Newfoundland Studies

Johnston's Smallwood

Stuart Pierson

Volume 14, numéro 2, fall 1998

Special Issue on Confederation

URI : https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/nflds14_2re01

Aller au sommaire du numéro

Éditeur(s)

Faculty of Arts, Memorial University

ISSN

1198-8614 (imprimé)
1715-1430 (numérique)

Découvrir la revue

Citer cet article

Pierson, S. (1998). Johnston's Smallwood. *Newfoundland Studies*, *14*(2), 282–300.

REVIEW ARTICLE

Johnston's Smallwood

The Colony of Unrequited Dreams. Wayne Johnston. (Toronto: Knopf, 1998) 563 pp. $34.95, ISBN 0-676-97182-2.

STUART PIERSON

IN THE WINTER OF 1920, James Joyce, fretting over the episodes of *Ulysses* still incomplete, wrote from Trieste to his beloved and trustworthy Aunt Josephine Murray (Mrs. William Murray) at Dublin:

> Dear Aunt Josephine: ... Thanks for the journals. I want that information about the Star of the Sea Church, has it ivy on its seafront, are there trees in Leahy's terrace at the side or near, if so, what, are there steps leading down to the beach? I also want all the information you can give, tittletattle, facts etc about Hollis Street maternity hospital. Two chapters of my book remain unfinished till I have these so I shall feel very grateful if you will sacrifice a few hours of your time for me and write me a long letter with details...[1]

Ulysses, of course, was a novel, a work of fiction. Presumably writers of fiction may invent whatever locales they like, as in the detective novels of Agatha Christie or Margery Allingham, who provided maps of the imaginary villages where the criminals and their victims lived. Just as characters are products of an author's imagination, so places. Joyce, I think, was not content with the geographical

NEWFOUNDLAND STUDIES 14, 2 (1998)
0823-1737

component in this equation, for though his characters were his puppets (except perhaps for the semi-autobiographical and dull Dedalus), his streets and cemetery, hospital, library, post-office and so on must needs be as they had been in all their unique particularity, for Joyce meant to redeem them: Muriel Sparks' fine phrase applies: *Ulysses* is an exercise in the "transfiguration of the commonplace."[2]

I don't think Wayne Johnston had so lofty an aim in *The Colony of Unrequited Dreams*, and his casual attention to geographical and historical detail indicates that his settings, as in the theatre, where a papier mâché rock can stand for any island in the world, do not carry with them, by themselves, any numinous significance. He has, for example, Bishop Feild School, in downtown St. John's, at the "corner" of King's Road and Colonial Street, two thoroughfares that do not cross; he has a house on the "brow" (his term for Blackhead Road — as it was — or Shea Heights — as it is now) look out, front and back respectively on the Harbour and on the Atlantic; he has Harbour Drive (created in the 1950s by the federal Department of Public Works, which tore out the finger piers and merchant premises[3] to "modernize" the harbour front) in place in the 1920s; he has the "crumbling fortifications" and abandoned World War II artillery placements cluttering Signal Hill in 1920; he has the Newfoundland Railway — the Bullet — on which his Smallwood[4] rides on his way to the Boston States in 1920, proceed "From Stephenville Crossing, [following] the Long Range Mountains southwest to Corner Brook, going downstream along the black, cliff-channelled Humber River." (p. 143) Later on in the same journey, in the United States, the train — news to the New York, New Haven and Hartford Line — runs in its course from Boston to New York, along the Hudson River, instead of its actual track along Long Island Sound.

In New York City, the shyest, most private and withdrawn of intellectuals, Thorstein Veblen, harangues crowds in Union Square; a heckler at a "Smallwood" rally in Harlem wonders whether it was just a coincidence that the first thirty-six US presidents had been white — this during the administration of Warren G. Harding, the twenty-ninth president. A hundred and a quarter pages on, this time in 1930, the heckler's taunt becomes "thirty-seven white presidents in a row," well, actually thirty-one, and so it goes, Clark Gable and Betty Grable in the one film (it never happened, one night or any other time), Government House, the Colonial Building and Bannerman Park all visible from "Canada House" on the corner of Monkstown Road and Circular Road, Quidi Vidi Lake visible from the front doors of the movie theatre at Pepperell. And so on. Salt cod (p. 120) does not require "soaking ... for days and ... boiling ... for hours ..." One more example. When did radio come to Newfoundland? As Smallwood crosses the Gulf in 1920, the year of the first crude tries at commercial transmission on a city-wide scale in the United States, he reflects upon the Fisherman's Broadcast, with its island-wide report on the weather, as he listens to the ship's loudspeakers send out radio programmes for all passengers. (I'm just talking about radio: forget the dream of an "island-wide" weather service in 1920).

After the advent of government by Commission in 1934, Johnston has Smallwood embark on an entirely unlikely and completely implausible junket along the south coast (encountering on the way "bergy bits," another anachronistic phrase) by schooner in mid-winter. Half-way along, say about François, the boat's skipper turns back, leaving Smallwood to walk the ice floes into the next point of refuge, and, presumably, along the rest of the coast. (Has *anyone* ever done this? There are no ice floes on the south coast). At page 351 we learn that the houses of the inhabitants (most of them on the verge of starving) were "oil-lamp-lit" and that (p. 354) "there was, of course, no electricity in any of the houses." Probably true, but when Smallwood remembers the trip later (p. 388), he muses about south-coastians: "Take away their radios and they lived not much differently than people in such places" had lived for centuries. [battery radios ?]

Anachronistic language joins geographical and historical inexactitude. Reeves, the headmaster at Bishop Feild School in the 19-teens, exclaims: " ... it boggles the mind," a late-in-the-century expression; Smallwood's father was at a juncture "absolutely pissed," i.e., drunk, another current usage; on the same occasion he challenges the teacher to "have a little chat," i.e., fight, outside, a third recent usage. In the 20s, in New York, Smallwood's fundamentalist friend Hines speaks of "journalistic expertise," a term which caught on after World War II; Smallwood taunts Fielding in the late 1920s, "you know the issues ..." — again, the word "issues" for all manner of public difficulties and points for discussion, coming into use in the last couple of generations; Smallwood in 1951 announcing that he was in search of "world-class" investors, a phrase from the 1980s. And we also have "critique" used as a verb.

