

# Whigs and Nationalists: The Legacy of Judge Prowse's *History of Newfoundland*

Jerry Bannister

Volume 32, Number 1, Autumn 2002

URI: [https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/acad32\\_1for01](https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/acad32_1for01)

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## Publisher(s)

The Department of History at the University of New Brunswick

## ISSN

0044-5851 (print)

1712-7432 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

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## Cite this document

Bannister, J. (2002). Whigs and Nationalists:: The Legacy of Judge Prowse's *History of Newfoundland*. *Acadiensis*, 32(1), 84–109.

## FORUM

### Whigs and Nationalists: The Legacy of Judge Prowse's *History of Newfoundland*

Because Newfoundland's past is set down nowhere else but in Prowse's book, it is tempting to think that that past begins with him, tempting to think of him as having made it up. And so I often picture him at his desk day after day, year after year, scrupulously, exhaustively, painstakingly inventing Newfoundland.

— Wayne Johnston, 2000

FOR MORE THAN A CENTURY, D.W. Prowse's *History of Newfoundland* has been the island's most widely read historical study.<sup>1</sup> It is difficult to overestimate the influence of Prowse's work. Published to widespread acclaim in 1895, it has inspired generations of scholars and shaped the way Newfoundlanders see their past. Joey Smallwood admired Prowse's book, and his extensive writings perpetuated many of its core themes. Although Judge Prowse favoured joining Canada, he advocated, in the late George Story's words, a "sturdy nationalism".<sup>2</sup> The story of Newfoundland was, according to Prowse, a narrative of the long struggle for control over the island between, on the one hand, the tyrannical West Country merchants with their allies in the British government and, on the other, the humble settlers and their political champions.<sup>3</sup> In the 1970s this traditional interpretation received its first systematic reappraisal at the hands of academic historians, but Prowse's view still dominates popular conceptions of history.<sup>4</sup> It continues to influence an array of literary and commercial constructions of the island's history, thereby providing the basic frame for Newfoundland nationalism in both the arts community and the thriving cultural tourism industry. In his acclaimed novel, *The Colony of Unrequited Dreams*, Wayne

1 This paper is based on a postdoctoral project funded by the Institute of Social and Economic Research at Memorial University. An earlier version was presented at the 81st Annual Meeting of the Canadian Historical Association, held at the University of Toronto in May 2002. I would like to thank Dr. Peter Neary for providing an insightful critique of my conference paper. For their helpful comments on earlier drafts, I thank Allan Greer, James Hiller, Ronald Rompkey, Vince Walsh and Jeff Webb. For their assistance with this project, I thank Gregory Kealey, Patti Bannister, Marina Bannister, Gerald Bannister and Eleanor Fitzpatrick. The opening quotation is from Wayne Johnston, "A *History of Newfoundland* – D.W. Prowse [and] *The Newfoundland Journal of Aaron Thomas, 1794 – Aaron Thomas*", in Michael Ondaatje, et al., eds., *Lost Classics* (Toronto, 2000), p. 143.

2 George Story, *People of the Landwash: Essays on Newfoundland and Labrador*, eds., Melvin Baker, Helen Peters and Shannon Ryan (St. John's, 1997), p. 120.

3 D.W. Prowse, *A History of Newfoundland from the English, Colonial, and Foreign Records* ([1895] Belleville, Ontario, 1972), esp. p. 428.

4 The classic statement of this revisionist scholarship is Keith Matthews, "Historical Fence Building: A Critique of the Historiography of Newfoundland", *Newfoundland Quarterly*, 74 (April 1978), pp. 21-9.

Jerry Bannister, "Whigs and Nationalists: The Legacy of Judge Prowse's *History of Newfoundland*", *Acadiensis*, XXXII, 1 (Autumn 2002), pp. 84-109.

Johnston goes so far as to depict Prowse's *History* as the secular Bible of the island's people.<sup>5</sup> And with the publication of a new edition this past spring, it is enjoying a remarkable renaissance.<sup>6</sup>

Yet Prowse's conception of history has received relatively little scholarly attention. The best studies remain George Story's masterful articles, the last of which was written more than 15 years ago. Story's superb analysis of the life and times of Daniel Woodley Prowse provides the basis on which to undertake a reappraisal of the impact of the *History of Newfoundland*.<sup>7</sup> Not surprisingly, academic scholars have taken a critical view of the seemingly indefatigable popularity of Prowse's *History*. They have argued that the continued reliance on Prowse as a historical authority has come at the cost of ignoring important scholarly research conducted over the past 30 years.<sup>8</sup> The tenacity of Prowse's interpretation has perpetuated many of the stubborn nationalist legends which professional historians have worked to debunk and, as Eric Hobsbawm has argued, challenging such myths represents one of the most important responsibilities for historians.<sup>9</sup> But attacking the veracity of Prowse's assertions has revealed little about how or why his work has remained so popular for so long. By fixating on the task of overturning the misconceptions inherited from Prowse, historians have overlooked a key issue.

