor deal had inaugurated a "Maritime Partnership" and routed a "Quebec impasse," but it also asked "Could regional union be next?" Yet, even as the new hydro deal was celebrated, the old one was never far from mind. "It's a huge milestone," Williams was quoted as saying. "It's the day, hopefully . . . when Newfoundlanders can finally let go of the Upper Churchill and say, 'Done. It's over'."[22]

The second reason that the Newfoundland and Labrador situation is different is that, unlike most major dams in North American history, the public memory of Churchill Falls is oddly liminal. For a place that has dominated so much of the province's politics for 40 years, the actual Churchill Falls facility is rarely pictured or described in any significant detail (though the recent media coverage of the Muskrat Falls deal has started to change this). Isolated photographs of the river and the falls appear periodically on local television and in newspapers, but they are almost never accompanied by first-hand accounts or live shots of the dam. This is due partly to the relative lack of accessibility and to the lack of genuine interest in Labrador, which most Newfoundlanders still tend to view through the lens of the island's interests. But it is due mostly to the fact that, as a monument to failure, Churchill Falls transformed in public memory from an actual place to a heuristic device for understanding the province's past since Confederation. By the 1990s it had become a crucible of Newfoundland nationalism – the cause of, and solution to, the province's woes. No one wants to forget Churchill Falls, but no one seems to want to know much about it either. For all of its importance in the province's history, there exists only one full-length monograph on the original Churchill Falls agreement, published more than 30 years ago.[23] Several recent articles have contributed significantly to our understanding of the history of Churchill Falls, but there is still much that we do not know about the 1969 contract and its aftermath.[24] Like an apparition, Churchill Falls remains more real in politics as a nightmare than as an actual place. As James Feehan and Melvin Baker note, however, the current

21 Richard Blackwell, "N.S. Premier urges Ottawa to back hydro project," *Globe and Mail* (3 July 2011), http://m.theglobeandmail.com/report-on-business/industry-news/energy-and-resources/.

22 Rob Antle, "Lower Churchill Triumph," *Atlantic Business Magazine* 22, no. 1 (January/February 2011): 20-32.

23 Philip Smith, *Brinco: The Story of Churchill Falls* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1975).

24 Jason Churchill, "Pragmatic Federalism: The Politics Behind the 1969 Churchill Falls Contract," *Newfoundland and Labrador Studies* 15, no. 2 (1999): 215-45; James Feehan and Melvin Baker, "The Origins of a Coming Crisis: Renewal of the Churchill Falls Contract," *Dalhousie Law Journal* 30, no. 1 (Spring 2007): 209-54; James Feehan, "Smallwood, Churchill Falls, and the Power Corridor Through Quebec," *Acadiensis* XL, no. 2 (Summer/Autumn 2011): 112-27.

and future impacts of the Churchill Falls contract, which runs to 2041, mean that getting over it is easier said than done.[25]

As a cipher of failure and redemption, the Lower Churchill project has shifted according to the changing political winds. The original goal was to build a full dam (encompassing both Muskrat Falls and larger waterways around Gull Island) and export the hydroelectric power outside the province for a profit; however, as talks with Quebec collapsed during Williams's second term in office, the justification steadily shrank.[26] The current $6.2 billion proposal to develop solely Muskrat Falls and to build a transmission line to Nova Scotia is now justified largely on the basis of securing stable power rate increases for provincial customers.[27] The development dreams for the Lower Churchill may have become smaller, but its hold on provincial politics remains as tight as ever. As Ed Hollett has illustrated, in selling the Muskrat Falls deal, the provincial government has gone so far as to cite essentially the same logic and language used a generation ago to defend Smallwood's policies. In a call to VOCM Open Line in September 2011, for example, Finance Minister Tom Marshall defended the Muskrat Falls project by comparing it directly to the Baie d'Espoir hydroelectric development in the 1960s.[28] And, like the Smallwood era, the current period of Conservative government has also seen a palpable fear of retribution for speaking out politically in St. John's. As Russell Wangersky observed after Danny Williams slammed opponents of Nalcor's plans in January 2012: "I've spoken to a series of business people in this city who are unsure about the project as a whole, decidedly concerned about the current process that seems to be trundling along with all the decisions effectively already made, and yet are absolutely determined not to say one single public word." No one knows for sure whether fears of government retribution are justified, Wangersky notes, "but one thing is for certain: if you do speak out on Muskrat Falls, there's a good chance you'll be publicly roasted."[29]

