

***Amulree's Legacy: Truth, Lies and Consequences. Papers and Presentations.* Edited by Garfield Fizzard.**

Raymond B. Blake

Volume 18, numéro 2, fall 2002

The New Early Modern Newfoundland: Part One

URI : https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/nflds18_2rv07

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Éditeur(s)

Faculty of Arts, Memorial University

ISSN

1198-8614 (imprimé)

1715-1430 (numérique)

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Citer ce compte rendu

Blake, R. B. (2002). Compte rendu de [*Amulree's Legacy: Truth, Lies and Consequences. Papers and Presentations.* Edited by Garfield Fizzard.] *Newfoundland Studies*, 18(2), 325–331.

their transcription and transfer into written form, but such have been the sensitive skills of the transcribers that no apparent loss of immediacy or freshness is detectable, and their publication bears witness to the richness and variety of the folk-narrative inventory in the province. There is no doubt in this reviewer's mind that *Little Jack and Other Newfoundland Folktales* is more than the result of a rescue operation of a fading tradition, although it is that, too, but reflects and returns to the people of Newfoundland what were, and to some extent still are, important comments on their own narrative heritage. The volume is certain to meet fully the expectations of those who have been clamouring for a less academic presentation of the *Folktales of Newfoundland*. The attractive cover does its contents full justice.

Note

¹See for example, *Newfoundland Studies* 13.1 (Spring 1997): 93-97.

Amulree's Legacy: Truth, Lies and Consequences. Papers and Presentations. Edited by Garfield Fizzard. The Newfoundland Historical Society Symposium, St. John's, Newfoundland, 2001, softcover, 104 p., ISBN 0-968080340.

RAYMOND B. BLAKE

IN HIS NOVEL, *The Colony of Unrequited Dreams*, Wayne Johnston claims that when Sir William Warrender Mackenzie, first Baron Amulree, arrived in St. John's in 1933, he and his fellow royal commissioners were received "like parents in whose absence we had torn the house apart and to whom we were now relieved to unburden ourselves of our guilt, having lived with it so long." In Johnston's world, Joseph R. Smallwood travelled with the Amulree Commission to cover its hearings for his paper, and the future premier was embarrassed at the "contagion of self-debasement [that] swept the land" as he listened to what his fellow Newfoundlanders had to say. "We had admitted," Johnston had Smallwood saying, "neither for the first nor the last time, that nationhood was a luxury we could not afford ... I was choked with shame and anger ..." ¹ Those sentiments are clearly evident in *Amulree's Legacy: Truth, Lies and Consequences*.

Surprisingly, the Newfoundland Royal Commission of 1933, which led to the surrender of responsible government, has been the subject of limited scrutiny. Still, more than 30 years ago, in his *Politics in Newfoundland*, S.J.R. Noel noted that

while the Commission and its recommendations might have been expected to stir controversy, “it was greeted calmly, almost apathetically. There were no leaders to rally opposition.” Like others, Noel found that Newfoundlanders themselves welcomed “a rest from politics.” Peter Neary similarly concluded in *Newfoundland in the North Atlantic World, 1929-49*, that the Amulree Report “was widely praised in the press on both sides of the Atlantic,” adding that some of the “most flattering” comments appeared in the two principal St. John’s newspapers.² Noel wondered if the Commission’s diagnosis of Newfoundland’s problem was accurate, and even if it was, whether its recommendation to suspend responsible government was the correct prescription. After all, Amulree and his fellow commissioners had come to Newfoundland ready to compare the political culture there with an idealized Westminster model of government, rather than that which characterized the more backward and underdeveloped regions of Canada where, like Newfoundland, political corruption was common. Of course, the commissioners did not find the “strictest Westminster standards” operating in Newfoundland, but Noel argued — like others since — that Newfoundland’s problems in the early 1930s did not stem from the abuses of the political system, but were financial and economic. Even if Newfoundland was the political equivalent of Sodom and Gomorrah, did it necessarily follow that the best course of action was to strip away “every last vestige of representative government”?³

More recently, novelist Kevin Major, in his attempt at writing Newfoundland’s history, reminded us once again that there was no outcry at the loss of the democratic government that earlier generations of Newfoundlanders had fought hard to achieve. To his credit, Major wonders about this course of events and asks: “How, in the name of heaven, could a people ever allow its democratic rights to be swept away? This is a question many modern-day Newfoundlanders have been struggling with,” he acknowledges, but the “more appropriate questions might be, Why had a people been driven beyond caring? And by whom?”⁴