This paper argues that the essential tension is not between popular myths and professional research but among different ways of using (and misusing) the past. The reason Prowse remains so popular is not due to the power of myth per se; rather, it is because his entire idea of history has been turned on its head. He was a Whig historian in the classic sense of the term, and his *History* is an account of how Newfoundland triumphed in the face of adversity. For Prowse, a crucial break separated the past (backwardness) from the present (progress). In using the past to show how far Newfoundlanders had come in transcending a legacy of repression, he approached history as both a series of enlightening lessons and an entertaining narrative, dividing the past into distinct periods which advanced teleologically. Since the 1970s,

5 Wayne Johnston, *The Colony of Unrequited Dreams* (Toronto, 1998).

6 Stephanie Porter, "Re-releasing *History*: Prowse's *History of Newfoundland* may be a classic, but it was practically unavailable – until now", *The Express* (27 March - 2 April 2002), p. 5. Terming Prowse's work "indispensable reading", Gavin Will, the publisher of the new edition, claimed: "He [Prowse] felt Newfoundland had been done wrong by the individuals who exploited the fishing resources. By not allowing settlement to flourish, they really handicapped the province".

7 George M. Story, "D.W. Prowse and Nineteenth-century Colonial Historiography", in S. Ryan, ed., *Newfoundland History, 1986* (St. John's, 1986), pp. 34-45. Story's other important essays on Prowse, originally published in the early 1970s, are reprinted in *People of the Landwash*, pp. 77-101 and 116-28.

8 As Olaf Janzen recently commented, "We overlook, at our peril, the tremendously important additions and alterations made to that understanding during the past century, and in particular during just the last two or three decades". See Olaf U. Janzen, "Prowse is not enough", *The Express* (17-23 April 2002), p. 8. For literature reviews which consider the role of Prowse, see Peter Neary, "The Writing of Newfoundland History", in J.K. Hiller and P. Neary, eds., *Newfoundland in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries: Essays in Interpretation* (Toronto, 1980), pp. 3-13; Olaf U. Janzen, "Newfoundland and the International Fishery", in M. Brook Taylor, ed., *Canadian History: A Reader's Guide, Volume 1: Beginnings to Confederation* (Toronto, 1994), pp. 280-324; James K. Hiller, "Is Atlantic Canadian History Possible?", *Acadiensis*, XXX, 1 (Autumn 2000), pp. 16-22.

9 Eric Hobsbawm, *On History* (London, 1997), chapters 1-3 and 21.

successive writers have drawn heavily on Prowse's evidence and interpretation, but with the notable exception of Kevin Major, they have replaced his basic outlook with their own philosophy of history.<sup>10</sup> The new framework of these scholars is radically different: 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 Peckford's economic nationalism of the 1980s, and has resurfaced in the wave of historical fiction since the 1990s. The broader issues surrounding the making of culture, heritage, and traditions have been examined skillfully by a number of scholars.<sup>11</sup> This paper focuses more specifically on the legacy of Prowse in the changing conceptualization of Newfoundland history.

Although Prowse organized the chapters of his book according to the reigns of British monarchs, he envisaged Newfoundland history as encompassing four distinct periods. The first, which he called the "early or chaotic era", extended from John Cabot's voyage in 1497 to John Guy's colony in 1610. This was an age of anarchy, when the island was ruled, according to Prowse, "in a rough way by the reckless valour of Devonshire men, half pirates, half traders". Following this was the "Fishing Admirals period", from 1610 to 1711, which Prowse also termed "the colonisation period". This "dismal time" was marked by the bitter struggle between the humble settlers and the predatory adventurers from the West of England. The third era, which Prowse referred to as "The Colony under Naval Governors", began with Captain Crowe's tenure as commodore of the Newfoundland station in 1711 and ended with the appointment of the first civil governor, Sir Thomas Cochrane in 1825. Prowse called the final period simply the "modern era, the struggle for autonomy", which continued from 1825 to his own day.<sup>12</sup> He reported that he had initially intended to terminate his book in 1713 and decided to extend it to 1895 only after much of it was already written. Yet he devoted 10 chapters – about 40 per cent of the book's entire page length – to events after the reign of George III. The latter chapters included special essays on topics such as the French Shore problem, railway construction and

10 One of the few attempts at a comprehensive survey since 1895, Major's book is more similar to Prowse's approach than any other historical study of the past generation. See Kevin Major, *As Near to Heaven by Sea: A History of Newfoundland and Labrador* (Toronto, 2001), esp. p. xiv.

11 See, inter alia, Phillip McCann, "Culture, State Formation and the Invention of Tradition: Newfoundland, 1832-1835", *Journal of Canadian Studies*, 23, 1 and 2 (Spring 1988), pp. 86-99; Gerald Pocius, *A Place to Belong: Community Order and Everyday Space in Calvert, Newfoundland* (Kingston and Montreal, 1991); James Overton, *Making a World of Difference: Essays on Tourism, Culture and Development in Newfoundland* (St. John's, 1996); Ronald Rompkey, "The Idea of Newfoundland and Arts Policy Since Confederation", *Newfoundland Studies*, 14, 2 (Fall 1998), pp. 266-81; Jeff Webb, "Confederation, Conspiracy and Choice: A Discussion", *Newfoundland Studies*, 14, 2 (Fall 1998), pp. 169-87; James Overton, "Academic Populists, the Informal Economy and Those Benevolent Merchants: Politics and Income Security Reform in Newfoundland", *Journal of Peasant Studies*, 28, 1 (October 2000), pp. 1-54.

12 Prowse, *History of Newfoundland*, pp. xv-xvi.

advances in telegraphic communication. Prowse did not link these periods together in a concluding chapter, opting instead to append statistical data as well as a separate history of the churches in Newfoundland.

