

Doug Letto. *Newfoundland's Last Prime Minister: Frederick Alderdice and the Death of a Nation*

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Doug Letto. *Newfoundland's Last Prime Minister: Frederick Alderdice and the Death of a Nation*. St. Johns: Boulder Publications, 2014. ISBN 978-1927099452 (paperback)

While Confederation has attracted considerable attention from professional historians and conspiracy theorists, the period immediately before the end of self-government in Newfoundland remains relatively unexplored. That was true in 1988 when Peter Neary published *Newfoundland in the North Atlantic World, 1929–1949*. It was true when Gene Long published *Suspended State* on the fiftieth anniversary of Confederation. It remains true 27 years after Neary's study with the publication of Doug Letto's new book, *Newfoundland's Last Prime Minister: Frederick Alderdice and the Death of a Nation*. Letto brings considerable experience to bear on his subject. This is his fourth book and the first since retiring from a distinguished career in television journalism. His previous books include *Run*, about the 1999 provincial general election, and *Chocolate Bars and Rubber Boots*, based on his master's thesis in political science, about Joe Smallwood's economic development program in the 1950s.

The result is a book that is well written and researched. It should be well received by the curious amateur and the professional historian alike. Letto provides appropriate social, political, and economic colour in each of his main chapters. The biographical chapter on Alderdice doubles neatly as a précis of major political developments in the country up to the point that Alderdice assumed the prime ministership, for the second time, in 1932. Editorially, the book could have used an index. Thankfully, there are ample footnotes. Some are explanatory, but they do not detract from the narrative at all. Rather, the editorial choice of using footnotes — as opposed to endnotes — serves to remind us that Letto has done his work with the primary sources. One can glance down and check a source or read a tidbit of explanation without having to hunt around the back of the book. More importantly, though, the notes confirm that Letto did not simply take hoary tales and doll them up with the odd reference to a supposedly secret government memorandum that now confirms the tale as truth. Anyone familiar with *Newfoundland in the North Atlantic World* will know that Letto has filled in details that Neary had to dispose of in a sentence or two purely out of the necessity of getting to other subjects. In that sense, Letto has produced a tidy complement to Neary's larger 1988 work.

Letto's account proceeds chronologically. From all appearances, Letto has relied for his framework on the records contained in the Provincial Archives for Alderdice's administration, with some additional research through the

National Archives in the United Kingdom. This is where one finds a weakness in Letto's work. Few government papers have survived from the period before 1934. Researchers have almost none of the personal observations of key characters because the papers that have survived were either culled or never had anything in them in the first place. The result is that Letto relies on speculation, where the answer to his very good rhetorical question might well rest in another pile of documents than the one Letto used. Letto wonders, for example, if it might have made a difference to Alderdice if he had known of the British discussions with the Americans about the British war debt at the time he was negotiating with the British in late 1933. Letto leaves the question unanswered. A bit of additional digging in the United Kingdom archives, the National Archives of Canada, or even the Governor's papers in the Provincial Archives of Newfoundland and Labrador might have yielded an answer.

Another example of this speculative approach appears in the relationship between Alderdice and Governor John Middleton. Letto notes that Alderdice opted to communicate directly with the Dominions secretary rather than follow the usual practice of sending coded telegrams through the Governor's office. Letto contends Alderdice wanted to avoid the Governor and act on what Letto describes as his tendency to insert himself into discussions outside the strict confines of his role. Perhaps Middleton did. What some additional research might reveal is that Alderdice was aware of a great many international developments such as the British talks. He might also have been aware, for example, of the threatened German default on war reparations and the hard line the British had taken against any suggestion that the Germans should escape paying their debts. Alderdice's predecessors were well informed on international affairs. They did not deal with their counterparts in London in a subservient way, nor is there any reason to believe they treated the Governor as more than he was: an appointed civil servant acting as an agent of the British government. There is no reason to assume Alderdice knew less than others or behaved differently from them. Letto poses a good question. The answer might be as close as the Governor's routine correspondence with the Dominions Office.

Extra research or a bit of additional explanation might also have tidied up Letto's discussion of the negotiations, especially the proposal for default made by Alderdice. Letto notes that the idea appears to have come from William Stavert, the Newfoundland government's financial adviser appointed at the behest of the British government. Neary points out that Stavert changed his mind about the idea of a large default before Alderdice and the Newfoundland government finally accepted the British proposal. It called for a much smaller

default but came at the cost of self-government. We could use a better explanation of these crucial few months at the end of 1933. This point ties back to the exclusion of the Governor from some discussions. Letto refers to John Middleton's telegram of 22 November 1933, in which Middleton describes his efforts to persuade Alderdice against the government's default proposal. Excluding Middleton from the exchange merely cut out the middleman in the talks at a crucial point. Alderdice would surely have understood that the Governor was merely a public servant acting, more often than not, as a functionary on behalf of Whitehall. As talks reached their climax, there would have been no reason for Alderdice to deal with the underling. Letto raises the point, but we are left with the issue unresolved. Perhaps a sequel is coming.

The story of how Newfoundland came to surrender its self-government is more intriguing than how it regained self-government within Canada. We do not have many examples of this to study. The earlier story has been given scant attention by scholars and popular historians alike, even though the political consequences of Newfoundland's crushing debt have come up periodically when countries like Greece find themselves in financial difficulty. Doug Letto has gone a considerable way to remedying that deficiency. As good a job as he has done, Letto thankfully has left a few nagging questions for others to explore.

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Kathleen Winter. *Boundless: Tracing Land and Dream in a New Northwest Passage*. Toronto: Anansi, 2014. ISBN: 978-1770893993

The Northwest Passage has fascinated explorers and writers since the end of the fifteenth century. Explorers in search of a northwest passage to the Indies tried to master the land by writing their language into the lines of maps, maps that changed with each charting expedition. Writers have set out to capture the wonders of this land of rock, ice, and water that is forever in flux. More than just a place, the Northwest Passage is an idea that pulls people to it. It is a "land of fables, channel of dreams" (19), a place "where an imaginary world intersects with the real: a place where time flows differently from the linear way in