

Jackson, F. L. *Newfoundland in Canada; A People in Search of a Polity.*

Eric Waddell

Volume 2, numéro 1, spring 1986

URI : https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/nflds2_1re02

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Faculty of Arts, Memorial University

ISSN

1198-8614 (imprimé)

1715-1430 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Waddell, E. (1986). Compte rendu de [Jackson, F. L. *Newfoundland in Canada; A People in Search of a Polity.*] *Newfoundland Studies*, 2(1), 95–99.

Cuff's earlier releases. The collection of verse has left me looking forward to more poems from Alastair Macdonald. As for the novel, I rather doubt that there will be another one. If there is I'll be willing to give it a go.

MOUNT PEARL, NEWFOUNDLAND

Newfoundland in Canada; A People in Search of a Polity. F. L. Jackson.
St. John's: Harry Cuff Publications, 1984. 120 p. \$8.95.

ERIC WADDELL

As I turned the pages of Jackson's *Newfoundland in Canada* I could not help but think of the March, 1974, issue of *The Canadian Forum* on the subject "Newfoundland: Nation and Province." And on picking it out from my bookshelf I was struck yet again by the bittersweet observations of David Alexander and of G. K. Goundrey on central Canada's conceptualization of the "Newfoundland problem": that the province suffers from an excess of population and that the mainland needs the island's resources. Hence, by improving communications between the two, out-migration would be facilitated, while the resources would be exploited and exported more efficiently! Following such reasoning, Goundrey could only "recommend" that "What is needed is a tunnel under the Straits of Belle Isle connecting the Island with the mainland" (18), while Alexander arrived at the depressing conclusion that "It is a shabby prospect for any province, and especially one so recently a country" (13).

Jackson's essay also brought my mind back to an earlier article by Jim Lotz reviewing several publications of the Institute of Social and Economic Research. In it he remarked on the tendency of central governments to advance "the assumption that the problem is 'out there'—among the out-porters, the Indians, the Eskimos, the poor" (*Canadian Review of Sociology and Anthropology* [1971]:58), with social scientists, in their concern to be "socially useful," frequently acting as both architects and victims of the myth. Hence his recommendation that "the time is ripe in Canada for an anthropology of business and government, to study their culture, their values, their kinship system, their interaction patterns. In the new vertical villages in the capitals and the cities lie many of the sources of the problems of isolated areas" (58).

A decade or more later little seems to have changed, and Newfoundland

still struggles to survive on the margins of a country and a continent, culturally insecure, politically insignificant and with an economy that is "someone else's." Of course, as Jackson explains, the roots of this malaise are deep:

Five centuries of the plundering of Newfoundland's resources on the part of outsiders traditionally unconcerned with the advancement of the local people, has left historical bruises that are still clearly visible. They left a legacy of political impotence, a chronically retrograde economy and a cultural life thwarted by the unrelieved rigours of bare subsistence, isolation and alienation. (78)

It is the interdependence of these three variables—politics, economics and culture—that constitutes the author's central thesis. One cannot become economically secure without exercising control over one's resources. For this to be possible, one needs to exercise strong political power. And to acquire such power there must be a collective will, a self-confidence and a capacity to identify what is good for the society as a whole.

One can scarcely contest such reasoning. Its pertinence has been demonstrated time and again in the study of small nations, ethnic minorities and regional movements in the modern world. The difficulty lies in operationalizing it. Jackson sets out to exorcise the past, working essentially between the years 1934, when Newfoundland "forfeited its independence" (7), and 1984, when it had become "what could only be called a federal protectorate" (27). The judgment is severe—of a continued plundering of resources, of self-depreciating pessimism and corruption, of persistently high unemployment levels, and of a polity that has been neutralized by bureaucratic centralization in Ottawa.

Such reasoning is indubitably a product of the new Newfoundland, that of the cultural and political renaissance of the 1970s, a renaissance nourished by a generation that was brought up in a province of Canada and that has rejected Smallwood and his "colonized world." To a mainland Canadian, and a Quebecer, all this makes for fascinating reading; to see the country from the periphery, and the "white" periphery at that. The analogies with Québec are numerous: a sense of being different, of being a "reluctant" member of Confederation, of minority status, and of serving a seat of power that is located outside the province. Jackson's global vision of culture resembles that formulated in the Parti Québécois' *Livre blanc sur la culture*, while his profound but unadmitted ambivalence about that place called Canada also rings an all too familiar bell.

