

## Patrick O'Flaherty. *Lost Country: The Rise and Fall of Newfoundland, 1843-1933.*

Robert J. Harding

Volume 22, numéro 2, autumn 2007

URI : [https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/nflds22\\_2rv04](https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/nflds22_2rv04)

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Faculty of Arts, Memorial University

ISSN

0823-1737 (imprimé)

1715-1430 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Harding, R. J. (2007). Compte rendu de [Patrick O'Flaherty. *Lost Country: The Rise and Fall of Newfoundland, 1843-1933.*] *Newfoundland Studies*, 22(2), 552-555.

mother and lover, is met by his mother's fear of it, the power that drowned her husband.

Is all this "true"? I have no idea. Having caught one cod in my life and never having lived in an outport, much less a 1950s outport, I cannot say. The details of the descriptions, especially of Sylvanus's methods of fishing, of sailing, of filleting, of cooking, have the ring of authenticity. My guess is that Morrissey has done her homework, both in reading and in asking questions of those who remember these experiences.

Still, this love of the hardscrabble life reminds me so much of Michael Cook's plays. To call *Sylvanus Now* "Head, Guts and Soundbone Dance" would be accurate. For me, it is all just too full of the Irish curse, the belief that no matter how bad it gets, it was worse before and that was so much a better time. Slap me for being a rationalist but the logic escapes me.

Adelaide's name is not remarkable. It might not have been the most common baby name in the 1930s but it was certainly around. On the other hand, "Sylvanus" seems unlikely. Morrissey has claimed that the name just came to her but it would have been far more likely in the nineteenth century and far more likely in a more sophisticated family than the Nows. Morrissey felt driven to make her protagonist a god of nature and could not call him Pan.

The last name is even more striking. Perhaps "Now" is a Newfoundland name but I have not heard of it (I await correction from some onomatologist). Rather it is a Newfoundlandish name that suits Morrissey's purpose. Sylvanus is a person who lives in experience, a phenomenologist without the label. Yet, on the other hand, his desire to live in a simpler time suggests he is rather something like "Sylvanus Now-in-the-then."

So like many reviewers, I am torn. Morrissey creates a compelling portrait of two compelling people. Think of how few authors make that magic leap to produce life on the page. Morrissey offers viscera of both fish and people. And yet for me at least, the novel's belief in the pure hard primitivism of the outport world is too much. I would have appreciated at least a hint that modernity is not just a larger curse.

Terry Goldie  
York University

Patrick O'Flaherty. *Lost Country: The Rise and Fall of Newfoundland, 1843-1933*. St. John's: Long Beach Press, 2005, ISBN 0-9680998-3-1

RECENT STUDIES HAVE effectively situated the history of Newfoundland and Labrador in a broader context. Peter Pope employed an Atlantic World framework to shake up our impressions of seventeenth-century Newfoundland in *Fish into Wine*. Jerry Bannister did the same for eighteenth-century Newfoundland in *The Rule of the Admirals*. Patrick O'Flaherty embarks on a similar mission in *Lost Country*:

*The Rise and Fall of Newfoundland, 1843-1933.* Building from his previous volume, *Old Newfoundland: A History to 1843*, O'Flaherty argues that the colony is best understood in a wider international context. Local political and economic circumstances were frequently shaped by the diplomatic dealings and market demands of other countries. O'Flaherty contends that Newfoundland's progress was hindered by those external currents. He concludes that such bigger trends were more a factor in Newfoundland's loss of responsible government than the colony's internal economic and political disruptions between 1919 and 1933.

*Lost Country* looks intimidating: it is long, comprehensive, and deeply rooted in primary sources. However, O'Flaherty's study is highly accessible, energetically written, and surprisingly straightforward. It offers a chronological account of mid-nineteenth- to early-twentieth-century Newfoundland told through six substantive chapters. O'Flaherty also develops several thematic strands over the course of that narrative. He skillfully advances his arguments (which are both substantial and timely) with a narrative carried by the actual voices and rhetoric of the period. A retelling of this period could easily be dense and convoluted, but O'Flaherty offers a readable, fluid, and exciting account.

If detailed narrative is the muscle of *Lost Country*, then O'Flaherty's well-timed analytical interludes constitute its spine. He situates Newfoundland in the context of international diplomacy, arguing that such processes often worked against the colony. France proved a constant nemesis, actually reinforcing its autonomy along the French Shore as the nineteenth century progressed. Newfoundland also had to fend for itself in trade and tariff negotiations with Canada and the United States. Even more frustrating was Britain's unenthusiastic responses to Newfoundland's diplomatic efforts. O'Flaherty believes Britain sacrificed the colony's diplomatic capabilities in order to secure its own relations with other countries.

