

## *River Thieves*, Michael Crummy

Lewis Macleod

Volume 19, Number 1, Spring 2003

URI: [https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/nflds19\\_1rv05](https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/nflds19_1rv05)

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### Publisher(s)

Faculty of Arts, Memorial University

### ISSN

0823-1737 (print)

1715-1430 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

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### Cite this document

Macleod, L. (2003). *River Thieves*, Michael Crummy. *Newfoundland Studies*, 19(1), 247–249.

*River Thieves*. Michael Crummey. Toronto, Doubleday Canada, 330 p., cloth, \$34.95, 2001, ISBN 0-385-65810-9.

LEWIS MACLEOD

A NATIONAL BESTSELLER, winner of the Raddall Atlantic Fiction Prize and the Atlantic Independent Booksellers' Award, shortlisted for the Giller Prize and Commonwealth Writers Prize, Michael Crummey's *River Thieves* is one of the most successful Newfoundland novels ever. And not just commercially. It is an artistic success of a very high order: epic in its scope, poetic in its execution.

*River Thieves* focuses on the personal and historical tensions at work in a single settler household in the Bay of Exploits in the early nineteenth century. The Peyton family, consists of an aging frontier father, John Sr., his conflicted twenty-something son, John Jr. (called Peyton throughout the book), and their housekeeper/schoolmistress, Cassie, a woman of mysterious origins and the object of Peyton's frustrated, unexpressed affections. Peyton's struggles to emerge from the shadow of his father, to win Cassie's love and become "a man in his own right, finally" (8) are linked with his state-supervised journeys into the interior of the island looking for "the Red Indians", the Beothuks.

In *River Thieves*, the vividly described interior of the Newfoundland landscape and the secrets it hides connect with the equally rugged, dense interiors of individual psyches, and the ghosts and demons that haunt John Sr., Peyton, and Cassie are, in an important sense, linked with the ghosts, the echoes of the Beothuk people themselves. The "deeply abraded" landscape is as "untidy and wild" (28) as the impulses of the people who live there, and its confused topography, like the confused psyches of Crummey's characters, sometimes gives the sense that we are encountering a world "devoid of any suggestion of design, of intent" (28). In such a space, all forms of communication become fraught with difficulty, and Peyton feels the mystery of the Beothuks in terms of the mystery of Cassie, the impenetrability of his father, and his perplexity with himself. His hopes for happy and productive relations with those he loves are essentially similar to his hopes for productive relations with Beothuk people he has never really seen. All seem to "dissipate like a dream that resists articulation" (21).

These memorable and traumatic journeys are instigated by the presence of naval officer, David Buchan, a conscientious, if too-credulous, representative of British civilization and justice. Officious and self-consciously proper, Buchan sets himself in opposition to John Sr., who still thinks and acts according to the laws or at least customs of a wild and violent frontier. While Buchan insists that the Beothuks are to be protected by the crown, John Sr. is interested only in protecting himself and his property from the "Red Indians" he loathes and fears. Indeed, the conflict between these two flawed men, their inability to understand or reconcile themselves to each other's presence, parallels the series of "pivotal misunderstandings" (21) that lead to the Beothuks' destruction. Rightly, Buchan fears that the English nation will, "like the Spanish", have to bear "the indelible reproach of having extirpated a whole race of people" (24), but the viability of Buchan's forms of protection, the legitimacy of his recourse to law, is the subject of close scrutiny in the novel. Crummey's characterization of Buchan is subtle, as his idealism and ambition interfere with the complexities that real life demands. Despite his good intentions, Buchan is not the agent of much good, either to the Peytons or the Beothuks. His too-firm belief in the rightness of his cause makes him naïve and unproductive. He is, as Cassie finally tells him, "a simpleton about the truth", unable to understand that there is much "to fear from it" (299).

Like so many other good works of fiction, Crummey's novel negotiates the tricky distance between the microcosm and the macrocosm, between attention to particular fictional characters and attention to a larger historical reality. At once a kind of historical (even an adventure) epic and a postmodern investigation into the constitutive power of stories, *River Thieves* demonstrates the degree to which the struggle for individual spiritual survival is linked with the struggle for literal, actual survival of various groups. Near the end of the novel, Buchan laments that he and Peyton have "taken the tragedy of an entire race of people ... and cheapened it with [their] own sordid little melodrama" (381), but the novel itself suggests something quite different: that little melodramas, small, individual narratives make up the substance of epic tragedies. Buchan's abstract preoccupation with large scale matters is finally less moving than the small-scale, but deeply tragic, misunderstandings and missed opportunities that Crummey presents throughout the novel.

Whether of epic or miniscule magnitude, stories themselves (and the ways in which stories are told) are important to the novel's overall effect. Again and again, Crummey seems to suggest that the stories we tell make up the histories we all come to know, and, by extension, the lives we come to live. The fear and animosity of the settlers toward the Beothuk people travels more through anecdotes and tales than it does through their violent, but sporadic, conflicts, and Crummey shows how the terms we use to name and express things act as "stones set to mark the path out of [and sometimes into] the wildemess" (124). In a world where "a story is never told for its own sake" (361), Peyton eventually realizes, "a little book" (more than an actual event) has been "the start of their undoing" (347). It is a world where every version of events, every word and every story, seems to have some ulterior motive, some "curiously disturbing heft" (i).

All of these matters are presented in elegant, well-integrated, prose. Crummey has a poet's sense for metaphor and image, but there is nothing showy or ostentatious about the way he writes. When John Sr. swallows his glasses of rum "like a man trying to drown an animal he can no longer afford to feed" (34), the link between his violent, "animal" past fits perfectly with the degree to which his untamed, unregulated world is becoming submerged in, drowned by, Buchan's advancing bureaucracy. There are several equally apt links and comparisons in the novel, each with its own well-considered and well-rendered nuances.

Technically sophisticated, psychologically and intellectually complex, and emotionally compelling, *River Thieves* is a very fine novel indeed.