Document généré le 16 mai 2024 13:40

Newfoundland Studies

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Volume 10, numéro 1, spring 1994

URI : https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/nflds10_1art03

Aller au sommaire du numéro

Éditeur(s)

Faculty of Arts, Memorial University

ISSN

1198-8614 (imprimé)
1715-1430 (numérique)

Découvrir la revue

Citer cet article

O'Dea, S. (1994). Newfoundland: The Development of Culture on the Margin. *Newfoundland Studies*, *10*(1), 73–81.

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Newfoundland: The Development of Culture on the Margin

SHANE O'DEA

NEWFOUNDLAND'S HISTORY IS Newfoundland's culture. The two are not, as they are for many nations, separable. What distinguishes us is what we have made and what we have kept. Until comparatively recently we have had no body of work that another more developed nation might label as culture or art. Apart from our very strong oral culture, all that we have had is a material culture — things made, things altered; a host of objects, customs and creations shaped by our being here at the beginning of the New World and always clinging to the edge of its development. This is most evident in our architecture and in our settlement patterns.

The forces that have shaped this culture find their roots in our economy, in our fisheries and in the unusual historical development of Newfoundland — a development which is really quite distinct in terms of its pervasiveness and longevity from that of other North American regions. Newfoundland is (to reshape a term borrowed from an anthropologist who borrowed it from a biologist) a cultural refugium: "a place where archaic cultural forms . . . persist and develop their own peculiarities in relative isolation" (Smith 1987:29). This isolation is really a form of marginalism and it is this marginalism that has determined our culture.

It was, in fact, fishing, the very basis of the economy, which established the pattern of marginality which has seldom been broken. The European fishermen saw Newfoundland as a suitable way-station in their fisheries operations. It was not for them a place to settle. It was only a temporary resort for water, wood and the "making" or processing of fish. Because the European fishermen, unlike the English, had access to supplies of salt for the preparation of their catch, most of their time would have been spent on the sea with occasional forays to land for shelter or for water. The English had very limited supplies of salt and, to make

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up the deficiency, they were obliged to sun-dry their fish on the Newfoundland shoreline.

The fact that the English made more use of the shore did not make them any more prone to view it as settleable land than their European colleagues. Both groups saw Newfoundland as a place suitable only for seasonal exploitation and abandonment. As a consequence their treatment of the landscape was quite wanton. They would cut down all trees within reach of the shoreline for boats, or stores or firewood. At other times, through carelessness or malice, they would burn the woods. Clearly they felt the forest was endless, that they could move on to the next harbour if this one was depleted.

This conduct was to be expected in an endeavour that was driven by individual enterprise and governed by uncertain weather, seas and markets. While the returns were great, vessels were frequently lost and with them the cargo, the crew and the owner's investment. Yet the risk was considered to be worth it because the ship that got first to market with its catch obtained the best price. Those who pursued the fishery at a distance from the centre, on this margin of the known world, did so in a fashion that was the limit of the self-regarding ethic. The twin factors of great risk and considerable distance brought the individual to the fore: positively in the pursuit of enterprise, negatively in some of the manners of the pursuit. The normal mores determining conduct were essentially non-existent on the fishing vessels and in the fishing harbours of Newfoundland.

It was with these fisheries practices that the principle of impermanence, itself the basis of marginality, was entrenched. Because each season was treated as if it were to be the last (as for some it was, either through shipwreck or financial failure), nothing done at Newfoundland by the fisherman was done with any sense of permanence. He would have built what was necessary for that season and no more. Substantial stores, well-constructed accommodation with fine timber-jointing, adequate timber and unpolluted streams would not have formed any part of his calculations for the voyage.

When the English Westcountrymen began to dominate the Newfoundland fishery in the late sixteenth century they sought a completely free enterprise society in which the individual was the sole determiner of his own conduct. For that reason they were opposed to settlement and fought Guy's colony of 1610, prohibited settlement within six miles of the shoreline in 1671, proposed deportation of all inhabitants in the third Western Charter and twice destroyed all the inhabitant's property in Newfoundland. Their capacity to ensure that their interests were secure is best seen in the fact that as early as 1637, the grant that gave Sir David Kirke power to make laws contained a proviso that those "laws [were] not to extend to any fishermen who [were] to be for ever free from the jurisdiction of the Government of Newfoundland" (Prowse 1895:143). Several attempts were made to start colonies in the period between 1610 and 1630 but all

of them failed.

As a result settlement in Newfoundland was seen to be a marginal proposition; certainly there were no further attempts at official colonies. Nonetheless people did establish themselves in St. John's, Harbour Grace, Bonavista and a number of other places. It is not entirely clear how they sustained themselves, but they probably fished and sold their catch to the vessels that came from England or provided accommodation and supplies for the summer fishery. But they were always under threat from the fishing interests and, no longer being part of any organized colony, they had no one to plead for them in England.

