

# “a terrain of jagged, fearful aspect” Reconsidering Patrick Kavanagh’s *Gaff Topsails*

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**“a terrain of jagged, fearful aspect”:**  
Reconsidering Patrick Kavanagh’s *Gaff Topsails*

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*Paul Chafe*

In *This Is My Country, What’s Yours?* (2006) Noah Richler identifies Wayne Johnston’s *The Colony of Unrequited Dreams* (1998) as the closest any book has come to being the “Great Newfoundland Novel” (Richler 306). While Johnston’s fictionalization of the life of Newfoundland and Labrador’s first premier, Joseph R. Smallwood, does examine many facets of Newfoundland culture and identity, another historical novel, though less popular, is perhaps more ambitious and more sweeping historically, culturally, and geographically than *The Colony of Unrequited Dreams*. Patrick Kavanagh’s *Gaff Topsails* (1996) focuses on a single day in a fictional Irish Catholic Newfoundland outport community, yet, as Lawrence Mathews notes, the events of this day comprise “a microcosm of outport society” and, by extension, Newfoundland culture and identity (Mathews 17). Kavanagh’s continuous references to myths (most notably the “myth of the old outport,” which Adrian Fowler identifies as the one-time “prevailing myth of Newfoundland literature” [Fowler 71]), legends, folklore, historical moments and characters, pastoral musings, romanticism, depictions of work, and other elements of the quotidian beleaguer the narrative and force it to grind past at a glacial pace, reflecting perhaps the characters’ desires for the events of this day to carve a permanent marker onto the landscape.

In his introduction to an issue of *Essays on Canadian Writing* dedicated to the literature of Newfoundland, Mathews claims Fowler’s contribution, “Patrick Kavanagh’s *Gaff Topsails* and the Myth of the

Old Outport,” “represents the romantic tradition in Newfoundland critical writing” and says the following of Fowler’s reading of the representation of community as a sustaining and supportive force in *Gaff Topsails*: “this value is affirmed throughout and without reservation; no hint of irony calls it into question” (Mathews 16, 17). It is worth noting that Jennifer Bowering Delisle’s reading of *Gaff Topsails*, while not obviously romantic, is, like Fowler’s reading, without irony. In “Nation, Indigenization, the Beothuk: A Newfoundland Myth of Origin in Patrick Kavanagh’s *Gaff Topsails*,” Delisle contends that “Kavanagh’s origin story reconfigures the colonial moment as a myth of indigenous birth” to produce a Newfoundland “national narrative” that inoculates Newfoundlanders from the “colonial exploiters” from which they are descended, and from the pervasive Canadian culture of which they eventually become a small part (Delisle 24). Delisle goes so far as to condemn Kavanagh’s novel as an earnest privileging of “sacred destiny and mythical origin over the reality of colonial conquest” and a manifestation of “one final act of violence against the Beothuk people” (43).

In “The Three Sheilas: Irish Myth and Newfoundland Folklore in Patrick Kavanagh’s *Gaff Topsails*,” Michele Holmgren echoes Fowler’s and Delisle’s readings of mythologizing and indigenizing when she concludes her assessment of *Gaff Topsails* with the claim that Kavanagh is trying “to show how exiled, outlawed and castaway myths from Ireland became the native myths of Newfoundland” (Holmgren 62). Though all three readings are insightful and detailed, there is something to be read into Mathews’s subtle reference to lack of irony and his incongruous contention that “perhaps” *Gaff Topsails* presents Newfoundland identity and culture as a “(naïvely?) idealized possibility” (17). Perhaps Kavanagh’s novel is neither romantic nor naïve but more self-aware and less sentimental than Fowler or Delisle or Holmgren realizes. Perhaps, despite being the “Great Newfoundland Novel” that more than any other crams Newfoundland cultural and historical references into its pages, *Gaff Topsails* actually unsettles the foundational, national narrative. Despite the archival, folkloric, and linguistic miscellanea of Newfoundland that Kavanagh trawls and

then spreads throughout the novel, perhaps the only constant in the narrative and its characters is a fear of the environment: a fear of what the environment can do; a fear that the environment will consume all labours and leave no sign of the labourers; a fear that the environment of Newfoundland offers no space for Newfoundlanders, their identity, or their culture.

The readings by Fowler, Delisle, and Holmgren represent almost all of the scholarly attention given to Kavanagh's novel and are the only published articles to focus solely on *Gaff Topsails*. It is the purpose of this paper to engage these articles in a meaningful discussion of *Gaff Topsails* and examine a little further this important and woefully under-analyzed text. The goal is to produce a reading of *Gaff Topsails* that is less romantic than Fowler's while redeeming the novel from Delisle's somewhat unfair condemnation of it. Kavanagh's novel does more than mythologize Newfoundlanders, their culture, and their homeland. This reading aims to establish *Gaff Topsails* as more than the collection of myths and archetypes Fowler believes represent and reaffirm "defining elements of Newfoundland culture, especially the primary values of community and interdependence" (Fowler xi) and that Holmgren believes distinguish "the novel as a work of Newfoundland literature, sharing with E.J. Pratt's work the focus on 'heroic collective action'" (Holmgren 62). This reading aims also to elevate *Gaff Topsails* above Delisle's assessment of it as a crass continuation of colonialism and to undo her yoking of Kavanagh to "Many white Canadian novelists" who have written "their own myths of origin, in order to construct a 'primordial' national identity to counteract the guilt of colonization" (Delisle 23). While these three articles do an admirable job explicating a unique and very challenging work, more attention needs to be paid to the ironic, subversive undertones of *Gaff Topsails*. The 20 years since the publication of Kavanagh's novel have witnessed a substantial rise in the quantity and quality of literature from and about Newfoundland and Labrador. The best of this fiction is self-reflective, meta-fictive, and tremendously troubling to any notion of Newfoundland national identity — primary, primordial, or

otherwise. Johnston's *The Colony of Unrequited Dreams*, Michael Crummey's *River Thieves* (2001) and *Galore* (2009), Michael Winter's *The Big Why* (2004), Bernice Morgan's *Cloud of Bone* (2007), and other historical fictions re-enter Newfoundland's history and folklore not to reify it but to reshape it. As a result, the notion of Newfoundland has become more contested than constant over the last two decades. *Gaff Topsails* deserves to be read not just as a companion but as a catalyst to these complicated and complicating novels.

### **"behind everything you could see, there lurked something else you could not": Responding to the Scholarly Readings**

Towards contextualizing *Gaff Topsails* and this reading of it, it is best first to revisit Mathews's identification of an interesting binary found in Newfoundland literature and literary criticism. Mathews's comparing of Fowler's reading of *Gaff Topsails* with Paul Chafe's analysis of Michael Crummey's *River Thieves* notes that Fowler's unironic reading of Kavanagh's text valorizes (as much as Fowler claims Kavanagh does) the supportive, sanctifying nature of the community created by European settlers and forged over centuries into "a complex cultural web of obligation, understanding, and support" (Fowler 72). As Mathews sees it, Fowler's reading of *Gaff Topsails* presents Kavanagh's community as not only tested and sustaining, but redemptive for those who come into contact with (and/or perpetuate) this "cultural web." "In the climactic section, the village's one outsider, the priest from Ireland, is symbolically incorporated into the community: a romantic assertion of the collective power of its inhabitants to act benevolently" (Mathews 17). In "Lament for a Notion: Loss and the Beothuk in Michael Crummey's *River Thieves*," Chafe, according to Mathews, "takes precisely the opposite tack," and reads Crummey's presentation of the European settler culture as neither benevolent nor sanctified but failed, fallen, and held together by a Conradian lie that erases the Beothuk from the Newfoundland narrative (17). Mathews uses the inherent debate between Fowler and Chafe and between the texts they

analyze to reassert his binary notion, which is worth citing in its entirety:

Perhaps *Gaff Topsails* and *River Thieves* can be understood as continuing the debate between *Tomorrow Will Be Sunday* and *Random Passage* on the one hand and *House of Hate* and *The Afterlife of George Cartwright* on the other: the (naïvely?) idealized possibility, presented as tantalizingly actual, as opposed to the unsentimentally and uncompromisingly explored darker side of their society's collective psyche. (17)

Fowler, Delisle, and Holmgren seem content to consider *Gaff Topsails* as representative of the side of the binary that imagines a tantalizing, idealized Newfoundland. Fowler contends the village of the novel is a "mythological rather than real community, representing the distilled essence of Newfoundland outport life" (Fowler 72). The villagers themselves are "timeless" and possessed of a world view of "magical narratives . . . radically at odds with modernism" (73). Delisle reads *Gaff Topsails* as an origin myth rendering as tantalizingly actual, through an "idealized teleological development of the island of Newfoundland," the "reign of the indigenized Irish settler" (Delisle 23, 43). The villagers who move through the single day that constitutes the narrative present of *Gaff Topsails* manifest archetypes, perform rituals (mock and sincere), and celebrate traditions that mark this one day "not as a single unit but as part of a continuous thread of time stretching back five centuries or more" (24). Holmgren sees in Kavanagh's novel a deliberate "blending of Newfoundland and Irish folklore" to the point that she believes Kavanagh "consciously exploits" common confusions between the two to produce a Newfoundland people connected to and by "older beliefs and ceremonies" and brought into undeniable existence by a "slow evolution of myth and folklore" (Holmgren 57).

