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Olaf Uwe Janzen

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REVIEW ESSAY

# Naval Dimensions of Newfoundland's Recent Past

OLAF UWE JANZEN

Mark C. Hunter, *To Employ and Uplift Them: The Newfoundland Naval Reserve, 1899-1926*. St. John's, NL: Institute of Social and Economic Research, 2009, ISBN-13: 978-1-894725-07-1.

Bill Rompkey (ed.), *St. John's and the Battle of the Atlantic*. St. John's: Flanker Press , 2009, ISBN-13: 978-1-897317-39-6.

A STRONG RELATIONSHIP has long existed between Newfoundland and the exercise of sea power in the North Atlantic.[1] The European fisheries that sprang up so quickly in the sixteenth century were highly prized, not just for the wealth they generated through employment and commerce, but also because of the belief that the thousands of landsmen who were recruited in Europe to fish in Newfoundland were transformed by their experience into accomplished mariners. Since most of the fishermen returned home at the end of the fishing season, they became a reserve of

sailors from which the state believed it could draw whenever the threat of war made it necessary to mobilize and expand the navy with decisive speed and effect — or so it was assumed. Whether the fishery ever did function in this way as a "nursery for seamen" is moot. Yet commercial interests endorsed the idea enthusiastically, the better to convince government into providing measures to safeguard their investments, and countries like England and France fully embraced the idea in their competition to dominate Atlantic sea lanes in war and peace.

The "nursery for seamen" diminished in importance after 1815, as the frequent wars of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries gave way to nearly a century of peace, and navies not only reduced their appetite for sailors but discovered that the technological shift from sail to steam introduced a need for sailors with very different skill sets. France had lost much of its Atlantic empire by then, and even England was scaling back its imperial obligations by the second half of the nineteenth century. Nevertheless, as both of the books reviewed here demonstrate, the naval dimension of Newfoundland history remained significant into the twentieth century, thanks to new priorities and new kinds of threats. Mark Hunter's focus is on the Newfoundland branch of the Royal Naval Reserve, established in 1900, terminated by 1926, and therefore providing service for the Royal Navy during the First World War. Bill Rompkey's focus is on the crucial service that Newfoundland provided for the Allies during the Second World War, giving particular attention to "the effect of the Battle of the Atlantic on St. John's and the effect of St. John's ... on the Battle of the Atlantic" (50). Each author in his own way is successful in reminding us that Newfoundland's wartime history in the twentieth century was not limited to the fighting on land by its military forces during the world wars and since. While there is little doubt, as Hunter concedes, that the events at Beaumont Hamel were as much part of a "nation-building" experience for Newfoundland as Vimy Ridge was for Canada, nevertheless the Newfoundland naval experience has been cast into something of a shadow, a situation that both authors in their own way try to correct.

Of the two books, Hunter's is by far the more scholarly effort, complete with reference notes, an extensive (though by no means complete) bibliography, and an analytical approach throughout. He maintains that the two parties most anxious to develop a branch of the Royal Naval Reserve in Newfoundland — the colony's leaders in St. John's and the imperial interests in London — each wanted very different things, and that the tension that ensued from this fact contributed to the mixed results and eventual demise of the reserve in Newfoundland. Colonial officials believed that the reserve would benefit a society burdened by poverty, lack of opportunities, and unemployment; they believed that the reserve would employ men during times of the year when they were not employed fishing. In this, colonial leaders revealed a failure to appreciate the complexity of their own society. While few men were fully employed, most relied on a variety of activities — fishing, sealing, working at home in the winter — which discouraged the months of training and

commitment that the navy required of reservists. To outport fishermen, the reserve was just another economic activity (76); occupational pluralism collided with the demands of reserve service. This was something that the Admiralty had feared from the start; they wanted a reserve that was militarily useful, not one created for patronage or other political purposes.

Hunter also shows that the British Treasury and the Admiralty did not always see eye to eye, Treasury being driven by fiscal concerns, the Admiralty by strategic ones. The reserve did eventually make some real contributions to the Royal Navy's efforts during the First World War — contributions which Hunter examines in some detail — yet it never generated the numbers of trained recruits that the Admiralty had expected. Indeed, the wartime experience seemed to suggest that the Royal Navy's needs were better served through more traditional recruiting methods than by means of the reserve. The real contribution made by Newfoundlanders to the war at sea was not in the dreadnoughts, battle cruisers, and other warships of the modern navy but in small-boat operations and handling as the British endeavoured to blockade Germany. Reserve training was not needed for this; Newfoundlanders already had these skills. In the end, the Admiralty did not regard the reserve as sufficiently beneficial to keep it alive in an ailing post-war economy.