The first three periods together form a single coherent section, while the modern era comprises its own separate study. The chapters covering the pre-1825 epoch share the common themes of mercantile oppression, imperial neglect and local perseverance. Prowse followed the traditional interpretation first established in 1793 by John Reeves and propagated by 19th-century political reformers, most notably William Carson and Patrick Morris. A trained jurist who served as the island's first Chief Justice, Reeves saw Newfoundland history through the lens of conflict. In what is arguably the most influential statement ever written about Newfoundland, he began his book by setting out the heroes and villains:

I intend to give a short history of the Government and Constitution of the island of Newfoundland. This will comprise the struggles and vicissitudes of two contending interests – The planters and inhabitants on the one hand, who, being settled there, needed the protection of a government and police, with the administration of justice: and the adventurers and merchants on the other; who, originally carrying on the fishery from this country, and visiting that island only for the season, needed no such protection for themselves, and had various reasons for preventing its being afforded to others.<sup>13</sup>

As Patrick O'Flaherty has noted, by establishing the paradigm of repression, Reeves spawned the nationalist outlook which so greatly influenced Prowse.<sup>14</sup> Prowse's portrayal of the West Country merchants echoed Reeve's perspective: "Newfoundland settlers of all kinds, from Guy and Baltimore down to the poorest waif from the West of England, had to fight for their lives with the dire hostility of the ship-fishermen or western adventurers from England".<sup>15</sup> On the question of government policy, he took a markedly harsher view than Reeves:

It is no marvel that Newfoundland did not thrive under such a regime; the real wonder is that the settlers lived at all under such oppressive restrictions. But for their allies in New England, doubtless they would have been obliged to abandon their settlements. Our treatment by the British Government has been so stupid, cruel, and barbarous that it requires the actual perusal of the State Papers to convince us that such a policy was ever carried out.<sup>16</sup>

13 John Reeves, *History of the Government of the Island of Newfoundland* ([1793] New York, 1967), p. 1. For examples of 19th-century works influenced by Reeves, see Lewis Amadeus Anspach, *A History of the Island of Newfoundland* (London, 1819); William Carson, *Reasons for the Colonizing the Island of Newfoundland* (Greenock, 1813); Patrick Morris, *Remarks on the State of Society, Religion, Morals, and Education at Newfoundland* (London, 1827).

14 Patrick O'Flaherty, *Old Newfoundland: A History to 1843* (St. John's, 1999), pp. 109-11, 133-4. For an attempt to rehabilitate Reeves's reputation as a historian, see Mark Warren Bailey, "John Reeves, Esq. Newfoundland's First Chief Justice: English Law and Politics in the Eighteenth Century", *Newfoundland Studies*, 14, 1 (Spring 1998), pp. 28-49.

15 Prowse, *History of Newfoundland*, p. xviii.

16 *Ibid.*, p. xix.

In Prowse's hands, Newfoundland's early history became a tale of conspiracy, as mercantile interests blocked political reform and stunted social development. "There can be no doubt", he concluded, "that it was the influence of these West Country merchants that retarded the grant of a local legislature".<sup>17</sup> Without local control over resource allocation, the island remained economically backward and socially embryonic.

Prowse filled his narrative of the pre-1825 epoch with character sketches and accounts based on oral traditions. Perhaps the most famous was his caricature of the fishing admiral:

I will try and describe the fishing admiral, as he appeared to our ancestors, clothed, not in the dignity of office, not in the flowing judicial robes, not in the simple and sober black of the police magistrate, but in the ordinary blue flushing jacket and trousers, economically besmeared with pitch, tar and fish slime, his head adorned with an old sealskin cap, robbed from an Indian, or bartered for a glass of rum and a stick of tobacco. The sacred temple of law and equity was a fish store, the judicial seat an inverted butter firkin. Justice was freely dispensed to the suitor who paid the most for it. In the absence of a higher bribe, his worship's decision was often favourably affected by the judicious presentation of a few New England apples.<sup>18</sup>

Yet Prowse had never witnessed such a scene, nor had he ever met a fishing admiral. He was repeating an account written two generations earlier by Patrick Morris, a political reformer who also had never observed an admiral's court.<sup>19</sup> Morris was himself relying on an earlier history written by Lewis Amadeus Anspach.<sup>20</sup> Both

17 Ibid., p. 428.

18 Ibid., p. 226. The fishing admirals are discussed in Jerry Bannister, "The Fishing Admirals in Eighteenth-Century Newfoundland", *Newfoundland Studies* (forthcoming 2002). For overviews of the legal system, see Christopher English, "Newfoundland's Early Laws and Legal Institutions: From Fishing Admirals to the Supreme Court of Judicature in 1791-92", *Manitoba Law Journal*, 32 (January 1996), pp. 57-78; Jerry Bannister, "The Naval State in Newfoundland, 1749-1791", *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association*, new series, 11 (2000), pp. 17-50.

19 The passage, which Prowse copied practically verbatim, appears in Patrick Morris, *Arguments to Prove the Necessity of Granting to Newfoundland a Constitutional Government* (London, 1828), p. 17. In an earlier pamphlet, Morris, who quoted approvingly from both Anspach and Reeves, had condemned both the fishing admirals and the naval governors as the evil twins of Newfoundland history: "The Administration of the Admirals-Governors was of little benefit to the country. A Comparison with the Fishing Admirals may make a shade or two in their favour; but the historian of Newfoundland must rank them together: the principles upon which they acted were precisely the same – a pure, unqualified, and unmitigated despotism". See Patrick Morris, *Remarks on the State of Society, Religion, Morals and Education at Newfoundland* (London, 1827), p. 10. On the island's reform movement and Morris's place within it, see Jerry Bannister, "The Campaign for Representative Government in Newfoundland", *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association*, new series, 5 (1994), pp. 19-40.