Although Kavanagh's narrative does contain much of the mythic and the ideal, a more fruitful reading of the novel should consider how

Kavanagh moves between the extremes of Mathews's binary, presenting this mythical community and its equally mythical origins as a legitimate (if not literal) component of Newfoundlander's collective identity while tempering it with unflinching presentations of the "darker side of their collective psyche." There is no better place to begin the examination of this movement between the mythical and the unsentimental than with Kavanagh's layered presentation of the village's first settler, Tomas Croft.

Whereas Fowler and Holmgren consider many aspects and sections of *Gaff Topsails*, Delisle's analysis is less a reading of Kavanagh's novel and more an exploration of one chapter, "The Kingdom of God." This chapter abandons the narrative present of the novel and recounts the impossible, mythic, archetypal life of Tomas Croft, the outport's founding father and, as Fowler puts it, "spirit of the place" (Fowler 80). Tomas Croft is a mythological character who settles the land, encounters the Beothuk, witnesses John Cabot's arrival, marries Sheila nGira, engages in acts of piracy, and fosters the "bedrock paganism" Fowler believes outlasts the thin layers of political and religious ideology that cover the land from time to time (79). Croft's interaction with the island is overtly sexual, as if his arrival impregnates Newfoundland with the Newfoundlanders for which it has been waiting. The arrival by skiff of the Irish stowaway reads first like the phallic penetration of a feminine landscape, then later like the fusion of bay and boy:

[Tomas Croft] feels underneath him a hesitation, a kind of gathering, a sucking back, and then an advance, a heavy uplifting of the surface . . . an explosion of spray . . . He awaits the crest of a swell and catches it and runs the skiff ashore . . . Tingling with exhaustion the boy lays his body down upon the beach . . . In the last instant before he passes out, hypnotized by the monotony of the sea, it seems that this glowing breath is nothing less than his own being, his own life and soul and spirit. (Kavanagh 108)

Later, Tomas climbs to the highest point of the cove and consummates his marriage to the land:

The wind roars. He hears so many sounds that he can hear nothing at all. His blood flows madly. In a frenzy he tears open his breeches and he bursts out hard. With both hands he seizes himself and at once his whole body convulses and makes spasms. For the span of one breath, milky ribbons of his seed hang suspended before his eyes, and in the next instant are vaporized by the wind and scattered in a pearly steaming mist westward across the field of voluptuous blue. (111)

Though Tomas does eventually marry a fellow Irish exile, his children seem less a product of him and his wife and more a result of Tomas's earlier union with the land — a hybrid offspring that are as much island as they are human. They are born of a community that Kavanagh describes as a "womb-cove," and they live their lives in "rhythms [that] echo . . . the touch of sea upon the land" (139). The modern-day descendants of Tomas appear to remain attached erotically to the land; one girl actually reaches orgasm as she watches a passing iceberg, the very iceberg whose crevices her male schoolmates penetrate near the climax of the novel.

Delisle reads "The Kingdom of God" as a "transfer of indigeneity" from the Beothuk to the Irish settlers (38). Tomas's first and only encounter with the Aboriginal inhabitants of the island results in Tomas clubbing a Beothuk man "until his brains spill out of his skull and onto the snow" (Kavanagh 119). Delisle considers this "an almost Oedipal moment" in which "Croft kills the father and takes his place" as the indigenous inhabitant of the island (Delisle 38). Croft's usurping of the Beothuk as Newfoundland native marks him as Kavanagh's deserving European inheritor of the island, Delisle contends, having succeeded where others have failed.<sup>1</sup> One cannot entirely fault Delisle for her skeptical and scathing response to Tomas. He does appear to



represent the tired clichés L. Camille van der Marel identifies as the “[p]ossessive acts of representation, which retread worn tropes of first discovery, mapping, and the feminization of colonized land,” used by settler-colonial writers to legitimize and justify their indigenized occupation of the landscape (van der Marel 16). But it may be a critical misstep to claim that Tomas and his narrative are a part of a larger scheme of Kavanagh’s to eradicate the Beothuk “with a single blow” and thereby annihilate “their role in Newfoundland’s history, so that his own myth of origin may proceed unimpeded” (Delisle 40).

Delisle criticizes Kavanagh’s compression of “events that occurred over a span of centuries into Croft’s lifetime” and chides the author for trying to mingle his “purely fictional” tale with historical authenticity: “By using real names drawn from cultural memory in his fictional story, Kavanagh balances the mythical elements with recognizable references, reinforcing the feeling of historical continuity. But if he wanted to give his story factual legitimacy, why did he not tell the equally engaging legend of Sheila nGira and Gilbert Pike as it has been widely reconstructed?” (33–4). Delisle contends that in giving Croft an impossibly long life, Kavanagh conflates in his mythic forefather all the contrasting elements of the mystic Newfoundlander: “the hardy Newfoundlander who has heroically survived the harsh landscape” and the outlaw — the “raw flesh-eating, murderous thief who lacks knowledge of civilized society” (32). Delisle’s problem with this is that it is tantamount to Kavanagh’s “[s]uccumbing to these stereotypes” and, by making his modern-day outporters the undiluted descendants of Tomas Croft, thereby uncritically placing “his characters and their culture within a larger continuous narrative of cultural development” (32). While Delisle’s concerns are important ones, it seems rather unlikely that in writing *Gaff Topsails* Kavanagh was preoccupied with either capturing “factual legitimacy” or perpetuating “a larger continuous narrative.” More likely, Kavanagh is interested in simultaneously acknowledging that these myths, legends, and histories comprise a sort of cultural truth about Newfoundland while compartmentalizing them as separate from a Newfoundland reality as only the smallest and

non-defining part of an ever-evolving, ever-elusive Newfoundland character.

### **"By God it's terrible here, and we love it": The Hilarious History of Tomas Croft**

In an interview discussing *Gaff Topsails*, Sandra Gwyn notes how "The Kingdom of God" stands apart from the rest of the novel and asks Kavanagh why he wrote a chapter that "re-invents Newfoundland's history and geography in a sweeping, imaginative, and rather subversive way" (Gwyn). Kavanagh's reply indicates his intention was contrary to Delisle's perception of it and something other than crafting a nationalizing Newfoundland narrative "that finds order and a stable cultural identity amid the chaos of the modern world" (Delisle 31):

It was really in answer to a problem. I wanted to present the history and geography of Newfoundland. But I had to set them apart, because I wanted the novel to maintain the story of a single day. So I had to take the historical material and give it a quite different character. I also wanted to have some fun with Newfoundland history, because in my time at school, people read the history very solemnly, especially Irish Newfoundlanders, all about how terrible people came out from England, and then the Church came along and saved everybody. (Kavanagh in Gwyn)

Gwyn's labelling of the chapter as "subversive," combined with Kavanagh's claim that he wanted to "have some fun with Newfoundland history" to contrast its solemn and sanctified treatment by "Irish Newfoundlanders," seems to indicate that Fowler, Delisle, and Holmgren are reading this chapter (and this novel) too seriously and too literally. Croft's existence and survival are more than "highly improbable"; as Fowler contends, they are impossible to the point of ridiculousness and Kavanagh knows this (Fowler 80). Kavanagh's

oxymoronic depiction of Newfoundland as simultaneously succouring and severe is not sloppy writing; it is the capturing of a “reality” that cannot be captured in reality: the perception of the place, not the place itself, is a part of the Newfoundland character Kavanagh must include in his “Great Newfoundland Novel.” Croft’s narrative does not indigenize Newfoundlanders; rather, it captures the desire to indigenize and sets at the core of the perceived Newfoundland character the (im)possibility of loving such a daunting place.

