

Willeen G. Keough, *The Slender Thread: Irish Women on the Southern Avalon, 1750-1860.*

Kerby A. Miller

Volume 26, numéro 2, fall 2011

URI : https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/nflds26_2rv02

[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

Miller, K. A. (2011). Compte rendu de [Willeen G. Keough, *The Slender Thread: Irish Women on the Southern Avalon, 1750-1860.*] *Newfoundland Studies*, 26(2), 291-293.

Guess what happens after Rainblatt says, “‘Come out to the balcony.... It’s time for a toast’” (254)? I will hint that Elliot’s boss cannot fly. Riche’s novel is by no means “easy to like,” but despite these examples, he remains a few letters short of Richler’s heights of savagery. For Riche to truly take his place among Canada’s best satirists, he needs to step onto his own metaphorical balcony. If he believes deeply enough in satire, then he will leap recklessly, splattering his indignation onto the smug sidewalk of our national consciousness.

Note

¹Steven Beattie, “Book Review: *Easy to Like*, by Edward Riche,” *National Post*, 9 Sept. 2011, para. 9. At: <arts.nationalpost.com/2011/09/09/book-review-easy-to-like-by-edward-riche/>.

Tom Halford
Memorial University

Willeen G. Keough, *The Slender Thread: Irish Women on the Southern Avalon, 1750-1860*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2008. ISBN: 978-0-231132-02-2.

THE SLENDER THREAD: Irish Women on the Southern Avalon, 1750-1860, by Willeen Keough, a historian at Simon Fraser University, is a lengthy (542 pages), deeply researched, and well-written study of Irish Catholic (and some Protestant) women who lived on the southern shores of Newfoundland’s Avalon Peninsula from the late 1600s to the mid-1800s, particularly between about 1750 and 1860. This review is based on the printed text, although *The Slender Thread* was produced initially as a Gutenberg e-book, with “digital images, artwork, audio, video, and hyperlinks that allow the reader to experience the full meaning of this scholarly work” (ii). Yet, the printed text alone is very impressive. Combining extensive historical research, in oral as well as written sources, with perspectives drawn from anthropology, ethnography, folklore, and gender studies, *The Slender Thread* is a major work that makes important contributions to Irish diaspora and women’s and gender studies, generally, as well as to Newfoundland and Canadian history. In all respects, it is a worthy extension of John Mannion’s classic *Irish Settlements in Eastern Canada: A Study of Cultural Transfer and Adaptation* (Toronto, 1974), which remains one of a handful of truly seminal studies of Irish migration and overseas settlement.

Keough’s principal thesis is that “plebeian” Irish Catholic women on the southern Avalon enjoyed unusual degrees of personal and collective “agency,” especially when compared with their middle-class Protestant contemporaries in

Newfoundland as well as with rural Catholic women in post-famine Ireland. Keough emphasizes several reasons for her subjects' relative empowerment: the similarities between pre-famine Irish peasant society and the poor, subsistence-based fishing communities on the southern Avalon, in both of which women's contributions to local economies and family survival were numerous, crucial, and highly valued; the initial and persistent weakness of bourgeois influences, both lay and clerical, on the region; and the willingness of colonial authorities to defer to local traditions and practices deemed necessary to maintain the fishing economy. Perhaps most important was that, in the Avalon settlement's first century, Irish fishing communities were both highly transient, dependent on seasonal migrations of labourers and servants from southeast Ireland, and overwhelmingly male; not until the mid-1800s would "normal" gender ratios become characteristic. Consequently, during Avalon society's formative period, the small (albeit steadily increasing) numbers of Irish Catholic women were disproportionately essential and instrumental in creating enduring patterns of permanent settlement, family formation, socio-economic stability, and cultural transmission.