Such fears are fuelled by a toxic mix of nationalist rhetoric and talk-radio politics.[30] In a speech to the Board of Trade in 2007, David Cochrane, the provincial affairs reporter for CBC, issued a warning about the state of the province's political culture: "There exists in Newfoundland and Labrador a phenomenon I like to call 'Patriotic Correctness.' Like political correctness, it makes certain words or expressions unacceptable. But most significantly, it has fostered an environment

25 James Feehan and Melvin Baker, "The Churchill Falls Contract and Why Newfoundlanders Can't Get Over It," *Policy Options* 31, no. 8 (September 2010): 65-70.

26 "Quebec blocks NL energy development: Williams," CBC Newfoundland and Labrador (9 June 2010), http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/newfoundland-labrador/story/2010/06/09/.

27 "Backgrounder – Muskrat Falls," in Lower Churchill Project, Government of Newfoundland and Labrador, http://www.gov.nl.ca/lowerchurchillproject/backgrounder_3.

28 See Ed Hollett's numerous posts on Muskrat Falls on his blog, "The Sir Robert Bond Papers," http://bondpapers.blogspot.com/. On Marshall's comment on Open Line specifically, see "Dateline: Desperation, Newfoundland" (9 September 2011), http://bondpapers.blogspot.com/2011/09/.

29 Russell Wangersky, "Williams proves the point," *The Telegram* (17 January 2012), http://www.thetelegram.com/Opinion/Columns/2012-01-17/.

30 On the politics of talk radio, see Alex Marland and Matthew Kerby, "The audience is listening: talk radio and public policy in Newfoundland and Labrador," *Media, Culture & Society* 32, no. 6 (2010): 997-1016.

where informed dissent is seen as nothing short of treason."[31] Accompanying this patriotic correctness was an optimistic correctness that viewed public skepticism towards government policy as unhealthy negativity towards the province's future. The most dramatic example of this occurred in 2010, when Premier Williams called VOCM Open Line to complain about remarks made by the radio host, Randy Simms, about a recent oil deal. In response to Simms's concerns that the government was focusing too much on oil and not enough on the fishery, Williams exploded on live radio: "A lot of wonderful things are happening in Newfoundland and Labrador and we don't need that kind of pessimism and crap coming out of your mouth in the mornings, I can tell you right now." When Simms asked what was pessimistic about his earlier comments, Williams hit back: "Pessimism, negativity. You're the reason that I keep going in this job because it's the skeptics and the negative people in this province that have kept those lobsters clawed back into the pot, year after year after year. But I refuse to listen to pessimists like you, and we're going to move forward, and we're going to do it despite you."[32]

Williams's use of talk radio and nationalist rhetoric was, of course, part of a much longer and deeper political tradition in Newfoundland and Labrador. In terms of historical precedents, the Williams era most closely resembled the period Brian Peckford was in office: both witnessed a surge of optimism under a charismatic leader, a rise in nationalist sentiment in politics as well as the arts community in St. John's, an epic struggle against an unpopular prime minister over equalization and control over offshore oil resources, a combative style that attracted national media attention, emotional appeals to unite under the provincial government's banner against outsiders, and a palpable contempt for dissent. Each period saw official efforts to rebrand Newfoundland and Labrador – a new provincial flag in 1980, a new pitcher plant logo in 2006 – that mixed historic and futuristic iconography. Both Brian Peckford and Danny Williams promised that they would do whatever was necessary to stand up to the outsiders, especially in Ottawa, who had long pillaged the province of its rich resources and stunted its economic development. And both premiers had tempestuous relations with local journalists, blacklisting newspapers that were deemed to be too critical in their coverage.

