

Newfoundland Studies 2.0

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AS NEWFOUNDLAND AND LABRADOR ENTERED CONFEDERATION in the middle of the 20th century, Memorial University of Newfoundland was given two daunting tasks: first, be an agent of modernization in a province that many saw as largely pre-industrial and, second, document “the culture” before forces of modernization irreparably altered it. An unprecedented rise in public funding to Memorial and external research grant programs supported the establishment of interdisciplinary studies of the province’s people and environment. Newfoundland Studies, as Jeff Webb records in *Observing the Outports: Describing Newfoundland Culture, 1950-1980*, flourished between the 1950s and the early 1980s, making nationally and internationally recognized contributions to folklore studies, anthropology, sociology, geography and history.¹ The second generation of historians working on Newfoundland and Labrador has built impressively on this foundation; government austerity measures and the passing of most of the first generation of scholars perhaps have slowed the pace of scholarly output but not diminished its quality, if we are to judge by the four books reviewed here: Webb’s *Observing the Outports*, John C. Kennedy’s *Encounters: An Anthropological History of Southeastern Labrador*, Corey Slumkoski’s *Inventing Atlantic Canada: Regionalism and the Maritime Reaction to Newfoundland’s Entry into Canadian Confederation*, and Raymond B. Blake’s *Lion or Jellyfish: Newfoundland-Ottawa Relations Since 1957*.²

Webb’s *Observing the Outports* is a collective biography-cum-institutional history of the Newfoundland Studies “crowd” at Memorial, who developed into a small industry by the 1980s and earned legitimacy in the eyes of academics and, perhaps more importantly, Newfoundlanders themselves.³ Memorial had been founded primarily as a teacher’s college in 1925 and gained degree-granting status only in 1949. Webb traces its rapid growth into a university and research institution, built in large measure upon its Newfoundland Studies program.⁴ *Observing the Outports* explores the development of a discipline based in the humanities and social sciences, and, although Webb makes an effort to connect the faculty across departments and locate where cross-pollination occurred, the book’s chapters are

1 Jeff A. Webb, *Observing the Outports: Describing Newfoundland Culture, 1950-1980* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2016), 317. The multi-disciplinary journal *Newfoundland Studies* – after 2005, *Newfoundland and Labrador Studies* – was established in 1985 and continues to be hosted by Memorial University.

2 John C. Kennedy, *Encounters: An Anthropological History of Southeastern Labrador* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2016); Corey Slumkoski, *Inventing Atlantic Canada: Regionalism and the Maritime Reaction to Newfoundland’s Entry into Canadian Confederation* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011); Raymond B. Blake, *Lion or Jellyfish: Newfoundland-Ottawa Relations Since 1957* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2015).

3 “Crowd” here, of course, means “an integrated group of people” as defined in G.M. Story, W.J. Kirwin, and J.W.A. Widdowson, *Dictionary of Newfoundland English* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1982); quoted in Webb, *Observing the Outports*, 12-13.

4 Webb, *Observing the Outports*, 317.

largely self-contained. He begins with the humanities and the most popular product of Memorial's extensive project in Newfoundland Studies, the *Dictionary of Newfoundland English* (*DNE*). More than 30 years in the making, the *DNE* may have seemed a humorous novelty to many who snapped up the first edition; but lexicographers admired the respectful and careful presentation of the Newfoundland dialect. Indeed, scholarly discussions of the preparation of the *DNE* encouraged the public and faculty to take seriously the study of rural culture in Newfoundland and Labrador.

Modernization theory dominated the social sciences during the heyday of Newfoundland Studies, as articulated by faculty in folklore, anthropology, and sociology in particular. Many academics were calling for modernization – more capital investment, industrialization, and communication – in the province, but did so while acknowledging that existing cultural patterns would fade. Memorial's social sciences departments lacked graduate students in the early 1960s, but were able to attract foreign students with paid fellowships; these students conducted fieldwork throughout the province, usually in remote outports. Anthropologists, sociologists, and folklorists collected information on kinship, social relations, and cultural practices from informants who, Webb notes, were not always forthcoming or truthful.⁵ Their most famous “discovery” was mummering or janneying, a kind of Christmas charivari, and it is probable that the scholarly analysis and celebration of this practice led to its revival.⁶ This research seems an echo of the antimodern cultural selection that Ian McKay described as happening in Nova Scotia a few decades earlier.⁷ Webb maintains that in the case of Newfoundland Studies the antimodern impulse was absent in professional collectors, who wished to see the society “progress.”⁸ Yet it is clear that selection – often shaped by preconceptions – had a profound impact on what was collected.

