

Sean Cadigan. *Death on Two Fronts: National Tragedies and the Fate of Democracy in Newfoundland, 1914–34*

Raymond Blake

Volume 30, numéro 1, fall 2015

URI : https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/nflds30_1rev01

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Faculty of Arts, Memorial University

ISSN

1719-1726 (imprimé)

1715-1430 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce document

Blake, R. (2015). Sean Cadigan. *Death on Two Fronts: National Tragedies and the Fate of Democracy in Newfoundland, 1914–34*. *Newfoundland and Labrador Studies*, 30(1), 154–157.

REVIEWS

Sean Cadigan. *Death on Two Fronts: National Tragedies and the Fate of Democracy in Newfoundland, 1914–34*. Toronto: Allen Lane, 2013. ISBN 978-0670065394

The History of Canada Series, of which Sean Cadigan's *Death on Two Fronts: National Tragedies and the Fate of Democracy in Newfoundland 1914–34* is an important contribution, examines defining moments and crucial turning points in Canada's history. Although Newfoundland chose only in 1949 to become a part of Canada, the events between 1914 and 1934 that Cadigan describes so admirably in his book are, indeed, critical turning points in the history of Newfoundland and of Canada. Although it is not Cadigan's explicit purpose to establish a link between what happened in Newfoundland between 1914 and 1934 to developments after 1949, it is clear from the narrative he weaves that by 1934 there was little likelihood of Newfoundland and Labrador reverting back any time later to the politics and constitutionalism that marked the first three decades of the twentieth century. Those years that Cadigan describes paved the way for Newfoundland's entry into the Canadian confederation.

The Newfoundland that emerges in *Death on Two Fronts* is marked by pervasive disillusionment, despair, and demoralization. Such feelings did not result from the economic collapse brought by the ravages of the Great Depression, Cadigan contends, but from the events of 1914. The disillusionment began with the horrifying losses in the seal hunt that year when 173 sealers died on the *Southern Cross* when the ship sank in a storm and another 78 from the *Newfoundland* froze to death after being left on the ice floes in blizzard conditions. Such staggering losses demonstrated that the merchant class had little regard for human life and citizens finally became aware of the class divisions in their society. The arrival of the *Bellaventure* into St. John's harbour with 69

frozen corpses stacked on its deck like cords of wood “galvanized the incipient protest that had been gathering strength” (301) and bolstered the protest movement that had been launched by William Coaker and his Fishermen’s Protective Union in 1908. Coaker was committed to revolutionizing the fisheries to give fishers a greater share of the economic rents from the industry, but he did not threaten liberal democracy in Newfoundland. He had tried to work within the existing system and had turned to the political system earlier, in 1912. He believed that the government could ameliorate — and improve — the conditions for fishers through strong and progressive state action. The charismatic Coaker had considerable support, and by 1914 he had signed up just over half of those engaged in the industry.

Coaker’s plan for a more economically just Newfoundland was derailed in part by the outbreak of war in 1914. As Cadigan argues, the war put severe limits on how far Coaker and others could go in their criticism of the government, especially after the Newfoundland Regiment was nearly annihilated in the Battle of the Somme on 1 July 1916. Some 324 soldiers were killed and another 386 wounded in defence of liberty and democracy. The war subsequently spawned a new nationalism in Newfoundland, led in part by a conservative mercantile community and supported by the St. John’s elites who came to idealize and commemorate the fallen soldiers as embodying the political virtues of *laissez-faire* they had died protecting. All of this, Cadigan argues, worked against an active government with progressive measures to deal with the social and economic problems that faced the country in the post-war period.

Even Coaker subsequently lost faith in liberal democracy when his attempts to reform the fishery largely failed, and he became disillusioned that the people he believed he represented turned to the “patronage of corrupt St. John’s politicians and their mercantile supporters” (xvii) for relief from their poverty. Demoralized and disappointed, he turned increasingly to the virtues of authoritarian government and considered the effectiveness of dictatorial leaders such as Mussolini as the best way to save the country. He was joined in this crusade by the mercantile and professional elites, who also believed that Newfoundland workers and fishers had become so dependent on public relief that they did not deserve democratic government. The sealers, who earlier in 1914 were angry with such loss of life in the industry, were by the late 1920s being commemorated as “descendants of the Elizabethan sailors” and, hence, rugged individualists “who revelled in danger and required none of the state protection that Coaker had demanded in the wake of the disasters of 1914” (257). For Cadigan, the idealization of the sealer and the self-sacrificing soldier

by the elites — and by Coaker — was driven by a right-wing ideology that prevented even moderate reform to the existing political system. In the attempt to purify politics and encourage working people to behave “properly,” the elites in Newfoundland did not protest the suspension of responsible government in 1933. With one-third of the Newfoundland population on public relief, the unemployed and many workers, too, saw little hope for the existing political system.

