

Fardy, B. D. *William Epps Cormack; Newfoundland Pioneer.*

Alan G. Macpherson

Volume 2, numéro 1, spring 1986

URI : https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/nflds2_1re03

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Faculty of Arts, Memorial University

ISSN

1198-8614 (imprimé)

1715-1430 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Macpherson, A. G. (1986). Compte rendu de [Fardy, B. D. *William Epps Cormack; Newfoundland Pioneer.*] *Newfoundland Studies*, 2(1), 99–103.

ing a separate and modern continental identity, one that is clearly not American. The passing of Trudeau and the coming to power of the Conservatives in Ottawa are hardly likely to change this fact. Indeed, as Canadians, this is clearly what we have wanted. However as Newfoundlanders (or Québécois) the consequences may well be disastrous. And that is our other identity and commitment!

Jackson pleads prudence. Prudence is a typically Canadian quality that may well pay off in southern Ontario but I'm not sure that it offers a solution to the problems of an offshore island. Not surprisingly, perhaps, the examples offered by the author of successful yet small places are all sovereign states, one of which, Iceland, only achieved complete independence in 1944. After reading *Newfoundland in Canada* I can hardly believe that the people's search for a polity is over.

UNIVERSITÉ LAVAL

William Epps Cormack; Newfoundland Pioneer. B. D. Fardy. St. John's: Creative Publishers, 1985. 89 p. \$7.95.

ALAN G. MACPHERSON

This little volume is essentially an attempt to compile a narrative account of the events that made up the life of William Cormack. It is not a definitive biography, but it will undoubtedly prove useful to a future biographer.

Cormack's epic walk across Newfoundland from Trinity Bay to St. George's Bay in 1822, his philanthropic and ethnographic association with Shanawdithit, and his expedition from the Bay of Exploits to Red Indian Lake in search of Beothuck survivors in 1827 have long been part of the popular history of Newfoundland, and as such have been pretty thoroughly documented and commented upon by earlier scholars and writers, most notably James P. Howley in his documentation of *The Beothucks or Red Indians; The Aboriginal Inhabitants of Newfoundland*. Fardy mines this material in a rather selective manner, without adding anything to what is already known. Similarly, he uses the obituary written by Edward Graham, Cormack's last close friend, to fill in the main sequence of events in Cormack's life, as others have done, but quite uncritically and without mentioning him by name. Those events, in bare outline, were: his birth in St. John's in 1796, education in Scotland (1803-1818), an emigrant land agency in Prince Edward Island (1818-1822), his years in Newfoundland (1822-29),

a brief return to Prince Edward Island on business and a period of writing about his Newfoundland experience in Britain (1829-1836), his years in Australia and New Zealand (1836-1849), another short interlude in Britain, then his California phase (1853-59), followed by his final move to British Columbia where he died in 1868, just prior to his seventy-second birthday. Fardy's account has the merit of considerably clarifying this chronology and placing Cormack's various publications in proper context.

The method used to compile this narrative account is to accept what is already in print, and to pursue through the good offices of local archivists and historians whatever documentation is readily available on Cormack's activities in these far-flung fringes of empire. It works fitfully for New South Wales, New Zealand, California and British Columbia, poorly for Prince Edward Island, and not at all for St. John's and Scotland. There is, regrettably, a tendency to assume that persons important in Cormack's life can be left in anonymity. Thus we are told that his father was "a prominent merchant of the old town [of St. John's]," but he remains unnamed and undocumented; the five young men consigned to Cormack as convict labour at Dungog, north of Sydney in New South Wales, are not named, as are not the three English (?) land speculators for whom Cormack acted in the North Island of New Zealand. The anonymity in which his obituary writer is left has already been mentioned.

The author shows no curiosity whatever about Cormack's background in St. John's or in Scotland, although much of the evidence is readily available in local archives. His father, for example, is well-documented as Alexander Cormack, a small merchant who came to Newfoundland in 1782 and was one of the first of that class to take up permanent residence in the island. Nor is there any explanation for Cormack's un-Scottish middle name, which the author mistransliterates from the tombstone in New Westminster and which actually reads "William Eppes Cormack." He was evidently named after his father's senior partner, William Eppes, of Hart, Eppes & Co. trading out of St. John's to Québec and the West Indies. In 1798 Alexander Cormack was deputy to William Eppes in the latter's role as commissary of provisions to the garrison in St. John's. It is unclear in the book when Alexander Cormack died, and whether he died in St. John's or in Scotland. We are also left ignorant of the fact that the deeds to Alexander Cormack's property on Roope's Plantation in St. John's remained in the hands of one of the Rennies in 1814, so the vital connection between his St. John's background and his being sent to Prince Edward Island by Michael Rennie of Glasgow is never made. The property was managed by James

Stewart, another member of the Greenock connection in St. John's, until Cormack returned to his native place. The brief account we are given of Cormack's land agency in Prince Edward Island is mistaken as to the location; misled perhaps by Howley's footnoted comment (235) that New Glasgow (mentioned by the obituarist as the place of Cormack's activities) was not in the Island but in Nova Scotia, the author has Cormack as a founder of Charlottetown! But Charlottetown was over half a century old when Cormack took Rennie's emigrants from Glasgow to the Island. Edward Graham was probably correct in placing the new settlement in New Glasgow, a settlement on the River Clyde in Lot 23 between Hunter River and Cavendish, i.e. in "Green Gables" country, which was distinctly Scottish in its population.