The Newfoundland Tomas discovers is — to his mind — a feminized, unspoiled landscape. From the crow’s nest of the fishing vessel on which he has stowed away, Tomas’s first vision of Newfoundland is a “rounded contour of land,” a “curve of ground” that reminds him of “soft woman-shapes” (Kavanagh 104). It is a place of innocence and abundance: animals unaware of the dangers of humans approach the boy unthreateningly: “Sleek wolves, giant hares, slinking silver foxes, black bears, lynx-leopards — all these animals are harmless to Tomas Croft. Even the deer follow and gaze boldly upon him” (112–13). An ocean teeming with cod and barrens and woodlands “populated with every sort of God’s creature” are incongruous to any contemporary Newfoundlander familiar with a land and an ocean ravaged in the anthropocentric centuries following Tomas’s arrival (122). Equally jarring is the almost comedic interchange of words used to describe the land. The “womb of a cove” Tomas enters first is surrounded almost entirely by “rocky seaboard” (104). Looking up from the cove, Tomas sees that the rounded land he saw from the ship is topped at its crest “by some sort of outcropping” that reminds the castaway of “the pap of his own breast” (109). Tomas climbs this breast of land to find at its pinnacle not a soft pap but “a monstrous grey boulder, a stone every bit as long and broad and tall as the ship that brought him to this place” (110). The feminine, mothering landscape of abundance has been scraped clear by this and other large erratic glacier castoffs. The “rounded” coastline is also described paradoxically as “a rough thing, thrusting and violent,” and a “gargoyled . . . barbican of hostility, of death” (110, 114).

The hilarity of Tomas's love to the point of sexual appreciation of this unwelcoming landscape is only heightened by the harsh descriptions of the island provided by Kavanagh in an earlier chapter, "The Landlocked Archipelago," in which the creation of Newfoundland is detailed. On the sixth day of creation God "tosses the refuse of His labours into a rubbish heap," and, out of sight of its creator, this "rough pile of scraps and leavings" becomes Newfoundland (22). Assaulted by glaciers for the thousands of years leading up to a thaw in temperature, the island finally reveals itself as a "disfigured terrain," a "grotesque and frightful," "hideous" "mangled hinterland" of "grotesque relief forms" and "blistered complexion" (25). Millennia of gouging ice leave the island looking like a ravaged body: "the flesh of the earth is slashed by ragged outcroppings that resemble raw sores . . . [A] landscape that might have been filigreed like a Celtic jewel is instead left ghastly and repulsive" (25–26). Yet Tomas is able to love and celebrate this "monochromatic, grey and obstinate . . . dull hard edge of the earth" because he knows nothing else (26). Tomas is the son of an Irish monk and has been raised in virtual isolation, confined "to the cloisters and sanctuaries of the public church" (94). So unworldly is Tomas that "as manhood approaches, the fantasies that excite him, that stir his body beyond his control and take fierce command of him, are provoked by such things as coloured glass, or the smell of incense in the church" (95). His masturbatory consummation with the landscape is spurred by the robin's egg-blue of the blueberries and the reds and greens of the bogs that remind him of the "colours of stained glass" (111). By making such a boy the father of all Newfoundlanders, Kavanagh is saying that only a person with such a warped world view could look at Newfoundland and think "that this land is blessed, that God Almighty has smiled down upon it His fertility and His benevolence" (113). That Croft's hyperbolic supposition he is walking on God's chosen land comes just a couple of chapters after Newfoundland is described as God's "scraps and leavings" only heightens the possibility that Kavanagh is not being entirely serious here: one God's garbage is another boy's paradise.

Kavanagh's presentation of this oxymoronic love of such a "bare-bones of a territory" is echoed years later by Michael Winter (26). In *Into the Blizzard: Walking the Fields of the Newfoundland Dead* (2014), Winter admits he cannot sing the "Ode to Newfoundland" without laughing. According to Winter, the "Ode to Newfoundland" begins with references to sun, summer, and "pine clad hills" but "makes gradual inroads into something ominous, with the land frozen in winter and the snow driving deeper" until climaxing with "blinding storm gusts" fretting the Newfoundland shore (Winter, *Blizzard* 147). Winter's interpretation of the "Ode to Newfoundland" could be said of Kavanagh's "The Kingdom of God":

The "Ode to Newfoundland" is meant to be both sincere *and* sarcastic. It should be sung with hammy effects, as if the singer is embracing the punishment: By God it's terrible here, and we love it. It is a ridiculous and most genuine anthem because it acknowledges that the line between existence and death is unclear. The history of settlement in Newfoundland is one of barest survival. The ode is a march through those raw elements . . . . (148)

Tomas's wide-eyed euphoria as he skips through a "wasteland . . . strewn with boulders" should be read as both sincere and sarcastic (Kavanagh 26). As should most of his experiences on the island. No reader with even a rudimentary understanding of Newfoundland could suspend disbelief far enough to read without a trace of a smile the following line: "even though the air swarms with mosquitoes big enough to be called birds, they give him no annoyance" (113). Nor should readers miss the irony inherent in Kavanagh's other depictions of Tomas's early years on the island during which the boy "enjoys the abundance of all things" — all things, that is, except good weather: "Each day, each week, each month follows the last. Tomas Croft names each morning according to the air that greets him: Fog-day, Rain-day, Snow-day, Wind-day, Storm-day" (117). It is both telling and hilarious that Tomas

never wakes to a morning air that inspires him to call that day Sunday, Warm Breeze-day, Clear-day, Hot-day.

Yet Tomas loves this island, perhaps because he is mad. As Fowler notes, in fleeing the famine of medieval Ireland, Tomas is a "survivor of unspeakable trauma" and undoubtedly scarred in many ways (Fowler 79). Kavanagh depicts the young Tomas as somewhat dissociative: "He is neither happy nor unhappy. The breezes blow away his thoughts so that he is seldom troubled by worry" (Kavanagh 117). He moves through his environment on bloody killing sprees, clubbing what creatures he can find, crushing the skulls of birds with his teeth, eating raw the flesh of his kills. Illogically, Tomas believes "The land and he are as lovers, one together" and converses regularly with the few beasts he does not kill, as well as the trees and rocks (118). Centuries of close contact with the Newfoundland environment leave Tomas the deranged, drunken despot of the Newfoundland wild, as he is later depicted upon boarding an English man-o'-war to slaughter its crew: "Tomas Croft, wild-eyed, his hair knotted into red horns, his beard into red braids, candles blazing from his tricorn" (130).

It is important to take seriously the possibility that Kavanagh is not being serious in his depiction of Tomas Croft and the indigenization of Newfoundlanders in "The Kingdom of God." It is also important to consider seriously the possibility that Kavanagh deploys his humour in such a way that it will be recognized as such by some and taken seriously by others — and that no reader can be certain which reading is "correct." Certainly a wry, dry humour sometimes inaccessible to the uninitiated has long been considered a pivotal part of the Newfoundland character. Witness the observation of Rex Murphy in his Foreword to the third printing of the *Dictionary of Newfoundland English* as he analyzes a short anecdote in which one Newfoundlander eviscerates linguistically a "dull fellow" who has just finished "making a tedious hash of a good story to his buddies at a local bar":

This is a Newfoundland story. . . . Retell the story to any Newfoundlander and he or she will automatically register

the pitch and manner of the delivery, re-create the scene, play out the little oral movie in the mind's ear until its lethal and singular cadence is perfectly reproduced. To get the story into an outsider's understanding, as Charles Lamb once remarked in a context mildly analogous, would require a surgical operation. (Murphy viii)

Murphy wonders if even a text as official as the *Dictionary of Newfoundland English* "could catch and hold between its neat covers and on its crisp clean pages some of the mercurial spirit of art and play which permeates and drives Newfoundland speech" and make it accessible to the non-local, non-lobotomized reader (xii). That the tone and tenor of Newfoundland speech and sentiment rendered onto paper will be missed by many seems to be an unavoidable hazard and perhaps too tempting an aspect not to be included by Kavanagh in a novel that attempts to shine light on as many facets of Newfoundland identity as possible.

There are precedents for these sorts of misunderstandings. The most recent can be found in Aparna Sanyal's review of Crummey's *Sweetland* (2014). Sanyal misreads the following passage from the text, in which the eponymous character expresses his disgust at the flock of reporters who have descended upon his small (also eponymous) Newfoundland community following Moses Sweetland's rescuing of a boatload of Sri Lankan refugees:

Sweetland was poisoned with the whole affair and wished they'd fuck off home out of it, leave him and the island alone. But everyone wanted to hear his version of events and hunted him down to pose the same half-dozen questions. All of them asking him to spell his name, for accuracy's sake. Sweetland, he'd say as they bent their heads over their notebooks, *S-w-i-e-t-l-u-n-d*.

They glanced up and he shrugged. It's an old Swedish name, he said. (Crummey, *Sweetland* 118)

Anyone familiar with the "lethal and singular cadence" of Newfoundland speech will understand that no one so "poisoned" as Moses Sweetland could forego this opportunity to be as hostile, sarcastic, and obscure as possible, yet, in her review, Sanyal records Sweetland's Swedish ancestry as a "fact" of the novel (this despite the "Swedish" spelling appearing only once more in the text, under Moses's picture in an article clipped from a paper "from the mainland," thus serving as the punchline of Moses's practical joke (186)). In his review of *Sweetland*, Michael Collins makes much of Sanyal's "gap of understanding" and uses the gaff to launch into his analysis of Crumme's novel as perhaps a response to critical reactions to his previous work, *Galore*:

Sweetland makes me wonder if Crumme, while no doubt thankful for *Galore*'s success, wants to complicate any starry-eyed romanticism readers might have absorbed about "the improbable medieval world of Newfoundland." Upon finishing *Sweetland*, I wondered, "Will mainlanders get this?" In many ways that's a silly question, but it lies at the heart of this novel. If *Sweetland* were completely transparent to non-Newfoundlanders, there wouldn't be much at stake in the dilemma facing either Sweetland-the-outport or Sweetland-the-man. If Newfoundland were just another part of Canada, there would be no tragedy in leaving it, and no difficulty in feeling at home and being understood in Calgary or Toronto or Halifax or Moncton, for that matter. (Collins)

Collins's comment on the opacity of *Sweetland* being connected directly to its function as a Newfoundland novel is a profound one, and it speaks much to what is "at stake" for Kavanagh in *Gaff Topsails*, and in "The Kingdom of God" in particular.

