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Paul Bowdring. *The Strangers' Gallery*

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Paul Bowdring. *The Strangers' Gallery*. Halifax: Vagrant Press, 2013.
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> *Of all the national assets, archives are the most precious: They are the gift of one generation to another and the extent of our care of them marks the extent of our civilization.*
>
> Sir Arthur G. Doughty, "Canada's Records of the War"

Set in Newfoundland and Labrador, a province that was without provincial archives until 1960, Paul Bowdring's award-winning third novel, *The Strangers' Gallery*, would seem to query the assuredness of Sir Arthur Doughty's lofty proclamation. Encapsulating a vast mélange of historical sources, from the patently apocryphal to the most veritable historical accounts, *The Strangers' Gallery* is an archive unto itself. When it comes to the history of Newfoundland and Labrador, Bowdring leaves little unmentioned. From the landing of Leif Ericson to "year one of the Joey Smallwood calendar" and the entrance of Newfoundland into Confederation, the inclusion of events from over a millennia of Newfoundland history speaks to the novel's immense historical scope. In its preoccupation with history the novel is not unique, but in taking as its subject matter the ways in which we acquire, organize, classify, preserve, and manipulate historical knowledge through an engagement with archival documents, Bowdring offers a fresh perspective on a well-worn subject.

The novel is much more, however, than a catalogue of item-level fond descriptions of Newfoundland history or an index of political diatribes delivered by embittered nationalists, though it includes a bit of both. Taking as its narrator an "unimpeachably neutral" middle-aged university archivist, Michael Lowe, Bowdring's novel explores the inevitable inadequacy of recorded history and archival repositories even while it draws heavily from archival records. Bowdring's ability to weave seamlessly together a dizzying array of anecdotes, quotations, and historical accounts into a narrative that is neither jarring nor tedious is one of many strengths that make *The Strangers' Gallery* a compelling story. More importantly, Bowdring is able to render those disparate historical fragments relevant and meaningful to the reader through the development of complex and multi-layered characters.

The novel's central story traces the lives of four people living in St. John's over the course of a single year. At the centre of the story is Anton Aalders, a Dutch truck driver and polymath who arrives unexpectedly at Michael's home in St. John's on Father's Day in 1995. Anton has travelled from the Netherlands to Newfoundland in search of his father, a Newfoundland soldier in World War II whom he has never met. The novel documents the relationships Michael and Anton form with Brendan "Miles" Harnett, a fervently patriotic historian, and Miranda Michaels, a colour-blind artist and art teacher who recently has moved to St. John's after the death of her parents. The eccentricities and idiosyncrasies of these characters contribute to a narrative layering that enriches Bowdring's exploration of history as it is captured through personal memory. Like the land of Anton's native Holland, which we are reminded frequently was reclaimed from the sea, Bowdring's characters are seeking to reclaim elements of the past in order to give meaning to their present circumstances.

Through these quests for identity — historical, cultural, political, and personal — the reader is given access to a wide range of real and imagined histories. The encyclopedic digressions of Anton on everything from Vermeer forgeries to the endangerment of the piping plover are juxtaposed with protracted tirades delivered by Miles Harnett on the twofold demise of the country of Newfoundland, first in 1934 and then in 1949. All of these historical and anecdotal episodes, however, are related to the reader through the perspective of Michael Lowe, whose own associative leaps guide the reader along a meandering path into the depths of Newfoundland's past. A self-described member of the "sedentary, monastic, and wistful tribe" of archivists, scholars, and pedagogues, Michael is plagued with the fear that indifference has caused him to waste his life away thinking rather than acting (18). In keeping with the Joycean allusiveness of the narrative, Bowdring's protagonist appears as a sort of aging Stephen Dedalus who has yet to go forth and forge anything tangible in the smithy of his introspective soul. "Yes a whole life already," thinks Michael, "and I haven't even started" (57). His disinterestedness begins to wane when he determines, in the manner of Edward Gibbon, to "write the Rise and Fall of the country" of Newfoundland by compiling the "Brendan 'Miles' Harnett Fonds" (88). Michael's endeavour, however, is less focused on the rise and fall of Newfoundland than on the rise and fall of Miles Harnett, a character who represents a waning era of anti-Confederate nationalism, or "patriotism" as Miles Harnett is wont to call it. Through an eclectic amalgam of Miles Harnett's personal anecdotes, articles, letters to the editor, and impromptu speeches, Bowdring provides a portrait of Newfoundland nationalism that, not unlike Anton's beloved piping plover, is becoming endangered.

As one might imagine, the integration of so many tangential tales has the effect of decelerating the development of the central narrative. But while the pace of the novel is at times slow, it is never tedious. Bowdring's prose style suits his subject and he has a penchant for pursuing a new narrative thread at length before revealing to the reader a significant association, intersection, or parallel. Often oblique in their relationship to the central story, these narrative excursions are complemented by Bowdring's use of literary allusion and quotation. Indeed, a special place is reserved for literary, historical, and philosophical quotation as Bowdring prefaces each of the novel's 22 chapters with quotes from Shakespeare, Camus, Auden, Coleridge, Coatzee, and other poets, writers, critics, and philosophers. The result is not esoteric but illuminating. Few authors are endowed with the ability to integrate the philosophy of Jacques Derrida into a discussion of postmodern archival studies in a way that is accessible, humorous, and enlightening; Bowdring, however, does so masterfully. In fact, the novel is frequently humorous. While Michael's often morose ruminations on everything from his failed marriage to his existential solitude sets a sombre atmosphere that lingers throughout the novel, Bowdring's perceptive, witty, and at times sardonic humour manages to inject enough levity into the narrative to temper the gravity of the questions he poses.

And the questions he poses are weighty. Can we ever separate personal and national history? How does the past exert pressure on the present? Are we or are we not free to move beyond the past to create new meaning? Can we ever really know the past? These are the questions for which Michael, Anton, Miles, and Miranda seek answers. While Bowdring provides no definite answers, his novel is all the better for resisting the temptation to offer solutions rather than to pose new problems. The sheer historical scope of the novel may seem daunting to some, but it shouldn't deter potential readers. Impressive in its breadth and unassuming in tone, *The Strangers' Gallery* is as engrossing as it is ambitious.

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