

*Newfoundland entries in Dictionary of Canadian Biography, vol. 6 (1821-35) and vol. 8 (1851-60).* Ed. Frances G. Halpenny and Jean Hamelin.

J. K. Hiller

Volume 4, Number 2, Fall 1988

URI: [https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/nflds4\\_2br01](https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/nflds4_2br01)

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Faculty of Arts, Memorial University

ISSN

1198-8614 (print)

1715-1430 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Hiller, J. K. (1988). Review of [*Newfoundland entries in Dictionary of Canadian Biography, vol. 6 (1821-35) and vol. 8 (1851-60)*]. Ed. Frances G. Halpenny and Jean Hamelin.] *Newfoundland Studies*, 4(2), 119–202.

## REVIEWS

Newfoundland entries in *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, vol. 6 (1821-35) and vol. 8 (1851-60). Ed. Frances G. Halpenny and Jean Hamelin. University of Toronto Press, 1985-7. 960 and 1129 p. \$70 ea.

J.K. HILLER

WHERE TWO OR THREE historians of Canada are gathered together, the *Dictionary of Canadian Biography* (DCB) is almost certain to be a subject for discussion. Some will give thanks that "their periods" have been completed, and that they will no longer have to deal with phone calls from the Toronto office, first urging them to contribute and then to complete their entries. Others compare notes on whom they are writing up for volumes in preparation, how the editors have reacted to their submissions, and what they thought of each other's entries. All agree that writing brief entries on relatively obscure individuals is the worst chore of all. Such discussions reflect a certain ambivalence among DCB contributors to the most ambitious and longest running scholarly enterprise in Canadian historiography — at least, until the *Historical Atlas of Canada* came along.

The ambivalence is easy enough to explain. It is generally accepted that the DCB is a fundamentally important work of reference which must be seen through to completion, though this may well be after most of the present generation of historians have retired, having lived with the project all their professional lives. Yet writing DCB entries can be an irritating diversion from the work in which a contributor is primarily interested, particularly if he or she is stuck with individuals whose lives are difficult to pin down. For some, the biographical format is unfamiliar and restricting. And if one does spend time and energy in producing a crackerjack entry, how many people are going

to read it? There is much more kudos attached to an article in a refereed journal or to a solid monograph, than to 600 words on George Webber, newspaperman, fl. 1851-57 — words that may have taken literally weeks to assemble. Thus when the phone rings, or the familiar envelope of contracts arrives, duty and obligation war with academic selfishness and a natural reluctance to postpone that article yet again.

The DCB's editorial staff is aware of all of this, and they deserve much credit for having produced ten volumes so far, with another due to be released in the fall of 1988. These volumes cover Canadians who died in the 18th and 19th centuries, and work has begun on Volume 13, which will include those dying in the period 1900-19. From the outset, the DCB has insisted on high standards of scholarship and an adequate regional balance. Attempts have been made to ensure that non-elite groups and native peoples are represented, and authors are encouraged — in the longer entries — to range beyond the strict narrative of a particular career. The two volumes under review contain 47 Newfoundland entries. The colonial elite is heavily represented with twelve clerics (six Anglican, four Catholic and two Methodist), two nuns, nine merchants, five government officials, four governors, three judges, two newspapermen and one architect. The rest of Newfoundland society is represented by entries on three fishermen, two Indians and one farmer.

The imbalance is not surprising. A biographical approach ensures that those who left records of their lives and were prominent in their day are remembered as individuals. Others appear, usually, only because they came fortuitously into prominence by reason of their association with the elite. John Peyton and William Cull are included in Volume 6 because of their involvement with the remnants of the Beothucks at a time when their fate was causing concern. James Lundrigan is included because his brutal flogging by order of the surrogate magistrates provided a *cause célèbre* for the St. John's reformers. The Micmac Sylvester Joe guided William Cormack across the island in 1822. And Shawnadithit became a collector's item before succumbing to consumption. The exception is John O'Brien, an Irish farmer whose life John Mannion has reconstructed largely from oral evidence, and whose only association with the elite was to sell its members dairy produce. More entries of this sort could have made these and other DCB volumes more truly representative of Canadian society as a whole.

Accepting that the DCB tends heavily to favour the elites, and that the contents depend to an extent on the willingness of an ambivalent profession to deliver the goods, readers of those volumes can nevertheless be grateful for the range and quality of the Newfoundland entries. In a recent review of Volume 8, J.E. Bumsted asserted that the DCB research had substantially rewritten the history of Newfoundland and that of a few other provinces. This is something of an exaggeration so far as Newfoundland is concerned, but there can be no doubt that the entries do provide much valuable and

new information, and some important insights. And if the reader takes groups of entries — merchants, for instance — it is possible to gain an enlarged appreciation of broader social and economic structures which illuminates our understanding of the colony in the early 19th century.

In Volume 6, which is strong on Beothucks, the entry on Shawnadithit by Ralph Pastore and George Story provides an excellent, compressed analysis of the reasons for the tribe's extinction. Entries on such merchants as George Garland, Marmaduke Hart and James MacBraire by Gordon Handcock and Keith Matthews provide a good basic overview of the fish business. Raymond Lahey's article on Bishop Scallan describes the position of the Irish and the Roman Catholic church. Bumsted, Matthews and Peter Neary deal well with the judges, the state of the law, and the problems of an emerging colonial society. Patrick O'Flaherty makes his appearance as a master of the period, with entries on naval governors and the unfortunate Lundrigan.

Methodist missionaries arrive in Volume 8, reflecting the growth of that denomination after the Napoleonic Wars. Articles on Catholic priests, again by Lahey, and on Presentation and Mercy sisters, illustrate the energetic expansion of that church under Bishop Fleming, and also its internal conflicts. Frederick Jones' articles on Charles Blackman and Thomas Bridge show parallel developments in the Church of England. Matthews' entry on Robert Pack is probably the best of the merchant entries, though one should not skip Handcock on Samuel Codner and Melvin Baker on Patrick Tasker. There is important new material as well in O'Flaherty's biography of Edward Kielley, which deals with his celebrated lawsuit against William Carson, and in his balanced review of the career of Henry Winton, the outspoken editor of the Tory *Public Ledger*.

For historians of 19th century Canada, as well as Newfoundland, the most important entry is that by Phillip Buckner on Sir John Harvey, who acted as governor or lieutenant governor in each of what are now the Atlantic Provinces between 1836 and 1852. This is a significant and revisionist analysis of a colonial governor's attempts to come to terms with the conflicts existing in each colony, and with the gradual move of the British authorities towards the institution of responsible government. Buckner argues convincingly that Harvey is an underrated figure, having been neglected by central Canadian historians of the period. The description of Harvey's stay in Newfoundland between 1841 and 1846 is well done, and until Buckner's full-length biography of Harvey appears, should be required reading.

A review cannot mention all the entries. But enough has been said to indicate the richness of these volumes, and their value to students of Newfoundland history. They deserve to be widely and intelligently used. Together with the other volumes in the series, they demonstrate clearly the health of Canadian historical scholarship in general, and that of Newfoundland in par-

ticular. Let us hope that the SSHRC will continue to fund the DCB for years to come.

MEMORIAL UNIVERSITY