Then there are the chronological puzzles within the narrative itself. I select one. How old was Sheilagh Fielding? We first encounter her in the schoolyard of that posh Protestant academy Bishop Feild College, a student at Feild's nearby girls' counterpart, Bishop Spencer — though this did not "back onto the Feild, separated from it by an iron fence at the end of [Feild's] playing grounds"; it was diagonally across, south and west, Bond and King's Road and Flavin Street from the boys' school. Though a mere girl, she is accepted into Prowse's group (the top clique at the school) for her audacity and wit. She is the most interesting character in the book, which *faute de mieux*, becomes, at the last, her story. Only in her teens, she drinks — not by wheedling containers of ale from local watering holes, but by somehow contriving always to have about her person a flask, symbol of the fox-hunt and the gentlemanly, occasional and discretionary nip. More about her later. Upon her first entrance she is "just thirteen," (p. 27) and Smallwood, who had entered Bishop Feild in September, is twelve. We know that this Smallwood, like JRS (my term for the real, historical Smallwood), arrived in this vale of laughter (Peter de Vries' phrase), on Christmas Eve, 1900. So he will be thirteen in December 1913, and she was thirteen, let us say, in the summer of that year: she must also have been born in 1900. This is consistent with her journal entry of 19 November 1949 with

which the book opens: she says there that she is not yet fifty. (pp. 3-4) So far so good. But several other passages in the book contradict this assumption, and suggest that she may have been born as early as 1896.

Does such inconsistency matter? Literary people might say, only to pedants, only to historians for whom exactitude has become a fetish, only to those Germanically-schooled zealots subject in Max Weber's phrase to the "strange intoxication"[6] of believing that the fate of their souls depends upon getting right every detail, every particular that many shrug off with a "whatever." Ordinary readers, taking pleasure from ordinary writers, need not heed these stringent requirements. Let the nit-pickers go pick nits in some corner and let the "average" reader "enjoy." (A verb which has only recently become, I notice, intransitive.)

I am of two minds, as I suppose most are, about the language police. On one side, I am of their number. I give out to my classes copies of George Orwell's bellwether essay in this legal regime, "Politics and the English Language."[7] On the other side, however, priggish pedantry sets my teeth on edge. Ultimately editors, authors and readers will have to sort out questions of usage like the one between "different than" and "different from." For now, I can only observe that Johnston (and, presumably, his editor) gets away with murder. A few instances of "than" rather than "from" (pp. 87, 197) mix with errors of agreement: "Almost everyone ... had a chip on their shoulder" (p. 33, also p. 191): of "like" for "as": "I would write about one man, like Rousseau did ..." (p. 48; cf. pp. 307 and 549); relative-pronoun errors (" ... my family, of whom I was the oldest child ..." [p. 267]; "... [Boyle] is often absent from official functions, which forces his wife to say that he is sick ..." [p. 546]) — these jostle many instances where present participles used nominally, that is, gerunds, are modified by pronouns in the objective, rather the possessive case ("The very absurdity of you [please, *your*] surviving that storm ..." [p. 234]; "I didn't tell him about you [i.e., *your*] converting me to socialism ..." [p. 549]; "Once, I stood behind him ... without him [*his*, surely] knowing I was there ..." [p. 560] Non-capital offenses, maybe, nor even felonies, but they stop readers as readily as a missed note in a song. Reading and hearing music are akin in this at least: you want an unglitched flow to carry you along. Movies, too: an illogicality can spoil whole stretches. In exhibit A, now under subpoena, I could start with the title. The verb "requite" means "make return"; this implies something offered or put forward, like love or a wrong. But dream? Mostly they just happen. They are not offered, nor is it easy to imagine who or what could return anything for them.

All of this — the factual inaccuracies, the problem of Fielding's age, the grammatical slips - hint at a certain disturbing carelessness in the working out of this book. Sometimes Johnston just coasts along with Richard Gwyn's biography of Smallwood.[10] Here are some parallel passages, on top from *Colony*, below from Gwyn:

> My grandfather, David Smallwood, was a short, bright-eyed man who always wore a tailcoat at the shop and had a beard so long he had to pull it out of the way to see his pocket watch. (*Colony*, p. 10)
>
> Inside [the shoe]shop he greeted customers, a small bright-eyed man in a tailcoat, his ornate watch-chain almost hidden by his patriarchal beard. (Gwyn, p.3)

JRS in New York at "twenty-one" (actually nineteen, in the fall of 1920):

> I was wearing the only suit I owned, the smallest adult-style suit I'd been able to find, a threadbare dark brown Harris tweed with a Norfolk jacket and trousers so over-sized they bunched in folds around my feet. (*Colony*, p. 155)

> He owned a singed suit of dark brown Harris tweed with a Norfolk jacket and trousers which hung in limp folds...(Gwyn, p. 20)

> I went to a large boarding house on West Fifteenth Street...Many Newfoundlanders lived there...It was convenient...because it was about a block from Fifth Avenue and five minutes walk from Union Square, the speaker's corner of New York socialism, where such giants of "the cause" as Eugene Debs and Thorstein Veblen spoke ... [the house] was situated among a dingy maze of narrow streets that, because they were lined by warehouses and run-down office buildings, almost never saw the sunlight. On one side of the neighbourhood Greenwich Village and on the other the affluent edge of upper Fifth Avenue ... (*Colony*, p. 156)

> He lived amid a crowd of fellow Newfoundlanders ... in a dingy...boarding house on west Fifteenth Street, a block or so off Fifth Avenue and five minutes walk from Union Square, the nerve-centre of New York socialism, where Eugene Debs and Morris Hillquit and Norman Thomas came to sketch the golden vision...[this part of New York] remains a gloomy limbo of narrow streets shadowed by warehouses and grimy office buildings, suspended between raucous caverns of Greenwich Village and the glamorous reaches of upper Fifth Avenue. (Gwyn, p. 20)

These dependencies are not so much theft, as evidence of indolence where setting and historical circumstance are concerned. It could be that Johnston intended at first to write the "definitive Newfoundland novel" or a "national epic," in Luc Sante's words, [11] and found himself saddled with a totally intractable hero. Joseph Roberts Smallwood, in personality, character, motive, outlook, style, psyche, mentality, ambition and *Weltanschauung*, differed so completely from Johnston himself that this shy, ironic, wry, humourous, unpolitical, unself-dramatizing author must have given up early on history and its attendant particulars (many of those could be got anyway from Gwyn *et al.*) in order to concentrate more satisfyingly (to him *and* us) on Fielding, a character like himself. For she is, as Luc Sante also noticed, "the book's great creation."