20 Although Anspach had served as a justice of the peace and a surrogate judge from 1802 to 1812, his description of judicial administration drew heavily upon local folklore. Published in 1819, his account is the likely origin of the portrait of the fishing admirals, though Anspach included the justices of the peace in his indictment: "It was said of the Fishing Admirals, and of the Justices of the Peace in the out-harbours, that their decisions were uniformly characterized by the grossest partiality and injustice

Morris and Anspach, in turn, had been heavily influenced by John Reeves' seminal *History of the Government of the Island of Newfoundland*, which repeated second-hand accounts of alleged corruption.<sup>21</sup> Handed down from one generation to the next, this apocryphal portrait was based on little more than local legend and political hearsay, but it has become a central feature in Newfoundland historiography. It is doubtful whether Prowse intended his description of the fishing admiral to be taken literally, or even seriously, for he freely mixed humour with analysis.

Prowse could take jabs at figures such as the fishing admirals precisely because they were figures from the distant past or, as he put it, "olden time".<sup>22</sup> Like Reeves, he was careful not to impugn the character of naval officers and most governors were treated rather gently, though public life in the early 19th century remained fair game. In an anecdote as celebrated as his portrayal of the fishing admirals, Prowse summarized the violent faction fighting among the St. John's Irish in a noticeably light-hearted way:

"Yellow-belly Corner," on the east side of Beck's Cove, commemorates the spot where the wounded in the melee used to be washed in the little brook flowing into Beck's Cove. The Tipperary "clear airs," the Waterford "whey bellies," and the Cork "dadyeens" were arrayed against the "yellow belly" faction – the "Doones" or Kilkenny boys, and the Wexford "yellow bellies." There were besides the "young colts" and a number of other names for the factions. They fought with one another "out of pure devilment and divarsion," as an old Irishman explained it to me. Besides these scrimmages there were plenty of fights when the "fools" or mummers came out from Christmas to Twelfth Day. . . . I remember, as a boy, how proud I used to be to shake hands with a fool, and to know what "rigs" Noah Thomas or Mick Toole were going out in. Each company had one or more hobby-horses with gaping jaws to snap at people. The fools had to be put down by Act of Parliament. Mummers and fools were English customs, dating back to the Saxon time, brought to this Colony by the old Devonshire settlers.<sup>23</sup>

However, when Prowse turned to public life in the 1860s, he no longer used humour to describe topics such as sectarian violence. At the beginning of his chapter covering the reign of Queen Victoria, he stated:

Many persons have imagined that the frequent election rows in Newfoundland, about this period, were the outcome of religious bigotry, but

. . . and as to the resident Justices, a quarter-cask of Lisbon or Madeira, a present of some choice spirits, nay, a barrel of apples, a few bottles of West-Indian pickles . . . were the usual grounds of the decisions of those administrators of Justice". See Lewis Amadeus Anspach, *A History of the Island of Newfoundland* (London, 1819), p. 177.

21 Reeves, *History of the Government of Newfoundland*, pp. 149-54. Unlike Patrick Morris, Reeves was careful to separate the fishing admirals from the naval officers who served as surrogate judges in Newfoundland: whereas the former were portrayed as habitually corrupt and incompetent, the latter were depicted as fair and honourable.

22 Prowse, *History of Newfoundland*, pp. xviii-xix.

23 Ibid., p. 402.



a better understanding of the facts will show us that this is an incorrect view. There is no real bigotry or sectarian intolerance in Newfoundland; all these riots were made to order. Dr. Johnson has defined patriotism as “the last refuge of the scoundrel.” The sham patriots who instigated their dupes to get up these disturbances often made religion a stalking horse for their designs on the Treasury; the blatant demagogues who cried out that the Catholic Church was in danger, or that the sacred rights of Protestantism were being trampled on, always bloomed out after the *mêlée* as fat officials. Instigated by these designing rogues, a few rowdies and bludgeon men led the way, and the simple crowd that followed were led to believe that their rights or their religion were in danger; in American political slang this is known as “bulldozing.”<sup>24</sup>

Prowse may have found the bloody battles at Beck’s Cove somewhat comical, but for him there was nothing funny about the election riots which figured so prominently during the latter half of the 19th century.

The difference between the two accounts reflected a broader distinction between the distant past and recent history. For Prowse, the distance between the reigns of George III and Victoria was not merely temporal; it marked a fundamental break between the primitive and the modern. His treatment of the post-1825 era is qualitatively different from the chapters covering the preceding three periods. As George Story pointed out, the final third of the *History* resembles journalism as much as history.<sup>25</sup> In reporting on issues current in Newfoundland politics, such as the French Shore problem or Confederation with Canada, Prowse did not have the advantage of historical perspective. Nonetheless, his approach to the problems confronting Newfoundland in 1895 reveals a great deal about his deeper view of history and cultural memory. In the concluding section to the final chapter, Prowse confronted the twin disasters of the great fire of 1892 and the bank crash of 1894. In the face of what “seemed enough to fill up the cup of our woe”, he chose optimism:

We must remember that whilst much of the working capital of the Colony has been lost in recent failures, the wealth-producing power of the Island has not been seriously impaired. Fish must always remain one of the staple foods of the world, but the products of the sea, which have hitherto been our chief, we may almost say our only resource, should in time be augmented by the labours of the lumbermen and the miner. Newfoundland is still an almost unexplored country; her geological formation points to much hidden wealth, which we may fairly hope the development and completion of the railway will help to bring forth; the natural result of speedy and convenient communication is to attract capital and start new enterprises.<sup>26</sup>