Kavanagh's goal in "The Kingdom of God" to "have fun," to be "imaginative, and rather subversive," which (he admits in his interview with Gwyn) enables him to reflect within his novel another aspect of the Newfoundland character, discussed by Murphy: "Newfoundlanders



are, and always have been, a verbally conscious people” (Murphy ix–x).<sup>3</sup> It also enables him to set a challenge for himself and his readers — Kavanagh has to be ambiguous, he has to risk his intent being missed or misinterpreted, he has to court multiple readings and misreadings of his text — for how else can he be subversive? Kavanagh must be “verbally conscious” and must articulate his irony earnestly, whether it be an Eden-esque Newfoundland replete with mosquitoes that do not bite, a solitary settler who “greet[s]” each day the unending onslaught of detestable weather, or that same settler fashioning “a cozy hut,” staying “warm and dry and comfortable,” and surviving countless Newfoundland winters (and springs, summers, and falls, for that matter) despite having “forgotten how to make fire” (Kavanagh 117). Unlike Johnston, who supplements *The Colony of Unrequited Dreams* with a corrective, overtly ironic, alternative *History of Newfoundland* penned by Sheilagh Fielding, the acidic, acerbic foil to Johnston’s fictionalized Smallwood, Kavanagh leaves his corrective history more open to interpretation and thereby includes in his novel Mathews’s “critical debate” within Newfoundland literature and literary criticism “between the romantic and stoic or ironic impulses” (Mathews 15). In this way (and in the spirit of Collins’s review of *Sweetland*) does Kavanagh make his novel matter, inspiring not only conflicting interpretations of his text, but of the Newfoundland culture it examines. While some readers may see in Kavanagh’s “The Kingdom of God” an intentionally ironic implosion of a particular naïve interpretation of history, others will read in Kavanagh’s apparently earnest imagining of European colonization the erasure “of colonial violence and the extermination of the Beothuk” (Delisle 37). To borrow a phrase used by Murphy in his assessment of the “aggressive and deflationary” Newfoundland humour he discusses in his Foreword: “Talk about dry” (Murphy viii).

### **Cutting the “continuous thread of time” in *Gaff Topsails***

All three critics of *Gaff Topsails* make the claim that Kavanagh fashions an unbroken cultural and historical narrative that connects Tomas

Croft to his descendants of the narrative present. Holmgren claims: "In Kavanagh's fictional world, both chronological time and 'official' imperial history . . . are distorted and compressed" and de facto dismissed as less important than "an even more ancient pagan cycle" that reifies as it repeats the rituals by which Tomas claimed the island for himself and his descendants (Holmgren 56). Fowler notes that the landscape familiar to the modern-day characters is exactly the one examined by Tomas so many centuries before and these villagers react to their world in the centuries-old mindset of their forefather: "The villagers understand and manage their lives according to visions, symbols, and signs" that are often manifested by "the ordinary activities and pastimes of this Newfoundland village," which thereby evoke "their primitive origin" (Fowler 73, 75). Fowler claims the symbols by which the villagers understand their surroundings "arise naturally out of the world [they] inhabit" (78). For Fowler, the characters within the text cannot experience these symbols beyond a "primitive" understanding and it is left to the readers to grasp these notions on a "conceptual level" (78). These characters are "lost in time" (72). Delisle sees in the inclusion of Tomas's narrative within *Gaff Topsails* the beginning and legitimizing of an unbroken five-century-long Newfoundland culture and believes that in creating a history of Newfoundland "worthy of mythological status," Kavanagh "establishes a community that, through both nationalistic and religious means, becomes 'eternal'" (26, 28). Delisle is critical of this perceived continuous narrative because it is equivalent to an essentialism that is "problematic because it reduces Newfoundlanders to a homogenized clan of simple, superstitious and often two-dimensional characters" transfixed in an "anachronistic space" (32).

It is undeniable that Kavanagh's novel does, as Holmgren notes, situate "archetypal patterns behind an otherwise realistically chronicled day in the life of a fictional Newfoundland village on the eve of Confederation with Canada" (56). Fowler does an excellent job of detailing many parallels he believes "are used to emphasize the essential connection between the world of Tomas Croft and that of the

latter-day inhabitants of his village” (Fowler 80). Among these are the recurrent image of the iceberg; the blackthorn cudgel Tomas takes with him from Ireland and uses as a weapon against animals, Beothuks, and European settlers, then leaves with the parish priest who usurps Tomas’s position as leader of his people (and subsequently begins the tradition of bequeathing the cudgel to his replacement until it becomes the walking stick of the current priest, Father MacMorough); the lighting of bonfires on midsummer’s night; and the “employment of a blueberry motif” that almost always connects setting to sexuality (80).<sup>4</sup> While these parallels are an obvious tactic employed by Kavanagh, it is perhaps premature to accuse him of essentializing or primitivizing Newfoundlanders or even doing as Fowler suggests and creating villagers who are more mythological than they are actual and who “believe as strongly in fairies and bogeyman as they do in the saints” (82). It is important to note that any such overt primitivism is confined to “The Kingdom of God” and does not appear anywhere in the actual reality of the modern-day characters.

A passage alluded to by Fowler and Holmgren and cited entirely by Delisle seems to serve as the strongest piece of evidence that Kavanagh is presenting a race of simplified and simple-minded Newfoundlanders. None of the critics considers the context in which the passage appears, yet consideration of this context must be central to the discussion of *Gaff Topsails* as a mythologizing or primitivizing novel. The passage appears near the end of “The Kingdom of God,” centuries after Tomas Croft relinquishes mastery of the cove to the Catholic priest and disappears into the ocean horizon rowing the same skiff that delivered him as a boy. The passage describes the lives and world view of Tomas’s descendants in “the modern century” (Kavanagh 139):

If the people of the womb-cove should hear the drone of an airplane behind the clouds, or the horn of a steamer passing through the fog, or, in the calm of night, the moan of a locomotive sounding down the corridors of the land, they might take any of these sounds to be the lament of

the Boo Darby, suffering in beastly solitude somewhere in the wilderness.

Although it is now the age of science and reason, the people of the cove still fear the Masterless Man, who carries off to the barrens any children he can catch.

Delisle, in particular, is troubled by this passage: "While Kavanagh seems to be attempting to forge a distinct and rich history for his compatriots, the claim that the people of the parish would not recognize the sound of an airplane or a locomotive, that they live outside of 'science and reason,' is clearly problematic" (Delisle 33). Delisle chastises Kavanagh for fixing his villagers "outside of time" and thereby condemning them "to the stereotype of primitive, backward simple-mindedness" and confining them in "timeless infancy" (33). Yet Kavanagh contradicts this depiction within his narrative — but notably outside "The Kingdom of God."

Though the passage does state that, even within this age of science and reason the villagers may mistake the moan of the locomotive for the cries of the Boo Darby,<sup>5</sup> not a single character makes this inference in the narrative present of the novel. As the novel comes to a close and the characters meet the fates they have been pursuing or avoiding throughout the day, a train passes through the darkened countryside. The train is out of sight, but its lumbering motion and wailing whistle can be heard by many of the characters and nobody mistakes it for anything supernatural. Fowler makes much of the reader's point of view in his analysis of *Gaff Topsails*, claiming the reader has a "historical perspective" absent "in the world view of the characters in the novel" (Fowler 81). Yet, as the locomotive emits its mournful cry announcing its passing and the characters identify it for what it is, the readers should recognize these are not idealized, infantilized primitives they are observing. In *The Machine in the Garden*, Leo Marx notes how a train lumbering through the town of Concord, Massachusetts, near an area known as "Sleepy Hollow" — where Nathaniel Hawthorne carefully records his impressions of nature in a notebook — disrupts Hawthorne's

romanticization of the place: “the startling shriek of the train whistle bearing in upon him, forc[es] him to acknowledge the existence of a reality alien to the pastoral dream” (Marx 15). So, too, should readers of *Gaff Topsails* acknowledge the existence of a reality in the narrative present that is alien to the primitive, anti-modern dream space of “The Kingdom of God.”

