

## Andy Jones, *Letters from Uncle Val.*

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Keough, whose chapter is drawn from her 2005 book on Irish women on the Avalon Peninsula, is well-stocked with fascinating material driven forward by sound questions but which, after setting an interpretative framework, retreats to a series of case studies. A similar character emerges in Goudie's chapter on Newfoundland's northern circuit and Simon's discussion of women in the Placentia district's courts, both of which employ descriptive case study methodology that too often produces a shopping list narrative. On the other hand, Brown's chapter on women's legal status in Confederation-era Newfoundland is based on five published cases and is unable to tease out how those legal precedents shaped the lived reality of women's status in the mid to late 1940s.

Christopher English's introduction argues that in the absence of a truly national legal history, we have adopted a view that is "modest, cautious, eclectic, and incremental" (8). To the extent that this is true of the broad field of Canadian legal history, it is certainly true of *Two Islands* which, buoyed up its strongest elements, signals the arrival of Newfoundland and Prince Edward Island into the field of Canadian legal history. While there remains more to be done in elaborating and expanding our legal historical understanding of those two islands and their peoples, these future enquiries can be founded on an essay collection that successfully provides compelling examples of the quality scholarship that can be produced.

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Andy Jones, *Letters from Uncle Val*. Tors Cove: Rattling Books 2006, ISBN 9780973758689.

*LETTERS FROM UNCLE VAL*, is an epistolary novel whose elderly outporter narrator, Valentine Reardigan, lives with his daughter and her family in the suburbs of St. John's between 1987 and 1989. Originally a series of radio broadcasts on CBC during those years, it was written and performed by Andy Jones. The programme has now been made available on compact disc.

It is presented as a set of letters from Val to his friend Jack, who remains behind in their home outport. Val is a wry observer of the lives of the first generation urbanites. He makes a series of discerning comments upon his daughter, her husband, children, and dogs. (Remarkably, dogs in St. John's lack jobs, and are kept and fed just for being themselves). Through the series of 18 letters and the ups and mostly downs of Val's daughter's family, Val moves from being an outside observer of the ways of St. John's, through a period of nostalgia for a past life that contrasts with urban living, to a yearning for a return to the burbs when the plot exiles him to a downtown neighbourhood. The listener comes to know the family, and to recognize characters that we have known, even as Val and his contemporaries face the inevitable facts of aging and mortality. Val adapts to his new surroundings and becomes

a success in town; in some respects he is more successful than his social climbing son-in-law, Bernard. Bernard wants too badly to be accepted in the St. John's country club setting to ever be one of them. Val, on the other hand, parlays his babysitting duty into acceptance among the young mothers of his neighborhood and finds a second chance at romance. Self-aware, he recognizes that he misses the suburbs when it is taken from him.

Some Newfoundland comedy in the last few decades is a kind of blackface. The comic adopts the burnt cork of a rural accent or sou'wester and finds humour in the lack of worldliness of the rural rube. That is not peculiar to Newfoundland. Such material harkens back to the origins of popular radio; *Amos n' Andy* was the first widespread hit and established that radio could appeal to mass taste. Similarly, the *Goldbergs*, another golden age radio show, explicitly dealt with an immigrant Jewish family adapting to life in the United States. In this tradition, the performer invites the audience to recognize the rural rube as outsider and thus distance themselves from the object of fun. The nature of the aural medium encourages a simulation of intimacy, and lends itself to verbal wordplay. At its best it can be subtle and sophisticated; at its worst it exaggerates a few characteristics for a cheap laugh. Codco occasionally went to that well, and they had the unfortunate legacy of encouraging the newfie joke among subsequent, less-talented, comics.

Andy Jones does not go for the cheap laughs of the malapropism of the unsophisticated or even the court fool observations. Uncle Val is no fool, in either the sense of the court jester who speaks truth to those with power, or in the sense of a person who is the butt of jokes because he does not comprehend the social circumstances in which he finds himself. Jones' humour invites us to see the human foibles of the suburban dwellers through the one good eye of a shrewd observer, to laugh only at those who invite it though their pomposity. The humour comes from a generational division as much as a rural versus urban one, and Val observes that his grandchildren live in a different world than the one in which he grew up. They know little of the dead sitting up in the front room, or conversations with wolves that a man might have had in the days before television.

This novel is about a family fitting into St. John's, but rather than the *Goldbergs* a more appropriate basis of comparison for the letters of Uncle Val is that 1950s Newfoundland classic series of radio broadcasts, the *Chronicles of Uncle Mose*. Uncle Mose too adapted to the changing way of life and its creator and performer, Ted Russell, did not feel the need to distance himself from the outport. He was able to evoke character rather than caricature. Russell's humour, and Jones' here, is based upon the rural person observing the ironies and pomposities of life. Russell saw value in the outport; Jones sees value in the suburb. Like Russell's intimate vocal style, and his was a masterful use of radio, Jones' attention to the cadence and inflection of Val's voice shows an author and actor who respects and likes his narrator and makes effective use of the qualities of the medium. In an interview on CBC, Jones spoke about the storyteller upon whom he based the character,

Francis Colbert. Uncle Val is an homage to a style of storytelling rather than a comic persona — it fits into a Newfoundland oral culture rather than seeming to be a piece of theater that has been adapted for radio.

Just as Uncle Mose spoke of a way of life in a fictional outpost that was fast changing, so Uncle Val speaks of suburban Newfoundland that was changing. I remember the Peckford years in St. John's. I can still feel the promise and skepticism that oil wealth was just around the corner and big changes were soon to happen. And as a young man from Gander, I too had a detachment from "town." Listening to the show again — I had heard some of the broadcasts when they were new — reminded me of the changes in the city and province over the last 20 years. The show seems of its time, but does not seem dated.

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Paul Rowe. *The Silent Time*. St. John's: Killick Press, 2007, ISBN 1897174179.

*THE SILENT TIME*, BY PAUL ROWE, is a charming novel that introduces readers to Leona Walsh, a young woman raised in Three Brooks, Newfoundland in the early 1900s. At 17 years old, Leona endures more than many contemporary readers can imagine. For as long as she remembers, her mother has been dead and she has been raised and tormented by her drunken father and pesky brothers. Although she cleans, gardens, and cooks for her family, she must forfeit her place at the table for the unruly men all while being taunted and teased. It is actually a stuck teapot lid that leads her to her freedom and her future husband, Paddy Merrigan. Described as a "short, stout, impish" man, Paddy has a knack for fixing teapot lids, among other things, and possesses the quality of not giving up on anyone, including an old cat Leona considers dead. After bringing the cat back to life, Paddy and Leona have a brief courtship where Paddy promises to take her away to Knock Harbour on the island of Cape Shore. Once there, he promises that neither the shore, nor he will ever hurt her.

Within days of the proposal, Leona is treated as a princess by her new "sisters" and marries Paddy in a church wedding that is held inside of a school house. During the ceremony she promises to be his wife and she also promises her future children that they, unlike her, will be educated. By 1904, the happily married couple is raising three young sons when a shipwreck changes their lives forever. Leona, convinced that she can quickly and secretly board the wrecked ship and collect goods for their home, escapes the sinking schooner with a cardboard case and a small seaman's chest. The "lucky find" opens Pandora's Box which ends the few happy years they have enjoyed. This time, Paddy's ability to heal and never give up on anyone does not save his family. Leona is left alone and under investigation by Arthur Duke, the Deputy Colonial Secretary to the Prime Minister of Newfoundland.