

"Wry Comment": Rhoda Dawson's Cartoon of Newfoundland Society, 1936

Peter Neary

Volume 8, Number 1, Spring 1992

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/nflds8_1art01

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Faculty of Arts, Memorial University

ISSN

1198-8614 (print)

1715-1430 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Neary, P. (1992). "Wry Comment": Rhoda Dawson's Cartoon of Newfoundland Society, 1936. *Newfoundland Studies*, 8(1), 1–14.

“Wry Comment”: Rhoda Dawson’s Cartoon of Newfoundland Society, 1936

PETER NEARY

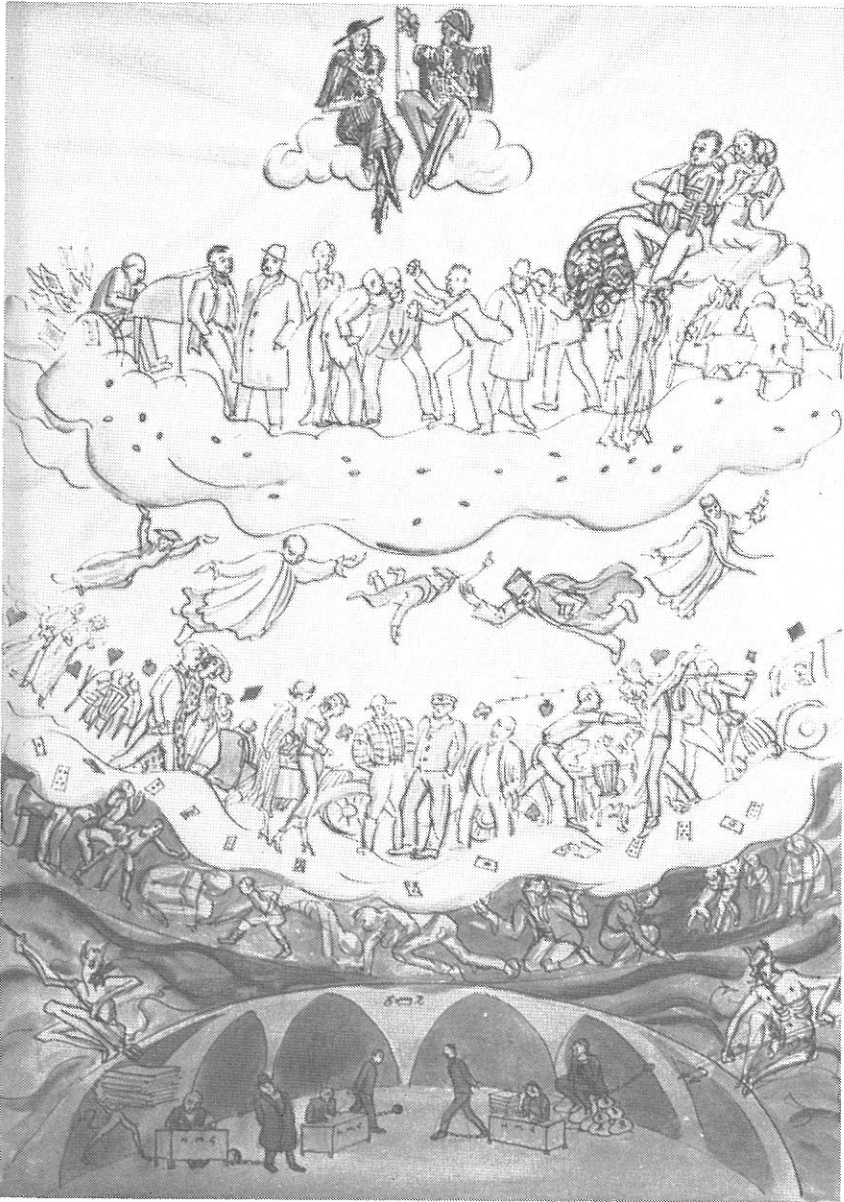
IN 1989 THE Fine Arts Society of Bond Street, London, England, exhibited some of the Newfoundland and Labrador watercolours of Rhoda Dawson, who died in London on 26 March 1992 at age 94. These date from the 1930s when the artist spent lengthy periods on the island of Newfoundland and in Labrador. The 1989 London show was organized by Peyton Skipwith of the Fine Arts Society, a friend of the artist, and the announcement of the exhibition featured colour reproductions of two of her watercolours. These are entitled “The Virgin of Conche” and “Ailik — Altagavayaivick in the distance.” “Altagavayaivick” means “the place from whence you can see a long way.”¹ The first mentioned work shows a domestic devotional arrangement of a statue of the Virgin Mary with flowers. The second work is a northern Labrador landscape, a vivid watercolour of a solitary settlement and sea, sky, rock, and snow. It is executed in a style typical of a body of work that has clearly stood the test of time. Happily, in 1991 the Art Gallery of Memorial University was able to acquire most of the pieces shown by the Fine Arts Society. This acquisition has spurred on the revival of interest in Rhoda Dawson’s Newfoundland and Labrador work and is now bringing her the recognition in the art history of the region she clearly merits. Included in the rest of her Newfoundland output is the cartoon introduced by this note and reproduced by permission of the artist and with the kind assistance of another of her friends, Carla Furlong. In Dante-esque fashion, the cartoon depicts the social structure Rhoda discerned in the Newfoundland of the decade of the Great Depression. The cartoon is at once lighthearted and pointed. As an introduction to the Newfoundland and Labrador of the period, it offers a unique perspective. The cartoon also highlights a sociological interest that runs through the North American work of this artist. Most painters who have