Many advisors to aspiring writers exhort them to write what they know; other, wiser advisors like William Trevor and Brian Moore warn that writing only what you know confines you to just the one story — your own — while exploring what you don't know gets you out of your cage. So far, Johnston has stuck close to home. *Bobby O'Malley* (1983) has a strongly autobiographical feel to it, as does *The Divine Ryans* (1990). Both are stories about a boy faced with family conflict between pious, repressed, strict, humourless women on one side and, on the other, antic, unconventional, ironic, funny men given to punning and to reflective, oblique observations on language, on cliché, on superstition and on the great gaping chasm between wisdom and power.

> Despite the fact that Uncle Reginald was not involved in the actual running of Reg Ryan's [funeral home], the popular notion was that ... he was the real brains behind it. "The power behind the crone," he called himself, the crone being Aunt Phil, who really ran things.[12]

The Time of Their Lives (1987) diverges from this pattern some, for the main struggle there goes on between a stubborn patriarch (who perversely will neither die nor relinquish control) and his diverse middle-aged children, among them the narrator's mother, whose husband, the narrator's father, is another Johnston dad, funny, ineffectual, the family barber.[13]

The first fruits of Johnston's move to Toronto (presaged in *O'Malley* and *Ryans*) fell to the ground in *Human Amusements* (1994),[14] a novel about the public and exposed world of television production. At first glace we seem to have come a long way from Kilbride. But recall that Bobby O'Malley's dad worked as a weatherman on the tube, that modern life as represented by the narrator's father in *Time* centres upon acceptance, by the patriarch, of television, and that the central drama in *Ryans* comes together over televised hockey. Television figures in the Johnston corpus as the primary symbol of modernity, and so it does not matter that the Prendergast family lives in Toronto. The same dynamics are at play in *Amusements*, only in this case the mother with her practicality and adaptiveness succeeds in the medium, while visionary and daffy dad sinks into the quasi-employed as a substitute teacher, keeps up the Johnston banter, and slowly, ineluctably, goes bonkers as his otherwise and until-then sensible and sane wife gets more and more sucked down into what he regards, perhaps rightfully, as the insane world of television, and takes the narrator with her. Son and narrator becomes the star of a fictionalized series on the life of Philo Farnsworth, one of the inventors of television, Father gravely comments:

> Incidentally ... the couch potato was named in honour of Philo's home state of Idaho, the staple crop of which was potatoes. Had Philo been from Iowa, the name for people

> who vegetate in front of television sets would have been couch corn. If he'd been from Georgia, it would have been couch peach. (p. 108)

Against all odds, the book ends on a hopeful note, the family reunited after dad, who two-thirds along hit the road, leaving earnest mom and bewildered son without comic relief, returns, or so the cryptic ending suggests. I think we have here Johnston close to the top of his form, and the neglect of this book, compared with the take-off of *Colony*, is one of those inexplicable turns of a market which does not necessarily reflect merit.

Before embarking on sorties into the unknown, *Colony* revisits this familiar territory. The book is divided into six sections, which we might describe briefly as first, youth to departure for New York; then New York; the walk across the island and the Squires riot in 1932; Commission and World War II; the National Convention; and Confederation, power, Valdmanis. Feilding has the last word with an epilogue, a clutch of journal entries and letters to JRS, the last from 1989.

The first of these six sections, the longest, depicts a family like the earlier Johnston families, with a wayward and self-pityingly eloquent father (who owes a lot to Mr. Micawber), drunkenly railing against his fate, but never relinquishing his connection with the word:

> "They should have called it Old Lost Land, not Newfoundland but Old Lost Land," he roared, with a flourish of his hand as though to encompass the whole of the island, then held his arms out to the sky like some ham actor beseeching God's forgiveness. (p. 17)

It is a little odd that the grandfather, the successful boot-and-shoe man, who had the advertising boot installed in the Narrows, figures not at all in *Colony*. According to Gwyn, JRS claimed that "'no man influenced me more'." (p. 4) But, as he has repeatedly said, Johnston owns his Smallwood outright. The shape and drive of the historical JRS need not apply to this created one.

Still, Johnston has delineated a family from which Smallwood wants to, has to, escape to make his way. In this he is true to the pattern of his fiction and to the historical record. JRS's Uncle Fred Smallwood paid for a berth at Bishop Feild College, where JRS (and Smallwood) learned two important lessons — first, the power and solace of books, and second, the world against which power and solace are useful, or perhaps necessary — the world of social class.

Here the novel starts to go off on its own and to carry JRS with it as a kind of hostage. First of course, for a novelist of Johnston's temperament and calibre, an abstract and disembodied notion like class must be represented by one or more characters, in this case Prowse and his elite gang (the "Townies") at Bishop Feild, where as usual in schools, kids learnt the facts of immemorially stratified and hierarchical social life. This Prowse is fictional, though his ancestry is not, for he

is presented as the grandson of Judge D.W. Prowse, author of the indispensable *History of Newfoundland* (1895), from whose pages Fielding draws so much of her *Condensed History*.[15] Prowse the character swells a scene or two, keeps turning up like a bad Widmerpool, and, in his early relation to Fielding, occupies a critical place in the book's plot, which has a Freudian-Ross MacDonaldish lay-out. Single actions taken in youth, and brief passions then suffered shape entire adult life-courses, but their enormity, and the pervasiveness of their determinations emerge only gradually, their author rationing his disclosures slowly and deliberately. Fielding was the love of Smallwood's life, but he, like the reader, knows very little about her until late in her life, in his own life, and in the book.