The result was that, at least through the mid-1800s, local Irish women were remarkably free from both traditional and modern forms of patriarchy. As in pre-famine Ireland, partible inheritance, among female as well as male relatives, was common, and sexual relations, marriage, and effective divorce appear to have been remarkably informal and largely unregulated by civil or religious authorities. Most important, Irish women on the Avalon had — and "felt they had" — "equal stakes and equal responsibilities in family enterprises," as producers and workers in the fisheries and in agriculture, for example, and they comprised "a significant part of the exchange economy" (366). In addition, they played central roles in both formal and customary religious systems of belief and practice, and were aggressive in inter- and intra-communal conflict situations, both "outdoors" and in provincial courtrooms. Ironically, however, although Newfoundland's Protestant elites generally acquiesced in plebeian Irish women's assertive roles, on the Avalon as in post-famine Ireland, the Catholic Church's "civilizing mission" eventually would impose bourgeois ideals of "proper womanhood" and of "Irish motherhood based on self-denial, virtue, and domesticity" (368).

This brief summary cannot do justice to the full richness of Keough's study, which is replete with fascinating examples (the story of Peggy Mountain, for instance) illustrating these and other themes, based on exhaustive research in official, legal, business, and parish records, private correspondence, newspapers, and personal interviews. Her notes and appendices alone are veritable monuments of scholarship. And although the women on the southern Avalon constitute Keough's principal subject, readers wishing to learn about Irish migration and settlement in pre-1860 Newfoundland, generally, as well as about the province's early economy, society, and legal and political systems, will find this work broadly beneficial. Indeed, one of Keough's most evocative chapters (Chapter Nine) focuses on upper-

and middle-class Newfoundland women, nearly all Protestants of English background, whose lives and roles contrasted sharply with those of the Avalon's Irish fisherwomen.

In short, this is a marvellous work, and this reviewer takes issue with only two points, one theoretical, the other historiographical but, admittedly, also somewhat personal. The first point concerns Keough's rather relentless insistence on the "agency" of Irish women on the Avalon (*versus* what she decries as many historians' stereotypical portrayal of women's "victimhood"). To be sure, Keough draws compelling contrasts between her subjects' multiple roles and relative freedoms, on the one hand, and the constraints of "domesticity" and "respectability" imposed on their middle-class peers, on the other hand. Despite its sometimes "New Left" associations, however, "agency" strikes me, ironically, as an inherently bourgeois-capitalist concept with "modern" and "individualistic" connotations, which therefore seems somewhat inappropriately applied to people who were embedded in what Keough describes as highly "traditional" and "communal" societies. Yet another danger in "agency" is its frequent reactionary usage — by authors with socio-political perspectives much different from Keough's — to obscure or even deny the structural inequities and systemic exploitations, which fundamentally constrain the lives of all those who inhabit "plebeian" or subaltern communities.

Finally, Keough's masterful book clearly proves that she is far too good a historian to feel any need to emphasize her own contributions by disparaging or caricaturing the work of other scholars; put bluntly, her assertion that my work depicts Irish Catholics as "an inferior ... emigrant type" (60) is a gross misrepresentation, although, to be fair, Keough is merely repeating the line taken by the reputed godfather of Irish Canadian studies, Donald Akenson, and, also to be fair, she displays more courage than most of her peers in critiquing his studies of the Irish diaspora.

Kerby A. Miller
University of Missouri

Calvin Hollett, *Shouting, Embracing, and Dancing with Ecstasy: The Growth of Methodism in Newfoundland, 1774-1874*. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2010. ISBN: 978-0-773536-71-5.

THIS FORCEFULLY ARGUED and finely researched study presents a fascinating account of the growth of Methodism in Newfoundland in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The first part of the study is primarily conceptual and throws down a highly provocative thesis about the character of Newfoundland Methodism and, more generally, about the social and cultural history of the island. Hollett asserts that Methodism in Newfoundland was "a robust popular movement of the religion of experience." It was rooted in local communities, led by lay preachers and class leaders, and sustained by ongoing revivals of religion that carried Methodism