The effect of this combination of factors was a marginal society because there was no stable landowning group; no real investment save in Mr. Wemmick's "portable property", in goods. In addition, there were no institutions to assert the central value system. A fort was not built until 1689 and its limited and rather disreputable garrison, in the view of some onlookers, contributed little to any value system — central or marginal. Despite requests, a governor was not appointed until 1729, but he himself was a migratory official, here with the naval squadron only during the fishing season.

But a century later, by the 1760s and 1770s, the migratory Westcountry fishery was forced to give way to a resident fishery. The disruption of the Seven Years War and a number of bad seasons broke a lot of the old Westcountry firms. When commerce restarted, the merchants had undergone a change of view. Now they saw the value of having a year-round fisheries operation in Newfoundland, with the capitalization and marketing being handled in England.

For Newfoundland the important aspect of this change was that the production side of the fishery would be conducted on the island with people who were or who could become permanent residents. With this new trend Newfoundland did not cease to be marginal, but it at least became less marginal. Many of the firms established operations in various bays and harbours and what had been small stations now grew into larger, more permanent communities.

With the coming of a locally-based fishery it is possible to begin to speak of settlement and society. But there is a distinction to be made here between what in Newfoundland was a resident and what in New England was a settler: a resident was someone who stayed over the winter but who might only view this as a temporary situation required by his work and which would be left once he had enough money to return to live in England; a settler was one who had left England to become a permanent occupant of the New World (Matthews 1988:84-85). A transhumant society, such as that which Newfoundland saw in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in which the fishermen came out in the spring and returned home in the fall, is a society which has a very transient relationship with its environment, its possessions and, frequently, with other members of the same society. Concepts of conduct and of relationships are

seriously affected by an awareness of the consequences of such behaviour. In a transhumant society the consequences can be limited because the contact with the place or person affected may be very limited. It is likely that such an awareness affected the early fishermen's treatment of the landscape as well as the first colonies and subsequent settlement patterns.

But in considering this matter of Newfoundland's diminishing marginality, two other questions must be asked: why did these people come to Newfoundland when they did, and what distinguished the Newfoundland situation throughout this period from other settleable areas of northeastern North America? There is a clear distinction to be made between the processes in New England and New France after the initial period of exploration and trial. In the 1620s the King and the church in France set down the principles of their imperialism and thereby initiated a controlled process for the colonization of New France. New England was occupied by Puritans who were, in contrast, attempting to escape a central control and who were determined to be permanent, self-sufficient, indeed prosperous inhabitants of their new land. The differences from Newfoundland then, should be readily apparent — there was no control except to discourage settlement and there was no attempt at self-sufficiency or permanency. Newfoundland was, from the beginning, at the margin of both European and North American worlds, a limited entrepôt for the New England traders, an outport for the Westcountry fishermen.

These distinctions apply to the seventeenth century but help to explain the historical framework which influenced Newfoundland's development in the succeeding centuries and provide the context in which to look at or understand our historical culture. Our buildings, our architecture, responded to this marginalism both in their structure and in their style. There are two causes for this: the nature of land tenure and the tradition of building. As has been seen, the migratory fishing interests did their best to block any form of permanent settlement and inhibited the development of the mercantile colonies that might have, in the seventeenth or early eighteenth century, created a Newfoundland community. One of the principal drawbacks to any prospective settler was the fact that he could not be sure of his investment. Aaron Graham, in giving evidence to an enquiry on Newfoundland trade in 1793, stated that "unless they could be secured in the possession of [their property], they could not think of expending any money upon it" (Innis 1954:318). And while property transactions did take place, they were not in any way secure, not an investment around which to build a future for oneself or one's children. It was not until 1813 that land grants were made for the purposes of agriculture in the St. John's area. It took another eleven years and a number of court cases before security of title could be given to land transactions by the Judicature Act. It is interesting to observe that the oldest houses (Figure 1) surviving in Conception Bay seem to date from this period — an indication that building in a common and permanent form had to

wait until there was some security of tenure and transfer. And when these houses — generally the property of planters — were built few were large (Figure 2) or elaborate and most were small, simple dwellings (Figure 3).