2 Neary

come to Newfoundland and Labrador in search of subject matter have concentrated on natural wonders. These are certainly to be found in Rhoda Dawson's work, but she also shows something of how Newfoundlanders lived and of the variety of their working world. These were topics that engaged both her brush and pen. In addition to their aesthetic merit and appeal, her Newfoundland and Labrador watercolours are notable for this reason.

Rhoda Dawson was born on 10 December 1897 at Swan House, Chiswick Mall, London.² Her parents, Nelson and Edith Dawson, were both artists and she gave a graphic account of them in "The Dawsons: An Equal Partnership of Artists," which she published in *Apollo* in November 1988.³ Nelson and Edith Dawson were decidedly eclectic in their artistic interests, as Rhoda Dawson also became in her own career. Along with much else, they were well known for their enamels and jewellery, a focus of their work at the time Rhoda was born. Rhoda herself relates her parents' interest in this genre to "the undertow of artistic handicraft, following Morris and Ruskin ... against the mechanization, the vulgarity, the cast iron, and the diamonds of commercial artefacts."⁴ Edith and Nelson were also accomplished painters and both were attracted to marine subjects, a taste Rhoda drew upon and refined. Edith also "took up weaving ... and had a side-line in beautiful bead-chains made of lovely Venetian beads."⁵ According to Rhoda, her father's interests "were so wide that his reputation was lost among them" and "he was always better for change."⁶ Both parents "had a longing for the open air" and in most years the family, which grew to four in 1899 with the birth of Mary Dawson, would spend "three periods in the country."⁷ These interludes would be spent "in a (real) gypsy caravan with a real horse, in country cottages, or in a large tent."⁸ There was much in all this that prepared Rhoda for the rough and ready life of her Newfoundland and Labrador days.

As small children, Rhoda and her sister would walk with Nelson before breakfast to his workshop where he would start the business of the day. In 1902 she and Mary started lessons with a nanny, using one of the *Royal Readers*, a series which she would find was still in use in Newfoundland in the 1930s. In 1910 Rhoda entered St. Paul's Girls' School, which she remembered as being "Very academic."⁹ By now she was a regular attendant at Friends' Meetings, a practice she maintained into her nineties. In 1916, to her distress, Nelson plucked her from school to work with him, but this arrangement didn't last long. Rhoda next progressed through a series of art schools, ending at the Royal Academy Schools circa 1920. She subsequently worked professionally at a couple of interior decorating jobs and then at Heal's in the "Arty-Crafty" furniture trade.¹⁰ She gave this up, however, to nurse her mother. She and her sister had to undertake this obligation and at the same time earn their own living. Her mother's death was followed by domestic upheaval. Her father remarried secretly, whereupon Rhoda and Mary were "turned ... out."¹¹ By this



Rhoda Dawson's Newfoundland Cartoon (1936)

4 Neary

time, however, they each had “a comfortable allowance.”¹² Sometime in the 1920s Rhoda spent “a whole year sailing my boat up and down the Thames, out to the mouth and back to Chiswick.”¹³ She also got to know the author Robert Graves when he was a tenant in a house owned by her father, who was an investor in real estate. About 1920 she painted “Mary with Jesus on the Sussex Downs,” which is in a style remarkably unlike the work she would do in Newfoundland. As was the case with so many other artists who had visited its shores, Newfoundland would transform her artistic vision.

