canversations

{ Newfoundland }

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canversations

The National Library of Canada and the Association for Canadian Studies are pleased to launch Canversations, a reading and discussion series whose aim is to bring Canadians together to exchange views on issues and ideas as presented in Canadian books. We believe the pleasure of reading can be enhanced when it is shared with others. This series is designed to offer readers the opportunity to meet and exchange views, pose questions, and explore ideas in an informal setting.

The vibrant world of Canadian publishing provides a rich and varied resource from which to draw themes and subjects. For the first series, we have chosen the topic of Newfoundland, in celebration of the 50th anniversary of Newfoundland's entry into Confederation. Professor Ronald Rompkey, Director of the J.R. Smallwood Centre for Newfoundland Studies, has selected four titles for inclusion in the series. His choices, and descriptions of each book, follow.

Canversations is a conversation about Canadian books. It is a collaborative initiative of the Association of Canadian Studies and the National Library of Canada to help Canadians understand themselves and their country through reading and discussion.

Raymond-M. Hébert
President
Association of Canadian Studies

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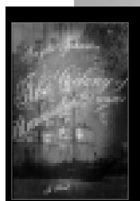

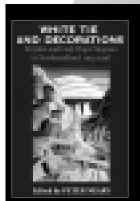

ROMPKEY, Ronald.

Newfoundland and Labrador: Colonial and Post-colonial Writing

Department of English, Memorial University.

One of the mental exercises carried out at the Newfoundland Historical Society's 50th anniversary symposium on Newfoundland's entry into Confederation in the spring of 1999 was a poll on the matter of entry with the same set of alternatives. In that poll, without the political pressure brought to bear by the original circumstances, the assembly voted somewhat mischievously in favour of Responsible Government While it would be difficult to read the result as much more than an interlude of nationalistic yearning, it did reopen the vexing question of what might have occurred had Newfoundland arranged itself at finish line on the long road to Confederation, made some encouraging gestures, and refused to cross it. With J.R. Smallwood set on the margin, who would have led the ensuing government? Indeed, who would have been elected to the House of Assembly? What alignments would have occurred with foreign countries?

TO THIS DAY, it is deliciously amusing to ponder who among the existing élite of the province might now be employed as, say, ambassador to Ireland? (Richard Cashin?) Who might occupy the office of high commissioner in Ottawa? (Clyde Wells?) This kind of amusement serves as a reminder that Newfoundland and Labrador as a collectivity displayed at the time of Confederation many of the elements associated with nationhood: a lengthy recorded history, cultural tradition, distinctive linguistic traits, folk songs, folk tales, and above all a sense of place. "This is a country [sic] in which we have developed very distinctive peculiarities," declared Smallwood at the National Convention in 1947. "We have our own traditions. We have our own folklore. We have our own folkmusic... We have got a distinctive culture all our own..." The inhabitants of Newfoundland and Labrador could justifiably claim such distinctions, but ironically it took Confederation itself to bring about what is sometimes regarded as their "renaissance," a flowering of cultural expression similar to those taking place in newly independent countries the world over. In particular, it produced a body of literature not unlike what was produced throughout the British empire after 1945, a literature broadly linked to the transformation of colonial society.

This series of readings at the National Library of Canada examines some of the ways in which writing about Newfoundland and Labrador participates in the process of self-imagining, ways in which a variety of literary forms have served to project identity and a sense of community within the Canadian cultural landscape. For apart from its geographical and political formations, Newfoundland and Labrador is (to borrow Benedict Anderson's term) a community "imagined," a product of its own writers, soldiers, politicians and public functionaries. Throughout the world, new political transformations, especially newly independent colonies, have found ways of symbolizing identity. A similar process has occurred for the past fifty years in Canada's newest province.

In Newfoundland and Labrador, the process has involved the founding of Memorial University (also 50 years old), the conservation of linguistic and musical traditions, the visual representation of the landscape, a revival of community theatre. New writing by Newfoundlanders, both at home and abroad, has been enormous, and it would be impossible to summarize what has occurred in prose alone. But perhaps the four titles chosen for this series will raise questions about the role of literature in the provincial consciousness. Wayne Johnston's Colony of Unrequited Dreams (1998) is the latest of a series of Newfoundland novels to examine networks of national affiliation and the construction of historical memory. Though its chief protagonist is "Joseph Smallwood," the central preoccupation is Newfoundland itself, its self-consciousness and its political impotence. David Macfarlane's Danger Tree (1991) is an attempt by an Ontario writer of Newfoundland heritage to come to grips with his family's place in the world by linking it to a defining episode of the colony's history: its participation in the First World War and the annihilation of its young men. White Tie and Decorations (1996), the letters of a colonial administrator edited by Newfoundland historian Peter Neary, makes plain the financial and social deprivations which brought renewed claims for an alignment with Canada. And in No Holds Barred (1997), John Crosbie, one of the new political élite, traces from the inside the political transformations brought about by Confederation both provincially and federally. All four invite us to contemplate how change occurs and how perception is related to textuality.

