

Kathryn Welbourn ed., *Ray Guy: The Smallwood Years.*

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REVIEWS

Kathryn Welbourn ed., *Ray Guy: The Smallwood Years*. St. John's, Boulder Publications, 2008, ISBN 9780978338121.

I ARRIVED IN NEWFOUNDLAND in 1965, fresh from the English satire boom — “That was the Week That Was” on television, “Beyond the Fringe” in London’s West End, and the clever, witty criticism of the establishment which appeared in the early issues of *Private Eye* magazine. Students joined in, and politicians became fair game — especially after such delicious incidents as the Profumo affair with all its ramifications. This is also where “Monty Python” took root.

The atmosphere in Newfoundland — at least in St. John’s — was very different. I was on occasion taken aside by elderly gentlemen who spontaneously explained to me the tremendous achievements of Mr. Smallwood and his Liberal party. There seemed to be little open political debate, and once his columns started appearing in *The Evening Telegram*, I recall people wondering whether there could actually be a real person called Ray Guy — who would dare say such things? How could this stuff appear in public print?

Ambivalence reigned, even at the University. For all his faults, Smallwood understood in principle the importance of academic freedom and institutional autonomy. Yet practicing that understanding was another question, and the University’s cautious senior administration (dominated by Moses Morgan) was conscious of that reality. Smallwood’s unilateral choice of Lord Taylor as President in 1966 was much resented but — tellingly — did not cause the public fuss which surrounds the University presidency in 2009.

Nevertheless, the University’s social scientists, sometimes lampooned in Ray Guy’s columns, had much in common with him, though from divergent perspectives. The key issue was resettlement. Guy questioned the government’s insistence on “modernization,” praised the traditional outport way of life (“Juvenile Out-harbour Delights”), and excoriated bureaucrats and politicians for the damage done to individual lives and communities. The academics lamented the loss of what we would now call “intangible heritage” and justifiably wondered whether there were other routes to a sustainable future for rural Newfoundland and Labrador. The jury

is still out on the resettlement programme, but Guy and others — Harold Horwood, for instance — did much to challenge the Smallwoodian gospel that 1949 was Year One of the New Dispensation, and that “Uncle Ottawa” was the source of all good things.

Guy’s other major contribution — he alludes to this in his introductory essay — was to make people laugh at the Liberal establishment and generally encourage irreverence. Smallwood became “the OLF” (“Only Living Father of Confederation”), or “Chairman Joe,” and others of his entourage were similarly satirized. Fair commentary or not, Guy helped dissolve a quiescent political culture grateful for the improvements in social services that had occurred since 1949 (and the patronage payoffs), and replace it with real debate.

“The Smallwood Years” covered in this volume extend from 1963 to the end of 1970, when Smallwood was still in power. The “Smallwood Years” actually ended early in 1972, so why are none of the 1971-72 columns included, assuming that such columns exist? This is a great pity, and the absence is not explained. Indeed, there is no editorial note at all. How was the selection made? What were the criteria? Have the columns been edited in any way, or are these verbatim copies? Moreover, apart from the welcome introductory articles by John Crosbie and Guy himself, there is no attempt to establish historical context. An essay on the social, cultural, and political circumstances in which Guy was writing would have been valuable, especially to readers who were not in Newfoundland in the 1960s. In addition, there is no annotation — events referred to in the text are not explained. What was all this business about the “school for wayward girls,” for instance?

Another piece of appropriate context would have been a discussion of *The Evening Telegram* during the period it published these columns. During the 1960s it was an independent newspaper owned by the Herder family, and edited by that mild-mannered yet committed Newfoundlander, Michael Harrington (it was sold to Thompson Newspapers in 1970). What led — or allowed — the crew at the *Telegram* to give Guy his go-ahead? What changed after the Thompson sale?

I am glad to have this collection on my shelf, but an opportunity has been missed. These columns are by turns serious, funny, passionate, savage, and reflective. They are well-written, often containing echoes of the King James Bible and the Book of Common Prayer. They were eagerly read when originally published, and they deserve more careful and sensitive editorial treatment than they have received in this volume — much as I enjoyed it — because of their intrinsic importance, let alone their merit. I never much liked Aunt Cissie Roache, but I’m sure she would have something to say.

Finally, who is going to resurrect the “Me ‘n’ Ned” columns?

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