Though Prowse referred to the need to stamp out the last vestiges of the credit system, there is a telling absence of historical villains in his final assessment. After

24 Ibid., pp. 483-4.

25 Story, *People of the Landwash*, p. 91.

26 Prowse, *History of Newfoundland*, p. 537.



dominating the earlier chapters, the West Country merchants are no longer to be blamed for the colony's misfortunes. "The prejudice against the merchants", he noted, "however reasonable and natural in olden times, should not exist now; employers and employed are mutually dependent on each other".<sup>27</sup> The one explicit reference to a past event is to the crisis of 1817, which he cited as an example of how Newfoundlanders had persevered in the face of similar problems. This did not mean that Prowse was uncritical of either the merchants' party or imperial policy – indeed, his comments on the French Shore problem were particularly scathing – but he did not see Newfoundland as caught in a cycle of failure or captive to a history of oppression.

The contrast between the chapters on the pre-1825 era and those on the modern period reflected his nationalist convictions. Prowse was a tireless enthusiast of Newfoundland who did not disguise his efforts to promote the island's development, particularly its tourism industry. The theme of economic progress figured prominently in Prowse's later writing, such as his *Newfoundland Guide Book* (published in 1905), which emphasized economic growth. His work on other projects, such as Cabot Tower, reflected not nostalgia so much as nationalistic pride.<sup>28</sup> He was in the business of "booming Newfoundland", as he termed it in a letter to Sir Edward Morris.<sup>29</sup> George Story argued that Prowse's chapter on telegraphic communication represented the "optimistic climax of his long history of neglect and oppression".<sup>30</sup> But the emphasis on technological advancement was not merely tacked on to the end of his *History*. It formed part of a larger philosophy of history marking the transition to the progressive era. Prowse established this watershed in his introduction:

In 1825 commenced the modern period of our history with the advent of Sir Thos. John Cochrane; no man ever did so much for Newfoundland as this excellent Governor. On the 1st of January 1833 he opened our first Parliament. Since that date, notwithstanding great fluctuations in the fisheries, and disasters like the great fires of 1817, 1846, and the last terrible calamity of the 8th of July 1892, and worst of all the financial crisis of 1894, the Colony has progressed; her resources in minerals and timber are being greatly developed, railways are being extended, steam communication and telegraph lines are promoting civilisation and advancement.<sup>31</sup>

Prowse was a nationalist of a very distinctive, Victorian stripe, and his *History* cannot be simply lumped together with various strands of nationalism which emerged in the second half of the 20th century. In his mind, history comprised neither an undifferentiated mass of chance occurrences nor an endless series of cyclical patterns; rather, it was divided into epochs which evolved in a linear manner toward modernity.

27 Ibid., p. 530.

28 Shane O'Dea, "Judge Prowse and Bishop Howley: Cabot Tower and the Construction of Nationalism", in Iona Bulgin, ed., *Cabot and His World Symposium, June 1997: Papers and Presentations* (St. John's, 1999), pp. 171-82; Peter Pope, *The Many Landfalls of John Cabot* (Toronto, 1997), chapter 5.

29 Quoted in Story, *People of the Landwash*, p. 122. On this point, see also Neary, "The Writing of Newfoundland History", pp. 4-7.

30 Story, *People of the Landwash*, p. 121.

31 Prowse, *History of Newfoundland*, pp. xx-xxi.

His Whig interpretation was not the unbroken line of relentless progress envisaged in Herbert Butterfield's classic model but followed instead the broader pattern of nationalist historiography in the late 19th century.<sup>32</sup> As Eric Hobsbawm and Benedict Anderson have argued, the invention of a shared historical narrative was a key ingredient in the construction of a political identity.<sup>33</sup> The liberal ideology current in Prowse's time envisaged the assimilation of smaller polities into larger nations as part of the natural march of progress. He did not see any contradiction between his support for Confederation with Canada and his pride in being a Newfoundlander.

For three-quarters of a century, Prowse's view of history remained basically unchallenged. The major studies completed in the pre-Confederation period – most notably A.H. McLintock's *Establishment of Constitutional Government in Newfoundland* – focused largely on how British policy had stunted the island's economic and political development. Like Prowse, McLintock narrated how the settlers had eventually persevered in the face of adversity to build a successful society. "Modest and unpretentious as is its story", he concluded, "no student of its history can set it aside without feeling strangely moved at the wonder of human pertinacity in creating from 'a great ship' an amazing colony which, in spite of inherited weaknesses and economic disabilities, stands to-day as a testimony to the power of people to nullify Britain's greatest experiment in retarded colonisation".<sup>34</sup> Joey Smallwood also took up Prowse's themes in his *Barrelman* radio program, which often presented a nationalist perspective, and in his copious writings in Newfoundland history.<sup>35</sup> Smallwood followed the conventional framework by dividing history into the dark age, before the advent of representative government, and the enlightened era ushered in by industrialization and later Confederation with Canada. Amplifying Prowse's grand narrative of struggle, he created an epic tale which at times bordered on hagiography. For example, Smallwood's book on William Carson placed him at the top of the pantheon of Newfoundland's heroes:

The historian Prowse called William Carson "the greatest figure of the early nineteenth century in Newfoundland." Carson was more than that. He was the greatest figure of the whole century: the greatest, grandest and most patriotic man that ever lived in Newfoundland. . . . It is impossible to doubt that he would have ranked with Washington, Paine, Jefferson, Franklin,

32 See Herbert Butterfield, *The Whig Interpretation of History* ([1931] New York, 1965); E.H. Carr, *What is History?* (London, 1961), pp. 40-1.