Johnston has not until now given us a love story. His decision to do so was a literary one, rather than one having anything to do with JRS. Once that decision was made, Fielding had to be invented, for if the evidence in the book is anything to go on, not even Johnston could fabricate much of a love story between JRS and Clara, whom he met at Corner Brook in 1925 (according to Gwyn, p. 37, who devotes less than a page to Clara). She does not seem to have interested anyone outside the family. Gwyn remarks that she was, at 23, "a shy and gentle girl, with sparkling eyes and long luxuriant hair which she pinned up in Dutch-style buns on either side of her head," and that "between the hesitant girl and the voluble visionary, friendship flowered into love." (p. 37) The marriage just sort of happened. Johnston, on the other hand, provides for his Smallwood a Machiavellian twist to the affair: "I changed my mind about marriage. I saw that men of the sort I aspired to be had wives, were expected to have them, and children, too." (p. 244) In consequence, when he espies Clara Oates (with her "hair pinned up in Dutch-style buns on either side of her head," p. 245) in Bannerman Park, St. John's (why Johnston moves the courtship to the capital is not stated), he makes his move. For he "knew [she] would agree to be [his] wife if [he] asked her." (pp. 244-45) He is pleased with her "lack of self-confidence, which after Fielding, was exactly what I was looking for .... It seemed I had at last met a woman who found it charming that I spoke to her as if all I wanted from her was her vote." (p. 245)

Thus Johnston accepts a historical Clara in order to provide us with a romantic Fielding. In Fielding's creation, however, I think he allowed his imagination to be captured by conventions that defeat her historical plausibility and make her into an exotic, sometimes an eccentric, and, occasionally, a companion-spirit or *Doppel-gänger*, always showing up at unlikely times and in impossible places to offer solace and challenges to a hapless Smallwood, so often in need of these. During his cross-island trek to organize the railway sectionmen, he gets caught in a snowstorm out on the Bonavista branch. Nearly starved and frozen, he is rescued by a shadowy figure, hauled into a shack, bathed, put into warm bed-clothing and watched over until he comes to:

> From my bed ... I could see someone sitting at a table ... reading a newspaper ... I wondered if my lucidity was just a dream ... She was greatly changed, her large-boned frame no longer rounded, but bare, angular ... There was no mistaking who it was.
>
> 'Fielding,' I said. (p. 227)

She has also to do duty as the detached, ironical, bemused observer of the obsessively ambitious politician that Smallwood (and JRS) eventually became. She is the foil, like Adam Caulfield, nephew of Frank Skeffington, Boston pol at the centre of Edwin O'Connor's fine novel *The Last Hurrah*, or like Frank Burden, Willie Stark's assistant or hanger-on in Robert Penn Warren's *All the King's Men*, an even finer novel.[16] These characters, most commonly cynical boozers from the press, are drawn to the demagogues, the men of power and public flash, because they (the hangers-on) have lost a capacity to believe in anything, and are fascinated by the single-minded pursuit or electoral success that preoccupies their observees. They stand at the sides, and offer analysis. They fall into, perhaps, in real life, a type; in political fiction, they play an indispensable role because the heroes of this fiction do not reflect in suitable literary ways. They are not the men of idea, in Warren's's phrase, but the men of fact (*op. cit.*, p. 436), and of course will not write their own novels.

In *Colony*, these formulae get a little mixed up, inasmuch as Smallwood purports to be writing the novel while Fielding presents the enigma. Maybe this is what is wrong with the book. For we are expected to acquiesce to a sensitive, introspective, diffident Smallwood, a humorous Smallwood, one capable of writing prose influenced by Jorge Luis Borges out of Einstein. Here is Smallwood, Manhattan-bound:

> I remember the evening sunlight on the eastern ramparts of the Hudson [River]. As the train outraced the river and the boats, I calculated that the water we were passing now would reach New York sometime early in the morning and be parted by the island of Manhattan in the dark hours after we arrived there. It was as though an alternate time stream was [sic] moving parallel with ours, plied at sluggish speeds by ancient modes of transportation as we in the train, city-bound, got older faster, though in space our destinations were the same. (p. 154)

In short, we meet Johnston, from whom we are used to this sort of thing, not JRS.

We keep coming back, as *Colony*'s reviewers kept coming back, to the relation between Smallwood and JRS, between the historical Father of Confederation and all the rest on the one hand, and Johnston's fictional Smallwood on the other. Two questions arise, one general: how do we establish the boundary, if there is to be one, between history, as written, and imaginative literature? And one particular: what is this book's answer to the general question?

Aristotle insisted that we have here to do with different kinds of things. The poet's (or the novelist's) function, he says

> is to describe, not the thing that has happened, but a kind of thing that might happen, i.e., what is possible as being probable or necessary. The distinction between historian and poet ... consists really in this, that the one describes the thing that has been, and the other a kind of thing that might be. Hence poetry [or literature] is something more philosophical and of graver import than history, since its statements are rather of the nature of universals, whereas those of history are singulars. By a universal statement I mean one as to what such or such a kind of man will probably or necessarily say or do — which is the aim of poetry, though it affixes proper names to the characters: by a singular statement, one as to what, say, Alcibiades [or JRS] did or had done to him.

Aristotle admits that "some historic occurrences may very well be in the probable and possible order of things,"[17] but not all, any more than all of us affect the way things are. Much that happens, just happens, unpredictably and without consequence, just as many are born, suffer, and die, the world not noticing. Aristotle's emphasis falls upon the fixedness of kind, and on the order of things, which runs deeper than the flux of things.

Both ideas — stable kinds, and a firmly discernible order in the flux — no longer command the assent Aristotle thought that they must. Darwin's discoveries have convinced many of us that forms in the natural world possess no eternal permanence, but are only the interim settlements in a constant negotiation amongst internal and external forces. Similarly, in social arrangements among humans, German idealism, Marx, and the astonishing revelations of anthropology have shown that Aristotle's faith in a universal order is simply a dream. There is no one "order," and such orders as do exist do not stay in place forever or even, maybe, for long. The condition we find ourselves in, according to some, is the condition that Plato and Aristotle ascribed to Heraclitus: all is flux after all — the condition of post-modernity.