Despite these similarities, there is a significant difference between the nationalisms of the Williams and Peckford eras. Both Danny Williams and Brian Peckford viewed history as a story of struggle; while Williams focused on optimism and triumph, however, Peckford warned of loss and uncertainty. Peckford's manifesto, *The Past in the Present*, offered Newfoundlanders a strikingly stark message. It envisaged Newfoundland's experience as a colony, dominion, and province as a seamless web of incessant struggle:

31 Quoted from the full text archived online by Geoff Meeker. See "David Cochrane's Speech on 'Patriotic Correctness'," "Meeker on Media" (28 February 2007), http://meekermedia.blogspot.com/2007_02_01.

32 Quoted from the transcript made by Geoff Meeker. See "Danny Goes Ballistic," "Meeker on Media," http://www.thetelegram.com/Blog-Article/. See also "Williams has 'no regrets' about on-air blow-up," CBC Newfoundland and Labrador (17 June 2009), http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/newfoundland-labrador/story/2009/06/17/.

> Confederation wasn't an isolated event, nor was it one emerging from our more recent history. It flowed from our whole history of colonialism, subjugation and exploitation. Newfoundland was frequently, as were all the colonies, a resource base to be exploited for the benefit of the mother country. *Not much has really changed: the essential elements are still present*. We are today facing choices that are similar to those that have been faced many times in our history. The central question is whether we will be "true to our history" and once again barter away our future; or whether we can translate into self-confidence a pride that is now emerging at certain levels of our psyche, but which we are still hesitant to express.[33]

In Peckford's mind, history was a type of post-traumatic stress disorder from which it was not certain that Newfoundland could recover. The past haunted the present, making it difficult to break from historic patterns of subjugation and failure. Peckford's warnings were echoed in the new provincial culture textbook published the following year. According to its authors, "it is difficult to decide what kind of people we are, and what kind we might be in the future."[34]

Such expressions of uncertainty over the province's identity intensified in the 1990s. Nationalism was central to works such as the popular film *Secret Nation*, based on the screenplay by Ed Riche, which suggests that Newfoundlanders are not free citizens of a province in Canada but rather captives in a nation occupied by a foreign power. Following current literary trends, Riche blended together elements of history and fiction into a new version of the old conspiracy myths.[35] The theme of mourning the loss of nationhood also became increasingly prevalent as the 50th anniversary of Confederation approached. In the poetry of Des Walsh, for example, Confederation is depicted as severing Newfoundlanders from their true folk identity.[36] For Wayne Johnston, joining Canada forced Newfoundlanders to forsake their own history.[37] In *The Colony of Unrequited Dreams*, for instance, Johnston depicts the past through the metaphor of a leash. When the fictional Joey Smallwood

33 A. Brian Peckford, *The Past in the Present: A Personal Perspective on Newfoundland's Future* (St. John's, NL: Harry Cuff, 1983), vi (emphasis added).

34 Keith Matthews, E. Rex Kearley, and Paul Dwyer, *Our Newfoundland and Labrador Cultural Heritage* (Scarborough, ON: Prentice-Hall, 1984), 336.

35 *Secret Nation*, director Michael Jones and screenwriter Ed Riche (St. John's, NL: Newfoundland Independent Film-makers' Co-operative and Telefilm Canada, 1992). On the use of history in the film, see John Edward FitzGerald, "Newfoundland Politics and Confederation Revisited: Three New Works," *Newfoundland Studies* 9, no. 1 (1993): 103-24. On the cultural contexts of Newfoundland nationalism, see Shane O'Dea, "Culture and Country: The Role of Arts and Heritage in the Nationalist Revival in Newfoundland," *Newfoundland and Labrador Studies* 19, no. 2 (2003): 378-86, and Paul Chafe, "Rockin' the Rock: The Newfoundland Folk/Pop 'Revolution'," *Newfoundland and Labrador Studies* 22, no. 1 (2007): 345-59.