33 E.J. Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, 1992), esp. chapter 2; Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism*, 2nd ed. (New York, 1991), pp. 198 and 204-6.

34 A.H. McLintock, *The Establishment of Constitutional Government in Newfoundland, 1783-1832: A Study of Retarded Colonisation* (London, 1941), pp. 191-2. Despite the similarities in their interpretations, McLintock termed Prowse's *History* "The standard work on Nfld. but a very poor history".

35 Jeff A. Webb, "Constructing Community and Consumers: Joseph R. Smallwood's *Barrelman* Radio Programme", *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association*, new series, 8 (1997), esp. pp. 165-7. For the broader context, see Peter Neary *Newfoundland in the North Atlantic World, 1929-49* (Montreal and Kingston, 1988); James Hiller, "Newfoundland Confronts Canada, 1867-1949", in E.R. Forbes and D.A. Muise, eds., *The Atlantic Provinces in Confederation* (Toronto and Fredericton, 1993), pp. 349-81.

Patrick Henry. He possessed precisely the qualities of patriotism, love of democracy, bold audacity and high-minded idealism of the early American fathers.<sup>36</sup>

As the founder of the Newfoundland nation, Carson represented the successful revolt against the ancien regime of the naval governors and the West Country merchants. Like Prowse, Smallwood saw no contradiction between his advocacy for Confederation and his Newfoundland nationalism. And as Premier in the 1950s and 1960s, Smallwood embarked on a crash program to usher in the era of industrial progress which Prowse had championed a half century earlier.<sup>37</sup>

The influence of Prowse's *History* reached its apogee in 1968 with the publication of a new provincial textbook. Leslie Harris's *Newfoundland and Labrador: A Brief History* inculcated tens of thousands of Newfoundland schoolchildren with what was essentially Prowse's view of history.<sup>38</sup> Harris adopted the traditional cast of villains (e.g., the West Country merchants and fishing admirals) and heroes (e.g., William Carson and Patrick Morris), as well as the familiar storyline of perseverance in the face of political repression and economic adversity. Harris asserts that "Neither the rule of the fishing admirals, nor the French wars, nor the bad treatment of the Irish made the Newfoundlanders give up hope".<sup>39</sup> With the arrival of Carson, described as a "brave and unselfish man", the great reform movement finally defeated the old tyrannical regime in 1825.<sup>40</sup> "At long last, after more than three hundred years of struggle", Harris concluded, "Newfoundland had become a colony".<sup>41</sup> The textbook extends Prowse's interpretive format into the post-1949 era: the First World War, the Depression, and Commission of Government are explained as obstacles which delayed the progress which Confederation finally bestowed. The last chapter makes this case clearly:

Confederation has brought prosperity to Newfoundland. The federal government has given money for the building of roads, wharves, and breakwaters. Community services such as electricity, water, and sewerage have been improved, as well as harbours and airports. Newfoundland has been able to build larger and better schools and to establish a new university. It has been possible to develop Newfoundland's rich resources more fully.<sup>42</sup>

The textbook ends on essentially the same point that Prowse made about resource potential in the conclusion to his *History*:

36 Joseph R. Smallwood, *Dr. William Carson, The Great Newfoundland Reformer: His Life, Letters and Speeches* (St. John's, 1978), pp. 9-10. Most of this book was written in 1938.

37 See Richard Gwyn, *Smallwood: The Unlikely Revolutionary* (Toronto, 1972); S.J.R. Noel, *Politics in Newfoundland* (Toronto, 1971), chapter 17.

38 Leslie Harris, *Newfoundland and Labrador: A Brief History* (Toronto, 1968). I was assigned this book in grade five. I can still vividly recall my history teacher ranting against vile merchants, dastardly fishing admirals and untrustworthy Englishmen.

39 Harris, *Newfoundland and Labrador*, p. 67.

40 Ibid., p. 85.

41 Ibid., p. 88.

42 Ibid., p. 167.

Newfoundland's 150,000 square miles of territory are rich in minerals, forests, and waterpower. She has some of the richest fishing grounds in the world. Newfoundland has also added 500,000 people to Canada's population and is a valuable market for Canadian food products and manufactured goods. When all Newfoundland's resources are fully developed, Newfoundlanders should be able to give more than they receive.<sup>43</sup>

Like Prowse, Harris separates the legacy of the past from the promise of the future. He espouses an optimistic variant of nationalism which presents Newfoundland history as a story of struggle but not of loss.

