

Gary L. Saunders. *So Much Weather!: Facts, Phenomena and Weather Lore from Atlantic Canada.*

Philip Hiscock

Volume 19, Number 2, Fall 2003

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/nflds19_2rv05

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Faculty of Arts, Memorial University

ISSN

0823-1737 (print)

1715-1430 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Hiscock, P. (2003). Review of [Gary L. Saunders. *So Much Weather!: Facts, Phenomena and Weather Lore from Atlantic Canada.*] *Newfoundland Studies*, 19(2), 394–397.

394 Reviews

Gary L. Saunders. *So Much Weather!: Facts, Phenomena and Weather Lore from Atlantic Canada*. Nimbus Publishing, Ltd., Halifax, NS, 2001, ISBN 1-55109-382-0

ON A VERY HOT, sunny Labrador afternoon in late May 2003, I drove west from Happy Valley to see Muskrat Falls. At Happy Valley, the Grand (or Churchill) River ice had broken up so much that only a half-dozen bergy bits could be seen at any moment floating by. But, despite the 30-degree weather, 30 kilometers upriver it was different. There, most of the ice was still in place across the river, a few kilometers wide, and perhaps still thick enough to drive a truck across.

Eight or ten kilometers before I arrived at Muskrat Falls I still couldn't see the falls. Once there, I saw a boiling cauldron of open water under Muskrat Falls churning and thundering, shaking the hill I stood on, and looking like a mile-wide toilet flushing. But back on the road I could see a strange cloud formation — a large donut-shaped cumulus cloud, like a gigantic smoke ring, hovering and slowly twisting a mile high over the falls. I stopped the car to photograph it and I'm glad I did — by the time I arrived at the falls, the cloud had dissipated.

Such, I have learned from Gary L. Saunders's book *So Much Weather*, is the way of warm-weather cumulus clouds. They roll and pitch and put you in mind of, as Charles Schultz said, the stoning of St. Stephen or horsies and doggies or perhaps, like me, gargantuan smoke rings. And then they disappear. I know now, from *So Much Weather*, that the ring was probably caused by a combination of turbulences from the huge power of that pool of churning open water, ringed by chunks of ten-meter-thick ice, and hot forests warmed by a July sun in May. Reading this book made me think of weather I've known.

But, reading this book, I did not think only of weather. An interesting book leaves the reader with questions. After reading Saunders's interesting book, among the questions I have are these: how widespread is the term "Atlantic Canada" (or "Atlantic Provinces")? Are the meanings quite the same in the three Maritime Provinces as they are in the fourth Atlantic, not Maritime, province?

In the late-1990s, there was some discussion of the term in Newfoundland nativist circles. Around that time, I heard musings that "Atlantic Provinces" was a deliberate political invention to reduce the independence of the provinces, and to increase the power of Moncton and Halifax at the expense of the other centers; and that it came into being in the 1980s, coined by nefarious centralizing federal government officials. Of course the theory is not true; the phrase had been around at least for three decades before the 1980s.

I had an interesting email correspondence ten years ago about who invented the term "Atlantic Canada." Perhaps Jack Pickersgill did. Perhaps, as the August 2003 *Downhomer* magazine reported, Joe Smallwood did. It was certainly a favourite term of Smallwood's, a seemingly polite effort on his part not to usurp the cultural, historical and political integrity of the phrase "Maritime Provinces."

In fact, I thought everyone alive in Canada in the 1950s and 1960s was attuned to the not-very-subtle distinction between “Maritime” and “Atlantic,” and to the highly subtle subtexts involved in their use. Katherine Barber’s *Canadian Oxford Dictionary* (1998) clearly makes the distinction. The subtexts were made less subtle in the 1990s when a series of school textbooks was made common curriculum in a concerted effort by the four Atlantic provincial governments to streamline their budgets and efforts. The schoolbooks were accused by some nativists of using the term “Atlantic Canada” to lead a new generation of Newfoundlanders and Labradorians into thinking kindly on the thought of an eastern union of provinces.

And thus I return to Gary Saunders’s book, whose subtitle contains the phrase, Atlantic Canada. Yet in the book, far more often than “Atlantic,” one finds “Maritime”: Maritime Provinces, Maritime weather, Maritime fishermen, Maritimer. I did some random counting and found that the word Maritime (or Maritimer) turned up twelve times more frequently than Atlantic, used in similar ways.

Gary Saunders grew up in Newfoundland. He was born in 1935 in Clarke’s Head, in Gander Bay, where he lived until he went to university in the mid-1950s. He has lived in Nova Scotia most of his adult life but retains strong ties to Newfoundland, travelling home from time to time.

As some writers, notably Malcolm MacLeod, have pointed out, the strong cultural unity of the four Atlantic Provinces has been somewhat hidden by political events of the past century and a half. Perhaps too much can be made of this view, but weather, as Saunders shows, is a great unifier. “The storm that drenches southern New Brunswick this morning may drench Nova Scotia and PEI tonight and sail on to Newfoundland tomorrow” (175). There are, of course, surprising variations, even in small local areas. Saunders draws a map (9) of Nova Scotia showing the average number of frost-free days each year. In a 40- or 50-kilometer zone on the north side of Cape Breton Island, it ranges from 80 days in one area to 140 days in another. This is not just a fact of nature; it has cultural ramifications — early settlers chose homesteads with exactly that knowledge in mind. (It would have been nice to see the same for other parts of the region.)

The hottest and coldest temperature records in the region are both held by Labrador (9) — Northwest River reached 41.7°C in August 1974; and Esker 2, on the iron ore railway in Western Labrador, reached minus 51.1°C in 1973. I probably need not tell you that St. John’s is the foggiest city in Canada (121 days!) and you might be interested that it is also what Saunders calls the Glaze Capital (meaning — I think — the leader in the number of days of silver thaw; he calls it freezing precipitation). St. John’s gets 38 days of it a year (9).