Historians generally have not subscribed to Aristotle's devaluation of history as being less important because it tells merely of what happened. But they do share his view that there are fixed kinds, and that an order exists. At least, they share those convictions in respect of two features of the world without which their work would be meaningless. Historians believe that that which has happened is one kind of thing, while that which has not happened is another kind of thing. They also believe that that which has happened has happened for good and all, and cannot be altered by imagining or wishing or taking thought.

From the very beginning of our tradition, of course, authors have believed themselves at liberty to mix the two kinds of thing. The Homeric poems tell of wars and cities and persons that existed; they also tell of Cyclopses and visits to the underground. Herodotus told stories not even *he* believed to be true, and Thucydides, the most severe critic of including pretty stories in sober histories, invented

whole speeches. Dante claimed in his great poems to have met all manner of historical figures, and to have been given a guided tour to the afterlife by Virgil himself. One of the earliest English novelists wrote an entirely fanciful account of a sailor named Crusoe, who, cast ashore on a desert island, recreated a little European world all his own there, complete with manor house and black servant; the same author took a copiously-documented series of events from the medical history of London a half-century or so before his time, and invented a "first-hand" account of it — *Journal of the Plague Year*. Imagination rules.

War and Peace, literature or history? Gibbon's *Decline and Fall*? Before we crack our brains coming down heavily on the one side or the other, we should wake up to the fact that both "poetry," in Aristotle's sense, and history, are essential to our understanding of the world, and that they must be distinct. They must cooperate but cannot merge. We need the shaping stories that are the sources in the imagination of what is "possible ... as probable or necessary" (again, Aristotle's terms) and we need the checks, in what "merely" happens, on the reliability of those stories. We have a very telling clinical account, after all, of what happens to one who cannot distinguish between the two:

> ... he so buried himself in his books that he spent the nights reading from twilight till daybreak, and the days from dawn till dark; and so from little sleep and much reading his brain dried up and he lost his wits. He filled his mind with all that he read in them, with enchantments, quarrels, battles, challenges, wounds, wooings, loves, torments and other impossible nonsense; and so deeply did he steep his imagination in the belief that all the fanciful stuff he read was true, that to his mind no history in the world was more authentic.[18]

It is a commonplace in this postmodern age that the line between story and fact has become muddy from so much traffic tramping over it. A folklorist remarked to me, "What happened doesn't matter; what people think happened does." I am not sure anyone can sustain a belief like that in practice. Law, contract, promise, the elaborate authentication of documents, trust, would be meaningless. The two sides — what happened, and beliefs about what happened — remain in perpetual dialectical tension, and can't get on, the one without the other. Old marrieds to the core.

One further remark before coming back to Johnston. Historical fiction or fictional history succeeds along either of the two dimensions, both of them if it is lucky and gifted, as was Tolstoy's, Stendhal's and Pat Barker's. Yet it must, if it is to last and be re-read, *illuminate* the historical record. It must be superior history. This standard will always condemn, for example, *Gone With the Wind* as kitsch, with its Civil War and gallant South out of Ulrich B. Phillips and D.W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation*. This is where Johnston half-succeeds. He has written a novel whose historical dimension seems flat, and whose characters play out their lives against backdrops selected at random from the prop room. The story — Small-

wood's doomed love for Fielding, the sad, defeating accidents of her life, the slow revelation of the determining and intertwined actions of Smallwood's, Fielding's, and Prowse's early lives — could have happened in many elsewheres. The inevitabilities that work their ways through these lives do not bring in place and time in a convincing way.

During the 1932 riot at the Colonial Building on Military Road, we find Sir Richard Squires, Lady Squires, Smallwood, and assorted officials and police barricaded inside while the plebs rage outside. Fielding has contrived to be on hand. Johnston puts dialogue into their mouths worthy of CBC's "The Great Eastern", or of some of Stephen Leacock's best:

> "My God, Smallwood," Sir Richard said, "they really do mean to murder me?"
>
> "Nonsense," Lady Squires said, taking off her cape [!] and fanning herself with her hand, "there'll be no one murdered here today ... This is a fine state of affairs, I must say ... The Prime Minister of a country forced to hide out from his own people in some cubby-hole [the Colonial Building, recall]. My God, what is the Empire coming to?" (p. 320)

Fielding weighs in with a drawl I associate with sit-coms set in Manhattan:

> "I hope no one will stoop so low ... as to invoke that old cliché about how poverty, chronic unemployment, malnutrition and disease bring out the worst in people. As to what inscrutable impulse causes people to take out their frustrations on the very politicians they voted into office —" she shrugged. (p. 321)

No doubt this kind of thing is pleasant enough to write, but in a way it contributes to, rather than assuages, one thing the book complains about: that the history of this place has not been taken seriously enough.

Another example. Late in the book, Smallwood in power, we meet "Dr." Alfred Valdmanis in a chapter called "Junket," in which the newly-appointed "Director of Economic Development"[19] takes Smallwood on a European tour to seek investors in the *Wirtschaftswunder* that was about to burst upon the waiting inhabitants of this hapless province. Most of the details are from Gwyn. Johnston adds Fielding to the travellers, mainly I suppose, so that she can invent the following story, which she is able to tell because, owing to mix-ups or economies, she shares hotel-rooms with "Dr. Valdmanis" and "my Premier."