In the 1970s the position of Prowse's *History* transformed from an authoritative text into an unreliable source. In the first sustained challenge to the prevailing orthodoxy, Keith Matthews argued the fish merchants did not conspire to prohibit settlement or stunt the colony's growth. Interdependence characterized relations between the different groups involved in the fishery: the credit system worked to insulate both merchants and planters from cyclical economic depressions. Market forces, resource endowment and commercial policies comprised the vital factors in the island's development.<sup>44</sup> As for the heroic Carson and Morris, Matthews asserted that the victory of representative government marked simply the success of a colonial elite's ambition: influenced by political currents in Britain, the reformers created a nationalist ideology which bore little relation to circumstances in the colony.<sup>45</sup> In a seminal review article, Matthews systematically discredited the traditional myths inherited from Prowse as well as the scholarly variants of the retarded colonization thesis.<sup>46</sup>

Although Matthews' work constituted the most important challenge to Prowse's reputation as a historian, it represented only one element of a much larger movement in academic scholarship. The 1970s saw the emergence of new schools of research in a variety of areas – historical geography, economic history, maritime studies and cultural anthropology – sponsored by agencies such as the Institute of Social and Economic Research. This wave of research involved dozens of scholars and, as a number of different commentators have noted, it revolutionized the way historians approached Newfoundland's past.<sup>47</sup> The new perspectives rejected not only Prowse's

43 Ibid., p. 169.

44 Keith Matthews, "History of the West of England - Newfoundland Fishery", D.Phil. thesis, Oxford University, 1968; Keith Matthews, *Lectures on the History of Newfoundland, 1500-1830* (St. John's, 1988), pp. 181-4. Matthews' "Lectures" were originally written and distributed in the early 1970s.

45 Keith Matthews, "The Class of '32: St. John's Reformers on the Eve of Representative Government", *Acadiensis*, VI, 2 (Spring 1977), pp. 80-94.

46 Keith Matthews, "Historical Fence Building: A Critique of the Historiography of Newfoundland", *Newfoundland Quarterly*, 74 (Spring 1978), pp. 21-30.

47 See, inter alia, F.W. Rowe, "Myths of Newfoundland," *Newfoundland Quarterly*, 74, 4 (Winter 1979), pp. 3-16; Eric Sager, "Newfoundland's Historical Revival and the Legacy of David Alexander", *Acadiensis*, XI, 1 (Autumn 1981), pp. 104-15; Neary, "The Writing of Newfoundland History", pp. 3-13; Janzen, "Newfoundland and the International Fishery", pp. 280-324; Hiller, "Is Atlantic Canadian History Possible?", pp. 16-22; Jerry Bannister "'A Species of Vassalage': The Issue of Class in the Writing of Newfoundland History", *Acadiensis* XXIV, 1 (Autumn 1994), pp. 134-44; Ingrid Botting, et al., "Evolutions in Research on Resource Development in Newfoundland, 1960 to the Present", (paper presented at the Atlantic Canada Studies Workshop, October 1999).

specific arguments, but also his entire Whig interpretation and its attendant bias toward high politics, great men and the march of progress. Part of the reaction against Prowse stemmed from a broader debate over nationalism in Canada during the late 1970s, as scholars discussed radical regionalism and worried about the potential breakup of the federation.<sup>48</sup> James Overton argued that “neo-nationalism”, as he coined it, was a type of reactionary ideology used to promote the class interests of the bourgeoisie.<sup>49</sup>

Patrick O’Flaherty offered what seemed to be the final nail in the coffin for Prowse’s reputation. In his authoritative survey of Newfoundland literature, O’Flaherty condemned Prowse as an unimaginative historian who ruined his impressive research with sentimental editorializing and employed a backward historical framework coloured by personal bias. “There was”, according to O’Flaherty, “a thick layer of such contrived emotion throughout Prowse’s book”.<sup>50</sup> As O’Flaherty explains:

Prowse did not often dwell on the condition of the mass of the population. Indeed, he was inclined throughout his book to patronize “the simple outharbour people”, whom he viewed as credulous and ignorant. His last chapters, in essence, recounted the activities of the country’s urban elite, of which Prowse himself was fully a part. His book enshrined as historical truth a twisted and sentimental view of the colony’s past. Thanks partly to historians like Prowse and “boomers” like Harvey, Newfoundland would enter the twentieth century believing herself to have been in the past the sport of “historic misfortune”, and “the patient Griselda of the Empire”, but looking forward to a new age of civilization and prosperity.<sup>51</sup>

Prowse’s optimistic conviction that Newfoundland had broken with its dark past and could anticipate a bright future became, in O’Flaherty’s eyes, a corrupted fantasy.

Yet Prowse’s *History* remained a popular and influential book. In spite of its savaging at the hands of scholars, outside of academe it was still included in the canon of Newfoundland history.<sup>52</sup> As the province witnessed a surge in nationalist sentiment

48 See David Alexander, “New Notions of Happiness: Nationalism, Regionalism, and Atlantic Canada”, in David G. Alexander, *Atlantic Canada and Confederation: Essays in Canadian Political Economy*, compiled by Eric Sager, Lewis Fischer and Stuart Pierson (Toronto, 1983), chapter 5. Matthews’ review article had, rather fittingly, appeared in a special issue of the *Newfoundland Quarterly* (Spring 1978), which featured 10 papers by prominent local scholars (including George Story, Harold Paddock and David Alexander) on the problem of Newfoundland’s place in Confederation.

49 James Overton, “Towards a Critical Analysis of Neo-Nationalism in Newfoundland”, in Robert J. Brym and R. James Sacouman, eds., *Underdevelopment and Social Movements in Atlantic Canada* (Toronto, 1979), pp. 219-49.