Coaker is the central figure in *Death on Two Fronts*, and he clearly disappoints Cadigan. By the early 1930s, Coaker was a bitter and disillusioned figure who had largely turned his back on the “fishing people he had once championed” (298). He had come to enjoy the “trappings of personal success” (308) demonstrated by his palatial home in Port Union, extensive international travel, and even a residence in Jamaica. He had failed to capitalize on the “awareness of class” (301) that the deaths of sealers in 1914 had occasioned and had failed to fundamentally reorder Newfoundland society. So many deaths in the sealing industry had shown most of the people in rural Newfoundland how little they benefited from the paternalism of the country’s economic order, but Coaker only advocated moderate reform rather than pursuing a new democracy. Coaker and his union of fishers were largely uninterested in the reforms advocated by St. John’s labour leaders and thus missed an excellent opportunity to build a broadly based, class-conscious reform movement. Moreover, Coaker was naive to believe that throwing in his lot with the existing political elites, joining the national wartime government, and supporting conscription would provide him the opportunity to reform Newfoundland from within the corridors of power. The quest for power, Cadigan contends, was Coaker’s undoing and, when he failed to win control of the political system as he had hoped, he lost faith in ordinary working people.

Cadigan’s focus on Coaker and the other political elites in Newfoundland society is a departure from his earlier work on Newfoundland, and it comes at the expense of a deeper investigation into Newfoundland and Labrador society from 1914 to 1930. The over-reliance on newspaper accounts and especially the editorial content of the St. John’s newspapers, including Coaker’s own mouthpiece, *The Fishermen’s Advocate*, ignores the plight and views of people outside the capital. His analysis would have been strengthened with a more in-depth analysis of Newfoundland society and economy and if he had looked beyond St. John’s and Coaker’s domain on the northeast coast. By doing so, it would have added credibility to his claim that the Newfoundland disaster, for instance, “charged the political climate of the colony with an unprecedented awareness of

class" (301). Identity based on class develops over a long period of time, and class antagonisms do not emerge spontaneously from a particular incident, nor, once galvanized, are they likely to be suppressed through the ideological musings of a local elite and a few newspapers editors promoting conservative ideals of freedom and democracy, as Cadigan suggests they were. What citizens in Newfoundland likely wanted in the 1920s and early 1930s was a caring state that offered them a more secure future than they then endured; they believed the chances of that were better with a British-run commission. Newfoundland, it seems, was looking for a new constitutional arrangement and a state that could better meet their needs, which were great.

While the metaphor of the two fronts is, indeed, interesting and Cadigan does a fine job of developing the sealing disasters and the tragedy of war into a single theme, too much of the book is based on reports from newspapers and at times such reporting is tedious. Still, he must be commended for his attempt to offer a new interpretation of the loss of responsible government in Newfoundland and Labrador and for showing that by 1933 the country was demoralized and disillusioned with its experiment with democracy and ready to move on to something better.

Raymond Blake
University of Regina

Olaf U. Janzen. *War and Trade in Eighteenth-Century Newfoundland*. Research in Maritime History No. 52. St. John's: International Maritime Economic History Association, 2013. ISBN 978-1-927869-02-4

In *War and Trade in Eighteenth-Century Newfoundland*, Olaf Janzen presents Newfoundland history in the broader context of the North Atlantic world. His book contains 12 essays written between 1984, when he received his Ph.D., and 2008, by which time he had become a seasoned academic. They therefore trace an intellectual journey, albeit one that is difficult to follow because the essays appear not in the order in which they were written and published, but in rough chronological order of their subject matter. The first paper, "A World Embracing Sea: The Oceans as Highway, 1604-1815," is the only questionable