Ronald Rompkey
Department of English
Memorial University

For Further Reading

Anderson, Benedict. Imagined Communities. London: Verso, 1983.

Byrne, Pat. "The Confluence of Folklore and Literature in the Creation of a Newfoundland Mythology within the Canadian Context," in Jørn Carlsen, ed., Canada and the Nordic Countries in Times of Reorientation: Culture & Politics (Århus, Denmark: Nordic Association for Canadian Studies, 1998), 55-77.

Duley, Margaret. "Glimpses into Local Literature," Atlantic Guardian, 13, no. 7 (July 1956): 20-26.

Gwyn, Sandra. "The Newfoundland Renaissance," Saturday Night (April 1976): 38-45.

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Overton, James. "A Newfoundland Culture?" Journal of Canadian Studies, 23 (1988): 5-22.

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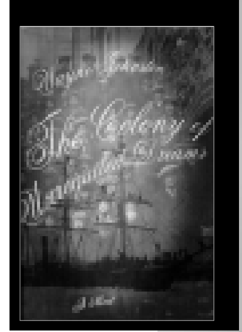
The Colony of Unrequited Dreams.

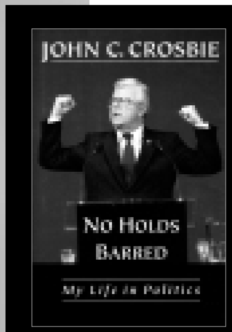
Toronto, Knopf, 1998.



THE COLONY OF UNREQUITED DREAMS is the master work of Wayne Johnston, the St. John's writer who began his career as a reporter for the old Daily News in 1979-81, then left for Ottawa to write full time. In short order, Johnston produced The Story of Bobby O'Malley (1985), which won the Books in Canada/W.H. Smith First Novel Award, and The Time of Their Lives (1987), which brought him the Canadian Authors' Association/Air Canada Award for young writers. His next novel, The Divine Ryans (1990), brought further acclaim, and it has since been adapted as a feature film. The Colony of Unrequited Dreams, a contemplation of the soul of Newfoundland itself, is Johnston's most ambitious and most accomplished work so far. It was short-listed for the Booker Prize in 1999.

The Colony of Unrequited Dreams brings us intimately into the history of Newfoundland through the career of the central character, "Joseph Smallwood"—not the first premier of the province but a fictional construct who engages in some of the actual Smallwood's activities and in other imagined events leading up to Confederation in 1949 and beyond. Operating on at least three levels of textuality, it is an ambitious attempt to reach into the depths of Newfoundland as a society and explore something of its identity. As Johnston said in a CBC Radio interview in 1998, "The unrequited dreams are not only the privations that Newfoundland has endured over the centuries but its thwarted or aborted national aspirations. Its march to nationhood was cut off, and therefore the dream of nationhood that a lot of Newfoundlanders had went unrequited. For the characters in the book, a lot of their dreams and aspirations are unrequited as well, sometimes because of politics, sometimes because of flaws in their own character, sometimes because of chance."

The novel has raised questions about the efficacy of historical fiction, especially reconstructions of the recent past. Rex Murphy concluded in the Toronto Globe and Mail (3 October 1998), for instance, that "Fictionalizing an inner life and inventing a love interest has shorn Joey of the vigour and elemental charisma that were the magnetic signature of the original." Johnston replied on 23 November, "There are many precedents for it in world literature, but few in Canadian literature, which I suspect may be the reason that some Canadian critics find its premise so hard to accept." Regardless of which of these views is acceptable, the reader will discover one of the more stimulating fictional treatments of Newfoundland public life, a rich journey through time enlivened by Johnston's characteristic wit.



No Holds Barred: My Life in Politics.

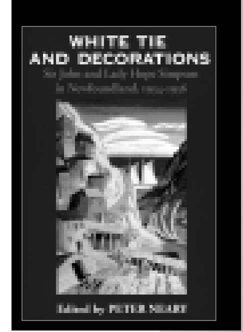
Toronto, McClelland & Stewart, 1997.

NO HOLDS BARRED is the political memoir of John Carnell Crosbie (b. 1931), one of the ablest and most entertaining Newfoundland politicians of the post-Confederation era, one who would most certainly have figured prominently in a national government if Newfoundland had remained independent. We encounter Crosbie at his most vituperative and most antagonistic as he revisits the characters and events of a lifetime. Beginning with his privileged upbringing as the son of St. John's businessman Chesley A. Crosbie (who refused to sign the Terms of Union with Canada in 1949), his schooling at St. Andrew's College (Aurora) and his university education at Queen's, Dalhousie Law School, and the LSE, we then proceed to his life in politics. Called to the bar in 1957, Crosbie was first elected to public office in 1965 as a St. John's municipal councillor, resigning in 1966 to enter the cabinet of Premier Joseph R. Smallwood, whose presence animates the first half of the book like a bogeyman. The drama surrounding Crosbie's resignation from cabinet with Clyde Wells (later to be premier) in 1968 brings this phase to a close.

