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REVIEW

Suspended State: Newfoundland before Canada. Gene Long. St. John's: Breakwater Books, 1999. Newfoundland History Series, No. 9. Softcover, 218 pp., notes, appendices, bibliography, $20.00, ISBN 1-55081-144-4.

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IN LATE 1933 THE AMULREE Royal Commission recommended, and the Newfoundland legislature accepted, a novel, radical constitutional remedy for what had been presented in its terms of reference as a "financial" crisis. As a condition for financial relief, the institutions of responsible government were to be replaced indefinitely by a wholly appointed Commission of Government, responsible only to British government. In *Suspended State*, Gene Long presents the first analysis of this outwardly calamitous episode which "puts the actions and aspirations of Newfoundlanders themselves in the picture."

This focus is particularly relevant in this fiftieth year of Confederation, for it helps to link (and contrast) the sentiments and arguments of 1946-1949 to the state of public opinion in 1933. A central theme in the confederation debate was Newfoundland's putative "nationhood." Should Newfoundland have returned to a state of pre-1933 sovereignty before negotiating entry into Canada? With the act of union with Canada did Newfoundland somehow surrender her nationhood? We may conclude from Gene Long's study that whatever claims Newfoundland may have had to being a sovereign nation had been more comprehensively surrendered in 1933 than analysts (and apologists) have generally acknowledged. The revived

debates of 1946-1948, which have considerable life even today, were, Long says, founded to a considerable degree on a revisionist negative interpretation of the work and recommendations of the Amulree Commission.

A more apt title for Long's book might thus be "Suspended Nation." Here I draw a distinction between the institutional trappings of statehood, which in some respects were buoyed up by the Commission of Government, and the definition of a "nation" as a people who share a sense of identity and distinctiveness, *on the basis of which they assert a claim to autonomous self-government.* Following upon the acceptance of the recommendations of the Amulree Commission by the governments of Newfoundland and the United Kingdom, Newfoundland undoubtedly lost the institutional basis for self-government. However, if this constitutional demotion was somehow visited upon the people of Newfoundland against their will, or for reasons beyond their control, a remnant of nationhood might be said to live on. It is well known that the Amulree recommendations were promptly accepted by the Newfoundland legislature and were enthusiastically received by most of the Newfoundland press. Long goes further, arguing that the very concept of government by commission was largely a Newfoundland invention, and that it was pressed upon the Amulree Commission in testimony and submissions which have not previously been examined in any publication.

> In the record of how Newfoundlanders themselves viewed the dire circumstances of their besieged homeland, it may be seen that the radical solution brought forward by the Royal Commission served as an indirect expression of self-determination on behalf of a people who had shown themselves willing to yield their own voice. (130)

Long builds his case on two pillars of evidence. First, he casts his view backwards from 1933, and finds both precursors and the explicit genesis of the "commission government" idea within Newfoundland; the concept was not a British colonial import, as later imagery of the Amulree Commission might have it. He observes that the National Patriotic Association, a non-elected body given considerable governmental powers during the war, and the commission which governed the City of St. John's from 1914 to 1916, served as examples of non-democratic solutions to crisis situations. It is pure supposition, however, that these restricted instruments prefigured the response of Newfoundlanders to the vastly more comprehensive crisis of the early thirties.

More to the point in developing the "made in Newfoundland" theme, Long spotlights William Coaker's despairing speech to the Fisherman's Protective Union annual convention in 1925, in which he proposed that the only remedy for the wasteland of partisan politics was to give all power to a "Commission" of nine men elected on denominational lines for a ten year period. Long tracks this "commission government" idea as it reappeared from time to time in Coaker's writings and speeches and in *Fisherman's Advocate* editorials. Coaker's concept remained

largely rhetorical, pairing the need for a rest from the "curse of politics" with the notion that a few "honest men," unfettered by partisan ties, could set the ship of state on a progressive and steady course. Eventually, as the political and financial crisis deepened in 1932, Long finds the idea being taken up in newspapers other than the *Advocate*. When Alderdice pledged in his 1932 election platform to "enquire into the desirability and feasibility of placing the country under a form of commission government for a period of years," Long argues that he was only borrowing the idea from Coaker. (Contrary to previous published accounts, Long also contends that the Alderdice commission government pledge was no more than a peripheral issue in the 1932 campaign.) In short, at least as a verbal token for a kind of "clean" way out of both financial and political unpleasantness, "government by commission" was common currency in Newfoundland discourse well before the arrival of the Amulree Commission. Apparently it was from both public and private discussions within Newfoundland that the commissioners adopted the expression and made it a focus of the political side of their inquiries and deliberations.