Overall, this is a fairly straightforward interpretation. However, the text suffers from too many repetitions and the analysis leaps over chronological gaps, which a good edit by the publisher should have caught. The clarity of the analysis is also impaired by a sometimes superficial treatment of both the Newfoundland and the imperial contexts. For instance, though Hunter emphasizes that Newfoundland's economic condition in the 1890s was critical in arousing colonial interest in establishing a branch of the Naval Reserve, opportunities are missed to show just how serious that economic condition had become — there is no reference, for instance, to the bank crash earlier that decade. Similarly, while Hunter does discuss the imperial government's desire to have the dominions assume a greater share of the Royal Navy's responsibility for imperial defence, including Colonial Secretary Joseph Chamberlain's efforts at the 1902 Imperial Conference, there is no reference to Chamberlain's "weary Titan" speech at that conference, in which he insisted that England was nearing the limits of its resources to provide for the defence of the Empire and needed the assistance of the Empire. It was a speech which would greatly have strengthened Hunter's analysis. Better use of the available literature would have made Hunter's analysis of the strains between what Newfoundland hoped to get out of the reserve (a shot in the arm for the colonial economy) and what England hoped to get out of the reserve (greater support from the Empire for the effectiveness of the Royal Navy) more effective.

There was no reserve branch in Newfoundland during the next world war. Instead, Newfoundlanders served at sea in the Royal and Canadian navies or in the merchant marine by joining as individuals, not through an organization like the Naval Reserve. Yet this did not lessen Newfoundland's importance in the naval war

effort. Geography gave Newfoundland great strategic importance in the struggle by the Allies to maintain the flow of food, war supplies, and personnel to England in the face of the German U-boat threat. The convoys that crossed the Atlantic did not originate in Newfoundland, but the escorts that tried to protect them used St. John's as an operational centre. Newfoundland became a place where corvettes and destroyers replenished, recovered, repaired, and then resumed their dangerous task.

Bill Rompkey sets out to tell this story anecdotally rather than analytically. He sets the stage with a 50-page introductory essay about Newfoundland during the Second World War, based on his own memories and research. He then offers a selection of excerpts from the writings of a dozen or so authors, which total another 200 pages or so. Their recollections about the Battle of the Atlantic and the part played by St. John's in that longest campaign of the war are used to give readers the "flavour" of what life was like for those who lived in, served in, or just found brief refuge in St. John's from the horrors and stress of the "North Atlantic Run". This can be a very effective approach. For instance, his own observations about the critical role played by St. John's in the resupply of escort vessels are effectively confirmed by excerpts from "The Little Ships that Saved the Day," an essay written in 1944 by journalist Leslie Roberts, and from *The Corvette Navy* by James Lamb; both stressed how officers from the shore establishment would scramble on board corvettes just in from the sea to determine what supplies were needed, almost before the corvette had finished tying up at the wharf (54, 65). Similarly, both Roberts and Lamb contrasted the British base in St. John's (but run by the Canadians), cobbled together from whatever could be scrounged ("all improvisation and make-do; more a state of mind than actual substance"; Lamb, 65), with the near-luxury facilities that the Americans built at Argentia, again echoing points made in Rompkey's introduction.

Some of the excerpts focus on the people of the city. That from Helen Porter's *Beyond the Bridge* succeeds in conveying what life was like for a young teenage girl growing up in wartime St. John's, while Otto Tucker's light-hearted account of his experiences reminds us that life was not always grim during the war. Yet too often, the realities of the life-and-death struggle being played out just over the horizon were inescapable, as when survivors and victims of a torpedo attack were brought into port for medical attention or burial, or when over a hundred people died or were terribly injured in the fire that destroyed the crowded Knights of Columbus hostel in December 1942, or when *U-513* sank the ore carriers *Saganaga* and *Lord Strathcona* at Bell Island a few months before.

Rompkey's intention is to convey to his readers what life was like in St. John's during the war for residents and sailors alike. In this, I think he succeeds. Yet a history of the part played by St. John's — indeed, all of Newfoundland — in the Battle of the Atlantic remains to be written. Can the economic impact of the war be measured? What about the darker side of the encounter between civilians and service personnel? Rompkey's book hints at the existence of prostitution and venereal dis-

ease, but generally such issues are not explored. How did the impact of the war on St. John's affect its relationship with the rest of Newfoundland? What effect did Commission of Government have on the way in which Newfoundland responded to the war? The literature about Newfoundland shortly before, during, and immediately after the Second World War is substantial and growing, and a thorough treatment of Bill Rompkey's topic needs to make use of it.

In the end, both books left me with the same feeling — each in its own way explored an important topic in Newfoundland history, yet neither dealt with those topics as thoroughly as is possible. The final words remain to be written.

olaf@grenfell.mun.ca

## Note

[1]Throughout this review, I use the term "Newfoundland" rather than the modern name "Newfoundland and Labrador". Both books focus their attention primarily on the island of Newfoundland, and the contemporary name for the Canadian province did not exist during the period covered by the books reviewed here.

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