> They are a lively, fun-loving pair [wrote Fielding to the press back home] who betimes will while away the hours playing "Pedals," a Latvian children's game in which two participants lying flat on their backs at opposite ends of a bed, with their hands behind their heads, place the soles of their bare feet together and "pedal" each other like bicycles, the object of the game being to pedal one's opponent off the bed, though

> my Premier and the Latvian are so evenly matched that neither can budge the other and they pedal themselves into a state of mutual exhaustion, then fall asleep. (p. 515)

This is exactly the sort of thing fathers and children get up to in Johnston's other novels, but it does not work here because a grand-guignol character cannot be absorbed into Smallwood's first-person account. Neither can JRS's cracked infatuation with the Latvian sleazebag, which suits Johnston's view of the absurdity of those early years of JRS's long tenure, but cannot persuasively fit Smallwood's. The latter writes: "Frauds, shady businessmen, scam artists, shysters, imposters, opportunists, eccentrics, mountebanks, they proposed, and were given government grants for, the most unlikely, far-fetched, bizarre schemes for the economic development of Newfoundland, almost all of which [schemes] flopped or never got off the ground." (pp. 523-4) He even generously reports Fielding's lumping them all together as "'Herr Humbug of Hamburg'."[20] And he admits, does Johnston's Smallwood, that Valdmanis charmed him:

> I was infatuated, not so much with Valdmanis, as with the man he was impersonating, who had all those qualities that I felt the lack of in myself — worldliness, sophistication, business savvy, education, culture, taste, refinement. (p. 514)

JRS himself, in *I Chose Canada*, reported that Valdmanis was

> of medium height and build, with the lithe body of an athlete, a handsome and very intelligent face, and a clarity of expression in English that impressed everyone who met him ... He was one of the best tennis players we ever saw ...; he was a superb dancer, had a glorious singing voice ... [etc., etc.] (*op. cit.* pp. 346-7)

One thinks of Colonel Strasser in *Casablanca*. When Valdmanis got caught with his hand in the cookie jar, JRS called it a "tragedy." This "brilliant" man was a "product and a victim of the dire events through which he lived in Latvia and war-time Germany." (pp. 354, 357) The Nazi regime. "Dire events." Hmm.

Johnston's JRS puts an even glossier shine on this:

> Perhaps what appealed to me most about [Valdmanis] was that he seemed not only so lonely, but also isolated, enisled, as if the world within which he had been designed to excel had ceased to exist or had never come about in the first place. Enisled.
>
> We were no less enisled for having joined Canada, not yet, at least. Perhaps that is why it seemed to me that Newfoundland, this world apart, was just the place for Valdmanis, and he for it. Enisled, a Newfoundlander by predilection if not by birth. (P. 508)

This is implausible, both as an assessment of Valdmanis and as a characterization of any JRS remotely like the one we know. In short, Johnston's JRS more closely resembles Johnston himself, or a typical Johnston narrator, than he does the man who wrote these words:

> My *Book of Newfoundland* is, I believe, the great literary success story on Newfoundland. The *Book* is unique in Canada, for no other province has ever produced such a work about itself. The six volumes contain 3,718 pages, 449 colour illustrations and 3,693 black and white. Three hundred authors contributed ... [etc., etc.][21]

The man of facts and numbers and lists, the man of repetition and superlatives, the name-dropper, the humble braggart, the deliverer of carefully-timed clichés, the artful rhetorician of the rule of three — first tell 'em what you're gonna tell 'em, next tell 'em it, and finally tell 'em again what you've just told 'em — this man does not show up on the pages of *Colony of Unrequited Dreams*.

Smallwood makes himself sympathetic by his idealism, his application and hard work, and his devotion both to Newfoundland and to Sheilagh Fielding. Maybe it is impossible for a first-person narrator (except Sade) to convey a sense of his own humourlessness, ridiculousness, cruelty, and nihilism. Dostoevsky tried in *Notes from the Underground*; Céline, too in *Journey to the End of Night*, J.P. Donleavy in *The Ginger Man*, and Jean Genet in various fictions. Somehow all these anti-heroes become likeable.

If the point then, or if one point, of this book is to re-imagine JRS, it cannot be said to provide much help in that direction. Johnston has repeatedly claimed that he has depicted a Smallwood of his own, and of course he is free to maintain that, as he also was free to create whatever characters he pleased. But JRS, *vir ipsissimus* remains too large a memory around here for anyone fully to suspend disbelief.

I would suggest to any student, whether in school here, or in the press corps upalong, who wants to know about JRS, that he or she borrow copies of two NFB films — Julian Biggs' *A Little Fellow from Gambo* (1970), and Michael Rubbo's *Waiting for Fidel* (1974)[22] — and look keenly at the following scenes. First, for the essential ridiculousness and fatuity of the man, examine the beach scene in the latter film. JRS, Geoff Stirling and Michael Rubbo with assorted crew flew (apparently at Stirling's expense, though the NFB is in there somewhere) to Havana in order to interview Castro, and to film the encounter for documentary purposes. The Cuban government set them up in a posh house, with servants, an interpreter, a car and a schedule of edifying interviews. Smallwood awaits the call to meet The Leader; scurries to the ringing phone; writes endless lists of questions. As it became increasingly clear that the encounter *n'aura pas lieu*, mainly because the East German party boss Erich Honecker was in town, the two principals amused themselves on the strand. Stirling, long, lean, tanned, and convinced (this seems to be a millionaire's occupational hazard) that much was to be learned from far-eastern

practices, did a prolonged headstand in the Caribbean sands, his golden neck-chain draped in gently curving arcs from ear to nose to other ear, while he explained that this posture "reverses the body against the gravitational pull, opens up the organs of the body and allows them to relax and reverse themselves and therefore [!] makes the body more healthy." JRS, meanwhile, dressed in shorts and a loose gaudy shirt, artfully dodged the low surf (it was at this point that I decided that JRS could not *conceivably* have hopped over the ice along the south coast) and thought up more questions to ask their host. Later, JRS, the only one of the little NFB crowd (plus Stirling) invited, attended a reception in honour of Honecker. He did not get much of a look-in on Castro and his eminent guest, but he did converse with the "Apostolic delegate" from the Vatican. Back later from the party and a little elevated by the *Weltgeschichtliche* headiness of it all, JRS reported to his chums, enunciating carefully:

> I said to [the apostolic delegate], "do you think that the Government of Fidel Castro, the Communist government of Cuba, are really working, really striving, for the good of the people of Cuba? What would your answer be?" He said [JRS here goes down an octave]
>
> "Of course."
>
> I said, "They are?" He said, [same descent] "Of course."
>
> I thought that was impressive, to say the least.

