

## ***Making a World of Difference: Essays on Tourism, Culture and Development in Newfoundland.* James Overton.**

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*Making a World of Difference: Essays on Tourism, Culture and Development in Newfoundland.* James Overton. St. John's: ISER, M.U.N. xvi, 296 p., illustrations, softcover, 1996, \$24.95, ISBN 0-919666-73-6.

## WILLIAM LAWTON

THIS IS A COLLECTION OF TEN ESSAYS, the original versions of which were published between 1978 and 1988. Professor Overton is a Newfoundland-based sociologist whose work draws upon Marxian scholarship and has largely been a class-based critique of social movements and development policies of Newfoundland governments and agencies. The premise of the collection is that tourism provides a mirror to larger questions of state restructuring generally and, in particular, to the historical flux in developmental visions in Newfoundland. Each chapter provides a brief analytical framework which attempts (with some success) to situate the subject matter within a broader critique of capitalist social relations. The slogan, "A World of Difference," was added to Newfoundland and Labrador licence plates to mark the Cabot 500 events of 1997. That the collection was published just prior to this was appropriate, perhaps, but also ironic in light of its sustained critique of marketing and commodification.

The first part of Chapter 1 is based on some remarkable sources and provides an engaging history of the promotion of tourism in Newfoundland. From the end of the nineteenth century to the Smallwood era, it juxtaposes the ideas of tourism and the invention of the Newfoundland nation, tourism as an essential part of the industrialization vision, and tourism as the provision of cure-all, therapeutic spaces for jaded Americans (rested and re-energized capitalists are more productive capitalists). From the political uses of tourism, Overton turns to "post-tourism," or the repackaging of the industry to cater for "post-industrial" sensibilities. He

suggests that this particular economic niche is an ineffective response to underdevelopment.

The following three chapters are not about tourism. This first section of the book is thematically the least cohesive, offering as it does a critique of the “applied romanticism” of Farley Mowat’s *A Whale for the Killing* and a very odd chapter which chronicles a debate on littering in Newfoundland and theorizes it through an examination of middle-class moralizing on social disorder and violence. The chapter entitled “A Newfoundland Culture?” is a skeptical view of the neo-nationalism which emerged in the 1970s. Overton provides a penetrating analysis of nationalism’s ideological imprecision and its basis in idealized stereotypes but he less accurately identifies the “culturalist critique of modernization” as “pessimistic”: in Newfoundland it was anything but. The evident unease with “Newcult” assertiveness appears to be related to its potential and actual alliance with conservative politics. Certainly the “economic and cultural nationalism” for which Peckford provided a focus was riddled with ideological contradictions, but that does not mean the movement lacked an ideological basis distinct from that of modernization. Overton’s characterization of it as another manifestation of the agenda it set out to supplant is not revealing of the wholesale underlying social shift that had transpired. And in the time since the essay was first published (1988), there has been sufficient neo-liberal fiscal austerity to disavow his apparent belief that “Liberal” politics in Newfoundland is more progressive.

The three chapters of the second section return to the themes introduced in Chapter 1. They provide an analysis of advertising and commodification and a dissection of such soft targets as back-to-nature escapism, patriotism, and Screech-Ins. The cultural-nationalist elite — if they still exist — might not be impressed by the dismissal of the *Ode to Newfoundland* as “sentimental.” The equation of romanticism with misanthropy is overstated but Overton argues convincingly in Chapter 5 that in an underdeveloped context, culturally based tourist promotion depoliticizes and justifies socio-economic inequality by portraying it as “natural.” He reminds the reader that there are no arcadias untouched by capitalist social relations.

The rubric for the final section is the restructuring of state activity and it focuses on conflict in the regulation of caribou hunting, provincial parks policy, and the creation of Gros Morne National Park in 1973. These case studies are intended to illuminate both the struggle to shape state policy and the use of the law to control tourism resources. For example, Chapter 9 concludes that game laws for caribou cannot be understood simply in resource management terms. They are an expression of class conflict and the contradictions of Newfoundland’s economy and society.

On an organizational level, the 50 pages of notes are located at the end of the volume and access to them is not facilitated by the omission of page locaters there. The lack of an index and separate bibliography is always disappointing to a reader

who would intend to use a book as a reference tool, and this omission is not common to all ISER publications. A consequence of both the age of the essays and the four-year gap between completion of the manuscript (1992) and its publication (1996) is that there are references to the “current” Premier Peckford and such “recent” events as the 1986 Newfoundland Royal Commission, a 1979 Harry Hibbs album, and a 1977 DREE agreement. In the final chapter, the reader is also advised that it is “too early” to determine whether a rise in usage of provincial parks in 1987 marks the start of a trend. Not to update these and other references was clearly an editorial decision but perhaps much of the material should have been placed firmly in the past tense where it belongs.

When turning a series of articles into a book, thematic cohesion is desirable and not necessarily served by the overlap in content evident here. Perhaps each chapter’s reiteration of the Marxian framework could have been revised so as to appear only in the Introduction. That framework is an unreconstructed and paradoxical account of the role of the state in people’s lives: it aids the reproduction of capitalism but yet has a moral responsibility to solve the problems thus created. That the Left has largely abandoned this account since the essays were written is not the concern. Marxism provides insights that are otherwise unavailable and its critique of capitalism is as timely as ever. But in these days of the intrusion of private-sector management techniques into public administration, and policy-making by non-elected agencies, the point is that policy analysis should be located in the new historical context in which we live. This context is not acknowledged here.

The historical and empirical material is impressive and should also be of interest to a general Newfoundland readership, although some might be desirous of more recent information on, for example, the privatization of provincial parks. Overton’s preface to the collection states that its aim is “to provoke thought and encourage debate about tourism, development and culture” in Newfoundland. It certainly achieves the former and it deserves to do the latter.