John C. Kennedy joined the “crowd” in Memorial's anthropology department in 1973, and spent much of his career researching in Labrador.⁹ His remarkably rich *Encounters: An Anthropological History of Southeastern Labrador* builds on work presented in his *Peoples of the Bays and Headlands* and establishes a centuries-old Inuit presence much farther south on the Labrador coast than has yet been conceded by governments in Ottawa or St. John's.¹⁰ Kennedy takes a multidisciplinary

5 Anthropologists James Faris and Tom Nemec each reported that it took months to win the trust of outport residents as research questions “yielded only fabrications, half-truths, laughter, ridicule or some other evasion.” See Nemec, quoted in Webb, *Observing the Outports*, 226.

6 Herbert Halpert and G.M. Story, eds., *Christmas Mummering in Newfoundland: Essays in Anthropology, Folklore and History* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1969). This research inspired the formation of the Mummies' Troupe and “The Mummer's Song” by Bud Davidge and Sim Savoury. See Webb, *Observing the Outports*, 189.

7 Ian McKay, *The Quest of the Folk: Antimodernism and Cultural Selection in Twentieth Century Nova Scotia* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1994). For an examination of the continued impact of antimodernism on cultural production, see Erin Morton, *For Folk's Sake: Art and Economy in Twentieth-Century Nova Scotia* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2016).

8 Webb, *Observing the Outports*, 190, 328-9.

9 Kennedy began his fieldwork in Labrador in 1971-72. See Kennedy, *Encounters*, 6.

10 John C. Kennedy, *Peoples of the Bays and Headlands: Anthropological History and the Fate of Communities in the Unknown Labrador* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995).

approach to his topic, supplementing his ethnography and fieldwork with exhaustive archival work, genealogy, and the latest archaeology reports. The effect is to create a near-comprehensive history of foraging, trade, work, social interaction, and culture among the Inuit, Europeans, and Inuit-Métis over the last three centuries.

Central to Kennedy's story is the inextricable relationship between economies and ecosystems of southeast Labrador; abundant resources were available in Labrador, but only seasonally and in different locations. Human populations who survived there had to amass considerable environmental knowledge and a nomadic, or transhumant, culture. The seasonal – and later permanent – presence of Europeans along the Labrador coast expanded the place of trade within the Inuit economy, one more layer in a sophisticated, dynamic culture. To further proselytization efforts and reduce Indigenous economic competition on the Labrador shore, the Moravians and Governor Hugh Palliser decided to build a mission north of Lake Melville to “contain” the Inuit there.¹¹ The mission at Nain was established in 1771, but Kennedy documents a continuous Inuit presence hundreds of kilometres south of Lake Melville. His research is meticulous, and his descriptions of work and technology in seasonal harvesting is superb. Woven together with genealogies, the stories of the development of the Grenfell Mission and fledgling state services, and the recent “organizing of Aboriginality,” Kennedy's portrait of the communities of southeast Labrador has a warmth that is rare in such detailed scholarship.¹²

Corey Slumkoski is the only one of these four authors not directly shaped by the Newfoundland Studies program at Memorial, but his graduate work at the University of New Brunswick and his connections with *Acadiensis* link him to a tradition of Atlantic Canada studies that includes Memorial's David Alexander. *Inventing Atlantic Canada: Regionalism and the Maritime Reaction to Newfoundland's Entry into Canadian Confederation* examines the regional impact of Newfoundland's Confederation with Canada against the backdrop of the federal government's vague ambition that the “Atlantic Provinces” would cooperate or even merge. As Ottawa saw it, these four provinces had much in common and ought to be working with each other to develop their infrastructure rather than worrying about national economic patterns.¹³ The now-infamous Term 29 of the Newfoundland Act

11 Kennedy, *Encounters*, 42-8. The Moravian Church is a pre-Reformation Protestant religion that emerged in Bohemia before moving to Saxony. Many Moravian missionaries, like the Jesuits, worked to become fluent in Aboriginal languages, including Inuittitut.

12 In Newfoundland and Labrador – as in other parts of Canada – Indigenous and Métis communities established organizations to fight for rights, social services, and land claims, beginning with the Native Association of Newfoundland and Labrador and the Labrador Inuit Association in 1973. These organizations have been as dynamic as their communities and, since 2010, the NunatuKavut Community Council has taken the lead on land claims in Labrador. See Kennedy, *Encounters*, 323-6.