When her father remarried and the family home broke up, Rhoda was at a crossroads and it was at this juncture that she was inspired to go out to Newfoundland. She was pointed in this direction by a designer friend who gave her the London address of the International Grenfell Association (IGA). Wilfred Grenfell had first visited Newfoundland in 1892 and by the 1930s the mission he established there was well developed. The mission’s origins lay in evangelical Protestantism. Its practical purpose was to minister to the spiritual and physical needs of the widely scattered population of northern Newfoundland and coastal Labrador.¹⁴ Grenfell’s Newfoundland headquarters was at St. Anthony on the Great Northern Peninsula, and the mission had built up a strong base of financial support worldwide but especially in the U.S. and Canada. It also attracted a steady stream of workers, including highly skilled professionals, from abroad, mainly from the U.S. and the United Kingdom. The mission’s primary focus was medical, but it also sought economic and social improvement through the promotion of cooperative effort and the building up of a handicraft industry. Responsibility for the latter lay with the Industrial Department, the foundation of which had been laid by the American Jessie Luther of Rhode Island, an associate of Jane Addams and a pioneer in the field of occupational therapy.¹⁵

It was to work in the Industrial Department that Rhoda was taken on by the IGA. She left for Newfoundland from Purfleet on 15 November 1930 on board the *Geraldine Mary*, a paper carrier. She arrived in Newfoundland at Botwood, the port used by the Anglo-Newfoundland Development Company to ship the finished product of its pulp and paper operation at nearby Grand Falls. From Botwood she travelled to St. Anthony on the *Prospero*, a government mail boat. As she went north, she was caught by “the extraordinary charm” of Newfoundland.¹⁶ What appealed to her were “the wooden stages and sheds, the little wharves, the grey or painted houses — always with white curtains in the windows — the pulled up boats and schooners, the small twisted trees near the water and the glimpses of black fir woods behind the rocky coast line.”¹⁷ Here at first sight was some of the subject matter of her Newfoundland and Labrador watercolours. And to sight was added sound. “The welcoming crowd on the wharves,” she would later write, “the rush and flurry on deck at each point of call, and the language — Devonshire, Dorset, with American or Canadian

overtones, occasionally Scottish, boomed in my ears.”¹⁸ Finally, and at night, the *Prospero* rounded a point and a crew member announced unceremoniously: “Here you are, Miss, St. Anthony.”¹⁹ The contrast with the sophisticated metropolitan world she had left behind could hardly have been more startling but in fact Rhoda would blossom in northern Newfoundland and Labrador. She was embarked on the experience of a lifetime, an episode that would leave strong and lasting memories.

Once established ashore, she quickly fitted into the routine of the Industrial Department. The work was congenial and she found a challenging outlet for her artistic endeavour in designing rag rugs. These were a staple of the Grenfell handicraft effort and the reputation of their Newfoundland makers had grown apace. In keeping with established practice, Rhoda based her designs on local motifs, but her choice of subject matter also exemplified her own interest in depicting everyday life and work as well as landscape. “Fish on the Flake,” which she considered her finest Newfoundland piece in this genre, shows how saltfish, the principal export product of the country’s fishing industry in this period, was laid out to dry.²⁰ The rug measures 101 x 66 cm. and is made of undyed silk stockings on soft sacking. This particular piece stood out for the artist not only for its subject matter but also for how the women who executed the design “took it off” and for how the design “got more interesting as it became more simplified.”²¹ “Two Hunters Dressed in Blue,” another especially fine piece, is notable for its subtle and varied coloration, its authentic depiction of landscape and its dramatic flair.²² In 1991, first Canada House, London, and then the Canadian Embassy in Paris exhibited from Rhoda’s own collection the mats she designed in Newfoundland. In the same year these were described and discussed in an article by Geraldine Rudge in *Crafts*, a publication of The Crafts Council, London. “On the whole,” this writer notes, “the rugs produced for export were too commercial for Rhoda’s taste; she preferred the ‘real primitive’ varieties that she tracked down on the north shore of Belle Isle, where the local people had started their own cottage industry using flannelette.”²³ Though she now found herself working in a medium that was far removed from the metalwork of her parents, her artistic impulse evidently had much in common with theirs. If she was a free and independent spirit, she also worked in a family tradition of which she was justifiably very proud.

In the late summer of 1931 Rhoda set out on a painting holiday along the Labrador coast, travelling first to Battle Harbour and then to Red Bay, where she stayed with Minnie Pike, who had worked for the Grenfell family in the U.S. At Red Bay, Rhoda spent her time “walking round among the houses, painting where I could, talking to the people, staring out across the Strait to Newfoundland eight miles away, a low line of land, [and] wondering how I could get along to Henley Harbour which looked so charming a place.”²⁴ She eventually reached Henley Harbour by another mail boat and while there was

