

## Peter Coffman, *Newfoundland Gothic*.

James K. Hiller

Volume 24, numéro 1, spring 2009

URI : [https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/nflds24\\_1rv03](https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/nflds24_1rv03)

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

### Éditeur(s)

Faculty of Arts, Memorial University

### ISSN

0823-1737 (imprimé)

1715-1430 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

### Citer ce compte rendu

Hiller, J. K. (2009). Compte rendu de [Peter Coffman, *Newfoundland Gothic*.] *Newfoundland Studies*, 24(1), 159–160.

derstanding of sixteenth-century Newfoundland history. This book is “a must read.”

Rainer Baehre  
Memorial University.

Peter Coffman, *Newfoundland Gothic*. Québec: Éditions Multimondes, 2008, ISBN 9782895441267.

This book derives from the author’s 2006 PhD thesis (Queen’s University), and was the winner of the 2007 Phyllis-Lambert Prize for the best dissertation “on the subject of architecture and architectural history in Canada.” It focuses on Gothic Revival architecture in Newfoundland and Labrador as practiced during the nineteenth century by the Church of England and the Roman Catholic Church. Methodist churches and those of other Protestant denominations are not discussed, and no explanation is given for the exclusion. Domestic and secular architecture is mentioned only in passing.

Within these limits, Peter Coffman places Newfoundland ecclesiastical architecture in context, discussing the phases of the Gothic Revival in Britain, its export to British North America, and the importance of developments within the Church of England, notably the Tractarian movement. Indeed, much of this handsome book is devoted to the Anglicans, who adopted the Gothic style with much more enthusiasm and scholarship than did Roman Catholics. The result is a useful, readable, lavishly illustrated, and generally well-researched book. Many of the churches which Coffman discusses survive today as important features of the landscape, and to have their origins and histories described here is of great value.

Of particular importance are Coffman’s discussions of the Anglican cathedral in St. John’s (designed by that Victorian architectural colossus George Gilbert Scott), and of the churches designed by the Rev. William Grey, Bishop Edward Feild’s diocesan architect. These buildings clearly demonstrate the influence of Tractarian and ecclesiological thought on church design, and are as important in their own way as Bishop Medley’s ecclesiologically-correct cathedral in Fredericton. More originally, Coffman also includes the Anglican churches that preceded and followed the more well-known Feild-Grey era, as well as Roman Catholic essays in Gothic architecture in St. John’s, Trinity, Harbour Grace, Carbonear, and Woody Point.

That said, Coffman’s grasp of Newfoundland history in the nineteenth century is unsure, and he falls back on tired clichés about the place — adjectives such as “isolated,” “remote,” and “desolate” appear all too often. On page 113, for instance, he writes that outposts “were (*and indeed remain*) [my italics] far from the centres of power, sparsely populated, inaccessible, and impoverished.” Far too much reliance is placed on Archdeacon Wix’s famous *Journal* (1836), a good example of

missionary propaganda designed to open pockets back home, but a text which provides few balanced insights into nineteenth century Newfoundland society.

Part of the problem is that Coffman has missed a number of important secondary sources. In the key church-building period of the early to mid-nineteenth century, the central figures were the Anglican Bishop Feild, and the Roman Catholic Bishop Michael Anthony Fleming. Coffman does not cite Frederick Jones's 1971 PhD thesis (Cambridge) on Feild, nor any of his numerous articles, including an entry in the *Dictionary of Canadian Biography* (*DCB*). Similarly, Coffman does not mention John FitzGerald's 1997 PhD thesis (Ottawa) on Fleming, nor the Rev. R. Lahey's entry on Fleming in the *DCB*. These are significant omissions, and there are others.

There is no need to labour the point. Peter Coffman has made a significant and valuable contribution to the architectural history of nineteenth century Newfoundland and Labrador. While his knowledge of the architectural context is solid and well-explained, and likewise his analysis of individual buildings, his explication of the social, economic, and political environments in which these buildings were constructed needs — as academics say — “more work.”

James K Hiller  
Memorial University

Paula Laverty, *Silk Stocking Mats: Hooked Mats of the Grenfell Mission*. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2005, ISBN 0773525068.

SILK STOCKING MATS is a stunningly illustrated book that examines the history of “the Industrial,” a cottage industry of the Grenfell medical mission, through the prismatic lens of its most successful and noted products, hooked mats. While many other crafts were undertaken and ultimately produced throughout the Industrial's history, it is the mats that have maintained an international audience and that remain Laverty's focus here. Her interest and expertise span almost two decades during which time she has curated three exhibitions on the subject and served as a contributing author on the craft and its history for the Newfoundland and Labrador Heritage Website.

She introduces us to this project by outlining her research problematic — a series of simple questions regarding the mats: who produced them, who designed them and why, and ultimately, what was the relationship between the makers and the Mission. These questions lead to ever more complex answers as she unravels the personal stories of the makers, the myth of the founding British medical missionary, Sir Wilfred Grenfell, and the shifting images within the mats themselves. These multiple stories are then woven back together to reveal the culture and commodity production of which the mats are the material residue. Textile production has always paralleled social and industrial development and these seemingly sim-