13 The Atlantic Provinces Economic Council, established in 1955 from elements of the old Maritime Board of Trade, proceeded to investigate national economic patterns and the relative decline of the Atlantic Provinces after the Second World War. See, for example, Arthur C. Parks, *The Economy of the Atlantic Provinces, 1940-1957* (Halifax and Fredericton: Atlantic Provinces Economic Council, 1957). See also Raymond Blake's blog post on the *Acadiensis* website: “Citizenship and Newfoundland's Decision to Join Canada,” <https://acadiensis.wordpress.com/2016/11/07/citizenship-and-the-newfoundlands-decision-to-join-canada/>.

stipulated that special financial assistance from Ottawa would be paid to Newfoundland if, after eight years as part of Canada, the level of the province's public services remained below that of the average of the Maritime Provinces, instead of the national average.¹⁴ The relative poverty of Maritime provincial governments was assumed and accepted as normal. Newfoundland (and Labrador) was simply an extension of the East Coast, not significantly different in its economy or culture from New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, or Prince Edward Island.

Slumkoski surveys the region's press and the speeches and correspondence of most of the key political players and concludes that "the Atlantic Provinces" remained a disparate collection of self-interested governments, in spite of federal assumptions or aspirations. Publicly, premiers were expected to make pro forma statements about the benefits of regional cooperation and even the merger of the provinces at some point in the distant future. When political leaders spoke specifically in favour of Atlantic Union, however – as New Brunswick's Progressive Conservative leader Hugh John Fleming did in March 1947¹⁵ – they were quickly reminded that each province had distinct economic and political interests and that there was little evidence of any pay-off in terms of savings or greater political clout in Ottawa. These diverse – and often competing – interests prevented the regional cohesion that casual observers may have expected. Moreover, the prolonged and occasionally bitter dominion-provincial negotiations over fields of taxation in 1946-1947 reminded all involved that provinces were real, whereas a region was more of a collective "feeling." It may be that Newfoundland Studies – together with the development of workshops and conferences in Atlantic Canada Studies – has bolstered the formation of a "region of scholarship" among Atlantic Canadian universities, but there is no evidence that a political union is in the offing.

Eight years after joining Confederation, Premier Joseph Smallwood eagerly anticipated a dramatic rise in federal transfer payments to Newfoundland as Term 29 kicked in, bringing the province's public services up to the level of the Maritimes. Prime Minister John Diefenbaker appointed the McNair Commission to calculate what was owed to Newfoundland, and in July 1958 it gave its answer: \$8 million, about half what Smallwood thought was reasonable.¹⁶ Breaking with his normal policy of speaking sweetly about Ottawa in public, Smallwood called the commission "a dead loss." Smallwood appealed to Diefenbaker's "big heartedness" and tried to pursue a satisfactory arrangement through executive federalism, premier to prime minister. Diefenbaker announced that the \$8 million was the "final and irrevocable" settlement, and that the payments would last only five years.¹⁷ Smallwood – and presumably most Newfoundlanders – was bitterly disillusioned by this first glimpse of how heartless Canadian federalism could be.

This story ends Slumkoski's book and begins Raymond Blake's expertly developed account of Newfoundland and Labrador's place in Confederation since 1957. Blake's title – *Lions or Jellyfish: Newfoundland-Ottawa Relations since 1957* –

14 Slumkoski, *Inventing Atlantic Canada*, 3-5.

15 Fleming back-peddled within a few weeks, calling union an admirable goal but one whose time was not yet ripe. See Slumkoski, *Inventing Atlantic Canada*, 108-16.

16 Slumkoski, *Inventing Atlantic Canada*, 130-2.

17 Blake, *Lions or Jellyfish*, 36, 48-9.

is drawn from Premier Danny Williams's combative line in 2010 that he "would rather live one more day as a lion than ten years as a jellyfish."¹⁸ Williams presided over the nadir in Newfoundland-Ottawa relations, but discord was common in the six decades after the Term 29 break. Blake's study is a welcome addition to the histories of Canadian federalism as it affirms the fact that few dominion-provincial relationships are consistently positive and adds complexity to the familiar litany of misunderstanding, indifference, and hostility. Blake is familiar with all of the important collections of personal papers, but also delves into cabinet minutes, departmental papers, and press coverage while also including useful interviews with Brian Peckford, Clyde Wells, and Mitchell Sharp. This is high politics, but it is well contextualized and alert to a wide range of factors that constrained the actors. Commonplace federal-provincial cooperation on harbour infrastructure, for example, could be delayed for more than a year to punish a premier like Brian Peckford, but even Pierre Trudeau had to allow the state to function eventually.¹⁹