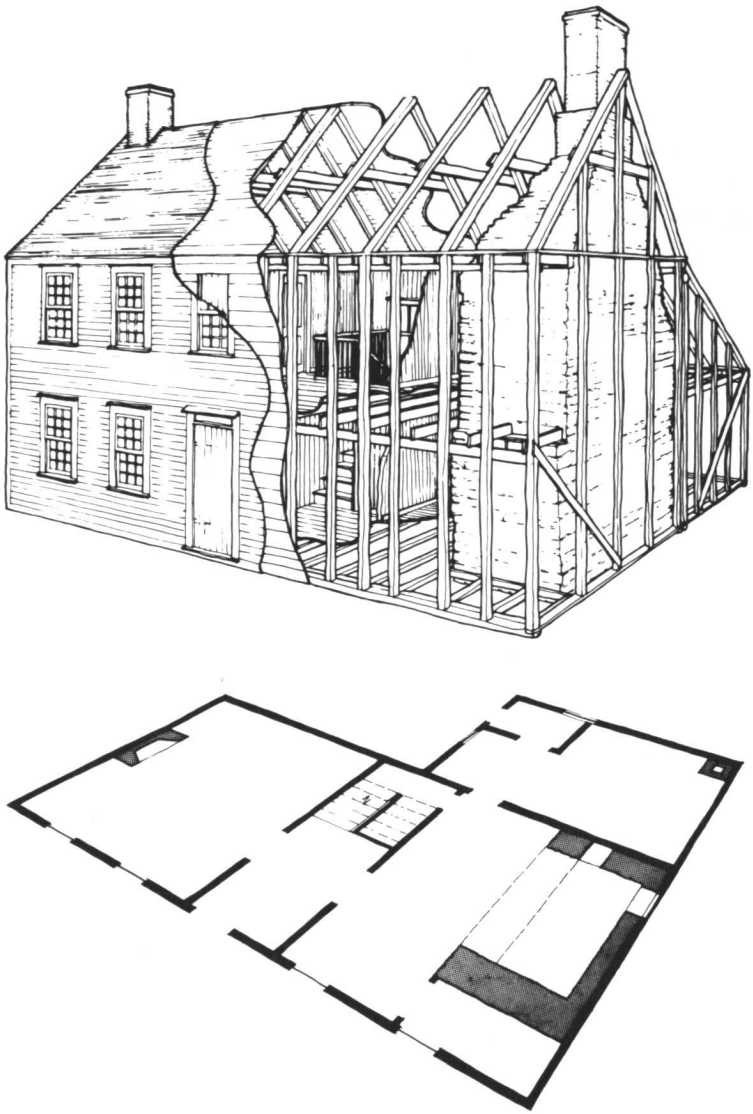

Figure 1. Perspective view of framing, plan and elevation of Webber House (demolished), Harbour Grace. Drawing by Charles Henley from measurements and drawings taken by Philip Pratt and Shane O'Dea.

Fig. 2. Elevation of Thomey House (demolished), Bristol's Hope. Drawing by Charles Henley from measurements and drawings taken by Philip Pratt and Shane O'Dea.

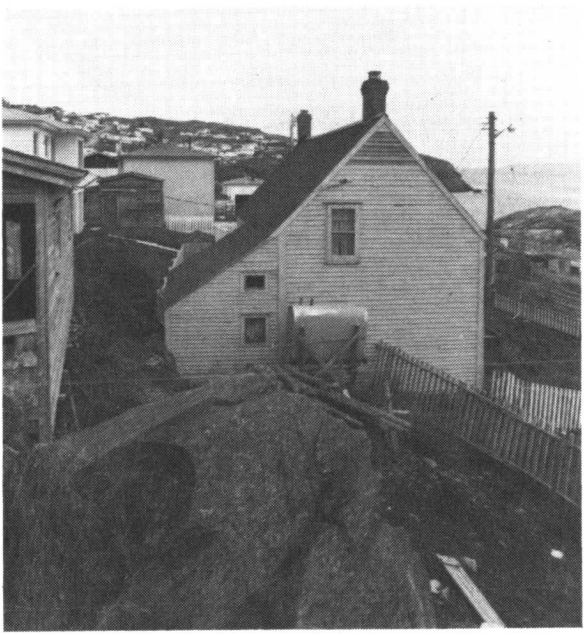

Fig. 3. Young House, Upper Island Cove (Photo Shane O'Dea 1979).

Equally important and a product of the uncertain tenure was the building tradition. Shaped by a society that had for so long viewed itself as impermanent, the structure of many of the buildings developed from a form commonly used for temporary accommodation. The early fishermen built very rudimentary huts for their shelter and for their stages and cookrooms. From what is known, many if not most of these were constructed of vertical logs placed palisade-like in the ground and roofed over with whatever materials were at hand. This structural form, also found elsewhere in North America (particularly in New France as *piquet* or *pieux debout* construction), was used by the English, French and Irish in Newfoundland; by fisherman, soldier and merchant. It developed by moving from impermanent, earth-fast construction to becoming permanent full-studding in which the feet of the vertical logs rest on or are set into a sill. In this permanent form the logs are generally no longer exposed but covered in sheathing and clapboard. The full-studded form persisted long after sawmills were introduced because it had become part of the tradition — a tradition with its roots in the margin. It was still being used during the 1930s, when it once again became an adaptation to a marginal situation. The Depression reduced the amount of cash work available and mills required cash to saw lumber into board so that, in the case of one man in Bonavista Bay who wanted to build a house for his family, it was the sensible resort. He cut his own logs and, with friends or family, built the house in full-studded form using what cash he could get for windows or roofing materials. "Stogging" the chinks in the logs with moss or other materials, he had a sound and warm house until he could afford to get boards to sheath it.