Nimbus publishes good-looking books and this is no exception. It was designed by Kathy Kaulbach and has many little drawings, quotations, facts and the like in the wide margins. I expect the drawings are Saunders’s own: he holds a BFA from Mount Allison, and was a regular visual art winner in the Newfoundland Arts and Letters competitions in the late 1950s. It is a pleasant-to-look-at book, and also

396 *Reviews*

a pleasant read. Saunders is a literate and well-read author and it shows in the choice of references and quotations.

The book has some apparatus: a four-page glossary, and a three-page bibliography. Sadly, there is no index. This book is not an almanac or a compendium, but even so an index would have been helpful. More importantly, Saunders nowhere tells the reader where he got his information. This is not a scholarly treatise but, just the same, the general reader often wants to evaluate information in terms of source. Despite the natural unity of Eastern Canada, there are important cultural disunities to be respected. Without sources they are not.

Note the subtitle: "... and weather lore...." Folklore is central to the book. As a folklorist, I am especially worried by the use of folklore without attribution. It is not just a matter of giving credit. It is also a matter of understanding the context of the material. A folklorist should have been consulted before the book went to press. As a result, we get Chapter 15, "Weather Lore and Superstitions" with its list of "Maritime Lore" (139-144) — about five dozen items of weather folklore, all of them unexplained as to era, ethnic group, geographic area or any other contextual identifier. That's too bad — a little more information would have made them much more useful. So too throughout the book.

Saunders's folkloric bits and pieces sometimes appear to me to be not folklore, but Saunderisms. I've never before come across these two rhymes: "Catchy drawer and sticky door, / Coming rain will pour and pour" and "When the chairs squeak / It's of rain they speak" (141). Had he said, "I learned these in Gander Bay," or "I heard them on the Fundy Shore," I'd be happy. But left with the catch-all qualifier "anonymous," I just wonder.

As noted, the book is visually lovely; clearly a designer worked on it. Just as likely, an editor had a hand in, but nonetheless typos have come through. Most readers don't mind obvious typos: poor Wiarton, Ontario, is here called Wyarton (136) but I understand its townsfolk are used to the indignity. It's the un-obvious typos that hurt the reader. When 893 cm is mis-translated for the seeming benefit of metric-challenged readers as 35 inches, as on page 9, the mistake is not clear except to those who don't need the translation. When the word "reflected" is used for "refracted," it is confusing (168).

One more metric-imperial conversion is worth mentioning: "The temperature underground increases 9°C/48°F for each thousand feet downward" (68). It is true that the *temperature* of +9°C is about 48°F. But an *increase* of 9°C is only about 16°F by my mental arithmetic. The book seems to have been originally composed in that peculiarly Canadian style of eclectic measurements. An editor appears to have gone through to catch the imperial measurements and translate them into metric, and vice-versa, so that both appear everywhere. But they were sloppy, and that is not good with technical books.

Ditto the problem of what to call the region. An editor seems to have tried to catch (and vary for variation's sake) the phrases used by Saunders. And they seem

to have thought there is no difference between “Maritime” and “Atlantic.” There is — at least out *here* there is.

Despite the title, this Atlantic province gets short shrift. I found myself reading about episodes of regional weather, like storms, with nice details from, say, Halifax, or Digby, and thinking of the Newfoundland and Labrador reflexes of the same storms. The St. John’s townie in me was disappointed to see no reference to the (record-breaking!) snowfall we had in 2000/2001 (though that winter’s snowfall is mentioned with regard to the Maritimes). The August gales of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, which led to so much tragic loss of life and property in Newfoundland — and the writing of several folksongs — are not mentioned except with Maritime Province results. In effect, this is a book about weather in the Maritimes, with some Newfoundland and Labrador additions.

I was reminded of Charlie Horwood’s *Getting to Know the Weeds* (Cuff, 1996). Both Saunders and Horwood have lived lives of aesthetic involvement with their natural surroundings, intertwined with technical knowledge. Horwood wrote about Eastern Newfoundland and more generally about all of Nature. Saunders writes about Atlantic Canada (or the Maritimes) and specifically about how weather works in our lives. If you like one, you’ll like the other.

Readers, don’t get too knotted up about regional designations. That’s not natural history. However, a word to publishers in the Maritimes: be more careful about your terminology. And perhaps buy Barber’s dictionary.

Philip Hiscock
Memorial University of Newfoundland

Richard MacKinnon. *Vernacular Architecture in the Codroy Valley*. Mercury Series, History Division, Paper 2. Canadian Museum of Civilization [www.cyberboutique.civilization.ca], 2002, ISBN 0-660-18788

FEW REGIONS of Canada have had their traditional patterns of cultural life and landscape as carefully documented and analyzed by folklorists, anthropologist, geographers and social historians as has occurred in Newfoundland. In this sense the region is truly blessed. This book is another important contribution to this fortuitous process. Richard MacKinnon is a Cape Bretoner and was a member of the faculty at the University College of Cape Breton. He also holds a doctorate in Folklore from Memorial University. These facts are central to the genesis of this study, for one of the dominant settler groups to occupy the Codroy Valley were Cape Bretoners who left Inverness County in the middle decades of the nineteenth century in search of a new land frontier for their agricultural way of life. MacKinnon therefore brings a strong personal affinity and sympathy to this study, which was the subject of his doctoral dissertation. His training at MUN also establishes a solid theoretical foundation and an essential awareness of the broader context of scholar-