36 Des Walsh, "March 3, 1999: Notes on an Upcoming Anniversary," *TickleAce: A Journal of Literary and Visual Art* 37 (2000): 85. The poem was part of a "Special Confederation 50 Issue," edited by Bruce Porter.

37 Wayne Johnston, "*A History of Newfoundland* – D.W. Prowse [and] *The Newfoundland Journal of Aaron Thomas, 1794* – Aaron Thomas," in Michael Ondaatje et al., eds., *Lost Classics* (Toronto: Knopf, 2000), 140.

readies himself to return from exile, he experiences an epiphany: "I tried to convince myself that I was ready to return, that only by leaving had I learned to live here. But I wondered if I, too, had reached the limits of a leash I had not until now even known I was wearing and was, like my father, coming home not because I wanted to, but because I was being pulled back, *yanked back by the past*."[38] The popularity of this version of nationalist history was reflected during the special conference – entitled "Encounters with the Wolf" – convened by the Newfoundland Historical Society to mark the 50th anniversary of Confederation; Johnston was in attendance and read from his novel.[39]

For Danny Williams, however, doubt and pessimism were incompatible with Newfoundland nationalism. Whereas Peckford had questioned whether self-confidence could emerge in the provincial psyche, Williams proclaimed its arrival. Whereas Johnston had warned Newfoundlanders of the troubled legacy of their past, Williams declared that the leash of history was now broken. "We're really the centre of the universe, from my perspective," he told *The Telegram* in 2007. "That's the way I operate, so I want to build on that."[40] Two years later, the Speech from the Throne embraced an unabashedly triumphal nationalism:

> Last fall, we received news that proved the course My Government has taken is the right one. For the first time since Confederation, Newfoundland and Labrador has achieved **"have" status**. We will not qualify for equalization payments in the coming year and in years to come. This unprecedented achievement is the culmination of everything My Government and our people have been doing since 2003 to master our own destiny. For Newfoundlanders and Labradorians, this is a moment to take pride, not merely in what we have done, but more importantly in who we are. We are determined to stand strong as leaders in this federation, proud of our achievements and confident in our future. Let the naysayers be warned: we will not be stopped short of success.[41]

In terms of the province's history, the speech declared "the future we are working to build is not limited by the constraints of the past." In many respects, Williams's form of Newfoundland nationalism was a throwback to the optimistic provincial nationalism of the Smallwood era. It is reminiscent of the view propagated, for example, by the school textbook published by Leslie Harris in 1968, which drew a sharp line between the failures of the past and the promise of the present. For Harris,

38 Wayne Johnston, *The Colony of Unrequited Dreams* (Toronto: Vintage, 1998), 211 (emphasis added).

39 The symposium was organized by the Newfoundland Historical Society and held in February 1999 in St. John's. The "Wolf" – i.e., Canada – is an allusion to a verse in a popular anti-confederate song, circa 1869.

40 Steve Bartlett, "Were [*sic*] really the centre of the universe," *The Telegram* (29 December 2009), http://www.thetelegram.com/Natural-resources/2007-12-29/.

41 Speech from the Throne, Second Session of the Forty-Sixth General Assembly of the Province of Newfoundland and Labrador, 25 March 2009, http://www.releases.gov.nl.ca/releases/2009/ (emphasis in original).

as for Danny Williams, the story of Newfoundland was one of struggle but not of loss; the difference is that Harris's textbook credited the province's prosperity to Confederation.[42] And like the provincial nationalism of 1949-1972, the Tory nationalism of 2003-2010 emphasized unquestioning faith in industrial modernity, it focused on state-sponsored megaprojects and development of natural resources, and it measured heritage through material progress and not folk identity.