Thus, in *Gaff Topsails*, as a train barrels through the night, Michael Barron, a teenager on the cusp of manhood who has this day (and presumably many days before) been building the courage to declare his heretofore unexpressed love for 16-year-old Mary Dwyer, steps with purpose into the night and towards the communal bonfire where he knows he will find the object of his affections. Not only does Michael recognize the train whistle, he proves himself a truly modern character by using the locomotive as a metaphor for his own situation:

From the barrens over back comes the lonely cry of the locomotive. The train is on its night crossing westward. Michael Barron realizes that he has done it after all: he has stepped into that narrow band of certainty that waits between the iron rails. He stands in that dangerous realm, and now the inevitable train of which he has been so sure, that he has felt rumbling deep in his chest, roars down the track — straight towards him.

He takes a breath and pushes open the door, and steps out into the night. (Kavanagh 415)

Michael’s familiarity with the train, his knowledge of its westward destination, indicates he is not living in a state of what Ian McKay terms “folk innocence.” Rather, he is a citizen of a wider world, not so “far removed from capitalist social relations and the stresses of modernity” (McKay 26). While Michael’s worldly knowledge is certainly limited due to his young age and a life that to this point has been lived entirely inside his community, there is nothing to indicate that he is completely ignorant of a modern world or hampered by irrational

explanations for anything unfamiliar.<sup>6</sup> Even Michael's younger brother, Kevin, who spends the entirety of the narrative in a terrorized state bolstered by superstitions, uses the metaphor of a train to describe the natural world around him: "the boy becomes aware of the sound of the ocean rolling against the landwash. It rumbles like the distant trundle of a long slow train" (Kavanagh 404–05). Likewise, another modern machine arises unbidden in the mind of Mary Dwyer when an insect distracts her from the meandering musing that takes up most of her day and at this moment finds her astride a rusted field-gun in the marsh outside her village: "A tiny aeroplane buzzes out of the muzzle of the gun and startles her from her daydream. Horse-stinger! The insect swoops at her face and circles her hair and threatens to become entangled. Devil's darning needles, says Alice, they sew you up" (57).<sup>7</sup> It seems unlikely this girl who sees in an insect similarities to a machine would ever mistake the "drone of an airplane" for the "lament of the Boo Darby."

Though Michael is the only one to make a metaphor of the passing train, other characters are connected during the climax of the novel by their acknowledgement of the vehicle. Hestia Dwyer, Mary's mother, in so many ways unhinged from reality due to the traumatic loss of her fisherman husband, spends most of the day circumventing her devastating reality yet takes note of the passing train: "Isn't that a mournful sound — a train going by in the night. They says it's a sign of weather, but all it ever puts into my mind is places far away. Places I never been to" (407). As revealed by her unceasing dialogue throughout the text, Hestia is a repository of Newfoundland folklore — and a staunch believer — she is certain her daughter will find today the man she will marry for she has completed many husband-divining rituals: the baking of a "dumb cake,"<sup>8</sup> and the examination of an egg white in a glass of water. Yet even Hestia dismisses what "They says" the train may mean, and acknowledges it for what it is: a conduit to "places far away." Moreover, Hestia promises her infant son to someday "pack up a picnic lunch . . . walk up the country, over back, all the way to the tracks, and . . . wait for the choo-choo to pass us by" — hardly the behaviour of one

who believes the sound of the passing train to be a cry from a demon or spirit (407). It is obvious that the traversing train is so familiar to these villagers that it is far from being an object of fear and is instead a “choo-choo” considered suitable entertainment for an infant.

Most telling, Johnny the Light, broken and booze-besotted throughout the text, literally unaware that the war is over (though the narrative takes place on 24 June 1948, Johnny asks the local merchant “How goes the w-w-war?” [150]), does not mistake the train’s whistle for anything supernatural, but rather for the calls from another modern machine, a sealing vessel (the horn of which would likely be mistaken for the howl of the Boo Darby by the “womb-cove” dwellers in “The Kingdom of God”). Johnny the Light survived the great sealing disaster of 1914, and he kept many of his fellow sealers alive by lying to them that he could see their ship — a harrowing experience he relives every day as he stumbles through the community.<sup>9</sup> As the train passes by, “Johnny appears to have heard something, for abruptly his eyes blaze” as he “glares into the dark and cries, ‘Aye, 1-1-lads, there! There’s our ship!’” (403). Later, when the train’s “steady noise, hollow and wooden, bounces off the stars,” Johnny again hears his ship and calls “C-C-Come along now lads” (417). At various points throughout the narrative, Johnny misinterprets the world around him, but he never falls into superstition. In fact, Johnny’s constant delusions of seeing and hearing his vessel mark him as a modern character who has suffered anguish synonymous to a modern, industrial world: Johnny mistakes the school bell for the bell of the ship come to deliver him, the iceberg grinding by the community for his steamer, and thunder-rolls for the rifles of the search party: “Lads! You hear that? They’re shooting off the g-g-guns for us” (297). Even as he disappears from the narrative, naked, rowing a boat, and unhinged from time and space, Johnny recognizes “the mournful call of the night train making its slow journey across the interior barrens” (425).

If Kavanagh’s purpose in *Gaff Topsails* is, as Delisle claims (citing Stuart Hall), to create a Newfoundland people “lost in the mists of, not ‘real,’ but ‘mythic’ time,” or if it is, as Fowler and Holmgren claim, to

present his contemporary characters as more fabled than factual, why does he ground them in the reality of the modern world through their knowledgeable interaction with the train (Delisle 23)? Especially after establishing in "The Kingdom of God" that these womb-cove dwellers will likely mistake the sounds of such modern machinery as the call of the Boo Darby and the darkness through which it roams as the realm of the Masterless Man? If his goal is to confine his characters within a womb-cove, to affix them within the "anachronistic space" of a "continuous culture inherited from a mythical origin which remains largely unchanged for several hundred years," why would Kavanagh forgo so many opportunities to solidify his characters as primitive and outside modernity (36)? Most likely because he wishes to sever rather than to strengthen the thread between Tomas Croft's mythical reality and the more pragmatic reality of the present occupants of the cove.

While Kavanagh does use Tomas Croft to place on the page so many aspects of Newfoundland history and folklore, he compartmentalizes this chapter so that this indigenized, primitive Newfoundlander is both included (in the novel) and excluded (from the larger narrative). Tomas does not win a place in Newfoundland for his descendants, despite his centuries as ruler of the cove. The moment Catholic missionaries appear in the cove, Tomas is rendered "defenceless" by the sight of the crucifix the priest holds aloft as his tiny vessel rows into the "pirate's lair" (Kavanagh 133, 132). Tomas is immediately subservient to the priest and becomes a willing acolyte, ordering his people to build a chapel, become baptized, and confess their sins. The pagan bonfires on Midsummer's Night are now sanctified by the priest as celebrations of the feast day of Saint John the Baptist and in the following years the villagers forget that these fires were lit to ward off supernatural evils. Suddenly grey, weak, and senile, Tomas disappears unceremoniously from the land he once believed to be his lover and "After a generation the man is forgotten" (138). If Kavanagh is being sincere in his depiction of Tomas, then perhaps Delisle is correct in her assertion that Kavanagh attempts through Croft to confer sacred destiny and mythical origin upon Newfoundlanders. And perhaps



Holmgren is correct in her belief that Kavanagh begins with Tomas a “mythic solar cycle that allows all individual [modern-day] actors to become one with the village’s founding myth” and have “faith in a continuing cycle in which the individual dies, but survives in the folklore” (Holmgren 60, 62). And Fowler is correct to claim that the mid-twentieth-century villagers are animated by a “hybrid spirituality” that is as much primitive and medieval as it is Catholic and that is under threat from encroaching modernity and Confederation (Fowler 82). Yet, all three of these assertions assume that “The Kingdom of God” is connected sincerely to the narrative present — that Michael, Hestia, Mary, and the others are “the people of the womb-cove” detailed at the end of “The Kingdom of God.” It is important to realize these characters are separated from their founding father not only because, as Fowler notes, “this historical perspective is . . . missing in [their] lives” but by a radical caesura Kavanagh crafts between Tomas’s chapter and the rest of the narrative, which, in particular, problematizes one of Delisle’s major criticisms of *Gaff Topsails* (81).