These are interesting questions, and one might have expected answers from those participating in the symposium organized in 2000 by the Newfoundland Historical Society on the legacy of the 1933 Newfoundland Royal Commission. In fact, Garfield Fizzard tells us in his brief Foreword that the event was intended “to consider the impact that the report has had on the way Newfoundlanders subsequently came to be viewed by themselves and others.” Unfortunately, Professor Fizzard merely teases the reader, noting that the Royal Commission saw Newfoundland’s problem in moral and political terms. Yet Fizzard maintains that the judgements of Amulree and his fellow commissioners did not die with the Report, but “have reappeared in popular histories and the media, and have influenced how others view us, and, unfortunately, how we sometimes view ourselves.” The volume would have been strengthened considerably if Fizzard had elaborated on his claim. Not only would that have been a useful contribution to our understanding of Newfoundland, but it would have also set the context for the papers that follow, as

their authors attempt to assess the validity of the Commission's claim, and examine "the ways in which these judgements have made their way into Newfoundland's culture and self-image." As the volume was published, each essay virtually stands alone and that, I fear, does an injustice to the Society's attempt to assess Amulree's legacy and the lines of inquiry and analysis that Fizzard began in the Foreword. What we have here, then, is more a mimeographed collection of conference papers than a real attempt at an edited collection, though Fizzard tells us that he included the essays in the form submitted by the authors. There are only three historical essays in the volume, and one of them, paradoxically, comes from a sociologist. The rest are reflections and thoughts on aspects of Newfoundland society, culture, identity, and history.

Terry Bishop-Stirling provides the introduction to the subject, though, curiously, it is the fourth chapter of the volume. Using mainly published secondary sources, she provides the background leading to the appointment of the Royal Commission, and examines briefly its findings and the reaction to it in Newfoundland. She claims — as do others in the volume — that the Amulree Report did not create the negative images it portrayed. She alludes to the testimony of Newfoundlanders who appeared before the Commission, but refers the reader to Gene Long's *Suspended State: Newfoundland Before Canada*,⁵ rather than providing even a synopsis of that testimony which, elsewhere in her paper, she calls a "jackpot." She also notes that some scholars have rejected the notion that "Commission Government was a foreign notion imposed on Newfoundland from the outside," though it would have been interesting to have Bishop-Stirling's own interpretation of Amulree and the period in which he came to Newfoundland, given her work in teaching at Memorial and researching Newfoundland history.

There are several papers on what might be called the uses of Newfoundland history. Jeff A. Webb takes the occasion to reflect upon this subject, claiming that the Amulree Report was "arguably the most important text" in Newfoundland history, as it provided the justification for ending democratic government in the dominion. He also claims that it "also became a master narrative of Newfoundland history ... [as] much of what had been written about Newfoundland since 1933 has been influenced directly or indirectly by the Amulree Report's conclusions about the history of Newfoundland." This claim seems to fit nicely with the objective of the symposium, but Webb chose not to follow this theme. Instead, he gives a brief overview of the potential uses of history, and throughout the essay, calls for a dialogue on the goals of a new history curriculum contemplated by the Department of Education. This call should be heeded if, as John P. Greene suggests, the history he learned in Newfoundland's school system in the early 1950s left him with a victim mentality, though it will be important in any new history not to replace one myth with another.

The role of Newfoundland culture is another theme developed in some of the essays. Chris Brookes attempts to answer Kevin Major's question concerning

Newfoundlanders' failure to stand up and fight for democracy in 1933. Brookes finds part of the answer in religious accommodation. In his view, the rapid acceptance of the Amulree recommendations had little to do with what the Commission actually reported, but more to do with the accommodation between Catholics and Protestants that had been reached in the 1860s. After that, a Protestant lighthouse keeper, for instance, had to be followed by a Catholic one, regardless of qualifications, creating a mentality which assumed that what the people wanted mattered very little, and which bred a feeling of resignation. Why bother to be engaged with public life, when everyone knew that the social and religious accommodation between the elites determined the outcome of practically everything in the country? This is an interesting hypothesis that calls for further investigation.