6 Neary

ordered to go north to distribute work supplies at Seal Island and Bolsters Rock for the Industrial Department. To this end she made her way back to Battle Harbour where she connected once again with the northbound *Prospero*. Either on this or on a subsequent trip she wintered at Makkovik and while based there stayed three times with the Chard family at Ailik, “five miles from the nearest inhabited house, twelve miles from Makkovik, fifty from Hopedale.”²⁵ On the last of these visits, around the time of the spring break-up, she was able to paint outdoors but she later observed that “such sheer beauty as was there could never be caught in paint.”²⁶ “Once,” she would also recall of this visit, “I clambered out towards the Cape and sat down over a little lake, which lay deep between black, rocky walls, washing on one side up a tiny beach. There was a sound in the air like the faint tinkling of innumerable glass wind bells. The edges of the pond had frozen in the night and the little pieces of broken, clear ice tinkled as the waves lapped against the rocks. I took out the dory and sat for hours in the bay, making drawings of the shore on the nearby ice.”²⁷ Out of such experience came “Ailik — Altgavayaivick in the distance,” truly one of the most striking depictions ever made of Labrador.

In 1933 Rhoda returned to England, travelling by mission boat to Cartwright and then direct to Southampton on the *Blue Peter* by courtesy of the owner of the ship, Maurice Job Taylor. With a letter of recommendation in hand from Grenfell, she was able to arrange an exhibition of her Newfoundland and Labrador work at the Imperial Art Gallery, Imperial Institute. This featured nearly one hundred watercolours, mats, carvings “and other odds and ends.”²⁸ The show was reviewed in the *Times* but was not a financial success. Under the heading “Down North,” the *Times* reviewer characterized Rhoda’s watercolours as “broad, free, and direct ... not only interesting from the subject point of view, but excellent pictures as well.”²⁹ Her work showed “a robustly sympathetic appreciation of the very hard life of the people” but information was “conveyed, not by illustrative intention, but by fidelity to the facts and conditions in consistently pictorial terms.” Altogether this critic was most favourably impressed:

The exhibition is very well arranged, the pictures being hung according to season in a single line in one of the best lighted galleries in London. There is a large scale map of the region covered, and a few relevant objects – some hooked and scrap mats and rugs, made by the people, Polar bear skins, and so on – are included. Miss Dawson’s water-colours show the advantage of going out to the wilds equipped with a technical method. There is nothing tentative about them, but, on the other hand, they are quite free from technical showing-off. It is clear that the artist was too much absorbed in her subjects to think of anything but getting the effect in the shortest and most direct way possible, in a pictorial arrangement which should show the character of the subject to the best advantage.

The writer singled out eight of the watercolours for their “special qualities.” These were: “Ice in the Bight”; “The Ice is coming in”; “Fish flakes in an

outport"; "Winter sunshine"; "Italian Armada — Colonel Balbo landing at Cartwright on the way to Chicago"; "Altagavayaivick, Afternoon"; "Spring Ice — Labrador"; and "Rainstorm over Altagavayaivick." The first four of these were Newfoundland scenes and the rest scenes of Labrador. The account in the *Times* also specifically mentioned two wood carvings — "Erda," said to be "Eskimo in type," and "Concertina man." These pieces were praised as having "come very happily into the general atmosphere of the exhibition." By the same token, the rugs shown were declared to be indicative of "a natural talent for design."

With the help of Nelson Coghill, a medical student cousin, Rhoda organized a second show in Cambridge in the foyer of a small theatre, but this brought more financial disappointment: she sold one picture to a school friend, now a don, gave another to the Scott Polar Institute, and a third to Coghill. In 1934 she responded to an offer by the American office of the IGA to teach school at Payne's Cove on the Great Northern Peninsula. This time she travelled out to Newfoundland on one of the ships of the Furness Withy Line, bringing with her school supplies, paints, paper and a secondhand Leica camera. In time a collection of some of her Newfoundland and Labrador photographs would find their way into the Provincial Reference Library, St. John's.

Arrived in St. John's, Rhoda stopped overnight at the Y.W.C.A. and then found passage north on the *Silver City*, a coastal trader. According to her own account, the captain of this vessel was on bail for manslaughter and was accused of having run down a schooner with loss of life. This did not bode well for the trip but in fact Rhoda would remember the journey fondly:

We turned in and out of little coves and deep bays, stopping at traders' wharves, delivering stores and taking on fish – the skipper being greeted everywhere by his friends, who seemed sympathetic to him. Every time I got near him he would start grouching at his bad treatment, but he gave me really remarkably good meals, cooked either by the boy or the engineer.... My cabin was on deck; it was completely empty, except for the bunk and a wash-basin, and painted all over in silver paint stuck about with pieces of cork to stop condensation, which enhanced the glitter. I awoke that first morning to nothing at all but light...bright sunlight reflected back from the white wave tops into the silver room, causing such an uplift of spirits I have never known since.

