

Palmer, Craig T., Emily K. Groom, and Jordan H. Brandon.
Kindness, Kinship, and Tradition in Newfoundland/Alberta Migration

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Volume 30, Number 2, Fall 2015

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/nflds30_2rev06

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Publisher(s)

Faculty of Arts, Memorial University

ISSN

1719-1726 (print)

1715-1430 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Robinson, A. (2015). Review of [Palmer, Craig T., Emily K. Groom, and Jordan H. Brandon. *Kindness, Kinship, and Tradition in Newfoundland/Alberta Migration*]. *Newfoundland and Labrador Studies*, 30(2), 340–344.

Palmer, Craig T., Emily K. Groom, and Jordan H. Brandon. *Kindness, Kinship, and Tradition in Newfoundland/Alberta Migration*. St. John's: ISER Books, 2012. ISBN: 978-1-894725-11-8

Over the years, migration from the island of Newfoundland in search of work has been a recurring trend. Early twentieth-century residents left in droves to work in the “Boston states,” by mid-century out-migration to Ontario was common, and, from the 1980s onward, tens of thousands of job-seeking Newfoundlanders sought employment in Alberta’s booming oil industry. Arguably, people have been one of Newfoundland and Labrador’s most notable exports. In *Kindness, Kinship, and Tradition in Newfoundland/Alberta Migration*, authors Craig Palmer, Emily Groom, and Jordan Brandon attempt to understand kindness among Newfoundlanders from “the Straits” who, as migrants, have developed a sense of community forged in kinship and cemented through acts of kindness shared between themselves and other transplanted Newfoundlanders in Fort McMurray (Fort Mac). Migration between Fort McMurray and Newfoundland is used as a social-cultural frame to test the descendant-leaving strategy (DLS) hypothesis. The DLS explanation expands upon previous models by combining a social scientific study of tradition with evolutionary explanations of non-hedonistic, or altruistic, practices. Following Darwin’s evolutionary theory, and as a bio-cultural model, the DLS assumes that, within any given kinship group, cross-generational, traditionally held altruistic behaviours promote the success of the group’s future and distant generations. The authors claim that, as a product of received ancestral teachings, the carried tradition of human kindness among Newfoundlanders encourages descendants to value themselves and their kinfolk alike, which in turn creates forms of “ethnic kindness” that are embedded in “the Newfoundland identity.”

This relatively short book (138 pages) employs alternative explanations of human kindness in order to elucidate specific features of Newfoundland/Alberta migration. More generally, Palmer et al. use aspects of that same migration process to expand on existing explanations of human kindness and to employ academic contexts and research findings to understand the role of kindness as an evolutionary strategy. The introductory chapter clearly outlines the parameters of the study, providing context to and a lengthy description of Newfoundland migration patterns with a focus on those moving to/from “the Straits” region of Newfoundland’s Great Northern Peninsula and Alberta’s Fort McMurray. It also offers some general demographic information, and briefly outlines the DLS model and how it applies to the Newfoundland/Alberta test case.

Chapter 2 provides an academic treatment of kindness, explains some key distinctions between hedonism (self-interest) and altruism or non-hedonistic behaviours, and identifies kindness as a common practice among traditional human populations. The authors find that social scientific models fall short in explaining the phenomenon of human kindness. They propose that the standard parameters of evolutionary theory, which focus on present or near-kin generations, need to be expanded to include future and distant generations in order to gain more comprehensive insights into the practice of human kindness and why kindness is held as an ideal. Chapter 3 offers a detailed explanation of the DLS hypothesis framed in reference to expressions of kindness that accompany various forms of migration to/from Alberta and Newfoundland. Palmer et al. contend that existing social science and evolutionary explanations are unable to elucidate the diverse forms of kindness displayed in the varied, complex social situations that emerge among Newfoundland/Alberta migrants. Accordingly, the DLS model is adopted to accommodate both the complexity and diversity of kindness-based behaviours. The basic assumptions that inform DLS are: (1) kindness has evolutionary roots; (2) kin selection, based on shared ancestry/genes, does not account for the range of kindness displayed by humans, and does not address why altruism often extends to non-kin; (3) cross-generational social learnings/teachings may account for kindness-based behaviours evidenced in Newfoundland/Alberta migration processes and in global contexts.

In Chapter 4, Palmer et al. provide ethnographic and historical contexts to migration to and from several coastal communities located along the Strait of Belle Isle. Ethnographic data on the region are taken from anthropologist Melvin Firestone's study of life in the Straits, conducted in 1962–63. Although the study is primarily descriptive, according to the authors, Firestone operates from a pragmatic, or materialist, hedonistic position that "material self-interest" is at the centre of co-operation with kin. Upon encountering incidents where material self-interests are not served, Firestone introduces an unspecified form of hedonism to explain away contrary data, and posits kindness as a form of "social capital" used to "maximize personal interests through reciprocal altruism" (p. 56).

Chapter 5 focuses on the traditions influencing kindness among "relatively close kin" in the Newfoundland/Alberta migration process and the reciprocal effect of migration influencing tradition. Various manifestations of kindness-to-kin traditions are noted. The near-kin relationships (i.e., that of grandparents, parents, offspring, siblings, first cousins, within which acts of kindness are most commonly noted) are outlined and possible explanations about the nature of

the migration process for Newfoundlanders are provided. In reference to the latter, the authors note that, instead of seeing “kinship as social capital with which to promote economic self-interest,” some viewed working in Alberta’s oil industry as opting for economic success over kinship (p. 82). The authors conclude that although kin selection is consistent with kindness to close kin and the DLS hypothesis, ethnographic data show how opting for a social life with family and kin over economic success is *only* consistent with the DLS hypothesis. For instance, one respondent provides a clear distinction between social and economic costs, stating that hiring a person to care for your children is a “double loss”: it costs you economically and also costs you valuable time with, and influence in, the raising of children (p. 83).

