

Three Sides of the Same Coin: Some Recent Literature on Canada-Newfoundland Relations in the 1940s

David MacKenzie

Volume 4, numéro 1, spring 1988

URI : https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/nflds4_1re01

[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

MacKenzie, D. (1988). Compte rendu de [Three Sides of the Same Coin: Some Recent Literature on Canada-Newfoundland Relations in the 1940s]. *Newfoundland Studies*, 4(1), 98–104.

REVIEW ARTICLE

Three Sides of the Same Coin: Some Recent Literature on Canada-Newfoundland Relations in the 1940s

DAVID MACKENZIE

NEWFOUNDLAND'S ENTRY into Confederation in 1949 has long attracted the attention of scholars and students of Newfoundland history. With the passage of time, virtually all the relevant document collections in Canada, Great Britain and the United States on this subject have been opened and made available to historians eager to disprove old theories or confirm new ones. Rather than ending the discussion, however, the opening of new archival sources has again raised speculation about the activities of Canada and the United Kingdom during those crucial years. The publications looked at for this review reflect the diverse interpretations that have emerged in recent years, ranging from a collection of documents published by the Canadian government, to the work of an established historian, to the more popular history of a retired journalist.

The dramatic increase in contact between Canada and Newfoundland in the 1940s is well laid out in the two volume set, *Documents on Relations Between Canada and Newfoundland*, edited by Paul Bridle. Mr. Bridle, an

ex-member of the Department of External Affairs, was very involved in the affairs of Newfoundland in the 1940s, and he has skillfully gathered together more than 3,000 pages of documents and has assembled them so that they tell the story in their own way.

Newfoundland always had fairly close, though not always cordial, relations with Canada, but the events of 1939-45 put this relationship on a completely new plane. The fall of France in 1940, in particular, put the island on the front line in the defence of North America, and Newfoundland's isolation, still strongly felt in the 1930s, vanished overnight. Over the course of the war Newfoundland played a significant role in continental defence, as host to thousands of Canadian and American troops, as a naval base for the Newfoundland Escort Force, and as an integral part of the Atlantic ferry system.

Defence relations is the primary focus of volume 1 and it contains comprehensive sections on the negotiations behind the establishment of Canadian bases at Gander, Botwood, Goose Bay and elsewhere. In addition, attention is given to the Allied naval and air operations based in Newfoundland, to the creation of the Canadian High Commission in St. John's in 1941, and to the problem of command between the visiting forces. Other chapters look at developments in civil aviation and wartime economic cooperation with Canada.

A constant concern for the Canadian government during the war was the growing influence of the United States. Beginning with the base-destroyer deal of September 1940, an American presence was introduced to the island and quickly the United States threatened to become the dominant foreign power — something the Canadians felt to be unacceptable. More important, given the advancement in flight, it was clear that Newfoundland's new strategic importance would continue after the war. The implications for Canada were profound; for the first time the Canadian government had to consider seriously the possibility of "another Alaska" on its east coast. No longer was it possible to sit back and assume that Newfoundland would ultimately fulfill its "natural destiny" in union with Canada.

Volume 2 of the collection was published in 1984, ten years after the first, and it concentrates on one theme only — Confederation. The editor's touch is more keenly felt as the reader is guided through the evolution of Canada's (and to a lesser degree Britain's) Newfoundland policy in the 1940s. In his efforts to present a complete picture Mr. Bridle has used more outside sources than in volume 1, including over 200 pages of House of Commons *Debates*.

The real strength of volume 2 lies in its presentation of the Canadian viewpoint. The work of the various committees that investigated the pros and cons of union is fully explored. Not surprisingly, considerable internal debate erupted over questions such as the effect the removal of Newfound-

land's tariff would have on Canadian exports, over the question of what to do about Newfoundland's large national debt after union, and over the specific terms to be offered the Newfoundland delegations sent to Ottawa in 1947 and 1948.

