

Cottage Hospital Doctor: The Medical Life of Dr. Noel Murphy, 1945-1954. By Noel Murphy. (St. John's: Creative Publishers, 2003. x + 293 p., ill. ISBN 1-8942-94-72-6 \$19.95)

Ronald Rompkey

Volume 29, numéro 1, 2006

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/800514ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/800514ar>

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Éditeur(s)

CSTHA/AHSTC

ISSN

0829-2507 (imprimé)

1918-7750 (numérique)

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Citer ce compte rendu

Rompkey, R. (2006). Compte rendu de [*Cottage Hospital Doctor: The Medical Life of Dr. Noel Murphy, 1945-1954.* By Noel Murphy. (St. John's: Creative Publishers, 2003. x + 293 p., ill. ISBN 1-8942-94-72-6 \$19.95)]. *Scientia Canadensis*, 29(1), 106–107. <https://doi.org/10.7202/800514ar>

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Noel Murphy, born in London in 1915, was the son of a physician from St. John's, Newfoundland. After receiving his early schooling in St. John's, he returned to the United Kingdom to complete his education at Ampleforth College, the Benedictine school at York, and subsequently entered the Massachusetts Institute of Technology to study engineering. But after six months, he was back in London to pursue a career in medicine at the London Hospital and after graduation served in the Royal Air Force as a medical officer until 1945.

At that point, Murphy's life took a dramatic turn when he was summoned by the Government of Newfoundland to assume responsibility for the cottage hospital at Norris Point, Bonne Bay, the setting for the present volume. After labouring there for nine years, he brought his family to Corner Brook, where he entered private practice and inaugurated an extraordinary career in public life. Yet this part of his life is barely mentioned here. The reader would not know, for instance, that he founded a broadcasting company there and in the 1960s entered provincial politics as a Conservative, briefly serving as party leader, or that he was mayor of Corner Brook from 1967 to 1973 and again from 1978 to 1981. With these and other commercial and political activities dividing his time, Murphy did not continue his medical practice, and his early cottage hospital career was put aside until now.

Curiously, among the memories called forth in this volume, we are never told about the structure of the Newfoundland cottage hospital system, established by the unelected Commission of Government that conducted the affairs of the ancient colony from 1934 until it joined Canada in 1949. Neither are we told how that same government, recognizing the inadequacies of the rural health service, had adopted a system of clinics based on the Scottish model. Likewise, we would not know that it had divided Newfoundland into administrative districts, each served by a hospital with a capacity of between fifteen and thirty beds and a chain of satellite nursing stations, each hospital placed in the hands of a salaried physician who was left to his own devices to deal with the full range of medical and surgical problems facing him. To help fund this programme, it required the families of each district to pay an annual fee entitling them to medical attention or referral to a large hospital at St. John's or Corner Brook. The system had been launched in 1935, so that when Murphy was called to Bonne Bay, both his hospital and the expectations of his patients were already well established.

Cottage Hospital Doctor cannot be called medical autobiography since so much is left unsaid. Rather, it belongs to the realm of the memoir, a form of self-writing wherein the author concentrates on extraordinary circumstances and events. According to convention, the memoirist revives the past to create an impression of singularity, and the attraction of such a work lies in its representation of a state of affairs physically or socially remote from the reader or inaccessible by time or space. We do not look to the memoir for history. Whether the subject is politics, show business or medicine, we look to it for an interpretation and for a sense of accomplishment by someone who has achieved something we might not achieve ourselves.

Murphy concentrates on what he calls “situations which, when they occur, may be startling, dramatic, acute emergencies, matters of life and death, all of which need quick decision making” (p. 250). These include not only the routine work of the cottage hospital but the sorties he carried out by snowmobile or boat to handle delicate cases in patients’ homes, an established trope of the medical memoir. Yet this volume takes on even greater value, perhaps inadvertently, in another way: by offering the reader a glimpse of a society in transition, a rural population tied for centuries to the cod fishery and now entering the modern world. We encounter difficult births and painful deaths but also marriage customs, community traditions, Christmas mummering, seal hunting, diet, dialect, and folk belief. The section of coast served by Dr. Murphy was one of the last to be developed in Newfoundland because until 1904 the treaty entitling French fishermen to fish there had prohibited new settlement. With this memoir, he helps raise the curtain on a way of life emerging from the nineteenth century and still reforming itself.

RONALD ROMPKEY
Memorial University