The litmus test for Danny Williams's version of Newfoundland nationalism was the issue of separatism. Even before Williams ordered the maple leaf hauled down in 2004, Newfoundland nationalism had become tied politically to the threat of separation. In a highly publicized speech in 2000, Craig Dobbin – then president of Canadian Helicopters Corporation and arguably the province's most influential business leader – raised the question of whether Newfoundland and Labrador should separate from Canada. "If we're such a drain, such a sinkhole, let us go," Dobbin told the business leaders, adding "we'll manage our own resources and do what leading economies like Ireland are doing."[43] In reporting Dobbin's speech, the *Globe and Mail* published a feature article comparing separatist sentiment in Newfoundland with independence movements in other North Atlantic islands such as the Faroe Islands. In April 2001 James McGrath – a former federal cabinet minister as well as a former lieutenant governor of Newfoundland and Labrador – called for the establishment of a royal commission to re-examine the Terms of Union.[44] In a sign of how commonplace separatist language had become in St. John's, a local magazine's interviews with residents about the province's status within Canada in July 2001 phrased the question simply in terms of whether Newfoundland could survive economically as an independent country. None of the five published responses objected to the notion of separating from Canada – the desirability of eventual independence appears to have been assumed – and the answers all focused on the twin issues of economic resources and political management.[45] When Premier Grimes announced the establishment of the Royal Commission on Renewing and Strengthening Our Place in Canada, he felt compelled to stress that separation was "not on the government's agenda."[46]

The commemoration of the diamond anniversary of Confederation in 2009 illustrated the curious ways in which Newfoundland nationalism mutated during the Williams era. Initially, the anniversary was supposed to be marked alongside a massive celebration, including a provincial school holiday, to mark the province's transition to "have" status. After another feud with Ottawa over equalization payments – this time with Stephen Harper – Williams told the *Globe and Mail* that the incident was "kindling" separatism in Newfoundland and Labrador as it approached the 60th anniversary of Confederation. "Here we are coming up to that

42 Leslie Harris, *Newfoundland and Labrador: A Brief History* (Toronto: J.M. Dent & Sons, 1968).

43 John Ibbitson, "Newfoundland Looking out to Sea," *Globe and Mail* (7 October 2000). For local coverage, see Craig Westcott, "New found nationalism: Political and Business elite make the case for a new deal with Canada," *The Express* (St. John's) (25 February 2001).

44 James McGrath, "Time to revisit the Terms of Union," *The Express* (4/10 April 2001).

45 Leslie Doyle, "Do you think Newfoundland could survive on it's [*sic*] own?" *Newfoundland Herald* (30 July 2001).

46 See "Vic Young to head up commission on Confederation," *The Telegram* (20 April 2002).

anniversary," Williams stated, "and here's what Ottawa has done to us. We have to really, really be careful with that. I don't want that to become a focal point for separation, because that's not what it was intended to be. . . . It should have been a legitimate celebration of coming out of the 'have not' status and being a net contributor to Canada. We're looking at that to be a very positive thing – and then Canada just struck us over the head."[47] Later in the month, in a CBC interview, Williams announced that the planned celebration of "have" status would be scaled back because of recent economic set-backs, including the shutdown of a paper mill and cutbacks in mining.[48] By late March, on the eve of the anniversary, the provincial government had dropped talk of separatism or using the event as a protest against Ottawa. The Speech from the Throne ignored the anniversary, and the Williams government announced that it would not be holding any major celebrations. Press releases were extremely careful to stipulate that the decision had nothing to do with the ongoing dispute with Stephen Harper; instead, Williams explained that in light of a recent helicopter tragedy, which had killed 17 oil workers, a celebration would be inappropriate at that time. So while the 25th and 50th anniversaries of Confederation were marked by lavish provincial celebrations in 1974 and 1999, the 60th anniversary passed without official commemoration.