The possible annexation of Newfoundland never stirred the public imagination in Canada and Canadian policy, for the most part, emerged from a small group of politicians and bureaucrats. The names are familiar: Mackenzie King, St. Laurent, Claxton, Howe, Pearson, Robertson and Pickersgill. A shared wartime experience and a recognition of Newfoundland's continuing strategic importance fostered a common belief in the wisdom of bringing Newfoundland into Confederation, but clearly there was no uniform "Canadian mind" on most questions; indeed the evidence presented here suggests that many on the Canadian side, Mackenzie King for one, were reluctant to make any overt gestures or advance commitments to the Newfoundlanders right up to the very end.

The correspondence reproduced in this highly recommended collection also reveals that for most of the period the Canadian government was in regular contact with the British government over Newfoundland affairs. Few decisions were made in London without prior consultation with the Canadians and at the most crucial moments it appeared that Whitehall acted more with Canadian than Newfoundland interests in mind. The most obvious example of this is the decision to include Confederation on the referendum ballot, overruling the wishes of the majority of the National Convention.

The evolution of this pro-Confederate thinking in London has been thoroughly examined by Peter Neary in two articles, the first a short research note published in *Acadiensis*, the second a full article in the first issue of *Newfoundland Studies*. Using primarily British sources, Professor Neary explores the development of Britain's Newfoundland policy in the Dominions Office during the war. The Commission of Government was set up as a temporary measure in 1934, to govern Newfoundland until the island was again self-supporting. This was achieved during the war, thanks to the prosperity induced by Canadian and American military spending. There was no guarantee that such prosperity would last, but Britain's obligation was clear. At the same time, the demands of war had produced a major financial crisis in the United Kingdom and the British began borrowing heavily from North America. Britain's chronic dollar shortage coloured the way the British looked at the problem of Newfoundland, especially since the island was part of the dollar area.

The questions confronting the British government were far more complex than they appeared at first glance and each potential solution was examined and discussed thoroughly, investigative trips were undertaken (including one by Dominions Secretary Clement Attlee in 1942), options were

weighed, and recommendations made. Gradually a rough consensus emerged. Financial support to an independent Newfoundland was ruled out as inconsistent with the essence of responsible government, but the United Kingdom was prepared to maintain its support should the Islanders decide to keep the Commission of Government. But Britain's own financial predicament precluded anything but the barest level of support. Even then the dollars would have to be borrowed — most likely from Canada. Increasingly the Canadians were approached to provide a solution, and by 1945 the British were looking for ways to capitalize on the new attitude that was developing in Ottawa.

If there was a turning point, it was in September 1945 when Alexander Clutterbuck of the Dominions Office visited Ottawa to discuss Newfoundland with Canadian government officials. During these meetings it was made clear that the British government would favour any moves towards Confederation. As Professor Neary points out, no secret pact was signed, but from that point on Britain and Canada cooperated behind the scenes to bring about the union of Canada and Newfoundland. It would have been imprudent to force Newfoundland, but Britain and Canada could make sure that Confederation was given every chance to succeed.

The question remains, of course, at what point does collaboration become conspiracy? This issue is addressed by Bren Walsh in his book *More Than A Poor Majority*. A retired journalist who covered these events as a reporter, Mr. Walsh wrote this book out of a sense of duty. "My motivation was not simply a reporter's natural curiosity," he notes, "it also invited the prospect of correcting a major historical untruth" (p. 3). After researching in the available documentation Mr. Walsh concluded that "a plot to manoeuvre Newfoundland into Confederation by fair means or foul, was not only true, it was much worse than I had thought" (p. 5). The plot was hatched in the Dominions Office and in the Department of External Affairs early in the 1930s and for almost two decades the two conspirators poked, prodded and cajoled Newfoundland into Confederation.

What Mr. Walsh claims is not new — there have been many conspiracy theories in the past — the difference is that Mr. Walsh uses the new documentary evidence to back up his arguments. The result is a colourful and partisan history of Canada-Newfoundland relations stretching back to the 19th century that includes a lively account of the early failed attempts by Canada to draw Newfoundland in.

There are, however, serious shortcomings in this book, not all of which are Mr. Walsh's responsibility. No table of contents or index has been included, and there are neither chapter titles nor footnotes for the sources that were used. There is a lengthy bibliography, but the primary sources are listed as individual documents with no reference to where they can be found.

