

The Voice of Generations: A History of Communications in Newfoundland. Michael McCarthy, Frank Galgay and Jack O'Keefe.

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The Voice of Generations: A History of Communications in Newfoundland.
Michael McCarthy, Frank Galgay and Jack O'Keefe. St. John's: Robinson Blackmore Printers and Publishers for Newfoundland Telephone Co. Ltd. 1994. ix, 428 p., ill., apps., bib., endnotes, index, \$29.95, cloth, ISBN 0-920884-30-x.

JOHN EDWARD FITZGERALD

ON FIRST SIGHT OF THE WORDS *The Voice of Generations* (which in 1994 was the corporate slogan of the telephone company) and "a publication of Newfoundland Telephone" stamped across the front cover of this telephone-directory sized book, I committed the reader's cardinal sin of judging the book by its cover. I expected it to be as exhilarating as reading the phone book. Or perhaps it would be a volume of corporate-speak and an uncritical paean to the glories of technology and progress and the wonders of monopoly capitalism. But to my relief, the monotony of the former was not present, and the latter attributes were confined to the last couple of chapters. For underwriting this book, Newfoundland Telephone (now Newtel) is to be commended, although the impetus to have it written may perhaps have come from a small measure of corporate jealousy at the corporate-sponsored *Illustrated History of Newfoundland Light and Power* written in 1990 by Mel Baker and Robert and Janet Miller Pitt.

The Voice of Generations is a welcome book because it and other books on the history of businesses in Newfoundland and aspects of the influence of technology on society in Newfoundland have been needed for some time. McCarthy, Galgay and O'Keefe are skillful researchers and are to be commended for providing a

readable and informed historical narrative, dense in detail, about the history of telegraph, telephone and wireless service. The great drive to “wire” Newfoundland in the mid-nineteenth century for telegraph is explained along with the project of linking it with North America, and the various attempts to lay the Atlantic Cable, culminating with success in 1866. We also learn that Alexander Graham Bell’s father, Alexander Melville Bell, lived in St. John’s for four years in the late 1830s and 1840s, and while here “began to work out the teaching technique he would later call ‘visible speech.’” The first telephone in Newfoundland was constructed in 1878 by John Delaney, the Postmaster General of Newfoundland, who connected his house on Monkstown Road with a friend’s and entertained visitors with the transmitted strains of *Annie Laurie*. Only in 1883 did the Bell Telephone Company of Canada attempt to become incorporated in Newfoundland in order to provide service, and after several attempts, offered to lease its patent rights to the Anglo-American Telegraph Company. The offer was accepted in 1885.

One can easily become mired in historical details, but the common denominator of the episodes presented in this book is one as old as the Newfoundland state itself: the debate over getting an acceptable return on resources and using Newfoundland’s strategic location to benefit Newfoundlanders first. In the case of communications, the questions were whether to grant monopolies with ancillary rights not to have to pay taxes or royalties to the government. In 1854 a fifty-year monopoly on any cable landings in Newfoundland had been granted to Cyrus Field’s New York, Newfoundland, and London Telegraph Company, and more land concessions and mineral rights were sought from Newfoundland by the company in 1873. By the mid-1870s petitions were gotten up, and businessmen, politicians and local clergy protested and pressured the government to exercise its pre-emption option to end Field’s monopoly. A competitor offered thirty thousand pounds to the Newfoundland government to pre-empt the monopoly. When the British government refused to under-write the cost of pre-emption, the competition withdrew its offer, and the matter lapsed. After Marconi received a trans-Atlantic wireless message at Signal Hill and considered establishing a wireless station at Cape Spear, the Anglo-American Telegraph Company protested and ordered him to cease and desist, fearing a challenge to its monopoly. Only in the spring of 1904 did the Bond government enact a law levying a tax on new trans-Atlantic cables landed in Newfoundland. Finally, the United Towns Electric Company was launched in 1904 in Conception Bay under the presidency of John Joseph (“Gambo Jack”) Murphy. In 1919 Murphy’s Avalon Telephone Company was incorporated and began expanding. By the late 1930s, the phone company’s employees had wanted to unionize, which Murphy’s son, Director of Avalon Telephone R. J. Murphy, vehemently opposed on the grounds that it would threaten the viability of the company. Those seeking consecutive examples of the details of the ravages of industrial capitalism will find plenty of grist for their mills in this book. As one might expect in a corporate-sponsored book, the authors skate carefully around any

hard-nosed economic or political analysis, and by virtue of such writing, the underlying ideology is one of tacit acceptance of the principle of a lucrative monopoly, but in this book this attribute will probably attract as many readers as it might repel.

The Voice of Generations is well-illustrated and the authors provide adequate explanatory captions for many of the pictures, which convey a strong sense of the persons, places and events associated with the history of communications in Newfoundland and Labrador. I have two complaints about this book, however. One is that readers unfamiliar with Newfoundland will not find inside its covers a map of the island on which all the place names mentioned in the text have been plotted. Second, while Vince Withers is to be commended for paying to have eleven chapters of Newfoundland history written, the last three chapters of recent PR photos, good news about corporate management policies and uncritical writing about the company's boundless energy to increase its profits are difficult to take. The authors might have noted the judgment exhibited by the writers of the Light and Power Company's book, who wisely treated the history of that company since 1966 in a single-chapter epilogue. Nevertheless, *The Voice of Generations* has been meticulously researched by three able authors and it tells an interesting story in well-written, digestible episodes. It is a book worth acquiring and reading.