This farce ends logically with a pompous state send-off for Honecker and no meeting for JRS and Stirling, who fly back here on GS's chartered plane. The palpable irony is that, had he been head of a sovereign state, or even an ex-head, he might have commanded the protocol he lusted after; he could not claim it as the ex-premier of a Canadian province, a status that, by his own account, he had devoted his whole political life to achieving.

Biggs' film, shot while JRS was still premier, contains some remarkable footage of the Liberal party's leadership convention just thirty years ago in October 1969.[23] Although the scenes from this dramatic clash of political forces do not take up much of the sixty or so minutes of the film, they can be seen in a way as its point. Biggs does not impose his own thinking about JRS's person and career upon the material — a good retiring NFB documentarist in that; many scenes and set-ups were plainly devised by Mr. Man himself — he and his crew managed to capture some moments that are not just slightly at odds with the Smallwood in *Colony*, but flagrantly in contradiction. The vote has been counted; the results come over the loudspeakers from the chair: "Peter Cook 3, John C. Crosbie 440 ..." Here the camera (to which JRS is completely oblivious) stays on that Mr. Magoo face; behind those familiar black-rimmed glasses the eyes glitter with murderous glee, the face smirks, the head nods slowly in ferocious satisfaction ... "T. Alex Hickman 187" ... more fierce jubilation,[24] "Randy Joyce 13, Joseph R. Smallwood 1070" ... prearranged march-

ing bands emerge; the crowd yells; the opposition boos. JRS makes his protected way to the podium. He holds his bewildered young grandson in his arms. And then an exhibition of cruel vindictiveness to surpass all exhibitions of vindictive cruelty: the speech.

> I am thankful and grateful to you. This is the voice of the convention. All democratic Liberals will accept it. All democratic Liberals will accept it. Mr. Hickman has been up on the platform and Mr. Hickman has offered me his congratulations. Now I wonder, what about Mr. Crosbie? Will Mr. Crosbie come up and make it unanimous?

Well, poor Mr. Crosbie comes forward to consume his humble pie. He wants to wish JRS well, etc. In the midst of it JRS, now I think not oblivious to the cameras, reaches right across as Crosbie speaks, obscuring him, and shakes hands with a well-wisher. A small moment but a revealing one. JRS, as Gwyn observed, was gripped by "a visceral dislike, closer to hatred, of Crosbie, whom he saw both as a traitor to the party and as a representative of the merchant class he had once crushed, now reaching back for power."[25] None of this would you guess from *Colony*, whose Smallwood's consuming passion in life stayed Sheilagh: "I tried, for the fifteen years of public life I still had left [after she departed for good in 1959] ... to camouflage by great accomplishments my broken heart." (*Colony*, p. 552) Bloody likely.

Another moment in *A Little Fellow from Gambo* exposes the nihilism which infects men of power late in their lives. There is a slippage in their relation to the reality that the power was supposed to control. Something happens to them; they cease to care; a death-wish overtakes them. Here is JRS at the end of his tenure. It is after the leadership fight, after the students' march on Confederation Building in protest against the end of free tuition at Memorial. JRS sits in an airplane next to the window, and muses.

> I don't like the word "revolution." There's a mutiny; there's a rebellion. Mutinies and rebellions don't have to be intelligent; revolutions do. I don't see any attempt at a revolution. [This is circa 1970, remember] A revolution presupposes two things. One, that you're going to overturn and abolish. That's one thing. And two, that you've got something to put in its place. If you just want to overturn, smash and destroy, if you're just mutinous, if you're just rebellious, if you're against everything in sight, and you have nothing with which to replace, hah, what are you? You're just a menace, aren't you? Now sure, I'm not completely sure, that you must have the second part of that, that it isn't enough just to smash and destroy. Maybe it is. Maybe you have to begin all over. Maybe. I don't know.

Again, these violent currents of political feeling flow not in Johnston's Smallwood.

We are left, then, with a good Johnston novel whose most engaging character lurks just out of the frame. Our hero the narrator, believable and touching when he

tells us about yet another Johnstonian dad, and compelling when he relates the unfolding of his life-long love affair with Fielding, goes leaden when forced to wheel in episodes from his namesake's historical lifetime. The Valdmanis episode contributes nothing to the structure of the novel; he's only in there for the sake of the historical JRS. A bright idea has gone dim here, mainly because JRS' inner life, this is my guess, was pretty bleak. It was obsessive and incantatory; phrases repeated over and over, a constant stream of synonyms and superlatives, and a self-hypnotising barrage of facts and figures. Try dramatising that. Kevin Noble can do it, for the length of a skit. But not for the stretch of a thick novel.

Johnston would have been better off to have had Prowse tell the story, or, better yet, Fielding.

Notes

[1]Richard Ellman, ed., *Selected Letters of James Joyce* (New York: Viking, 1975), p. 248.

[2]"The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie," *New Yorker*, 14 October 1961: 52-161, p. 161.

[3]The destruction spared the Murray Premises, which in turn were "restored" with great fanfare, in the late 1970s.

[4]I'm not sure there is any confusion to be avoided here, but in case there is, I shall henceforth refer to Johnston's character as "Smallwood," and the Historical Father of Confederation as "JRS."

[5]See below, pp. 6-7.

[6]"Science as a Vocation" (1918) in H.H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills, eds. and transls., *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology* (New York: Oxford, 1958 [1946]), pp. 129-56, at p. 135.

[7]The essay (1946) has appeared in many anthologies; failing these you may discover its beauties in Orwell's *Collected Essays* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1961, repr. 1968), pp. 353-67.

[8]Carolyn G. Heilbrun, writing as "Amanda Cross," *The Puzzled Heart* (New York: Ballantine, 1998), p. 65.