Separatism was never a viable political option, but the passing of the Confederation anniversary in 2009 marked its demise in mainstream nationalist rhetoric. Just at the moment when the separatist stars appeared to be perfectly aligned – as the province entered the promised land of "have" status, where going it alone could be realized, and as federal-provincial relations sank to new lows – Danny Williams reined in his nationalist rhetoric. Instead of celebrating or protesting, the provincial government decided to let the diamond anniversary pass in silence. According to the CBC, Williams was careful not to blame Ottawa for his decision. "We are very proud as a province to be part of Canada," Williams stated. "Canada is a great country and despite the fact that we may have differences of opinion from time to time with various governments, that certainly wouldn't impede an overall celebration. But, at this particular point in time, we just really sincerely feel that it's not appropriate."[49] The same month that Danny Williams was backing away from separatist talk, other prominent figures were embracing it. In Ottawa, Senator George Baker was telling anyone who would listen that the federal government was driving Newfoundlanders, including himself, to embrace separatism. Baker told the Canadian Press "I will keep saying it, that if this keeps up then you're going to see a separatist movement in the province of Newfoundland and Labrador – and I'll be encouraging it."[50] Baker may have been willing to lead a separatist movement, but few took him seriously and virtually no one was willing to

47 Roy MacGregor, "Williams' dukes are up – who's with him?" *Globe and Mail* (7 February 2009), http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/politics/.

48 "N.L. party to celebrate 'have' status won't be grandiose," CBC Newfoundland and Labrador (19 February 2009), http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/newfoundland-labrador/story/2009/02/19/.

49 "N.L. marks 60th Confederation anniversary with whispers," CBC Newfoundland and Labrador (31 March 2009), http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/newfoundland-labrador/story/2009/03/31/.

50 "Senator warns of Newfoundland Separatism," *The Telegram* (5 March 2009), http://www.thetelegram.com/Politics/2009-03-05/.

follow him. His calls for a Bloc Newfoundland faded from the provincial news cycle, which focused instead on what would eventually become the ABC (Anyone But Conservative) campaign waged by Williams against federal Conservative candidates in Newfoundland and Labrador. Williams ended up calling Stephen Harper virtually every name in the political book, but he never hauled down the maple leaf again or invoked the threat of separation.

In retrospect, the political death of separatist rhetoric is not surprising. As the royal commission had reported in 2003, polling indicated that less than ten percent of the population of Newfoundland and Labrador supported independence.[51] Equally important, the global forces that brought relative prosperity to Newfoundland and Labrador – historically high oil and mineral prices, low interest rates, lax regulation – were wreaking havoc on the international economy. In 2008-2009 two of the independent island countries that Newfoundland nationalists (including Williams) had looked to as models – Iceland and Ireland – entered sustained economic crises that brought them to the edge of national bankruptcy. The global economic meltdown underscored both the dangers facing small economies in an unprecedentedly volatile climate and the benefits of being part of a larger country that weathered the storm relatively well. As one Icelandic businesswoman told *The New Yorker*, "Maybe we can become a kind of museum of how not to do things."[52] The Irish and Icelandic lessons were lost on no one in St. John's, where commentators reflected on the vulnerability of small economies. Although separatism and nationalism are often conflated, they are not the same thing: the demise of the former did not mean the end of the latter. In April 2009, a month after proclaiming himself to be a proud Canadian, Danny Williams told the House of Assembly "we are not prepared to turn around and kiss the backsides of the federal government under any circumstances. If that means that we have bad federal-provincial relations, then so be it."[53] Although Williams appeared to be at the height of his power, he would remain in office for only 20 more months, and he resigned in December 2010 as soon as the tentative Muskrat Falls deal was inked.

The resignation of Danny Williams marked more than the end of a political era. It marked the dénouement of a political narrative that stretched back over 40 years. For two generations, the story of Newfoundland had been one of an incessant struggle for economic survival. The achievement of "have" status brought an end to that story. I am not, of course, suggesting that the present economic boom in Newfoundland and Labrador has ended history in any literal sense. Nor am I suggesting that the achievement of "have" status has actually brought real material prosperity to everyone in the province. For all that has changed since the oil and mineral revenue started flowing, a lot remains the same. Unemployment remains stubbornly high by national standards, the crises in the fishery seem never-ending, per capita debt remains high, and there is plenty of debate over what happened and

51 "No to Separation! No to Status Quo!" press release issued by the Royal Commission on Renewing and Strengthening Our Place in Canada (3 July 2003), http://www.exec.gov.nl.ca/royalcomm/releases/jul02_03.