Yet, on putting down *Newfoundland in Canada; A People in Search of a Polity* one feels like reformulating that weary question so often posed of Québec and ask "What does Newfoundland want?" Jackson is speaking through the pages of his book to fellow Newfoundlanders rather than to Canadians at large, and his aim is to propose a vision to his compatriots, that of "the reclaiming of Newfoundland" (117)—its resources, its cultural identity, and its political clout—while subscribing all the while to the Canadian dream! Again, there's a sense of *déjà vu* in such a thesis in that it involves so many unresolved contradictions, contradictions that are perhaps dear to the real Canadian identity. To paraphrase the Québécois comedian Yvon Deschamps, Jackson seems to be forwarding the idea of "une Terre-Neuve indépendante dans un Canada fort." Thus, in Chapter One, he presents a strongly nationalistic vision of Newfoundland and concludes with a severe warning as to its abject political and economic status in 1984. There follows, in Chapter Two, a portrayal of Canadian federalism as a superior political system respectful of "special interests and institutions and traditions" (44), as well as of "the principle of shared sovereignty" (47), hence a "prototype of the state of the future, a state with a human face" (49). The hic appears in Chapter Three, in the person of Pierre-Elliot Trudeau, a Machiavellian figure, "radical democrat . . . [and] world-revolutionary intellectual who has little patience with tradition-based loyalties or historical roots" (56) and whose key objective is to neutralize the shared-sovereignty principle. Having drawn the distinction between the "evil" man and the "noble" country, Jackson proceeds, in Chapter Four, to a consciousness-raising exercise, assuring the reader that Newfoundland is not "inherently a retrograde society" (81), and that, with a vision, it can do as well as Japan, Iceland, the Netherlands, Switzerland and Korea (*sic*). It's all a question of "cultural vitality" (96).

The *dénouement* comes in Chapter Five with the author reasserting his profession of faith in Canada:

Confederation in 1949 . . . brought . . . the opportunity of becoming a participating member of a federation which I believe to be a model to the world as perhaps the most promising of contemporary political societies (101)

and a necessary renewed faith in Newfoundland:

. . . we must resolve to bend heaven and earth for as long as it takes to reclaim Newfoundland; to reclaim its economic resources, to reclaim our cultural spirit, to reclaim our political identity. (105)

But at the same time the reader is warned of false prophets:

Waiting upon a political Godot, a new cultic consciousness, or an economic Messiah to appear to make everything right (104-05)

as well as of "false roads" that lead to:

the precipice of separatist nationalism that would sunder Newfoundland from Canada and condemn it to oblivion

or, on the other hand, to:

the endless, dismal bog of continued dependency and bare subsistence, with the federal state looking after us . . . (109)

So where does Jackson's thesis lead us? I've no idea! The book ends in a whimper with the author pleading in favour of "the straight highway of Confederation" (109) and a kind of blind faith in Canada: "In this remarkable country our future lies" (120).

I can see little light at the end of Jackson's tunnel. In what is a generally passionate but also somewhat journalistic plea for a more vigorous Newfoundland he offers no concrete alternative to the reality of the province's peripheral location, and I fear that with an eventual Canada-U.S. free-trade agreement it risks being relegated even further to the periphery of a whole continent. The Pépin-Robarts *Task Force on Canadian Unity* recommendations that pleaded in favour of a more decentralized Canada and respect for both linguistic and regional differences have long been buried, the departure of Trudeau *non obstante*. And, indeed, to suggest that Trudeau was some kind of historical accident—a raging elephant in the delicate Canadian china shop—is to gravely misread the postwar transformations that this country has experienced. Trudeau was without a doubt a creature of his time. His predecessor Pearson had already laid the foundations of the grand design that he was to put in operation, and we invented him. As Richard Gwyn has so cogently stated in *The Northern Magus* (1980):

We invented him because after that long magical summer [Expo '67], we wanted to re-invent ourselves. . . . *Trudeau didn't look like a Canadian*. This was the beginning from which all the rest would flow. Trudeau might just stop us from drifting back into being the kind of Canadians we had been before. (60, 62)

Countries are complex, and we, as Canadians, are in the process of form-

ing a separate and modern continental identity, one that is clearly not American. The passing of Trudeau and the coming to power of the Conservatives in Ottawa are hardly likely to change this fact. Indeed, as Canadians, this is clearly what we have wanted. However as Newfoundlanders (or Québécois) the consequences may well be disastrous. And that is our other identity and commitment!

Jackson pleads prudence. Prudence is a typically Canadian quality that may well pay off in southern Ontario but I'm not sure that it offers a solution to the problems of an offshore island. Not surprisingly, perhaps, the examples offered by the author of successful yet small places are all sovereign states, one of which, Iceland, only achieved complete independence in 1944. After reading *Newfoundland in Canada* I can hardly believe that the people's search for a polity is over.

UNIVERSITÉ LAVAL

William Epps Cormack; Newfoundland Pioneer. B. D. Fardy. St. John's: Creative Publishers, 1985. 89 p. \$7.95.

ALAN G. MACPHERSON

This little volume is essentially an attempt to compile a narrative account of the events that made up the life of William Cormack. It is not a definitive biography, but it will undoubtedly prove useful to a future biographer.

Cormack's epic walk across Newfoundland from Trinity Bay to St. George's Bay in 1822, his philanthropic and ethnographic association with Shanawdithit, and his expedition from the Bay of Exploits to Red Indian Lake in search of Beothuck survivors in 1827 have long been part of the popular history of Newfoundland, and as such have been pretty thoroughly documented and commented upon by earlier scholars and writers, most notably James P. Howley in his documentation of *The Beothucks or Red Indians; The Aboriginal Inhabitants of Newfoundland*. Fardy mines this material in a rather selective manner, without adding anything to what is already known. Similarly, he uses the obituary written by Edward Graham, Cormack's last close friend, to fill in the main sequence of events in Cormack's life, as others have done, but quite uncritically and without mentioning him by name. Those events, in bare outline, were: his birth in St. John's in 1796, education in Scotland (1803-1818), an emigrant land agency in Prince Edward Island (1818-1822), his years in Newfoundland (1822-29),