Delisle delivers her *coup de grâce* to Kavanagh’s novel by branding it (citing Margery Fee), a “white ‘literary land claim’” that reconfigures “history into myth” and thereby repeats the “colonial relationship of conquest and domination” (Delisle 42, 43). She delivers this final blow by comparing *Gaff Topsails* to “Sense of Place: Loss and the Newfoundland and Labrador Spirit,” a jingoistic, sentimental article contributed by Newfoundland writer and performer G.C. Blackmore to the Newfoundland and Labrador government’s Royal Commission on Renewing and Strengthening Our Place in Canada. In the passage cited by Delisle, Blackmore is certainly guilty of the indigenization of which she accuses Kavanagh:

The will to survive, to overcome storms (natural, social and economic), the ability to carve out life, to adapt to unfamiliar events and circumstances — all these became the stuff of our spirit. So, too, grew our intimacy with the sea and the land, our sense of belonging here, our relationship

with those in the place where we lived and where we had our ready identification with others who claimed Newfoundland and Labrador as home. And because, from our earliest days, capitulation to circumstances was never considered a choice, our people could do no other than develop a strong sense of independence and self-reliance, one that became ours as if by birthright. (Blackmore 369)

Always referring to Newfoundlanders and Labradorians by the first-person plural, Blackmore moves quickly from the less-than-certain claim that intimacy with sea and land and ready identification with heritage and culture are “ours as *if* by birthright” to more aggressive nationalist sentiments like “our heritage is bred in the bone” and is part of “our collective DNA” (369). Most egregious, he conflates the eradication of the Beothuk with storms “natural, social and economic” weathered by European settlers and their progeny to create an unbroken narrative of Newfoundlanders overcoming hardships: “That spirit of Newfoundland and Labrador is our common line, forged over thousands of years through our First Peoples and engendered over 300 years of European settlement” (369).<sup>10</sup> The notion of contemporary Newfoundlanders as the end product of a shared historical narrative of hardship and survival is a popular one, which is why Kavanagh includes such romanticism in his novel; but to accuse Kavanagh of committing the same self-aggrandizing as Blackmore is unfair. Kavanagh’s use of such “stubborn nationalist legends” is decidedly more critical and has more in common with the sentiments of another article from the Royal Commission on Renewing and Strengthening Our Place in Canada, Newfoundland historian Jerry Bannister’s “The Politics of Cultural Memory: Themes in the History of Newfoundland and Labrador in Canada, 1972–2003” (Bannister 125).

According to Bannister, the “nationalist historiography” that has been popular in Newfoundland and Labrador since the 1970s has popularized a “grand narrative of struggle” that has done much to create a shared identity but is also a historical misnomer (145, 128):

it collapses the distance between historical epochs into a single meta-narrative which deliberately blurs the line between the past and the present. Rather than triumphing over their history of oppression, according to this view, Newfoundlanders are haunted by it. We are not free from our past but trapped by it, forced to endure seemingly endless cycles of economic failure and social misery. Reflecting the zeitgeist of the post-Smallwood era, this outlook grew out of the cultural revival of the 1970s, emerged in one form in [Newfoundland and Labrador Premier] Peckford's economic nationalism of the 1980s, and has resurfaced in the wave of historical fiction since the 1990s. (125–26)

This “shared historical narrative” should be taken seriously, Bannister contends, for the “lure of historical certainty” — evidence folkloric and factual that Newfoundlanders are incontrovertibly the trial-tested inheritors of the land upon which they live — could lead to them forever looking backward and becoming “trapped by history” (127, 152). Through a drastic division within his text between the mythological, “tantalizingly actual” past and the practical present, Kavanagh is able to include this history within his narrative, then immediately explode it. The legacy of Tomas Croft, the myth of the indigenized Newfoundlander, does not extend wholly into the lives of the present-day villagers. While they do inherit somewhat from the generations before them an intimacy and familiarity with their surroundings, this legacy does little more than give them a starting point from which to begin their own exhilarating and frightening becoming. Like the locomotive that appears at the beginning and end of the novel, the progress of time and the changes it brings are undeniable and irresistible. Fowler is correct in noting that Kavanagh deliberately situates his narrative on a day that “fell between two fateful referenda on Confederation with Canada,” thereby merging “two mythologically significant occasions — the one recalling the origins of modern Newfoundland society in its settlement

by white Europeans, the other marking a momentous change in that society's sense of itself" (Fowler 72). Kavanagh compiles all the history and folklore he can within his narrative, piling it figuratively at the feet of his present-day protagonists. Yet Michael, Mary, and others must leap from this pile or be lost in it.

The caesura between Tomas's mystical reality and the reality of the villagers of 1948 is marked first by the jarring, laughable dissonance between the last words in "The Kingdom of God" and the first words in the following chapter, "Harmonicas." As the chapter detailing the life and legacy of Tomas Croft comes to a close, the villagers of "the modern century" are depicted living lives rhythmically in step with their environment. So in tune are these outporters with the world that surrounds them that "[j]ust as the breath of the sleeping mother comforts the infant, so the rise and fall of the sea soothes these people" — a people who "suffer no memory of the horrors of history, no sense of past or future, no terror of time" (140). The very last words of the chapter detail dreamily the "earthly immortality" of these blissful beings: "The steady come and go of the tidewater speaks the pledge of Tomas Croft to his children: eternal constancy. The dream-breath of the landwash, the sigh of the sea upon the shore, proclaims the easeful sound of warm snug love — the plain silent sound of home" (140). Having lulled them to sleep with this pastoral fantasy, Kavanagh wakens his readers immediately and rudely with the opening words of the next chapter, which depict the actual sights and sounds of the village in the narrative present:

Johnny the Light extends his arms and takes hold of the latticework and angrily he rattles the trellis.

The old man curses the padlock. He limps round to the front window . . . .

He bangs on the glass and damns the shopkeeper to hell. (141)

Johnny the Light's "eternal constancy" is a psychological hell in which he experiences daily the horrors he suffered as one of the ill-fated sealers

abandoned by the ss *Newfoundland*. As a plot device, Johnny's depraved delirium bookends the foundational lunacy of Tomas Croft, squeezing between them the few paragraphs at the end of "The Kingdom of God" describing the "plain silent sound of home." In doing so, Kavanagh renders this essentializing, indigenizing moment as the tiniest blip in his narrative. No characters are developed or deployed to live within this moment or experience the "warm snug love" of the "womb-cove," thereby making this type of existence more an idea than a reality. It is an idea shared by many within the narrative, but a reality occupied by none of them.<sup>11</sup>

### **"the thing she waits for": Stepping Outside the Grand Narrative**

At the end of Johnston's *The Colony of Unrequited Dreams*, Sheilagh Fielding, presented with the undeniable truth that Newfoundland has become a province of Canada, seeks to preserve Newfoundland identity and people by mingling them with the landscape they occupy:

... the northern night, the barrens, the bogs, the rocks and ponds and hills of Newfoundland. The Straits of Belle Isle, from the island side of which I have seen the coast of Labrador.

These things, finally, primarily, are Newfoundland.

From a mind divesting itself of images, those of the land would be the last to go.

We are a people on whose minds these images have been imprinted.

We are a people in whose bodies old sea-seeking rivers roar with blood. (562)

Danielle Fuller interprets this moment as "an example of strategic essentialism, a deliberate political claim to a specific 'racialized' identity by a group of people who have experienced long-term colonization by Britain and social and economic marginalization within the Canadian

Confederation" (Fuller 32). In her elegiac comments that constitute the conclusion of Johnston's novel, Fielding views herself as one of the last pre-Confederation Newfoundlanders, and likens herself to Shawnawdithit, "the last Beothuk Indian" (Johnston 556). Johnston's sudden inclusion of the Beothuk at the end of a narrative that barely acknowledges the existence of a Newfoundland Aboriginal history is for Fuller "sudden, unexpected, decontextualized, and . . . problematically naïve and romantic" (Fuller 33). Johnston, via Fielding, is able to overcome the "representational problem" posed by the Beothuk and "re-establish the romantic and elegiac tenor at the end of the novel . . . by the drawing together of the novel's themes in an emotional crescendo" that leaves no doubt that "the 'people' interpellated by the concluding images of the novel are clearly the descendants of the white settler-invaders who inhabit these 'settlements'" (33). Thus, is Fielding (and all Newfoundlanders of her generation) placed at the end of Newfoundland history as the entitled and embattled subject and inheritor of Bannister's "grand narrative of struggle."

As demonstrated by *The Colony of Unrequited Dreams* and Blackmore's jingoistic contribution to the Royal Commission, this essentializing grand narrative is a popular and problematic part of the Newfoundland identity.<sup>12</sup> And Delisle's condemnation of Kavanagh as another propagator of this myth would be more convincing had Kavanagh elected to end his narrative with his description of the "people of the womb-cove," a "people" similar to Johnston's intractable Newfoundlanders. But it is only early morning when the readers are returned from "The Kingdom of God" era to the single day that constitutes the entire narrative present of the remaining two-thirds of the novel. In a scenario quite different from Johnston's novel, *Gaff Topsails* now forces the contemporary Newfoundlanders, the supposed end-product of Newfoundland history, "the descendants of white settler-invaders," to live within this troubling essentialism. Each character's failure to find agency and identity within their cultural inheritance indicates that Kavanagh does not establish Tomas Croft and his descendants as "the next act in a teleological history of Newfoundland," but as actors

within a narrative that is at some distance from its uncertain conclusion (Delisle 40).

