

## *Old Newfoundland: A History to 1843.* Patrick O'Flaherty.

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## REVIEWS

*Old Newfoundland: A History to 1843*. Patrick O'Flaherty, St. John's, Long Beach Press, 1999. vii, 278 pp., pref., endnotes, abbrevs., bibliog., index, softcover, \$29.95. ISBN 0-9680998-2-3.

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IN NINE CHAPTERS, *Old Newfoundland* unfolds a narrative history of Newfoundland and Labrador, beginning with glaciation. The book provides a review of the sequence of early aboriginal occupations and the brief sojourn of the Norse; a recounting of the visits of Cabot and Corte-Real, and the beginnings of the fishery from England, Portugal, France and the Basque country and the whaling stations on the Strait of Belle Isle, now illuminated through the efforts of Selma and Michael Barkham and the archaeologists; the germs of settlement ideas from Gilbert and Parkhurst; a summary of the experience of the formal colonies under Guy at Cupids and Calvert and Kirke at Ferryland; examinations of the bits and pieces of legislation affecting the fishery and settlement, attacks and destruction by France and recommendations of deportation of settlers by England; the gradual introduction of a system of magistrates and courts; the rise of institutions such as a Society of Merchants, newspapers and an Irish Catholic population growing in number and voice; and finally, the granting of colonial status in 1824, representative government in 1832 and the suspension of that government in 1843.

In a book that covers such an expanse of ground, one might be prepared for a lightweight use of primary sources and a reliance upon secondary works. This is not the case. O'Flaherty has used a variety of scholarly works (the bibliography cites some 260 titles), re-examined the most applicable archival records series, and used

thoroughly the Newfoundland newspapers, when they are available. All are precisely referenced. Where scholarly sources are in conflict, he presents a position but carefully documents the opposing viewpoints in footnotes. The book is rich, but also very dense. There are neither illustrations nor maps: it almost seems to need pairing with O'Flaherty's earlier *The Rock Observed: Studies in the Literature of Newfoundland* (University of Toronto Press, 1979) which does supply these things. More analytically-based scholars may wish that there had been more use of chapter-end reviews, summaries and conclusions as way-point aids on this complex journey through narrative.

*Old Newfoundland* must be read and re-read. For this reader, three themes stand out. First, in a series of intriguing comments in several places throughout the book, O'Flaherty notes that the early formal colonies had charters, and these documents could have provided the essential constitutional elements upon which to build a society. The early North American colonial charters authorized, he tells us, "limited but democratic self-government". In the American Colonies they were seen as "...legitimate statements of rights and privileges to which the colonists could tenaciously and legally cling" and there these led directly into assemblies and a "collective democratic process". But in Newfoundland these charter colonies failed and so did the seeds of institutional self-sufficiency. The comparison merits further analysis. The second theme is that while the granting of official colonial status and responsible government came so late to this so early "colony", the "lower-level" mechanisms of law and order did not. The system that gave power to the first migratory fishing ship in each port was there before Gilbert and an array of magistrates and courts emerged during the eighteenth century, particularly after 1729 when Governor Osborn arranged to have copies of the newly-published handbook *The Practical Justice of the Peace* distributed to six districts with justices and constables. These officials could and did communicate to the governors more than criminal proceedings: they sometimes advised him from their knowledge of local affairs. Earlier scholarship has tended to focus on the high-level British Parliamentary legislation but O'Flaherty stresses that this "...bottom-layer sub-government, regulating life, overlooking conditions in general, and offering a measure of protection for people high and low" seemed to function rather satisfactorily (though there are cases of very rough justice indeed), so much so that it might have delayed the introduction of responsible government. The third theme hits hard: the impact of responsible government. Two forces had been building in the early nineteenth century: a large, self-conscious Irish Catholic population, particularly in Conception Bay and St. John's, and an outspoken press aligned with a Protestant merchant class. It did not help that the bitter struggles in Ireland were imported into Newfoundland, the fires fanned by the ambitious, strong-willed Bishop Fleming. Fleming found an equal opponent in Henry Winton, the owner and editor of the *Public Ledger* of St. John's. Fleming banned the *Ledger* from Catholic households; unidentified attackers accosted Winton in Conception Bay, severing one of his ears

and cutting pieces from the other and from a cheek. With elections and an assembly came, not quiet voting and reasoned debate, but riots and the calling out of troops. This is very much the climax of the book and it is not our smiling Newfoundland. But we must stand by the historians' mandate to hold up the mirror; O'Flaherty's handling of the narrative here seems admirably even-handed.

It should be noted that this is not a full history of the period and place. O'Flaherty tends to focus on the development of government, both legislative and executive and at levels from local justices to the Crown itself. Though he gives attention to the reaction of the common person to these, his focus is not upon economies, lifeways nor landscapes. These things are present but not in any continuity or well-developed context.

*Old Newfoundland* has been produced by a professor of English. This has perhaps slanted the work towards narration rather than analysis but has not detracted in any way from a thorough and careful use of the documentary and scholarly historical sources. It has resulted in a well-written work and has allowed the author's intimate familiarity with the literary and biographical history of the island to add extra depth to the story. Many of the facts of the narrative are well-known, but *Old Newfoundland* brings much to one place and from it draws out new themes. The book does not tell us (to use O'Flaherty's words in the "Concluding Notes" to *The Rock Observed*) "...the epic story of a people's struggle against overwhelming natural forces and economic adversity" but clearly that has not been the author's intention. Newfoundland's past is now documented and interpreted by a variety of historians, historical geographers, archaeologists and historical novelists. *Old Newfoundland* joins this literature as an impeccably-researched, clearly-written work — a highly significant, essential contribution.