Term 29 was not the only hard lesson in federalism that Newfoundlanders learned, and the development of the Churchill Falls hydroelectric project was perhaps the hardest. To realize a sustainable return on the project, Newfoundland and Labrador had to ship the energy to the United States, and Quebec effectively blocked transmission. Ottawa refused to intervene, fearful of alienating Quebec, and the project went ahead only after Smallwood agreed to transfer the lion's share of the benefits to Quebec.²⁰ This pleased the government of Lester Pearson in Ottawa, but cost Newfoundland and Labrador hundreds of millions of dollars. Except for his outburst against the Diefenbaker government, Smallwood continued his policy of maintaining close, friendly relationships with the prime ministers, trusting in the power of a strong central government to lift Newfoundland and Labrador out of its relative poverty.

Clyde Wells, premier from 1989 to 1996, also believed in the centralist federal vision of Pierre Trudeau and famously cancelled a vote in the provincial legislature to approve the decentralizing Meech Lake Accord. Blake's chapter on Wells is riveting, recreating the drama of the spring of 1990 as recriminations and compromises filled the daily press. Wells clearly placed his own judgment of the accord above that of Parliament and the provinces that had ratified it. As MLA Elijah Harper blocked a vote on the accord in Manitoba's legislature, Ottawa said that if Newfoundland and Labrador ratified by the 22 June 1990 deadline it would ask the Supreme Court for an extension to meet the procedural delays in Manitoba. Wells believed he was being manipulated and cancelled a last-minute open vote in the legislature, in spite of his commitment to hold such a vote. Brian Mulroney responded by stalling on \$2.7 billion in funding support for the Hibernia petroleum project, but relented after less than three months. Voters gave the Wells government an increased majority in 1993.²¹

18 Blake, *Lions or Jellyfish*, i.

19 On the pettiness of the Peckford-Trudeau dispute over offshore petroleum royalties, see Blake, *Lions or Jellyfish*, 205-6.

20 In 1964, in the midst of a dispute over the resources of Labrador with the province of Quebec, Smallwood's government changed the name of the province to Newfoundland and Labrador. See Blake, *Lions or Jellyfish*, 81, chap. 2.

21 Blake, *Lions or Jellyfish*, chap. 7.

Of course, Ottawa-bashing has been practiced at one time or another in almost every province; it is often an effective political strategy. In Newfoundland and Labrador, hostility toward centralized federalism and the occasionally capricious behaviour by Ottawa fed the political rhetoric of premiers Peckford and Williams. Smallwood had looked to the federal spending power to address regional disparity, but Peckford and Williams each put their faith in the province buoyed by revenues from offshore oil and gas. The feud between Williams and Prime Minister Stephen Harper is well documented and fresh in our memories, but Blake demonstrates that, at the executive level at least, relations between Ottawa and St. John's have often been contentious. Importantly, Smallwood, Peckford, Williams, and all of the other political leaders of the province since the 1950s have been Canadian nationalists.²² The anti-Confederates had polled well in the two referenda of 1948, but they had no lasting presence in provincial politics such that moments of intense anger toward the federation have never produced a serious separation movement.²³

Memorial University's ambitions for the Newfoundland Studies program seem almost absurd in hindsight: rapidly expanding the province's college/university into a modern research institute and using those researchers to both document and accelerate the change in the province's economy and society. Yet whether by sheer luck or, more likely, through shared enthusiasm and optimism, Memorial succeeded in recording and analyzing much of the culture, economy, and society of Newfoundland and Labrador and in establishing traditions of excellent scholarship. These books may not amount to a reconstruction of the Newfoundland Studies program, but they do show that the historical scholarship about the province has a self-confidence and rigour that make it relevant across the Atlantic region and beyond.

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22 Blake, *Lions or Jellyfish*, 315.

23 In the 3 June 1948 referendum, 44.5 per cent of voters opted for "Responsible Government" or an independent Newfoundland, while 41.1 per cent favoured Confederation (and 14.3 per cent wanted to continue with the Commission of Government, possibly pursuing closer economic ties with the United States). In the second referendum, held on 22 July 1948, voters chose Confederation over Responsible Government – 52.3 per cent to 47.7 per cent. Yet in the first provincial election held under Confederation, Smallwood's Liberals won more than 65 per cent of the votes and 22 of 28 seats in the legislature. See Peter Neary, "Party Politics in Newfoundland, 1949-1971: A Survey and Analysis," in *Newfoundland in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries: Essays in Interpretation*, ed. James Hillier and Peter Neary (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1980), 205-45.