It was a little rough and I had to rush to the side during breakfast, but felt better for it and spent the bright morning listening to the skipper's troubles, gazing at the savage coastline – sometimes high, bleak and jagged, sometimes low and barren, – through archipelagos of little islands; trying to take photographs of the wharves, the grey wooden "rooms" built out on piles into the water, with the stages on which the fish were dried, and the sometimes coloured houses where the people lived, further back on the rock; or the occasional patches of the brightest green grass and dark low scrub, and glimpses now and then of real forest at the ends of deeper bays.³⁰

8 Neary

Clearly she was delighted to be back in Newfoundland.

Following a brief stay “at home again”³¹ in St. Anthony, she was given passage by the Rev. W.G. Meadus of the Church of England around Cape Bauld to Eddies Cove. This journey was “through the archipelago of islands and past the shaggy cliffs of the tip of Newfoundland,” and was a trip that called “for careful seamanship at the best of times.”³² On this occasion the weather was mercifully calm, but even so “the rise and fall of the waves against those wicked rocks, with a suck and a sob, was rather sinister to the unaccustomed traveller.”³³ Having despatched her luggage by boat, she walked from Eddies Cove to Payne’s Cove, carrying only a “sealskin rucksack with camera, plant press and odds and ends.”³⁴ Her route was over a road made lovely by “the feet of settlers and occasional efforts of the Government”: “Buttercups, mealy primulas, blue irises rustled and fluttered in the strong July wind; rather thin daisies and dandelions were coming into full strength. One or two rough tracks indicated that carts were driven there, and that cows wandered about.”³⁵ Occasionally, “faces would appear at windows” and children would “come out to stare.”³⁶ This practice, however, was not encouraged because “the Newfoundlander never liked to be thought surprised by the unusual.”³⁷

At Payne’s Cove she stayed with a Parril family, found a class of nine children, and taught out of the *Royal Readers* she herself had used in Chiswick. She found a good companion in Ethel Graham, the nurse at Flower’s Cove, eight miles away. Ethel was “a large, hearty Canadian, with a long history of work in Newfoundland behind her.”³⁸ Rhoda also liked the Church of England rural dean of the area, John T. Richards, “a wonderful, elderly, bearded man ... whose charge was one hundred miles along both sides of the Strait, which he walked regularly, holding services in the schoolhouses or private houses, as he went along.”³⁹ Life at Payne’s Cove was lived without the benefit of radio or newspapers and moved to the deeply ingrained rhythm of outport existence. An unusual feature at this location was that great ships could often be seen offshore passing up and down the Strait. But of these only the *Empress of Britain*, which came by “every other Sunday” and “on every other Wednesday,”

apparently stirred the local imagination: Glowing like an iceberg, she moved majestically along. Meticulous as her namesake, she appeared almost to the minute. Then down from their hooks would come the telescopes, and the Uncles stood outside peering at the big white ship. She was a heaven-sent subject of conversation on an otherwise empty Sunday. Her size, speed and complement were welcome sources of speculation, whereas other floating palaces went by causing no more attention than passing seagulls. For what most inspired the wonder of these unwondering people was her steadfast regularity. “No wind don’t hold up she. She’ve only lost four howers [hours] since she started this spring.” Her grandeur was not known to them, but the contrast between her comfort, her accommodation, her passengers, their deck games, their meals, her lush cabins, and their own life was not to be thought of... Sometimes I was told... ‘The *British*

Empire went by this marnin' ” and I wondered if that meant anything to them.⁴⁰

One event in the larger world of affairs that certainly did begin to mean something in Payne's Cove while Rhoda was there was the changeover from parliamentary self-government to a British-appointed Commission of Government in Newfoundland. This had occurred in February 1934. A drastic reversal of normal constitutional development and a unique event in the history of the British Empire, the introduction of the Commission system had been forced on Newfoundland by a crisis in public finance brought about by the onset of the Great Depression. One of the early acts of the Commission of Government was the establishment of the Newfoundland Ranger force, whose members were to be the agents of the new government in rural Newfoundland and in Labrador. Rhoda was in Payne's Cove when the first Ranger called there. And she walked over to Flower's Cove in order to meet Sir John Hope Simpson, the Commissioner for Natural Resources, who touched in for an hour and a half during a coastal tour. Prime Minister Ramsay Macdonald of the United Kingdom was on holiday in Newfoundland and visiting St. Anthony at the same time, and the presence of “The Chief Man” (members of the Commission of Government were apparently referred to locally as “The Men”) caused unusual excitement in the area.⁴¹ Rhoda's impression of the people around Payne's Cove was that they “were too independent to be interested in an official except for the hope that he would affect the price of fish.”⁴² On the other hand, the arrival of a high official was “an occasion requiring gunfire and bunting” and that was “not to be missed.”⁴³ In the early days of the Commission of Government, as the new administration attempted to make its presence felt, Rhoda detected “a honeymoon feel in the air.”⁴⁴