Chapter 6 suggests that, across many generations, the transmission of traditions identifying kin and encouraging kindness towards kin have the cumulative effect of producing communities — referred to variously as “peoples,” “ethnic groups,” “societies,” and “cultures” — whose members exhibit kindness towards one another (p. 85). The authors suggest that Newfoundlanders make up an ethnic community and that “the Newfoundland identity” (p. 108) includes social-cultural beliefs and values embedded in kindness-based traditions that are important to Newfoundland/Alberta migration processes. They argue that the forms of “ethnic kindness” produced within communities, such as those evidenced among Newfoundlanders, are consistent with “the ancestral social environments of our ancestors” (p. 108).

The final chapter briefly summarizes the thesis that tradition encourages kindness among Newfoundland/Alberta migrants, examines to what degree Newfoundland/Alberta migration affects Newfoundland tradition, and offers a valuation on whether ethnic kindness is “good and desirable” as a form of moral elevation and as a social good (p. 120). The authors maintain that the latter is an “urgent” consideration since, “[i]f kindness is ‘good,’ then it is paramount to preserve traditions encouraging kindness because once such traditions disappear, they are unlikely to reappear” (p. 120). They suggest that judging the “goodness” of any behaviour can only be based on the consequences of that behaviour (p. 121). However, this suggestion is problematic since judging consequences is also subject to evaluation.

The fact that the authors encourage a discussion on the DLS indicates that the study is intended as a start to a lengthier conversation. As an anthropologist and a Newfoundlander, I have several points to bring to the table in reference to how the DLS hypothesis applies in this case. This work offers interesting and provocative perspectives on human kindness, but it is not a particularly fluid

read, as several chapters delve into philosophical and abstract concepts that elude concise and clear explanations. For instance, attempts to explain personal and collective identity and tradition become increasingly difficult when applied to cross-generational economic contexts and historical periods that involve migrant populations. In light of this, Palmer et al. construct a reasoned argument for the ways in which Newfoundland/Alberta migration processes support the basic assumptions promoted by the DLS hypothesis.

However, a number of other issues require attention, including a more comprehensive treatment of the forms of economic and non-economic hedonism referred to in the text and a fuller explanation of how tradition is to be understood and what exactly it entails. Other considerations also require attention. First, although the etymology of the term “kindness” was given sufficient academic treatment (p. 26) and specific examples were provided, a more comprehensive range of traditionally based expressions of “ethnic kindness” among Newfoundlanders is needed, because proof of the DLS hypothesis depends on this. While the list need not be exhaustive, some frame of reference needs to be included to establish how traditions of kindness among Newfoundlanders contribute to an “ethnic” or otherwise distinct identity and to the migrant experience as claimed. Second, reference to “the Newfoundland identity” is essentialist because it suggests singularity and denies the variety and complexity of Newfoundland society and culture. Although Newfoundlanders are known far and wide for their friendliness and hospitality (read “kindness”) — tourism ad campaigns draw heavily on this characteristic — the people of “the Straits” cannot be taken as a template for all of Newfoundland culture and tradition because there is no singular expression of identity/culture that can be said to apply to all Newfoundlanders in all regions of the province. Third, a clear distinction, based on in-depth historical and social analysis, between outport and urban cultures needs to be made. These necessary contexts are missing here, and there is an over-reliance on Melvin Firestone’s ethnographic work conducted in the early 1960s. For instance, small fishing outports tended to be relatively isolated, with residents having limited exposure to the outside world (especially prior to the completion of the railway in 1898 and the Trans-Canada Highway in 1965), whereas mercantile centres such as St. John’s and Harbour Grace were bustling trade centres that welcomed international traffic regularly.

In addition, the trajectory of history in rural and urban Newfoundland, particularly in reference to economic realities, was/is vastly different for the most part. Community-based/rural traditions may, in fact, derive from survival strategies that are distinct from those existing within urban centres where

economies operated under the rubric of capitalism. Historically, although subject to class distinctions, the province's urban centres overwhelmingly directed the movement of capital and resources within the province and embraced a market-based model that encouraged competition. Conversely, residents of the bays and inlets (or outports) were subjected to the truck system until well into the twentieth century, which significantly contributed to a form of economic oppression that often resulted in abject poverty. This historical circumstance suggests that the need for collaboration, and indeed acts of kindness, between rural community members was important to the overall survival of communities. This point tends to favour Firestone's notion of "social capital" rather than the DLS hypothesis. Arguably, the culture and traditions developed and transmitted amid the adverse economic conditions that existed in outport Newfoundland are different from those that developed in urban centres. Of course, many other considerations would be required to establish contemporary and historical distinctions between rural and urban existence in Newfoundland, and such an undertaking is a study unto itself.

Overall, this is an interesting and thought-provoking book that draws on a number of concepts (such as altruism, kindness, hedonism, and identity) and utilizes specific social-cultural and economic contexts to establish more advanced perspectives on kindness and its value as a feature of society. The book is appropriate for academic studies at the second-year level and beyond, and provides a number of new and interesting topics for future research.

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Sydney Frost, Edited and annotated by Edward Roberts. *A Blue Puttee at War: The Memoir of Captain Sydney Frost, MC* (St John's: Flanker Press, 2014).

Newfoundland and Labrador has been well served by memoirs of the First World War. John Gallishaw, Mayo Lind, Owen Steele, and others have provided windows into the perceptions of enlisted men and officers who served in the