

***Contrary Winds: Essays on Newfoundland Society in Crisis.***  
**Ed. Rex Clark.**

David Frank

---

Volume 4, Number 2, Fall 1988

URI: [https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/nflds4\\_2br04](https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/nflds4_2br04)

[See table of contents](#)

---

Publisher(s)

Faculty of Arts, Memorial University

ISSN

1198-8614 (print)

1715-1430 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

---

Cite this review

Frank, D. (1988). Review of [*Contrary Winds: Essays on Newfoundland Society in Crisis*. Ed. Rex Clark.] *Newfoundland Studies*, 4(2), 209–211.

*Contrary Winds: Essays on Newfoundland Society in Crisis.* Ed. Rex Clark. St. John's: Breakwater Books, 1986. 186 p. \$9.95.

## DAVID FRANK

THIS IS A MISCELLANEOUS collection of essays loosely organized around the theme of the subtitle: "Newfoundland society in crisis." The crisis referred to appears to be that of the early 1980s. Although the book was published in 1986, most of the contributions were written in 1982 and 1983 and none appears to have been updated since then. As a result the collection has a dated air and cannot be considered a reliable guide to contemporary issues.

Indeed it appears that the essays are principally of interest for what they reveal about the preoccupations of local social scientists in the early 1980s. The contributors share a concern about the structures of inequality which dominate the people of the province. At a time when the province seemed to be poised between the perpetual troubles of the fisheries and the novel temptations of an oil boom, the authors are also concerned about the prospects for a decisive breakthrough in the province's dependent status. On balance, however, they tend to have more interest in what we may call the structures of domination than in the structures of resistance.

The contents can be briefly summarized. Rex Clark looks for hidden meanings in the language of outport mummings in the early 19th century. This is followed by three essays on the fisheries. Vince Walsh provides a critique of government economic policy, pointing out that makeshift political solutions have helped maintain the status quo. In a revised version of a brief presented to the Task Force on the Atlantic Fisheries, Peter Sinclair offers insights into the crisis of the early 1980s and outlines some constructive directions for state policy in the industry. Gordon Inglis follows with a paper on the origins of the Newfoundland Fishermen, Food and Allied Workers' Union in the early 1970s. Then Elliott Leyton delivers an eloquent lecture on the meaning of crime in modern Newfoundland, reminding us that criminality can be read from the bottom up as well as the top down and that one of the ambivalent features of capitalist development is that "some grabs more than others." Mark Shrimpton provides an expert guide to the deepening

housing problems of St. John's, making it clear that the priorities of government and business threaten to make conditions worse rather than better for the less privileged classes. Two essays ponder the prospects of an oil boom from the vantage point of the early 1980s. W.R. Hynd introduces the politics of oil by drawing parallels with Alberta's experience in the formative years of that province's oil boom. Drawing on the Scottish and other North Atlantic experiences, Doug House gives a detailed prognosis of the potential local effects, good and bad. Finally, Jim Overton offers a critique of recent Newfoundland populism, emphasising the ambiguities of dependency analysis and the limitations of the role of the state in a capitalist society. And Rick Johnstone concludes with a qualified defence of populism. Hopefully seeking out the common ground between dependency and class analysis, he concludes that "the problem is not just an underdevelopment problem; it is also an underclass problem."

These final two essays are of special interest, for they highlight the implicit debate over Brian Peckford and his New Newfoundland which underlies much of the discussion of public policy in the 1980s. The lines of tension run between those who tend to favour capturing more economic benefits for Newfoundland and Labrador and those primarily concerned about a better distribution of benefits to the population of the province. The issue might be seen as a simple matter of priorities were it not for the possibility that the structure of underdevelopment is largely caused by the inequitable distribution of power within the local society. Is capitalist development a progressive force or is it the motor of regional underdevelopment? And in challenging the effects of underdevelopment, how autonomous a role can the state play in a capitalist society? That is to say, from both a theoretical and political perspective, it is not clear whether Mr. Peckford is part of the problem or part of the solution. These questions lurk somewhere below the surface throughout this collection and they are obviously of more than academic interest.

A second theme is less prominent in these essays, though it is certainly not neglected. As Clark states in his brief introduction, "the structurally disadvantaged are not simply victims; they make ways of struggling, sometimes effectively." If the meaning of underdevelopment is socially constructed, we must be alert not only to the expert analysis of intellectuals but also to the implicit meanings attached to their experience by the ordinary men and women of the region's underclasses. What can be said of popular resistance in Newfoundland? The clever opening chapter by Clark attempts to decode the language of class struggle in the world of the 19th century Newfoundland fishing village, deciphering a utopian language of protest against the strategies of merchant capital. One is left with the unfortunate impression, however, that the language of fishermen's protest in this era spoke largely by indirection and had its largest impact in the collective subconscious. Certainly there

were more articulate movements of social protest in the fishing village in this and later eras. The more contemporary account of fishermen's struggles provided by Gordon Inglis is a useful account which should have appeared in print before the author completed his book-length study of the fishermen's union, *More than Just a Union* (1985). In the wake of that book, which focused on the 1970s, we might have expected a more contemporary assessment of the union's role as a social force in Newfoundland. In other essays there are brief allusions to the struggles against plant shutdowns and to the significance of the *Ocean Ranger* disaster, but it is generally difficult to discern the role of the underclasses.

In the end this is a disappointing collection which need not have been published. Most of the authors have made their views known in debates over public policy. Several have published books which supersede the essays presented here. The cause of public discussion would have been better served by speedier publication in scholarly journals or in the public press.

UNIVERSITY OF NEW BRUNSWICK