At the end of her stay in Payne's Cove, the residents threw a party for Rhoda. This “proceeded along well-known lines, starting very late and continuing into the small hours, with reels and square dances and probably a tactful bottle or two.”⁴⁵ The next day, having once more sent her luggage on by boat, Rhoda set out on foot for Cook's Harbour, stopping en route overnight at Boat Harbour. From Cook's Harbour she travelled by boat to St. Anthony where she fitted back into mission headquarters life but missed the “peace of Payne's Cove.”⁴⁶ Towards the end of 1935 and while at Red Bay, Labrador, she broke her contract with the mission and “bolted.”⁴⁷ Her intention was to go home and to this end she headed south to St. John's. But when the boat on which she was a passenger stopped at Twillingate on New World Island and she met John and Betty Olds, she changed her mind. Dr. John Olds, an American, was a graduate of Johns Hopkins and was running the hospital at Twillingate. Though not playing in Grenfell's international league, Olds was another activist, visionary and medical empire builder, a man whose word was law in this part of Newfoundland. When Rhoda met him, he was well launched to become a legendary figure in his own right. When Rhoda expressed an interest

10 Neary

in staying over for a few days to paint, he invited her to stay longer and help by teaching children in the hospital. She readily agreed and the sojourn that followed on New World Island was both artistically productive and personally satisfying. Her Twillingate work includes landscapes, a strong portrait of Olds, and some dramatic sketches of operating room scenes. Olds arranged for her “to sit in people’s houses and paint through their windows.”⁴⁸ She met all the local notables, including a surviving sister of the celebrated Georgina Stirling. Under the stage name of “Marie Toulinguet,” Georgina Stirling, the “Nightingale of the North,” had been a professional singer and had appeared in many parts of the world.⁴⁹ An unforgettable Twillingate experience for Rhoda was of a tricky passage she and Olds made one Sunday across a stretch of sea ice whose strength and compactness the doctor had badly misjudged.

Rhoda eventually left Twillingate for St. John’s, travelling first by motorboat and then by train. This was her first trip on the Newfoundland Railway, another notable experience for the visitor to Newfoundland in this period. She stayed in St. John’s for about nine months and has given a full account of this phase of her Newfoundland adventures in “The Wharves of St. John’s, Newfoundland,” which she wrote circa 1936. She mixed widely in the intimate, gossipy, colonial society of Newfoundland’s capital and made many friends. Among them were Fred and Isabel Emerson, Carla Furlong’s parents. Fred Emerson was a prominent city lawyer and a talented amateur musician and raconteur. The focus of Rhoda’s artistic work in St. John’s, as the title of her reminiscence indicates, was the workaday life of the harbour. The city itself is very much a backdrop in her St. John’s watercolours. She took a special interest in the various activities connected with the return of the sealing fleet and she produced a detailed record of these:

I was allowed to work on the sealers wharves by the two firms who own the vessels, and for weeks I went daily across the harbour in the ferry boat of one or the other, and spent the whole day among the vats and tanks and crowds of sealers in the factory. It was an unsavoury atmosphere, but among the workmen and the regular employees and engineers I met some of the nicest men on the coast. I was invited [to] eat in the engineers mess, a tiny room at the top of the vats, where we ate seal-meat stewed or fried, or bully beef hash, washed down by large mugs of potent tea. Once I even dined on board the steamer, in the saloon among the company of sealing captains, old experienced schooner-skippers, the ship’s captain and the navigator. They were all a little silent, but extremely polite in the presence of a foreign female... I was making drawings and studies of the work, and I penetrated each department at first from curiosity and later because I found that no one wanted to be left out. I had intended only to paint the busy wharves, with the town rising behind the masts and scunners’ barrels of the sealers, just like a painted drop curtain, incredibly scenic, the tiers of houses overlapping one another from the water’s edge to the top of the hill, capped by the towers of the Roman Catholic Cathedral, spotted with lines of windows, the whole mass gashed

by streets like canyons running athwart the main thoroughfares, designed as fire-breaks after the last disaster. But I found the scheme of work in this odd trade very absorbing and discovered curious rhythms and patterns just as in the fishery business. The skins for instance are packed for a time in salt pickle in a large shed; the men stand on the growing piles, one party moves forward laying down the rolled up pelts, another group follows, spreading them out. A regular pattern is discernable throughout the pile, and it is all done in a damp half-light, salt pickle dropping everywhere, the tall dark figures stooping and rising and weaving about in the gloom, laughter and snatches of song flying around the shed. I even worked in the super-fatted steam of the room at the top of the vats, where bands of men fed the pelts to the skinning machines and the blubber to the cookers. Here I realised the danger of working to an admiring audience. An engineer hanging over my shoulder murmured wonderingly, as I carefully drew his machine and the strapping young boys grouped round it, "My, that's almost as good as the catalogue picture." He was quite right too; it was.