Several of the essays argue that the Commission misunderstood aspects of Newfoundland economy and society. An example of this is Sean Cadigan's contribution, which builds on his earlier investigation of merchant-settler relations in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.⁶ The Commission attributed many of Newfoundland's economic and political problems to "the demoralization of the people by the merchant truck," but Cadigan maintains that the truck system had worked well in outport Newfoundland, even if it was an "unequal, paternalistic accommodation" between merchants and fishers. By the time Amulree arrived, "the older paternalistic accommodations of truck had largely disappeared," and he maintains that Amulree was "wrong in blaming much of the class antagonisms that had recently marked Newfoundland society on truck." "The Commission," he concludes, "would have been more accurate in blaming such antagonisms on the decline of truck." He claims that the Amulree Commission misrepresented the importance of truck to Newfoundland, and suggests that when Brigus fishers came to the defence of their local merchant in 1848, this was evidence of popular support for the existing economic system. On the other hand, Chris Brookes includes in his essay several telegrams from magistrates in the 1930s reporting that fishers intended to raid the merchant stores because they were starving, and desperately needed food that they could not secure from the shopowners. Clearly, something had gone awry by then. Although Cadigan does not make the point in his essay, the belief is widespread that the fishing merchants pillaged and economically raped outport fishers for generations. Even a quick tour of a few merchants' homes — some of which exist as historic properties — suggests that the merchants did much better than the fishermen; it was not the fishers who gained most of the economic rents from the fishery. Yet, as Leslie Harris points out in personal recollections of his extended family at Great Gallows Harbour, the Royal Commission could have found examples of families of "comparative comfort and of considerable dignity and of total independence" if it had looked for them, as well as examples of abject poverty, misery, and dependence. For Harris, Amulree missed the culture of independence and self-sufficiency, a point reinforced by Maura Hanrahan who also reflects on her family's history. James Overton's essay reminds us that we need to

look beyond individual families to get an accurate picture of early twentieth-century life in Newfoundland, however.

One of the better papers in the volume comes from James K. Hiller,⁷ who asks if the political system was “as rotten and corrupt as Amulree said?” As Hiller acknowledges, it is difficult to answer this question in a short paper, but he provides an excellent start and, hopefully, other scholars will delve deeper into this important issue. He notes that the public service was not particularly efficient, as it was heavily politicized, overly centralized, and patronage-ridden. The absence of local government left the Members of the House of Assembly with too much power, and there were too few people or institutions that might have balanced or checked that power. There was corruption, of course, but Hiller makes the point that Newfoundland did not have a monopoly on political scandal and corruption, and that the situation in some Canadian provinces was not that much better. Hiller concludes that “irresponsible political extravagance does not seem to have been a major factor in creating [Newfoundland’s] financial collapse,” but he does suggest that the lack of political leadership and the bitterness of political warfare during the 1920s did nothing to help the situation. Unfortunately, Hiller did not pursue what he refers to (twice) as the country’s “ingrained denominationalism,” and analyze its role in the creation of Newfoundland’s problems. I noted above Chris Brookes’s suggestion that denominationalism was fundamental to the collapse of the country in 1933. Clearly, this is a subject requiring further study, and one that the Newfoundland Historical Society might soon pursue at one of its symposiums.

The best paper comes from sociologist (though he might pass as a historian) James Overton⁸ — and it is also the longest. Like Hiller, he investigates the accuracy of one of Amulree’s findings, as he moves from the political to social issues of poverty, dependence and self-reliance. He also explores the actual extent of the poverty that Amulree reported and others, such as J.R. Smallwood, used (or abused) in the Confederation campaigns. In a well-researched paper and nicely-written essay, Overton finds that Amulree did not get it wrong when he spoke of widespread poverty. He points out that there was poverty throughout the country, though not the kind that we have seen in recent years on news clips from Africa. People were not dying from starvation, but there was “death from malnutrition and deficiency diseases caused by poor diet.” Infant mortality was high, and deaths among young men and women was common, easily confirmed by a visit to any of the cemeteries in outport Newfoundland. (I was recently struck by the large number of headstones marking the graves of children and young women and men who had died between the 1850s and the 1950s, when my brothers and I recently visited Pushthrough, Macallum, and Hermitage.) Overton claims that Amulree did not exaggerate the extent of poverty — if anything, it might have been underplayed.

Similarly, Overton contends that Amulree was also accurate on the extent of dependency, though not in his analysis of the problem. Amulree assumed that fishermen were hoarding their money when he found that they had some \$1.26 million

in the government Savings Bank. Overton suggests that people kept their money there for emergencies — paying for the doctor, for instance. Amulree also believed that access to relief was easy, but that was not the case, Overton argues. Amulree also shared the view of the elites that the growth of poverty and unemployment was a problem of morality. Overton contends, convincingly, that there was no moral decline, and that what Amulree witnessed was part of a recurrent pattern of response to severe economic crisis, unemployment, and poverty.