This brings us to the second, and more important, pillar of evidence, the body of written and oral testimony received by the Amulree Commission from some 250 individuals and groups during 46 days of hearings in St. John's and several other locations across the island. In his *Politics in Newfoundland* (1971), Noel wrote of the Commission's findings, "But without some record of the evidence there is no way of judging the wisdom or otherwise of their choice." (211) Since all hearings were *in camera* and no records of them were (then) known to exist, Noel, and others, have suggested that the devastating comments in the Amulree Report about the venality of politics, the malign influence of denominationalism, and so forth, derived as much from assumptions and preconceived solutions as they did from direct evidence. As it turned out, a nearly complete set of Commission records reposed in the papers of Commissioner Charles A. Magrath in the National Archives of Canada. These were opened in 1983. However, Peter Neary, in his seminal *Newfoundland in the North Atlantic World, 1929-1949* (1988) makes almost no reference to the Magrath documents. Neary's account of the episode focuses on Amulree as the broker in a behind the scenes diplomatic game played out between the United Kingdom, Canada, and Prime Minister Alderdice, and hardly touches on the state of public opinion within Newfoundland.

Long's examination of the verbatim transcripts and written submissions, together with his reading of newspaper accounts at the time, thus comprises an original contribution to our knowledge of this critical turning point. What he finds is that a sizable majority of those who rendered an opinion did indeed favour some form of commission government, and that the royal commissioners probed extensively into what witnesses meant by this: How many commissioners? Elected or appointed? Outsiders or Newfoundlanders? For what term? Much of the detailed indictment of Newfoundland political culture and practices for which the Amulree Report has often been criticized seems to flow directly from themes in the testi-

mony. Long summarizes quite selectively from the thousands of pages and hundreds of witnesses, but does so in a fair and reasonable way so far as I can tell from my own more cursory perusal of the documents. His conclusion:

> Despite its absence of any mechanisms of accountability in its recommendations, the substantial content of the Commission's political analysis could have been authored by William Coaker at any time between 1925 and 1933. The evidence presented to the Royal Commission reflected a political discourse of the day in Newfoundland which framed the general crisis as more than an economic one. (129)

Long gives relatively little attention to the origins and dimensions of the financial crisis which occasioned the Royal Commission, or to the roles of the United Kingdom and Canadian governments in negotiating a compromise deal which would partially satisfy the creditors and meet their own political interests. On these topics, Noel and Neary remain essential reading, along with the Amulree Report itself. Long does significantly augment the previous accounts, and assist readers of Newfoundland history in assessing the Amulree Report, by focusing on the making and expression of public opinion within Newfoundland at this critical time. He also shows that William Coaker and the *Advocate* may have played a more critical role than has previously been noted in what are usually regarded as the twilight years of the FPU. Coaker ended up as the most thoroughgoing critic of the Commission of Government formula, of which he had been the main proponent for many years, because the unelected Amulree version lacked any form of democratic accountability.

Long surveys post 1933 developments up to the late Smallwood period in a rather spotty concluding chapter, apparently seeking indications of a legacy of the loss of national nerve revealed in his exploration of 1933 attitudes. Most interesting is his juxtaposition of the vehement indictments of the Amulree recommendations served up by Peter Cashin and Albert Perlin during the National Assembly and Confederation debates with their positions in 1933. Cashin was recorded as being sympathetic to "a form of commission government for ten years," and also spoke positively of confederation with Canada as the ultimate solution for the small country (81). Perlin had been one of the few witnesses to voice "principled opposition" to commission (102), but was writing favourably of this solution before Amulree rendered his report (108).

The book is written in a lively, non-tendentious manner. Existing secondary sources are adequately documented and cited in the bibliography (although an editorial lapse leaves the chapters unnumbered in the table of contents and body of the text, impeding the reader's search for endnotes). The slim text is supplemented by several key documents in the appendices. Given the inaccessibility of the Magrath papers to most readers, a more complete listing of the documents and witnesses would have been a useful addition. (Such an abstract, together with a

more systematic summary of the testimony than that provided by Long, is contained in a 1984 unpublished paper by Peter Fenwick entitled "Witnesses to the Lord," deposited in the Memorial University Centre for Newfoundland Studies.) The absence of an index weakens an otherwise scholarly book's utility as a reference work.

Gene Long's book is a welcome addition to the sparse literature on a critical period. It serves to remind us of the need for a more thorough analysis and critique of the Amulree Report, which stands rather embarrassingly as perhaps the most comprehensive account of pre-confederation Newfoundland society and politics.