I was followed about by an acolyte with a box for a stool, covered reverently with a green flag from the signal locker and I was handed up ladders, and over gang-planks, and shown all the sights, with the most tender care and never a hint of familiarity or offence except on one occasion, when an old boy, rather merry, spied my sealskin boots, and tried to make a date...I wore the boots for convenience on the dirty wharves....

Asking for a model one day, one of the managers sent up the ship's carpenter. I saw him on the deck, running round in great excitement telling his friends, but he soon found that sitting for his portrait wasn't much fun, and finally allowed it to be "tejus" [tedious]. He was the Sunday School Superintendent in his home town, an upright person, and he offered me a lift on the schooner he and his mates had chartered to take them back home, a few bays away. I was sorry not to accept, for he promised to look after me well, but I could see no justification for the jaunt, and a female on board is apt to be embarrassing, but I should like to have gone, and been looked after.

The last vessel was empty and the men being paid off, when I climbed a ladder and found myself in the culling-chamber, almost empty, the last wheel-barrow load being taken away. "We expected you yesterday, Miss" the Culler said reproachfully, "Howsomever, bring the barrer back, Byes, we'll do 'em again", and they staged a whole scene for my benefit, re-culling the pelts while I "sketched off a fotygraf" and pleased not to have been left out.⁵⁰

The many sketches and drawings Rhoda made in this way are part of her estate and constitute an important resource for illustrating the history of Newfoundland.

Her memoir of St. John's closes with this wonderfully quotable and evocative passage:

At the end of a day's work it is pleasant to climb up to either headland, and in half an hour to be sitting beside some lonely tarn, back in the primeval Continent, nothing to see but sky and the barrens with the cotton grass blowing, and a snipe beating somewhere in the evening light. Below in the basin of the hills the town is

12 *Neary*

bustling like an ant's nest, but up here the land is the same as it was when Cabot sighted it, or the first Icelander set foot on America 1,000 years ago.⁵¹

More than a half century later, this description still rings true of Newfoundland's weather-beaten old capital.

When Rhoda returned to England she began work on a full-scale account of her Newfoundland roivings. She based this not only on memory but on some rough diaries she had kept while there and on the letters she had written home. Her father had her letters to him typed out and bound in volumes, and these volumes are also still extant. She made good progress on her book but did not complete it.

Her career after 1936 spanned many interests. She first spent a year studying Anthropology under B.K. Malinowski at the London School of Economics. During World War II, she was engaged in youth work at several locations and in 1945 went to work for the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA) in Germany. She came back to England in 1949 and for the next few years wrote, taught and contributed to a variety of artistic ventures. In 1955 she married the sculptor John Bickerdike, a widower. Together they made large models of classical architecture in North Africa to be exhibited in the new museum of Ghana. Rhoda also designed two stained glass windows for the church at Cartwright, Labrador. These were commissioned by the Pilkington family, of glassmaking fame, who had been backers of Grenfell and therefore had a sentimental tie with Labrador. Rhoda had met Lawrence Pilkington, a "wop" (a Grenfell "worker without pay"), in 1933 at Cartwright, where he also met his future wife, a Canadian who was teaching there. For eleven years Rhoda worked in a small local museum in Gunnersbury, ultimately as Acting Curator. She retired from this position at age 67 and she and her husband then lived in Bignor, Sussex. John Bickerdike died in 1974 and Mary Dawson in 1980. Nelson Dawson had died in 1941. In 1982 Rhoda returned to Chiswick and lived on there until her death as one of its most honoured residents. For many years she was Clerk of the Amenity Society, which looks after the Chiswick Mall. She revisited Newfoundland in 1987 and was back again in 1989, when she also went to Labrador and saw her stained glass windows at Cartwright.

