

*Inside the Atlantic Triangle: Canada and the Entrance of
Newfoundland into Confederation 1939-1949.* David MacKenzie.

Melvin Baker

Volume 4, numéro 1, spring 1988

URI : https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/nflds4_1br03

[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

Baker, M. (1988). Compte rendu de [*Inside the Atlantic Triangle: Canada and the Entrance of Newfoundland into Confederation 1939-1949.* David MacKenzie.] *Newfoundland Studies*, 4(1), 112-116.

Inside the Atlantic Triangle: Canada and the Entrance of Newfoundland into Confederation 1939-1949. David MacKenzie. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1986, pp. 285.

MELVIN BAKER

DAVID MACKENZIE'S *Inside the Atlantic Triangle* is one of the first scholarly studies to make use of archival materials made available in the past decade or so. Prepared originally as a doctoral dissertation in 1983 for the University of Toronto, MacKenzie's research is broadly based and encompasses the major public and private papers for the 1940s. On the Canadian archival side of the Atlantic, the private papers of the key players have been examined: Mackenzie King, Louis St. Laurent, R.A. MacKay, J.W. Pickersgill, and Norman Robertson to name only a few. He has also explored the extensive files of various federal departments, some of whose records have recently been published by the Department of External Affairs in a two-volume set edited by Paul Bridle (member of the Canadian High Commissioner's Office in St. John's in 1948). Within the British and American archives, his research efforts are similarly impressive. Concerning Newfoundland records, MacKenzie has examined the files of the Commission of Government but, unfortunately, Newfoundland sources, in particular the private papers of prominent Newfoundlanders, appear to be almost non-existent.

MacKenzie's purpose is to study the "evolution of Canadian policy towards Newfoundland during the decade leading up to Confederation in 1949" (p. ix) and, in this regard, the book succeeds admirably and is a welcome addition to the growing number of works on Canadian diplomatic history in general and Newfoundland history in particular. His thesis is that Canada had a "special" or "natural" interest in Newfoundland based on a shared British heritage and long-established social, commercial, and cultural connections. This "interest", however, had to be defended continuously against entrenched British influence as represented by the British-appointed Commission of Government and the growing social and

economic hegemony of the Americans as a result of the Leased Bases Agreement of 27 March 1941. In practice, both the British and Americans "tacitly accepted" that interest (p. 41), but, for the small band of civil servants at the Department of External Affairs led by Robertson and MacKay, it was a constant balancing act to maintain that influence without offending, either publicly or privately, the sensitivities of Newfoundlanders who could easily be whipped into an emotional frenzy of anti-Canadianism.

At times, MacKenzie's account of Canadian efforts to maintain that interest is presented as a series of diplomatic victories in Canada's attempts to define a foreign policy independent of both Britain and the United States. For instance, in 1941 when the two Allied powers were negotiating the terms for the control of the American bases, Canadian diplomats found themselves sitting on the outside during talks in London and Washington. Protests by Lester Pearson of External Affairs finally resulted in a recognition of Canada's interest, which was incorporated in a protocol attached to the 27 March 1941 Agreement — "... the defence of Newfoundland is an integral feature of the Canadian scheme of defence and as such is a matter of special concern to the Canadian government which has, in fact, already assumed responsibilities for such defence..." (p. 58). Despite this concession, MacKenzie informs us, "the protocol cannot be considered a victory for Canadian diplomacy." The experience of these "negotiations produced a degree of resentment and bitterness in some Canadians such as Lester Pearson, but it also forced the Canadian government to take a more determined and creative role in its future relations with Newfoundland" (p. 61).

Canadian assertiveness against its Allies during the war was exercised in many ways. Canada resented having its naval forces on the Atlantic convoy duty placed under American military command and fought successfully for greater autonomy. Canada also maintained control of Goose Bay and Gander airbases, which it shared with the Americans despite the latter's desire to operate independently of Canadian military personnel. Similar efforts were exerted against the British, the most noteworthy being the protracted negotiations for the settlement of the lease to Goose Bay airbase, which Canada had constructed in 1941 at a cost of \$25 million. The issue was British insistence that post-war civil aviation rights for British and Newfoundland aircraft using the airport be negotiated as part of the lease, a matter the Canadians argued should be discussed after the war. When a team of British financial advisors arrived in August 1944 in Ottawa to settle financial problems between the two countries, Canada refused to conclude an agreement on these problems until Britain gave way on the lease negotiations. Canada won, but it "left behind a bitterness between the two countries involved" and for the men at External Affairs in particular it "served to reinforce [their sense of] the uniqueness of Canada's relations with

Newfoundland....” MacKenzie comments that all of these difficulties caused by Newfoundland’s political status (governed by a commission), American self-interest, and the machinations of the Dominions Office “would have been bypassed had Newfoundland been a province of Canada” (pp. 112-13).

By 1945 Prime Minister Mackenzie King and the Department of External Affairs were receptive to any overtures from Newfoundland to join Confederation and welcomed any efforts by the British “to do what they could to push the idea along” (p. 157). Given the sizable Canadian expenditures (over \$65 million) on military facilities and the continued strategic importance of Newfoundland in Canada’s post-war defence plans, Canada was determined to maintain its “special relationship” in the years to come (p. 80). As for the British, they had their own post-war financial problems and were unwilling to provide the necessary funds a dependent Newfoundland would require to raise the level of its public services and stimulate economic development. Nor could an independent Newfoundland expect such assistance. To the British, Newfoundland’s constitutional options were clear: a return to independent dominion status or confederation with Canada. By 1945 the British had decided “to help bring about Confederation if at all possible” (p. 161).

However, despite the Canadian interest, Canada played its hand with the British discreetly, never appearing to be too eager for Confederation. This reserve was also shown officially in any public pronouncements by Canadian politicians on the subject.

Consequently, MacKenzie’s book will give credence to those die-hard responsible government leaguers and current-day nationalists who view confederation as a Canadian/British conspiracy and the National Convention, elected in July 1946 to discuss and recommend options for the island’s political future, as an exercise in futility. However, the behind-the-scene actions of the British and Canadian governments do not negate the role of the Convention in stimulating political debate and encouraging democratic participation in a populace accustomed to directives and orders issued by the Commission of Government headquartered in the Newfoundland Hotel. Nor do such actions by any means diminish the role of Joseph R. Smallwood and his Confederate supporters in convincing a majority of Newfoundlanders on 22 July 1948 to vote for union with Canada. Rather, the “fight for Confederation” in the late 1940s must be seen and understood in the context that the rules of the contest for the minds and souls of Newfoundlanders were weighted greatly in Smallwood’s favour, that the conspiracy was little “more than a genuine belief that the national interest of all three countries would be better served through Confederation” (p. 223). For Britain, in an era of de-colonization, it was the chance to rid itself of a troublesome dominion; for Canada, it was the dream of rounding Sir John A. Macdonald’s

vision of a dominion from sea to sea; and for, Newfoundland it was the opportunity to raise its standard of living to North American standards through incorporation into the Canadian welfare state.