

Leslie Harris: 1929-2008

Shane O'Dea

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LESLIE HARRIS
1929-2008

A UNIVERSITY TAKES SHAPE SLOWLY and gains a particular character from each of its presidents. In the eyes of Patrick O'Flaherty, Les Harris was critical in Memorial's developing interest in things Newfoundland. As Dean of Arts and later Vice-President (Academic) he oversaw the development of the Folklore Archive, the English Language Research Centre, and the Maritime History Archive. But he was also active in each of those units, providing interviews to Folklore or, as Bill Kirwin told me, following up on enquiries about words for the *DNE* with visits to the dictionary room and long discussions with Bill and George Story. When George and Patrick went to Les with their proposal for a journal, for this our journal, Les was immediately receptive and set in train the administrative process necessary to create it.

His speedy rise through the ranks suggests he was seen as an able administrator, and he was also a formidable public scholar, one who took his learning out into the world beyond the academy. The nature of administration limited his teaching,

but not his engagement with the public. One of his greater pleasures was his long service with a group of lively colleagues on the Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada shaping the way in which Canada's past was to be commemorated. For many years Harris also edited *Aspects*, the quarterly publication of the Newfoundland Historical Society. He was regularly asked to give keynote addresses to visiting and local organizations and was always fluent, informative and interesting in his approach to the widely varied disciplines and groups to whom he spoke. Exercising a well-honed skill in shaping argument and defusing conflict, he was often sought out as a labour arbitrator. And, as I said in his eulogy, nowhere was this public scholarship, and his capacity for analyzing material and giving it coherence, more fully demonstrated than in his report on the cod stocks.

THE EULOGY

WE ALL KNOW the attributes of God: that she is all-good, all-powerful, and all-knowing but, as Samuel Butler once observed, "God cannot alter the past." Butler's observation does not stop with that negativity. He goes on to make the distinction that if God's power is limited in this way, the power of historians is not because "historians can be useful to [God]... [so] He tolerates their existence." This is a salutary warning to all who would judge the judges of time and in Leslie Harris you shall see its significance, and you shall see a man who altered the course of the waters.

Appropriately then, Les Harris was born on the waters of Placentia Bay in a place that is now little more than a mark on a map: St. Joseph's, a community washed away in the great wave of resettlement. Starting out as a teacher in 1945, he served from Harbour Buffett to Port Hope Simpson and then as principal of Brinton School (now itself resettled). Following a Memorial MA, and a London PhD, he directed the Asian studies program at a number of Virginia colleges.

In 1963 he returned to Memorial and began what can only be seen as a meteoric rise through administrative ranks — confirmation upon confirmation of his abilities. Head of History in 1965, he became Dean of Arts and Science in 1967, Vice-President in 1971 and President in 1981. In the period of his time as President, a time which followed the great boom in university development, he ensured that what had been sown was brought to fruition and, in particular, that the research side of the university was greatly strengthened. Rightly proud of his role in the development of the Music School, his cultivated mind is also apparent in the quality of Memorial's landscape in which trees and gardens now characterize a place that was for so long a brick desert. If the 1960s and 1970s at the university could be said to be a time of "bricks and mortar," his time could be characterized as that of "wine and roses." Taking over the university at a time when its institutional and physical attributes had been established, Leslie Harris saw that it matured in an intellectual and aesthetic manner. Many here will happily recall that among these aesthetic

transformations was an improvement in the quality of wine served at university dinners, from Donini into something from le Domaine de la Romanée Conti.

A profound commitment to Newfoundland ran through all his work but is best summarized in an article he wrote eight years ago in which, speaking of the new prosperity, he counseled caution and gave advice. “Our history,” he said, “shows us that we are survivors. But as we think of creating the New Jerusalem for our children’s children, we must be clear that mere physical survival is not enough.... [W]e must also ensure the survival of civility and of strong cultural traditions that inform a distinct identity; the survival of neighbourliness; ... of honesty, independence and hard work; and the survival of ... the ability, even in the hardest of times, to see the funny side of life.” This became more apparent to me over the last couple of days while I spent a pleasant time with Les in his childhood home, in the St Joseph’s he recreated in his book, *Growing Up with Verse*. That book also displays his prodigious capacity to gather and retain information — a capacity most marvellously demonstrated when, much later, he was on a committee reviewing thesis proposals. One of those proposals, in geology, had an impossibly long title in Latin. Even the geologist on the committee could not effect a translation but Les could. And why? Because one summer he and his brother had studied the geology of Labrador and Les remembered it on this occasion. Now committees are a standard feature of university life but can, sometimes, interfere with more important things — the play-offs, for example. Les was, as many of you know, a bit of an armchair sports fanatic and had little tolerance for committees that dragged their business into the hour of the big game. Noting his impatience someone once had the temerity to call his bluff and ask why he was so enthusiastic when he never actually played himself. With a deep twinkle in his eye and a great roar of laughter he replied, “Because I would never want to destroy the illusion of my own perfection.”

His great learning and deep pleasure in life were allied to a particular gift with language — a gift best shown in his magisterial report on the Northern Cod. There the fisher’s son stepped back into his role as outport teacher, first listening to and learning from his pupils — fisher, fish merchant, scientist — and then proceeded to teach them this nation’s most important and most painful lesson: that they were on the verge of making the once-bounteous Banks a place of poverty. That judgement, based on his broader perspective, far broader than any former assessment, delivered on the eve of doom and in superb prose, convinced the industry, the people and the politicians, and, for the first time in four centuries we drew up our nets. Les Harris altered the course of history and that is a claim few historians can make. His pupils then were not just the nephews and nieces who came into the university and found a home with him and Mary but all the students of Memorial, and, outside, the fishers, the people and the politicians of Newfoundland. And so, Mary, today with you we pay tribute to the first of our graduates to become President of our university, to the one who made us think of our future in order that we might have one. As we launch

forth your boat into the deep, Leslie Harris, we salute your words and we salute your work. *Ave atque vale.*

Cathedral of St. John the Baptist
St. John's, Newfoundland
30 August 2008

Shane O'Dea
Public Orator