Her cartoon of Newfoundland society is, of course, in an entirely different vein. This was done during her 1936 stay in St. John's and it draws on her first-hand knowledge of Newfoundland society. At the top are the governor and his lady. The next row down features members of the small, tightly knit business and professional elite. The harpist is Rhoda's friend Fred Emerson. Below are representatives of church and academy, the latter no doubt from Memorial University College. Next down come men and women of Newfoundland's versatile working class — the small property holders who sustained the country's staple fishing, forestry and mining industries. Newfoundland's

shockingly large 1930s relief population is represented at the next level by the people crammed into a dark tunnel, as, metaphorically, those living off the paltry relief on offer at the time truly were. At the bottom are seen government officials, perhaps including the members of the Commission of Government. Some of them are encumbered by balls and chains, symbols perhaps of the intractable social and economic problems the Commission faced. The playing cards highlight a popular local pastime (bridge at the top; auction forty-fives at the bottom) but they may also be intended to suggest just how much life in Newfoundland was a gamble. Rhoda remembers showing the cartoon to a professor of the Memorial University College. He photographed it but “was very anxious, in fact terrified, of anyone seeing it.”⁵² He “begged” Rhoda “to show the photograph to no one.” Rhoda herself described the cartoon as “a wry comment from someone on the spot, enjoying doing a bit of doodling.”⁵³ In fact it is a representation that sums up a great deal about the Newfoundland of the period and is a depiction for which students of Newfoundland history have reason to be grateful. It lights up the Newfoundland past just as Rhoda’s watercolours, sketches, drawings, portraits and designs enrich the general culture of the Province. Newfoundlanders are indeed fortunate that a body of work of such vitality and insight is being returned to public view.

Notes

I am grateful to Libby Perkins, A.P. Bates and Melvin Baker for editorial advice and research assistance.

¹*Times*, London, 11 October 1933, p. 10, “Down North.”

²Most of the biographical information in this article is based on a *curriculum vitae* she enclosed in a letter to the author dated 29 February 1991.

³Rhoda Bickerdike née Dawson, “The Dawsons: An Equal Partnership of Artists,” *Apollo*, November, 1988, pp. 320-25.

⁴*Ibid.*, p. 321.

⁵*Ibid.*, p. 325.

⁶*Ibid.*, p. 325.

⁷*Ibid.*

⁸*Ibid.*

⁹*Curriculum vitae* enclosed in letter to author, 29 February 1991.

¹⁰*Ibid.*

¹¹*Ibid.*

¹²*Ibid.*

¹³*Ibid.*

¹⁴For Grenfell and the history of the mission he established see Ronald Rompkey, *Grenfell of Labrador* (Toronto, 1991).

¹⁵See *ibid.*, pp. 128-29.

¹⁶Rhoda Dawson, unpublished Newfoundland memoirs, “The Job and the Voyage Out,” p. 14.

14 Neary

¹⁷*Ibid.*

¹⁸*Ibid.*

¹⁹*Ibid.*

²⁰For a picture of this rug see Geraldine Rudge, "Sources of Inspiration," *Crafts*, Sept./Oct. 1991, pp. 34-37.

²¹*Ibid.*, p. 36.

²²There is also a picture of this in *Ibid.*

²³*Ibid.*, p. 36.

²⁴Unpublished Newfoundland memoirs, "The First Winter in St. Anthony & Grenfell Work," pp. 33-34.

²⁵*Ibid.*, "The Traders House," p. 4.

²⁶*Ibid.*, p. 13.

²⁷*Ibid.*

²⁸*Ibid.*, "St. Anthony & a Year at Home," p. 7.

²⁹*Times*, 11 October 1933, p. 10, "Down North."

³⁰*Ibid.*, "Payne's Cove – The School," pp. 3-4.

³¹*Ibid.*, p. 4.

³²*Ibid.*, p. 5.

³³*Ibid.*

³⁴*Ibid.*

³⁵*Ibid.*, p. 6.

³⁶*Ibid.*

³⁷*Ibid.*

³⁸*Ibid.*, p. 8.

³⁹*Ibid.* For an account of Richards' career see Robert W. Cuff, Melvin Baker and Robert D.W. Pitt (eds.), *Dictionary of Newfoundland and Labrador Biography* (St. John's, 1990), p. 289.

⁴⁰Unpublished Newfoundland memoirs, "Payne's Cove – The School," pp. 15-16.

⁴¹*Ibid.*, p. 16.

⁴²*Ibid.*

⁴³*Ibid.*

⁴⁴*Ibid.*

⁴⁵*Ibid.*, p. 20.

⁴⁶*Ibid.*, p. 23.

⁴⁷*Ibid.*, "Twillingate 1935-36," p. 1.

⁴⁸*Ibid.*, p. 10.

⁴⁹For her life see Amy Louise Peyton, *Nightingale of the North* (St. John's, 1983) and *Dictionary of Newfoundland and Labrador Biography*, p. 328.

⁵⁰Rhoda Dawson, "The Wharves of St. John's, Newfoundland," unpublished essay, circa 1936, pp. 4-6.

⁵¹*Ibid.*, p. 9.

⁵²Letter to author, 16 September 1991.

⁵³*Ibid.*