The following year, Crosbie unsuccessfully challenged Smallwood's leadership of the Liberal Party, then sat as an independent Liberal and as leader of the Liberal Reform Group until he joined the Progressive Conservative Party in June 1971, serving in the cabinet of Premier Frank Moores before his election to the House of Commons in 1976. As federal Minister of Finance in 1979, Crosbie suffered the defeat of his budget and the resignation of the government of Prime Minister Joe Clark. In 1983, he unsuccessfully sought the leadership of the Progressive Conservative Party of Canada, but he was invited to join the cabinet of Brian Mulroney and implemented the Free Trade Agreement as Minister of International Trade. As Newfoundland's cabinet representative, he also brought about approval of the Hibernia oil project and negotiated the financial compensation package precipitated by the collapse of the cod fishery. He retired from public life in 1993.

White Tie and Decorations: Sir John and Lady Hope Simpson in Newfoundland, 1934-1936.

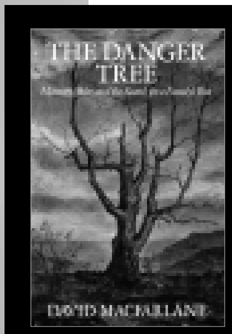
Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1996.



IN 1934, a financial emergency created in part by the Great Depression forced the suspension of self-government in Newfoundland. In dealing with this crisis, Britain guaranteed Newfoundland's debt but appointed a Commission of Government composed of a governor, three British members and three Newfoundlanders to manage its affairs. Among the first British appointees to arrive in St. John's was Sir John Hope Simpson, a man of considerable international experience whose portfolio was to include fishing, forestry, mining and agriculture. White Tie and Decorations is a selection of the letters written from St. John's by Sir John and his wife "Quita," judiciously edited by Peter Neary of the University of Western Ontario and provided with an introduction contextualizing the economic conditions that brought about the loss of democratic institutions in the first place.

A veteran of colonial and government service, Sir John was 65 when he arrived in Newfoundland in 1934, equipped with astonishing executive and legislative powers to "put things right." His wife was 64. The two admire the landscape during their forays outside the capital but condemn virtually everything else about the people and their public institutions, confident that in the future the regulated folk society they and their colleagues were endeavouring to construct would improve matters. Their letters sustain an amusing counterpoint with each other. Sir John had over the years developed an earnest but occasionally self-mocking narrative voice and a facility for the apt phrase. Grand Falls, in his view, was not just an industrial town but "rather like an Indian station," the city of St. John's not just factious but "divided into watertight compartments." Quita, for her part, had thoroughly mastered the domestic style. Nothing escaped her opinions and judgements, especially what she calls "social morality," but she was apt to drift into chats about household matters.

The two are dedicated to the task of reform (though privately they take the measure of their colleagues and the Gilbert-and-Sullivanesque court life at Government House), and their sense of mission and certitude never wavers as Sir John goes about his business. He must not only develop plans for marketing salt fish but reorganize the civil service, not only found a rural ranger force but promote game preservation and land settlement and look after lighthouses. Not surprisingly, a year after his arrival, he complains of fatigue, and a year after that he would hand over to his successor, convinced that despite deep-seated resistance to change amongst the local worthies he had accomplished something.



The Danger Tree: Memory, War, and the Search for a Family's Past.

Toronto, Macfarlane Walter & Ross, 1991.

DAVID MACFARLANE takes us inside his mother's family, the Goodyears of central Newfoundland, part of the lifeblood of the old colony. Macfarlane, who grew up in Hamilton, Ontario, amid reminiscences of the Goodyears and their past, introduces us to his grandfather and to the aunt and three uncles who served in France during the First World War. The book is at once an elegy and an evocation of pre-Confederation Newfoundland outside the Avalon Peninsula.

The American edition carried the title Come From Away, a term employed by Newfoundlanders to denote an outsider such as Macfarlane himself. But Macfarlane is well placed to regard Newfoundland both inside and outside. As the reviewer in the New Yorker (17 February 1992) correctly observed, the Goodyears acquire an "emblematic character" as the heart and soul of the pre-Confederation era and its lost identity. "Newfoundland—the country, not the province—was a stage small enough to make all their doings, and the doings of their friends and enemies, look larger than life, historical," we are reminded. "It seems ironic now that such a stubborn, independent people could not continue to go their own way politically."

The title of the Canadian edition, The Danger Tree, directs the reader to an old apple tree situated in No Man's Land during the First World War, where the Goodyear's lost their best men fighting with the Royal Newfoundland Regiment. But the title doesn't matter. Either way, the book indirectly speculates on what might have been. Interspersed with illustrations from the family album, pictures of promising young men gazing confidently beyond the camera, it takes a circular route through recollection and anecdote, much as the family itself might have done during one of their gatherings, and arrives at a poignant moment where the railway built at the turn of the century to encourage industry and tourism in Newfoundland is discovered tearing up its own tracks.