Perhaps more important for the theme of this volume, Overton attacks those politicians, academics, journalists and others who have claimed that Amulree painted a false picture, dismissed as inaccurate his portrait of Newfoundland as a poverty-stricken place, and accused Smallwood of fabrication when he seized upon Amulree's portrait in the campaign for Confederation in 1948. They have argued that the "claim of the poverty of Newfoundland" was false.⁹ Overton maintains that "this line of argument links into a denial that pre-Confederation Newfoundland was poor, and assertions that the loss of responsible government caused the growth of dependence [in Newfoundland]." But the poverty was real, and the argument that the culture of dependency in Newfoundland is new cannot be sustained.

Overton also offers some sage advice for those examining "difficult" periods in their history. Events such as the symposium that led to this volume "should not be the occasion for circling the wagons." They should be seen as a time to question our assumptions about the past, and an "opportunity to look again at the evidence which does exist and to assess it." As academics and social and political commentators, we must resist the urge to see the past as some poor reflection of ourselves and our present society, as this frequently results in the need to create new and misleading myths.¹⁰ As the recent Report from the Royal Commission on Renewing and Strengthening Our Place in Canada acknowledges, blame for whatever problem the province faces is often laid at "the feet of governments, big business or other impersonal forces [which] creates a milieu of victimization and erodes local agency and responsibility." The Report goes on to suggest that "we must [allow] people to learn that the story of their past, despite its perceived shortcomings, is largely one of resilience, survival and even success over the centuries."¹¹ Some of the essays in the collection should help in this process.

Notes

¹Wayne Johnston, *The Colony of Unrequited Dreams* (Toronto, Alfred A. Knopf, 1998).

²Peter Neary, *Newfoundland in the North Atlantic World, 1929-1949* (Montreal and Kingston, McGill-Queen's University Press, 1988).

³S.J.R. Noel, *Politics in Newfoundland* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1973).

⁴Kevin Major, *As Near to Heaven by Sea. A History of Newfoundland and Labrador* (Toronto, Penguin Group, 2001), 362.

⁵Gene Long, *Suspended State: Newfoundland Before Canada* (St. John's, Breakwater Books, 1999).

⁶Sean Cadigan, *Hope and Deception in Conception Bay: Merchant-Settler Relations in Newfoundland, 1785-1855* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1995).

⁷Hiller offers an overview of the period in "Newfoundland Confronts Canada, 1867-1949," in E.R. Forbes and D.A. Muise, eds., *The Atlantic Provinces in Confederation* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1993).

⁸Overton has written widely on this period. See, in particular, James Overton, "Economic Crisis and End of Democracy: Politics in Newfoundland During the Great Depression," *Labour/Le Travail* 26 (Fall 1990), and James Overton, "Brown Flour and Beriberi: The Politics of Dietary and Health Reform in Newfoundland in the First Half of the Twentieth Century," *Newfoundland Studies* 14.1 (1998): 1-27.

⁹Here, Overton directs the reader to John Fitzgerald and his review of my book, *Canadians at Last: Canada Integrates Newfoundland as a Province* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1994). See John Fitzgerald, "The Orthodoxy Unchallenged: On Raymond Blake's *Canadians At Last*," *Newfoundland Studies* 11.1 (1995): 127-144.

¹⁰For a thorough treatment of culture and history in Newfoundland, see Peter Gerald Bannister, "The Politics of Cultural Memory: Themes in the History of Newfoundland and Labrador in Canada, 1972-2003." Research Paper prepared for Royal Commission on Renewing and Strengthening Our Place in Canada, St. John's, 2003.

¹¹*Our Place in Canada*. Report of the Royal Commission on Renewing and Strengthening Our Place in Canada, St. John's, 2003, p. vi.

Curse of the Red Cross Ring. Earl B. Pilgrim. St. John's, Flanker Press, viii, 334 pp., trade pbk., \$19.95, 2000, ISBN 1-894463-11-0.

ROBIN McGRATH

"THE SUN LOOKED boldly through its bloodshot eye as it peeked over the boiling ocean, and the breath of the toiling men mixed with the salty spray to give a pinkish hue as they hauled the huge cod trap." Thus begins *Curse of the Red Cross Ring*, and thus it continues for 334 relentless pages. *Curse of the Red Cross Ring* is a best seller, a phenomenon of Newfoundland publishing.

Given the poetry of Mary Dalton and John Steffler, the fiction of Michael Crummey and Patrick Kavanagh, the prose of D.M. Doherty and Carmelita McGrath, it is inarguable that Newfoundland and Labrador writers are finally competing nose-to-nose with some of the best writers in the world. However, according to the sales figures, it is not Dalton, Crummey or even Donna Morrissey that