[9]The battle for this one may be lost. The mistake has become common. Is it not clear, however, in the examples cited, that the objects of the prepositions "of," "about" and "without" are the *actions* "surviving," "conversing" and "knowing," and that the pronouns merely *modify*, that is, answer the question *whose* surviving, etc.? These are examples of what the irreplaceable Fowler calls "fused participles." As he bracingly observed:

It is perhaps beyond hope for a generation that regards *upon you giving* as normal English to recover its hold upon the truth that grammar matters. Yet every just man who will abstain from the fused participle ... retards the progress of corruption; and it may therefore be worth while to [repeat] ... that the construction is grammatically indefensible.

H.W. Fowler, *Modern English Usage* (Oxford at the Clarendon Press, 1952 [First published 1926]), art. "Fused Participle," pp. 205-8, at p. 207. That he wrote that about three-quarters

of a century ago, and that the occurrence of the fused participle still stops me (at least), may give hope that the cause is not hopeless.

[10]Richard Gwyn, *Smallwood: The Unlikely Revolutionary*, revised edition (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1974).

[11]"O Canada," a review, sub-titled "The story of Joseph Smallwood, who was no George Washington" (a fine condescension, there) in the *New York Times Book Review* (25 July 1999, p. 3) of *Colony*. This is a book which has enjoyed a good press, which has garnered an international following (including translation into German according to a contract, we are told, with an agreeable *embonpoint*) and which is apparently selling well in North America.

[12]Johnston, *The Divine Ryans* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1990), p. 24. See the review in *Newfoundland Studies* 1991, 7: 78-82.

[13]*The Time of Their Lives* (Ottawa: Oberon, 1987). See the review in *Newfoundland Quarterly*, 85, 3 (Winter 1990), 35-6. For all its curious off-key misplacements of tone, *Time* remains the best of Johnston's novels. It cuts deeper into what bothers his whole cast of characters than any of the other novels does, and taps emotions more intensely felt there than in the other books. Johnston scores with his jokes in the whole *oeuvre*, but only in *Time* do the deeper and tragic feelings emerge fully.

[14]Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1994.

[15]By now everybody knows that Fielding published a book consisting of astringent observations on Newfoundland's history as reported in our canonical books on the subject, Reeves', Prowse's, and so on. Fielding's wry commentary is reprinted a few pages at a time throughout *Colony*. There is a mock preface over Sir Richard Squires' name, no less, at what would be pp. 18-19, if it weren't that for some reason the *Condensed History*'s pages do not get numbers. Squires praises its brevity, as well he might, for it only runs to some sixty-eight pages. Its tone may be registered from the following:

> In 1583, Sir Humphrey Gilbert, the half-brother of Sir Walter Raleigh, sets out [the whole of this history is told in present tense] in search of a passage to the Orient, but settles for claiming Newfoundland in the name of Queen Elizabeth I. Upon leaving Newfoundland for England, he takes with him a piece of turf and a small twig, symbols of ownership which, unlike him, remain afloat when his ship sinks in the mid-Atlantic. (p. [44])

And so it goes. History, for Fielding as for ironists like Kurt Vonnegut, Don de Lillo and Edward Gibbon, is little more than the register of the crimes, follies and misfortunes of mankind.

[16]O'Connor, *The Last Hurrah* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1956; reprinted New York: Bantam, 1962); Warren, *All the King's Men* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1946; reprinted New York: Bantam 1970). In many ways Warren's novel foreshadows Johnston's. Willie Stark was drawn from Huey Long, populist hospital-and-highway socialist, nicknamed the "kingfish," hence the title. Huey was Governor of Louisiana and then Senator. He was up from dirt poor, as was JRS, and like him a crowd pleaser. Some might say, proto-fascist. JRS admired Huey Long, if Harold Horwood is to be believed in Julian Biggs' film. See below.

[17]Aristotle, *Poetics*, ch. 9 (1451^{A}-1451^{B}), transl. Ingram Bywater, in Richard McKeon, ed., *The Basic Works of Aristotle* (New York: Random House, 1941), pp. 1463-4.

[18]Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra, *The Adventures of Don Quixote* (1604-14) transl. J.M. Cohen (Harmondsworth: Penguin 1950), ch. 1, p. 32.

[19]"Junket," pp. 306-19, draws on Gwyn's chapter 14, "Valdmanis: The Welkin Ring," pp. 140-52. Johnston's tour conflates two trips, one in October 1950, and another in the summer of 1951.

[20]The reader may note that there is a good deal of Ray Guy in Sheilagh Fielding.

[21]JRS, *The Time Has Come To Tell* (St. John's: Newfoundland Book Publishers, 1979), p. 156. Later in this pot-boiler, JRS included a chapter on his "addiction" to books ("I Am Totally Hooked," pp. 227-32); at its end, he lists "some of the authors who made life rich for me," two or three hundred of them, from Horatio Alger, Sherwood Anderson ... through Norman Mailer, John Stuart Mill ... to Yeats, Stefan Zweig and Israel Zangwill. It reminded me of nothing so much as the embarrassing moments at the Pratt Lecture in the Learneds Year 1996, when E. Annie Proulx recited to us, in answer to an ingenuous question from the audience, all the authors who had ever influenced her. After a time it began to sound like every author she had ever read. Maybe this is an autodidact's compulsion.

[22]Both NFB productions, respectively 1970 and 1974. A.C. Hunter Library in the Arts and Culture Centre, has them for loan on video cassette.

[23]For the grim and gripping political background to this bitter struggle, see Gwyn, *op.cit.*, ch. 25.

[24]The phrase is Louis Auchincloss'. See *Richelieu* (New York: Viking, 1972), p. 97. In the fall of 1628, after a cruel and murderous siege lasting more than a year, French royal forces marched into the shell of what had been the prosperous Atlantic port of La Rochelle, conquered and devastated because it was Protestant and had accepted British aid during its struggle with the Crown. At the head of the army was Cardinal Richelieu, the King's first minister, who had staked his career and probably his life on the policy of continuing the siege during the long winter of 1627-28 and the hot summer of 1628. As he rode triumphantly through the echoing streets of the town "he expressed a formal dismay at the scenes of horror that greeted him, but one doubts if they did much to darken the fierce jubilation in his heart." JRS would have understood. Smallwood?

[25]Gwyn, *op. cit.*, p. 294.