This sense of architectural conservatism extended from structure into style. The Neo-Classical, the Greek and Gothic revivals all made little impression on the generality of building in Newfoundland. It was as if those who had the money to build in the fashionable style did not feel that Newfoundland was the appropriate venue for it. Until the late 1870s and the introduction of the Second Empire style to Newfoundland, there was little real distinction except in the matter of size between the house of the merchant and that of the fisherman. The prosperity of the 1870s and 1880s as well as the attendant sense of economic buoyancy induced by the development of local manufacturing seem to have been expressed in the style of more elaborate houses for some of the St. John's merchants. The style or variants of it were soon taken over for outport houses of all classes and it became the defining style for the middle class row housing of St. John's after the Great Fire of 1892. When economic growth and cultural self-consciousness were at their height in the period from 1905 to the First World War, the Queen Anne Style of architecture was introduced to St. John's. The houses built then were of a size and a magnificence that clearly state the intentions of their occupants to stay in the land in which they made their money. They became streetscape documents of the fact that Newfoundland had ceased — at least in their owners' view at that time — to be a marginal station and had

become a place for their future.

The settlement patterns evidence the same sort of response and adaptation. The transhumant migratory fishery soon found its land-based analogue in the custom of winterhousing. In winter it used to be quite common for whole communities to desert the shoreline — and their communities there — for houses further up the bay. This meant they retreated from the exposed and generally treeless seacoast and moved closer to sources of fuel in the woods. Had some of the earlier colonies been as adaptable, they might have survived the harsh winters. As larger communities developed social institutions such as churches and schools in the nineteenth century, winterhousing became less practised and came to be viewed as backward or primitive behaviour pursued only by the underdeveloped (Smith 1987:1-36).

It is interesting to set these manifestations of material culture against the early assertions of what might be viewed as high culture. Any society emerging from marginalism creates its own social and political institutions and, sometimes subsequent to or contemporaneous with these, its own culture and national identity. At the end of the nineteenth century, cultural nationalism began to make an appearance in Newfoundland. The Athenaeum, established in 1875, housed a museum as well as a reading room. A number of histories of the colony were produced in Victoria's reign, of which the finest was that by D.W. Prowse, published in 1895. The Roman Catholic Bishop, Michael Francis Howley, wrote an ecclesiastical history and articles on folklore, toponymics and antiquities. His brother, James P. Howley, later published a very full scientific study of the extinct aboriginal group, the Beothuks. It is worth observing that Howley was the first native-born bishop, so that in him were married culture, nationalism and pride. The founding of the Newfoundland Historical Society in 1881 and of the *Newfoundland Quarterly* in 1901, both evidence of this steadily growing interest in the national self, are powerful indicators of the new sense of place, permanence and worth that the residents had developed. There were still absentee landlords, still merchants whose real home was England, but for those who participated in social, cultural and political life at the end of the nineteenth century, their Newfoundland was a country and a place they were beginning to see, for reasons that went beyond the economic, as different from the rest of British North America. This national sensibility almost died for the first three-quarters of this century — presumably because of the remarginalization of Newfoundland by the First World War, by the Depression and by Confederation. It was only in the 1970s when the first-generation Canadian-Newfoundlanders began to assert themselves that a new national and cultural identity was established. In each case the identity asserted was a response to a growing sense of permanence, a conscious demarginalization.

But in terms of the past, architecture is the most potent manifestation of Newfoundland's culture — it speaks of how we held onto, yet made practical and

effective use of, old forms, old patterns. The structural and stylistic forms that survived here longer than in our neighbouring nations speak through a distinctive cultural landscape, of a distinctive people. In a sense the architecture also shows how Newfoundland must manage both its present and its future — by using what it has, by adapting it to the time. This cultural refugium in which we live is like its biological equivalent: it is a treasure but it is a fragile treasure. We can misuse it (as we traditionally here) or use it properly and let it become, not an artifact, an archaism proclaiming our backwardness, but rather a proud expression of ourselves, a means by which we develop both economically and culturally.

Note

This paper was originally presented to the OECD meeting in St. John's, 23 September 1992. It benefited greatly from the advice of Maire O'Dea, Gerald Pocius and as always, but now no more, of George Story.

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