The secondary sources list is extensive and includes titles as diverse as Nellis M. Crouse, *Lemoyne D'Iberville - Soldier of New France* and Pierre Trudeau, *Conversations with Canadians*, but without footnotes it is difficult to assess their relative value to the work. Moreover, the chapters are organized in a somewhat unusual fashion; chapter 4 deals with the Canadian reaction to the July 22, 1948 referendum, chapter 11 goes back to the 1933 Amulree Royal Commission, chapters 14-17 are loosely focused on the National Convention but then chapters 21-24 return to Canada-Newfoundland relations in the 19th century. Finding anything specific is difficult at best, and this style of organization may prove disconcerting to those readers who prefer their books to be arranged chronologically. While written ostensibly to set the historical record straight, the above factors seriously limit this book's value as a research tool.

The text is also sprinkled with errors. For example, Vincent Massey is supposedly pictured on the front cover as Governor General in 1949, a job he did not get until 1952. On two occasions at least (p. 18 and p. 319), Louis St. Laurent is mentioned as Secretary of State for External Affairs before he actually was. Other errors, however, suggest a deeper, more significant problem. On page 71 the Interdepartmental Committee on Canada-Newfoundland Relations is discussed and its membership is reported to include "most, if not all, senior Ministers." This is incorrect; there were two committees formed at this time, the first an interdepartmental committee which consisted of civil servants, and the second a cabinet committee to which the senior ministers belonged.

The confusion between the two committees reflects the lack of a sense of context in the overall use of documentation in this book. The Cabinet Committee was the decision-making body, while the Interdepartmental Committee played a strictly advisory role — the recognition of this difference is crucial. Part of the latter group's basic function was to put forward and debate alternatives on which the Cabinet Committee would decide. When taken out of context, however, a bureaucrat's memo suggesting, for example, that Labrador be turned into a federal territory can be used as "evidence" of a plot, without reference to whether or not the recommendation was ever seriously considered. The best example is the correspondence of J.S. Macdonald, the Canadian High Commissioner and one of Mr. Walsh's most often used sources. Macdonald had a good knowledge of Newfoundland affairs and he flooded External Affairs with telegrams on local developments, but a careful reading of *Documents on Relations Between Canada and Newfoundland* clearly shows that his advice was often contradictory and frequently ignored in Ottawa. Yet on the surface one can draw from his words enough material to support any number of theories of collusion between

Canada and Britain or between the Canadian government and the Confederates in Newfoundland.

There is no question that Britain and Canada did all they could to bring Newfoundland into Confederation. Indeed, it would have been more surprising if the two countries had not cooperated, considering that both had reached the conclusion that Confederation was in the national interest of all concerned. But there were limits to the collaboration. As Professor Neary notes, "to influence is not to engineer...Great Britain and Canada had certainly worked together to put the choice of Confederation before Newfoundlanders but they could not and did not make that choice for them" ("Conspiracy or Choice?" p. 117).

If there is a unity in the works reviewed here it is that historians must look primarily to the 1940s to understand the forces that led to Confederation in 1949. There are themes that reach back through the long history of Canada-Newfoundland relations, but the effects of World War Two were monumental by comparison. The transition of Newfoundland from an isolated outpost to a central strategic base, the revolution in air transport, the shift in the balance of world power away from Europe to the United States and the Soviet Union, all combined to make Newfoundland a valuable piece of real estate in the emerging cold war. Moreover, the exigencies of war forced the Canadians into action. The need to defend Newfoundland against enemy aggression, the dramatic increase in the American presence there and Britain's inescapable financial crisis made it impossible for the Canadian government to ignore Newfoundland or its constitutional future.

References

- Canada. Department of External Affairs. *Documents on Relations Between Canada and Newfoundland, 1935-1949*. 2 volumes, edited by Paul Bridle, Ottawa: 1974 and 1984.
- Neary, Peter. "Great Britain and the Future of Newfoundland, 1939-45". *Newfoundland Studies* 1 (1985): 29-56.
- . "Newfoundland's Union with Canada, 1949: Conspiracy or Choice?" *Acadiensis* 12 (1983): 110-19.
- Walsh, Bren. *More Than A Poor Majority: The Story of Newfoundland's Confederation with Canada*. St. John's: Breakwater Books Ltd., 1985.