52 Ian Parker, "Lost: After financial disaster, Icelanders reassess their identity," *The New Yorker* (9 March 2009), http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2009/03/09/.

53 Newfoundland and Labrador House of Assembly Proceedings, vol. XLVI, no. 13 (30 April 2009), http://www.assembly.nl.ca/business/hansard/.

what to do next. What has changed, however, is the history of those problems and of those debates. The province's actual past never changed, but *that* history – the history predicated on struggle – is over because that struggle is over. In a figurative sense, a history ends when its dominant narrative ends. A new narrative will no doubt emerge in Newfoundland and Labrador from the unending dialogue between the past and the present, but it is not here yet.

This brings us back to Muskrat Falls. Nalcor's project has not lacked powerful, passionate, and intelligent critics: many of the province's sharpest minds have already weighed in against it. Nor has it lacked publicity: following a relatively quiet period after the provincial election in October 2011, the public is now actively engaged in the issue in a manner rarely seen while the media has covered the story closely and often critically. Yet even critics of the Muskrat Falls project seem oddly resigned to its inevitability, as though everyone knows that the current prosperity demands a new megaproject. As John Cassidy and others have demonstrated, boom times are not just any times; rational irrationality and the illusion of stability alter cultures and politics in ways that people barely comprehend until after the economic bubble has burst. Of all the effects of economic bubbles, Cassidy notes, perhaps the greatest is their tendency to erase prior history.[54] Whether it is a gold rush or a commodities boom, bubbles create a type of collective amnesia that washes away the lessons of history. If the original Churchill Falls contract taught us anything, it is to be extremely wary of megaprojects in general and predictions of future power costs in particular. It should also have taught us to be wary of those who advocate a future unconstrained by the past.

The government's response to the debate over the Muskrat Falls deal reveals how enmeshed it remains in the idea of Newfoundland history. In a recent speech to the St. John's Board of Trade, Premier Dunderdale celebrated how the province had broken with its past: "How attitudes have changed! Instead of wasting our time lamenting opportunities missed in generations past, we have set our gaze firmly on the opportunities before us now, determined to capture them to build a sustainable future." Dunderdale made the case for developing Muskrat Falls as the means to transition from dependence on oil revenues to a sustainable source of renewable energy. She then addressed the project's critics: "There are some people, haunted by the infamous Upper Churchill contract, who see its ghost every time development of the Lower Churchill is put on the table. For these people, no project will ever be good enough and no amount of scrutiny will ever be long enough. But we must remember: Failure to take the right course of action today would be no different than taking the wrong course of action a generation ago."[55] Dunderdale may disagree with critics of the Muskrat Falls project, but she shares their belief that it represents a watershed in Newfoundland history. Whatever one thinks of the deal, there is a common assumption that this will be no ordinary dam. In his report to the province's Public Utilities Board, Ed Martin, the CEO of Nalcor, pronounced that "the stars are

54 John Cassidy, *How Markets Fail: The Logic of Economic Calamities* (London: Penguin, 2009), 248.

55 Premier Kathy Dunderdale, speech to the St. John's Board of Trade, Government of Newfoundland and Labrador (31 January 2012), http://www.releases.gov.nl.ca/releases/speeches/2012/.

lining up."[56] Invoking the heavens aptly captures the place of the Churchill River in the political mythology of Newfoundland and Labrador. While the ultimate fate of the Muskrat Falls project remains uncertain – in April 2012 the Public Utilities Board refused to certify it as the lowest cost option for electricity – there is a clear sense that the province's future hangs in the balance.

JERRY BANNISTER

56 "'Stars are lining up' for Muskrat Falls, PUB told: Nalcor boss defends Lower Churchill project as review hearings begin," CBC Newfoundland and Labrador (14 February 2012), http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/newfoundland-labrador/story/2012/02/14/.