

***Newfoundlander in Exile. The Life and Times of Philip Tocque (1814-1899).* Marjorie M. Doyle.**

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Newfoundlander in Exile. The Life and Times of Philip Tocque (1814-1899).
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JAMES K. HILLER

STUDENTS OF 19TH CENTURY Newfoundland cannot avoid Philip Tocque. His major work, *Newfoundland, As It Was and As It Is in 1877* (1878), is essential reading both for the information it contains, and for a commentary that is at once individual and typical of a certain mentality. The individuality came from Tocque's varied experiences, and a willingness to speak his mind. Yet in common with several 19th century Newfoundland writers, D.W. Prowse or Moses Harvey for example, Tocque displayed a patriotic belief in the colony's great economic potential and a tendency to romantic exaggeration.

Born in Carbonear in 1814, Tocque was almost certainly Newfoundland's first native-born man of letters. This biography is therefore most welcome, even though Tocque was a writer of the second rank and his life is poorly documented. Marjorie Doyle's research was obviously thorough and painstaking but many questions still surround a curious career.

Tocque came from a comfortable business family, received as good an education as was available in the outpost Newfoundland of his youth and was well-connected. But instead of following conventional paths, Tocque converted to Methodism, turned against a career in business and decided to be a clergyman. In 1840 he applied to become a Methodist minister. He was turned down for reasons that are obscure and for the next nine years, the hard times of the 1840s, he worked as a teacher (Port de Grave, Broad Cove), a small merchant (Bird Island Cove),

lecturer (St. John's) and clerk of the peace (Harbour Breton). In 1849 he joined the stream of people leaving Newfoundland, moving to Boston, where he switched denominations and became an Episcopalian clergyman. Why he left the United States is unknown, but by the mid-1850s he was working as an Anglican priest in rural Nova Scotia, moving later to the Gaspé Peninsula and Ontario. He spent his final years in Toronto. He wrote four books and many articles.

Tocque apparently believed that his lack of success in Newfoundland was largely because he was a native and therefore subject to discrimination. Unable, as a result, to support his growing family, he was driven to emigration. Marjorie Doyle accepts this explanation, and sees in him the prototype of the talented Newfoundlander forced to leave home and accept reluctant exile but never forgetting his or her homeland, often writing about it from afar.

There is no doubt that during the first half of the 19th century, native Newfoundlanders did feel discriminated against, and being a Methodist — as Tocque was between 1830 and 1850 — compounded the problem. The colonial elite was overwhelmingly Anglican and the dominance of CFAs in church and state spurred the formation of natives' societies in St. John's and elsewhere. Nevertheless, opportunities for those who did not fit the mould did exist, and Doyle is perhaps unwise to accept at face value Tocque's assertion that natives had a bleak choice — to stay and be part of a subordinate class or leave (xii). Given his background there seems little doubt that Tocque could have become a businessman, lawyer or journalist, and one wonders whether he seriously pursued the option of joining the ministry. Being a native Methodist may well have been a disadvantage, but his personality may also have counted against him.

Tocque's Newfoundland career, such as it was, gives the impression of restlessness and frustration, as though he could not decide where to live or what to do. After he left the colony there were sudden, unexplained shifts from place to place and, although he preached well and was an indefatigable priest, he never achieved ecclesiastical distinction. One cannot but suspect that Tocque had a difficult, humourless character, self-important and didactic, perhaps tactless, given to displays of his considerable accumulation of knowledge. He may very well have been his own worst enemy. Doyle records a description of Tocque in backwoods Ontario, where he was remembered as wearing "long swallow-tail black coats (even in the bush)" (130). It is a telling image.

In a sense, Tocque was born too soon. The Newfoundland of the early 19th century did not have much room for young men with literary and intellectual ambitions. The major writers who achieved prominence later on were younger — Prowse by 20 years — and lived in a society which had by then developed an substantial educated bourgeoisie. Tocque could have returned to live in Newfoundland when he retired in the late 1870s, and to enjoy the changed circumstances, but he had been away too long. Instead, to use that able critic Patrick O'Flaherty's phrase, he continued "to celebrate her wonders from afar."

Tocque was not a great writer. He was, as Doyle notes, given to compilation and hack descriptions as well as flowery verbiage, but he could also write interesting and sensitive essays on a wide variety of subjects. As with so many of us, his reach exceeded his grasp. Tocque had genuine talent and abundant enthusiasm and curiosity. What he lacked was the critical intelligence which would have prevented him writing sentences celebrating the fact that in Newfoundland there was “no trace of malaria. Sunstrokes are entirely unknown The poisonous breath of the hot Siroc and the wet Monsoon ... never reaches her. The hiss of the boa-constrictor ... has never been heard.” Nevertheless, we owe thanks to Marjorie Doyle for finding out all that can be known about Philip Tocque, and for her thoughtful commentary. He is a significant figure in Newfoundland’s cultural history and well worth this study.