

Newfoundland in the North Atlantic World, 1929-1949. Peter Neary.

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REVIEWS

Newfoundland in the North Atlantic World, 1929-1949. Peter Neary.
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ERIC W. SAGER

A MERE TWO DECADES in the history of Newfoundland, and so big a book as this? Yet no serious reader will be disappointed or think this work too long, for this handsome volume contains the vision of a mature and subtle scholar who surveys very broad horizons. From the opening page it is clear that Neary is offering much more than a story of the events leading to Newfoundland's entry into Confederation. This book concerns Newfoundland, and Canada, and the North Atlantic locus of these countries. It is about a specific historical conjuncture, and the convergence in Newfoundland of an array of historical influences. This book is a master historian's construction of a framework through which we must now see the history of a people at a critical moment in their development. What Neary says of Newfoundland's union with Canada may apply to the rest of his elaborate but pellucid framework: these are complex diplomatic, constitutional, economic, and political events — they could not have been anything else, and they cannot otherwise be understood.

This book uses a traditional chronological approach, and even historians from different schools and different ideological persuasions will admit the merits of the approach in Neary's hands. Events are divided into five distinct periods, taking the reader from the coming of government by Commission, to the Commission of Government in the 1930s, to the first and second stages of war, and finally to the post-war constitutional and political adjustments. A traditional method is married to the very best of recent historical scholarship, with its sensitivity to the inter-connectedness

of economic, social and political factors. The narrative approach is powerful because of the coherence it imparts to otherwise unconnected and unintelligible phenomena: the whole is more than the sum of its parts, and the conclusions follow with ineluctable force from the events which precede them. At one level a diplomatic and constitutional history, yet this book defies simple categories, for the many underpinnings of constitutional change — economic, social, political, and even cultural — have their place in the narrative structure. As Governor Humphrey Walwyn put it, “every part of the structure is exposed to economic tempests.” This is diplomatic and constitutional history, of a quality rarely if ever attained in Canada, and it is much more besides.

How did Newfoundland become the only British colony to lose its self-government? The very question is an unpleasant reminder of past humiliations, and Neary understands the emotional baggage which the past has carried into the present. His answers will surely serve to trim that baggage. Behind Amulree’s report and its implementation there was, of course, the need of British politicians to maintain “the general credit of the Empire.” But long before 1949 Canada was also an important influence, and Canada’s decision to turn her back on Newfoundland in 1933 was “crucial” to the coming of government by Commission. There were also cultural influences: the belief, so common in the 1930s, that democracy and efficiency might be incompatible; the merchant capitalist’s longstanding suspicion that responsible government meant mob rule; and, of course, the remarkable tenacity of “that thin red cord of sentiment of blood,” as Richard Squires once described the imperial connection.

Newfoundland became a ward of the United Kingdom, but as so often happened in North America, imperial intentions were frustrated by colonial realities. The Commission of Government enjoyed “solid accomplishments” but these were constrained by economic forces beyond the control of any government, and the generation of Newfoundland politicians condemned by Amulree might well have found comfort in watching Commissioners learn this lesson. Thus the solid accomplishments remained ameliorative and even conservative, stabilizing rather than undermining the old order. Such is Neary’s skill in dealing with the 1930s that he can explain the achievements, the limits of those achievements, and at the same time the inevitable disillusion of Newfoundlanders with this form of government. And he does still more, for everything in these chapters is also prelude to the decade which follows.

A dependent colony, incapable of defending itself, became a strategic centre in a world war. Now readers may begin to unravel a paradox which teased them at the outset: here was a country upon which many international influences converged — yet a country which lived “dangerously and alone.” Newfoundlanders could not even defend themselves from their friends: Americans took extensive extra-territorial rights, while the bumbling Cana-

dians took less than they might have. In one of his many telling metaphors, Neary argues that the United States had a first class ticket to Newfoundland, whereas Canada had a second-class ticket which only the United Kingdom could up-grade; and as so often in her history, Canada was content with the second-class ticket. The "economic miracle" which followed the outbreak of the war had effects both positive and negative. Among the casualties of war Neary finds John Gorvin's radical scheme for a Scandi-navian-like future through rural revival, cooperative institutions, and state planning; the war-time base-building boom swept away such visions in favour of a cautious paternalism. And there were other effects, stated here with the sure touch which comes from long and mature reflection: "It can be argued indeed that one of the most lasting effects of the whole bases boom was to add a new dimension to that strain in the Newfoundland political culture which identifies prosperity with the application of foreign capital to untapped local resources." Newfoundland's politicians "would long scan the horizon for another ninth wave."

The war gave a lease on life to the Commission of Government and left many legacies, among them the painfully long rebirth of independent political discourse. By 1945 Canada and Britain had reached a working understanding about the future of Newfoundland. British politicians and civil servants had positioned themselves "brilliantly" to influence the outcome, and they put Newfoundland's National Convention on a short leash. But Confederation can no longer be seen as the result of a dastardly plot. "To influence is not to engineer" — the British arranged the choices, but it was Newfoundlanders who did the choosing. In passing, Neary offers an original vignette of that "most unconventional and unorthodox Newfoundlander," Joseph R. Smallwood. And he tells us much that is new about Confederation, which was never "an unmixed blessing," but a difficult choice in favour of many things which a return to Dominion status and responsible government would have denied. This account of Confederation surely merits a judgment akin to that which Neary applied to the British departure from Newfoundland itself: it is managed with a hard logic, a clinical precision, and a judicious caution. Like the sly old British foxes who conclude Neary's story, our author stands at the eastern marches of an old but now abandoned domain and achieves a distance that is truly remarkable.

This is a book to be perused slowly and carefully, for its measure is not easily taken. The British retreat and the Canadian advance are here part of a complex tapestry, woven by a master who has given many years of thought to his country and to his craft. It is a safe conclusion that this book will be shedding light upon its subject so long as there are Canadians and Newfoundlanders who care about their country.