Michael Barron spends a large part of this day with his friends Wish Butt and Gus Gallant on a quest full of mythic and sexual overtones. As Fowler notes, these boys row their fishing boat to a grounded iceberg, which they penetrate, thereby entering the unknown, risking death, and confronting “one of the quintessential fears of their culture — death on the ice” (Fowler 83). Wish and Gus take turns playing what they perceive to be their adult selves through a bastardization of the work their fathers conduct and the religion their parents practice. Upon shooting a seal, Gus intones “may the Lord have mercy on your soul” before striking the pose of a successful hunter (Kavanagh 209). Watching his mates skilfully butcher the seal, Michael can’t help but notice how they “move with a liturgical solemnity, as might a priest and his acolyte celebrating the Mass” (219). Gus in particular appears to find a strong sense of self by mimicking the work and attitudes of older men. Smearing the blood of the seal across his face, Gus screams, as if to the entire world, “Goddamn swilers! Goddamn MEN! That’s us!” (233). His confidence grows as he begins giving orders to his friends to build a fire, no doubt repeating orders delivered to him by his father: “Time for the blasty boughs. Scurry along now, Butt, and pick us a yaffle. And be nimble about it” (233). Fowler notes that this “violence and coarseness . . . masks inner unease” as later in the text the two boys have a vicious fight when Wish finally tires of Gus’s bullying and baseless bravado (Fowler 83): “Shut up, Gallant. You brags about cunt all day and night but you never saw a real one in your life” (Kavanagh 398). Wish declares to the group of their peers assembled in anticipation of the community bonfire that “Gallant here, he wants to suck dicks,” which so unmans Gus that he can hardly deliver his threats “through welling tears” (397). While Fowler does mention this moment of violence, he concludes his examination of these boys with the assertion that “All this serves to reveal to what extent the lives of the villagers are still governed by ancient rituals and legends reflecting the cycles of nature” (Fowler 84). Yet, these ancient rituals do not

appear to offer Gus or the other boys a legitimate sense of identity. Wish easily removes these adopted attributes from Gus, for they are not truly his. Deprived of them, Gus needs to look for his identity elsewhere and, seeing no alternative, lashes out in a moment of destruction rather than creation.

Central to his examination of the connection between Newfoundland's past, present, and future is Kavanagh's depiction of Hestia Dwyer, a woman whose inability to face the present warps her into a creature of the past. Perched in her *Pegasus* chair that is nailed to the roof of her home, Hestia literally sits atop a pile of debris salvaged from various shipwrecks over the years and faces the past as time moves by her. From her chair, Hestia watches the sea and waits for something to be returned to her — her husband Lukey Dwyer, who drowned the previous year. Her rootedness in the past has already begun to erase her from the present — her daughter Mary refuses to acknowledge her as mother and refers to her only as "the woman" (Kavanagh 13). Her long and rambling narratives are undoubtedly a result of a woman grown accustomed to speaking to herself. When she manages to trap someone long enough to listen to her soliloquies (filled with awkward references to her dead husband arriving at any moment), the reader can sense the beleaguered listener's desire to part from her. When the community comes together around the bonfire, Hestia remains at home, not because she needs to tend to her infant but because she imagines her husband has returned and needs to be fed.

Hestia's familiarity with folklore is matched by her remarkable knowledge of history, as evinced through the pet names she confers upon her infant son. At different times Hestia calls her son Cornelius Quirk (a famous merchant), Peter Easton (a pirate rumoured to have used Newfoundland as a base of operations), Sir Percival Willoughby (an early settler of St. John's), Alexander Pintikowski (who painted the ceilings of the Colonial Building in St. John's and was later arrested trying to cash forged cheques), and Sir Alexander Clutterbuck (the secretary of the Amulree Commission), among others. Hestia's namesake is the Greek goddess of the hearth, so her cultural and historical



wisdom does go a long way towards establishing and maintaining a sense of home and place, yet Hestia's mastery of the past also paralyzes her. As the child grows, he will become like his older sister and separate from his mother and the debris of history that grows around her. Hestia's grip on history and folklore has isolated her from her family and her community and offers her no agency in the present world. The preservation of the past is not enough.

The disappearance of Johnny the Light coincides with the acceptance of Father MacMurrough, the itinerant Irish priest who feels no affinity to the Irish Newfoundlanders who constitute his ministry. The priest is lonely, depressed, and suicidal for most of the narrative yet is saved in the end by Johnny the Light, who mistakes the priest for one of the stranded men he kept alive on the ice pans; he demands of the priest, as he demanded of the sealers, that he find purpose and stay alive: "No, Gerry Mack, my son. You climb to your two f-f-feet right now. And you turn yourself around, and you walk on out of this place. I won't let you stop here. The Lord Almighty, He'll hold me to account for it, but no by God, I won't let you kneel" (415). Father MacMurrough joins the community in their night-time revelries, feels their acceptance, and assumes the role expected of him within that community by starting and sanctifying the bonfire. Fowler believes "the saving of Father MacMurrough demonstrates that the community has the capacity to embrace the other, at least under the right circumstances" (Fowler 85). This is an astute observation but perhaps only part of what Kavanagh is doing here. Father MacMurrough's entrance into the community just as Johnny the Light finally exits represents a break in the unbroken grand narrative of struggle. Representing the "people" lionized by Blackmore who have earned their place through suffering, Johnny the Light quits the narrative for he has no place in the modern world. The villagers' acceptance of the outsider priest seems to challenge Johnston's notion of a people undeniably of the island. In this moment the reader should realize that Kavanagh has shown that the past offers no affinity or entitlement to place, and that place itself is an impermanent and perforated concept through which many people, not "a people," will pass.

Kavanagh saves his most troubling image for the last page of the novel. Having peopled his text with so many well-developed characters, Kavanagh gives the final moment to Martha, the madwoman of the cove who exists largely outside the narrative and heretofore is mentioned only in the memories of other characters whose brief interactions with Martha amount to little more than glimpses that left them frightened or scandalized. In the dawn following the bonfire, Martha is the lone occupant of the beach, poking among the ashes until she is distracted by the sea, staring at the empty horizon as if she "expects to see something there" (Kavanagh 435). The final lines of the novel describe her mysterious actions: "She stands in the wetted land-wash and she looks out to the sea. Soon — even in the face of the wind — the thing she waits for will drift ashore. And she will claim it at last" (435). Fowler believes that Martha is striking "an archetypal pose of the old outport — women waiting for lost men to return from the sea" and uses this interpretation to reify his reading of *Gaff Topsails*: "The community, pulling together, is the only response to such a fate" (Fowler 88). While Fowler's overall reading of the text is excellent, it is possible he misses Kavanagh's intent here. Why, having established Hestia perched upon her *Pegasus* chair in the "archetypal pose" of woman waiting, would Kavanagh reduce the final image of his text to redundancy? Far more interesting is Holmgren's reading in which she sees Martha as the crone in the Celtic triple goddess pattern of maiden-mother-crone — what she awaits to drift ashore "are not only the 'berg bits' remaining from the iceberg that died the night before, torn to pieces by moon and tide, but Johnny the Light's body" (Holmgren 61). But this reading seems to force the outsider Martha into a narrative that has no space for her. It is likely Kavanagh dedicates the last page of his narrative to a character who exists largely outside of it in order to encourage his readers to look outside this narrative as well.

This final moment is reminiscent of the culminating scene of Cormac McCarthy's dark and disturbing historical novel, *Blood Meridian* (1985). A gratuitously gory re-imagining of the actual escapades of a band of murderers employed by Mexican and Texan governments in

1849–50 to massacre Native Americans, the main narrative concludes with the chilling triumph of the novel's most evil character, Judge Holden, then cuts inexplicably to a scene outside the narrative of "a man progressing over the plain by means of holes which he is making in the ground," his two-handed, steel-headed implement "striking the fire out of the rock which God has put there" (McCarthy 351). Like Martha, this man appears at dawn and seems to have no place in the narrative for which he nevertheless provides the final image. None other than the venerable Harold Bloom is forced to admit in *How to Read and Why*, that even he is unsure how to read this mysterious character and his actions, surmising that perhaps this man is an "opposing figure" to the judge and the apocalyptic American history he represents: "The Judge never sleeps, and perhaps will never die, but a new Prometheus may be rising to go up against him" (Bloom 262–63). Perhaps Martha looks to the sea for signs of a new Prometheus to combat the encroaching darkness that so unsettled the villagers the previous evening.