The author appears to have made no effort to document Cormack's early years in Scotland; he fails to recognise Graham's obituary reference to Cormack's boyhood encounter with "Bonny Jean" (Robert Burns' widow) as an important cultural indicator; and he fails to note that Cormack, throughout his life, thought of himself as a Scotsman and was recognised by his friends as such, rather than as a Newfoundlander. In this, of course, he was no different from a good many others born in the island of immigrant parents but who moved away.

The account of Cormack's life in Newfoundland concentrates on a factual narrative of the 1822 expedition, the 1827-8 expedition to the winter quarters of the Beothucks on Red Indian Lake (which he found abandoned), and the circumstances of his association with Shanawdithit and the inauguration and subsequent activities of the Beothuck Institution. Nothing is said about the fact that most of Cormack's time was spent as a member of the business community, in effect reclaiming his father's place among the Scots merchants of the Greenock connection. In 1825, in partnership with John Thompson of Greenock, he purchased the *Seven Sisters*, a 59-ton coastal schooner. The partners, who had no home base in Britain, were active in the provisions and lumber trades from Quebec, just as Cormack's father had been a quarter of a century earlier. It is also unfortunate for the emphasis that the author rightly places upon Cormack's consistent support for the introduction of representative government in the outposts of empire—New South Wales, New Zealand and British Columbia—that he misses the fact that one of his last acts before leaving the place of his nativity was to sign, in 1828, a petition for representative government for Newfoundland. By that time the partnership with Thompson had been dissolved and Cormack was virtually bankrupt. In January 1829 he sailed for the last

time out of St. John's for Greenock, and all his surviving interests were sold off during the next three years. The last to go was a one-third share in a pew in the Anglican church.

The major contribution of the author to the record of what is known about Cormack comes in the period after 1836, when he went to Australia and New Zealand. We learn for the first time that he settled in the Dungog District of New South Wales, a few miles north of Sydney, where he had obtained the posts of clerk of the court and postmaster, and near which he began farming tobacco with young convict labour; in both capacities he ran into difficulties with the colonial authorities. Fardy provides much detail and reference to these affairs, which he describes as "the first kindling for the fires of contempt that he was to brandish at British Colonial Governments all over the world." Interludes in the North Island of New Zealand in 1839-1841 and 1842-43, acting in his old capacity as real estate agent for three English land speculators, led to clashes with Edward Gibbon Wakefield's New Zealand Company and the colonial authorities that supported it and a visit to England to attack the Treaty of Waitangi publicly as fraudulent encroachment on Maori rights. Further details are added to what is already known of Cormack's years in business in San Francisco (1853-58), and as colonial secretary to Governor Douglas in Victoria, newspaper essayist in *Amor de Cosmos'* *British Colonist* where he advocated the development of British Columbia's natural resources and urged the adoption of Newfoundland's fishery as the model for the Pacific Coast, municipal councillor in New Westminster, local superintendent for Indian Affairs, and finally chief librarian for New Westminster's new public library. In the last year of his life he presented a well-researched brief to the British Columbia government recommending the adoption of New Brunswick's land granting system for the new West Coast colony. It is stretching it rather anachronistically to suggest, as Fardy does, that Cormack had come full circle: British Columbia is over 7000 kilometres from Newfoundland and neither was part of Canada in 1868. But in referring to Cormack's concerns for resource development, native rights (Beothuck, Maori, Salish), social advancement, and political reform he succeeds in underlining the consistent themes of Cormack's life.

Historical biography demands a preparation for enquiry into the cultural and intellectual backgrounds of the individual which few amateur historians have. Bernard Fardy has succeeded in demonstrating the wide range of experience in Cormack's life. Wisely, he has refrained from examining the basis and expression of Cormack's thought as it has survived in his writings.

These writings do exist, and await the attention of a future biographer.

MEMORIAL UNIVERSITY

E. J. Pratt: The Truant Years 1882-1927. David G. Pitt. Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1984; St. John's: Jespersion Press, 1984. 415 p. \$24.95 (c), \$14.95 (p).

F. L. JACKSON

Biography is at its worst when it only gossips about the great or notorious. The work of sycophants who find genius even in the most trivial banalities of their heroes' lives is little better. The critical biography, again, all too often betrays some pedant's desire to get the better of the hero by revealing his feet of clay; regarding which we may observe with Hegel that if the hero is no hero to his valet, it is not because there are no heroes but because a valet is a valet.

In the biographical service he performs on behalf of his hero E. J. Pratt, David Pitt is neither gossip, lackey nor valet. The poet we encounter in the pages of this first volume of the projected two-volume biography leads no secret life; he is no Beerbohm caricature of artsy sophistication, no viking Übermensch imprisoned among the maple leaves. On the contrary, he is the very model of a modern college lecturer. He likes his job and weekends at the cottage. He enjoys movies and plays golf with the Toronto bourgeoisie. He is human, all too human: a fine poetic mind inhabiting an extraordinarily conventional body.

What is admirable about Pitt's study is just its faithfulness to the prosaic authenticity of Pratt's life. There is absolutely no effort to make him over into a Byronic demigod; Pitt is even gently critical of the poet's well-known penchant for autobiographical hyperbole. By sticking to the unvarnished narrative, however, Pitt is far from diminishing his subject in our eyes or compromising his genius. Rather the author succeeds in communicating a common truth unpopular among the literati: that manifest peculiarity and exceptionality of life are, frequently, hallmarks of pretentious fakers; true genius is often more modest and quite at home in unaffected souls.

Were it not so, how could our interest be sustained in the offspring of an obscure Newfoundland manse, in siblings Cal or Floss, in cats, boarding houses, train trips? What is it to us that a sometime draper's clerk, teacher, and travelling salesman should seek eventually to qualify for a clerical collar