Sectarianism, a pressing political theme in *Old Newfoundland*, is gradually removed to the background of *Lost Country*. O'Flaherty contends that aggressive sectarianism lost its political resonance after the 1861 election, resurfacing intermittently as a conjured electoral issue. Newfoundland's Irish Catholic Liberal/English Protestant Conservative political dichotomy was gradually dissolved by economic and constitutional debates. Recurring discussions of Confederation with Canada, the construction of an island-wide railway, and economic diversification superseded religion as the colony's primary political issues between the 1860s and the 1890s. The administrations of Sir Robert Bond and Sir Edward Morris were bolstered by cross-denominational support to an extent previously unheard of. Following World War I, politics became consumed with questions of economic and administrative management. Newfoundland politics remained highly unpredictable, but its tensions were primarily induced by concerns with development, finances, and governance itself.

Concerted efforts to diversify the Newfoundland economy date from the mid-1840s. O'Flaherty aggressively challenges the notion of economic underdevelopment, arguing instead that the colony's economy was hindered by overproduction within the cod fishery. There was no shortage of advocates for agricultural, mineral, and timber development. The introduction of telegraphy and railway construction bolstered many people's confidence in Newfoundland's industrial potential. O'Flaherty is not concerned with reiterating the economic failures painfully evident in Newfoundland's history. *Lost Country* depicts a highly resilient colonial economy that exhibited durable and recuperative tendencies on numerous occasions.

The penultimate crisis came on the crest of the Great Depression, but O'Flaherty asserts that its roots ran much deeper than that. Sir Richard Squires's venal government as well as the cautious administrations of Walter Monroe and Frederick Alderdice cannot be blamed for Newfoundland's loss of responsible government in 1933. O'Flaherty argues that they were left to grapple with economic and political defects that had been germinating within the colony since the late nineteenth century. The railway failed to spark industrial development or turn a profit, wartime loans were quickly compounded by stifling interest rates, and the colony never developed the economic alternatives necessary to counter the unstable nature of the cod fishery and its international markets. O'Flaherty also suggests that Britain's unwillingness to do more economically and constitutionally for Newfoundland during the early 1930s was borne from its indifference to the colony's earlier diplomatic excursions.

O'Flaherty passionately argues that Newfoundland witnessed a series of major accomplishments between 1843 and 1933. He reminds us that the excitement and optimism surrounding modern industrial technology swept the colony in the form of telegraphy, steamship services, and the railway. Such developments provoked many Newfoundlanders to envision prosperity and stability within a rapidly modernizing world. O'Flaherty makes an observation of Newfoundland history that is too often obscured by preoccupations with defeat and loss. *Lost Country*, quite correctly I think, challenges us to remember that Newfoundland's historical record also consists of perseverance, optimism, and triumphs.

There were elements within the book that I wished to see either more or less of. Ordinary Newfoundlanders assume a background role in *Lost Country*, entering the narrative as either pauperized peasants or aggressive anarchists ready to demolish the colony's democratic processes. The same can be said for O'Flaherty's occasional references to the changing social and political roles of women. Neither element is adequately integrated into the principal narrative. The effectiveness of the study would not have suffered from the absence of the colonial masses, as their homogenous presence on the fringes of O'Flaherty's otherwise dynamic political narrative does seem mildly awkward.

Patrick O'Flaherty's *Lost Country* is an invigorating contribution to the historiography of Newfoundland and Labrador. His is a fresh and engaging account that complements foundational studies of Newfoundland's economic and political history by S.J.R. Noel, James K. Hiller, Shannon Ryan, and David Alexander. *Lost Country* is an admirable sequel to *Old Newfoundland*, and O'Flaherty demonstrates that good history can be written with passion, conviction, and optimism.

Robert J. Harding  
Dalhousie University

Joan Clark. *An Audience of Chairs*. Toronto: Vintage Canada, 2005, ISBN 0-676-97656-5

... if you have endured a great despair,  
then you did it alone.  
Anne Sexton, "Courage"

IN *THE AGE OF INNOCENCE* Edith Wharton suggests that among an individual's greatest sins are conformity, cowardice, and a general failure of imagination. Based on Wharton's account of what constitutes a life well-lived, Joan Clark's Moranna MacKenzie succeeded despite an often debilitating mental illness, the devastating loss of her two daughters, and the hostility of an unimaginative and terribly intolerant Maritime community.

The trajectory that Moranna's life would take was determined early when her mother, Margaret McWeeny MacKenzie, plagued by bouts of depression, drowned herself during a visit to Scotland, leaving a bewildered husband to raise two young children on his own. For Moranna, this dark family legacy was twofold: in her youth she was haunted by the spectre of the drowned mother who had abandoned her; and as she grew into womanhood, an inherited condition, characterized by extreme mood swings and frequent periods of delusion, would worsen. Yet following the failure of her marriage and the loss of her children, Moranna learned to cope with the chaos of her illness and, in the process, she achieved some small measure of control and contentment. According to Clark, one of the books that "most inspired and informed" the writing of *An Audience of Chairs* was Clifford W. Beers's *A Mind that Found Itself*, an autobiographical account of Beers's own mental breakdown and the inhumane treatment he witnessed and received after his affluent family committed him to a private insane asylum in Connecticut at the turn of the century. Upon his release, Beers became an advocate to change public perceptions of mental illness; he campaigned for more compassionate models of treatment; and he worked tirelessly for the promotion of good mental health.