Martha's desire to "claim" the undefined "thing she waits for" is echoed in James D. Lilley's reading of McCarthy's conclusion when he notes that this man is actually "preparing the ground for fence posts that will soon be needed as property borders along the western frontier" (Lilley 155). Lilley interprets the sparks that fly when the man's steel device strikes stone as evidence of the landscape "rejecting and resisting penetration and inscription" (155). Lilley's and Bloom's readings of McCarthy's conclusion prove helpful in reading the final moments of Kavanagh's text. Despite the historical and cultural references with which Kavanagh fills his text, supposedly in order to indigenize his Irish Newfoundlanders, the characters are still left with an unhomely fear at the end of the novel. Fulfilling archetypes, conducting archetypal actions, believing in a 500-year legacy that legitimizes their identity as Newfoundlanders, Kavanagh's characters at novel's end still are left frightened and overwhelmed by the very land and sea from which they derive their sense of self. Contrary to Delisle's claims, this narrative has not indigenized these Newfoundlanders, and Kavanagh concludes

his text with a character who looks beyond conventional depictions of Newfoundland for agency and actualization.

As the flames of the bonfire die and the cold and darkness of the night draw closer, Kavanagh's outporters take up the "Ode to Newfoundland." Reminiscent of Winter's reading of the anthem, the song rings sincere and a little silly and the assembled Newfoundlanders manage only to complete the first verse, proclaiming to love that which they fear: "By the time the verse is finished the people crouch close within the cocoon of light and heat. A chill shivers their backs. Something cold lurks behind them in the dark, something terrible and dangerous" (Kavanagh 433). This encroaching entity is not the Boo Darby but an uncertain and unhinged future. Fowler's notion of pulling together is the final action of the villagers, but it is less a way of being and more a moment of deferral as these people "conspire to pretend," to "make believe that the monster is only a fable, only a fancy, that it is not really there at all" (433). This monster is not the Boo Darby, for that is a story with which all these villagers are familiar, a name they have used to compartmentalize the unknown and thereby continue to make sense of their own existence. What comes now is something that resists this easy othering — an entirely new way of existing that cannot be tucked into the shadows beside the current way of life. As Fowler notes, the coming referendum will mark a "momentous change" for the culture and identity of Newfoundlanders. It seems likely that Kavanagh is not just depicting this moment but using it as a metaphor through which to examine the state of Newfoundland at the time of his novel's publication one year before the five hundredth anniversary of John Cabot's "discovery" of Newfoundland and three years before the fiftieth anniversary of Confederation. Five centuries of European interference and occupation have produced a Newfoundland suffering through a cod moratorium, bearing the label of a "have-not" province, and witnessing the massive out-migration of its people. Kavanagh's gathering together of Newfoundland culture culminates in a fire destroying one of its most iconic images, as six men carry to the bonfire the "coffin-like object" of "a rotted buff-coloured dory," which is laid upon the

flames and is promptly consumed: “The fire scorches the paint from the vessel and turns it black. Rapidly the dry wood catches and burns” (431). Kavanagh’s meticulous itemization of so much that can be considered Newfoundland is not an artful elegy or an attempt at indigenization but a reminder that humanity’s interaction with the landscape is ever-changing, prone to failure, and unable to produce an unbroken narrative of cultural or geographical inheritance. “Eternal constancy” is the fable or fancy these outporters need to avoid as they step into the darkness of their own becoming.

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### Notes

- 1 Kavanagh begins “The Kingdom of God” with a band of Irish monks setting foot on the Newfoundland shore “five centuries [after] the torture and execution of the Nazarene” (Kavanagh 90). The monks are shocked by the “penitential terrain” and sail on shortly after making landfall (91). Five hundred years later, “squat warriors, dark-haired, armed with broadaxes and hatchets and swords and spears and clubs” try to settle this “land of rocks” but are driven mad by boredom and the wine they make from the meagre vegetation on the island and one night “run howling into the teeth of the storm-surf” and are lost (92, 93). Five centuries after that, “a decade before the voyage of the Genoan,” Tomas Croft arrives in Newfoundland, survives, and thrives. In doing so, Tomas exhibits just the right combination of “Christian piety and pagan roughness . . . to survive the severity of the landscape,” Delisle claims, a combination Kavanagh’s Newfoundlanders will wear as “a badge of nationalistic honour” and sport as evidence of their Newfoundland indigeneity, evidence that they are a race bred to occupy the island (Delisle 25).

- 2 As defined by the *Dictionary of Newfoundland English*, to be "poisoned" is to be "annoyed, irritated, disappointed or completely disgusted" (384). Sanyal's likely unfamiliarity with the colloquial use of that phrase probably led to her misreading Moses's caustic sarcasm.
- 3 Murphy supports his claim by stating "The early naming of Newfoundland settlements could only have sprung from imaginations essentially verbal, ironic, and poetic" (x).
- 4 Fowler describes young Tomas as "stirred to distraction by the overwhelming magnificence of the landscape" when he masturbates over the field of blueberries that will become eventually "the site of the future village" (80). Michael and Mary, the young soon-to-be lovers who finally approach each other in the final pages of the novel, hide themselves away from the other members of the village "in a place beyond the houses, amid the aroma of swelling blueberries" (Kavanagh 424). Another modern-day character, Johnny the Light, "catches a succulent blueberry fragrance wafting off the slopes" as he rows away from the village and towards his longed-for death (425). He later detects beneath that smell another "heavy odour, saltier even than the smell of the sea" that reminds the old man of "the smell of his own sperm" (425, 426).
- 5 As defined by the *Dictionary of Newfoundland English*, the boo-darby, boo, or boogeyman is an "Imaginary figure used to terrify children into good behaviour" (57).
- 6 In the opening chapter, entitled "Locomotive," Michael remembers the previous summer when he hiked to the train tracks, stood upon the rails, and felt the vibrations of the approaching train "roaring down the steel and across the wood and up into his chest" (Kavanagh 2). As he on this morning hears the "eerie, mournful wail" of the "inevitable locomotive" he pretends rather than believes it is the sound of "some great lonely beast, crying out for a mate" — another instance of Michael using the train as a metaphor for his own love-sick condition (3).
- 7 The *Dictionary of Newfoundland English* informs that in Newfoundland dragonflies are "generally called horse-stingers" (259). The use of the insect here seems indicative of a dual purpose on Kavanagh's part. In recalling the words of her friend, Alice, Mary alludes to a popular piece of Newfoundland folklore: "Dragonflies are called devil's darning needles by some people because of the belief that they sew up the lips

- and ears of naughty children” (259). In recognizing the dragonfly first as an “aeroplane,” Mary appears to traverse between a world of superstition and a world of modern wonders.
- 8 From the *DNE*: a dumb cake is a “cake mixed, baked and eaten in silence by young unmarried women wishing for a vision of future husbands” (159).
- 9 In a footnote in “Patrick Kavanagh’s *Gaff Topsails* and the Myth of the Old Outport,” Fowler provides the following succinct synopsis: “Perhaps the worst sealing disaster in Newfoundland history, the tragedy occurred in the spring of 1914 when 132 of the crew of the *s.s. Newfoundland* were lost on the ice for two and a half days in weather that lurched demonically from blowing snow, to rain, to sleet, to blizzard. Seventy-eight men died of exposure or drowning” (Fowler 89n).
- 10 Blackmore’s eccentric nationalism continues as he claims “Through the centuries here, our people lived and shared midst a wonderful paradox: Though clime and circumstance created a hardy independence in all of us, it also encouraged compassion” — so much so that “Hospitality and openness” became a “particular facet of our spirit” (Blackmore 370). According to Blackmore, the hospitality received in Newfoundland by travellers displaced by the events of 11 September 2001 was “singular and revelatory” — implying that nowhere else in the world did the displaced of that day receive such comfort. This unique and generous spirit, tested by centuries of rough climate and harsh treatment by British and Canadian governments, must be preserved, Blackmore declares, his essay transforming into an ethnic manifesto as he demands “We, the people of this province” must honour, defend, and appreciate “the fierce and distinctive spirit that is our heritage, what it was, whence it came, what it has accomplished and the value it can afford us in our future” (375).
- 11 Thirteen years after the publication of *Gaff Topsails*, Crummey would employ a similar caesura in *Galore*, albeit to separate his novel into two sections rather than to lift one chapter out of the larger narrative. The characters within the first half of the narrative live in a dark fairy tale dreamscape in which no dates are mentioned and ghosts are an accepted and oft-encountered part of daily life. In the second section the arrival of a doctor heralds modernity as the ghosts become part of a shared folklore that may contain cultural and emotional truths but are certainly not accepted as undeniably true.

- 12 Bernice Morgan concludes *Cloud of Bone* in a fashion similar to *The Colony of Unrequited Dreams*. The long-missing skull of Shawnawdithit is "returned" to a Newfoundland veteran of the Second World War, thus, to borrow Fuller's statement, "drawing together . . . the novel's themes" and placing once again the descendant of European settler-invaders at the end of the Newfoundland narrative. As Fiona Polack so expertly demonstrates in her analysis of Morgan's novel, the Beothuk and their annihilation serve only to bolster and solidify the foundational story of contemporary Newfoundlanders, establishing them as the inheritors and preservers of all stories comprising Newfoundland history and identity.

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