50 Patrick O’Flaherty, *The Rock Observed: Studies in the Literature of Newfoundland* (Toronto, 1979), p. 80.

51 Ibid., pp. 80-1.

52 Even within academic circles, Prowse’s status as a historical authority had not dissipated. George Story’s biographical sketch of Prowse asserted that his *History* “remains the most comprehensive history of the Colony almost a century later. Prowse’s *History* retains its value both for its pioneering use of primary original sources and for its stamp of authorship: human insight, learning and style”. See Robert Cuff, Melvin Baker and Robert Pitt, eds. *Dictionary of Newfoundland and Labrador Biography* (St. John’s, 1990), p. 280.

in the 1980s – culminating in the Peckford administration's battle with Ottawa over jurisdiction of offshore resources – politicians drew on historical sources, including Prowse, to justify their policies. As Harry Hiller notes, this rise in nationalism emanated from a sense of cultural uniqueness and economic disadvantage.<sup>53</sup> Though Hiller hesitated to categorize Newfoundland nationalism as a manifestation of a distinct ethnic identity, he concluded that separatist rhetoric could not be dismissed as merely political flirtation or elite manipulation. While groups such as the Party for an Independent Newfoundland attracted publicity, Brian Peckford was without question the leading political figure in the nationalist movement.<sup>54</sup> As Ronald Rompkey has argued, Peckford saw himself as a student of history and a strong supporter of Newfoundland culture.<sup>55</sup>

At the height of the province's campaign for ownership over offshore oil resources, Peckford published a political manifesto, *The Past in the Present*, which outlined the premier's view of Newfoundland history. Peckford was certainly a populist, but he was also well read, and he quoted liberally from scholars such as Gertrude Gunn, S.J.R. Noel, James Hiller, Peter Neary and David Alexander.<sup>56</sup> He followed Alexander's basic argument that the federal government was largely to blame for the failure to develop a viable economy in post-1949 Newfoundland.<sup>57</sup> Yet he combined his secondary research with an eclectic mix of personal history, political rhetoric and statistical analysis. Peckford's intent was to "show the extent to which the monumental mistakes of the past have resulted in our Province's being one of the poorest regions of Canada, and . . . to demonstrate how the situation has been aggravated by recent policies of the Federal Government".<sup>58</sup> To achieve this goal, Peckford drew on Prowse's *History*, which he quoted approvingly at the beginning of his historical section.<sup>59</sup> In many respects, *The Past in the Present* was a recapitulation of Prowse's interpretation of the island's past, complete with repressive government officials and merchants conspiring to restrict settlement, retard growth and deny Newfoundlanders their natural rights. "Stories are common even now", Peckford notes, "about those early days when we were not legally tolerated in our own land, and of the kind of treatment to which our ancestors were subjected".<sup>60</sup> Echoing the tone and language of Prowse, he used his conclusion to stress the prospect of progress:

53 Harry Hiller, "Dependence and independence: emergent nationalism in Newfoundland", *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 10, 3 (July 1987), pp. 257-75.

54 Ibid., pp. 270-2. For overviews of politics in the 1980s, see E.R. Forbes, "Epilogue: The 1980s", in Forbes and Muise, eds., *The Atlantic Provinces in Confederation*, pp. 512-14; Margaret R. Conrad and James K. Hiller, *Atlantic Canada: A Region in the Making* (Toronto, 2001), chapter 11.

55 Ronald Rompkey, "The Idea of Newfoundland and Arts Policy Since Confederation", *Newfoundland Studies*, 14, 2 (Fall 1998), pp. 272-4.

56 A. Brian Peckford, *The Past in the Present: A Personal Perspective on Newfoundland's Future* (St. John's, 1983), pp. 42, 44, 60.

57 David Alexander, *The Decay of Trade: An Economic History of the Newfoundland Saltfish Trade, 1935-1965* (St. John's, 1977), esp. pp. 1-19.

58 Peckford, *Past in the Present*, p. 79. On Peckford's use of rhetoric, see James Overton, "Oil and Gas: The Rhetoric and Reality of Development in Newfoundland", in R. Clark, ed., *Contrary Winds: Essays on Newfoundland Society in Crisis* (St. John's, 1986), pp. 150-75; Robert Paine, *Ayatollahs and Turkey Trots: Political Rhetoric in the New Newfoundland* (St. John's, 1981), chapter 1.

59 Peckford, *Past in the Present*, p. 35.

60 Ibid., pp. 35-6.



Viewed in this context, the Province has before it a fantastic opportunity. We have around our shores now a rich, renewable fish resource. On land we have tremendous water power. Our trees, minerals, agriculture, can all make important contributions to our future well-being. If we can manage the phenomenal oil and gas resource in such a way as to buttress these renewable resources to which our way of life is so intimately related, we can as a people look forward, despite past mistakes, to a bright and prosperous future.<sup>61</sup>

Peckford saw no evident contradiction in citing both revisionist scholars and Prowse, whom he seemed to follow closely in rhetoric and argumentation.

However, a subtle yet crucial difference separates the outlooks of Prowse and Peckford. Unlike Prowse, Peckford did not imagine history as a series of discrete eras moving teleologically toward modernity, nor did he see the distant past as part of a quaint “olden time” removed from the present. When he envisaged Newfoundland’s experience as a colony, dominion and province, Peckford viewed it as a seamless web of incessant struggle. His manifesto declares that real progress is a dream which can only be achieved by overcoming powerful political and cultural obstacles. As its preface proclaims,

Confederation wasn’t an isolated event, nor was it one emerging from our more recent history. It flowed from our whole history of colonialism, subjugation and exploitation. Newfoundland was frequently, as were all the colonies, a resource base to be exploited for the benefit of the mother country. Not much has really changed: the essential elements are still present. We are today facing choices that are similar to those that have been faced many times in our history. The central question is whether we will be “true to our history” and once again barter away our future; or whether we can translate into self-confidence a pride that is now emerging at certain levels of our psyche, but which we are still hesitant to express.<sup>62</sup>

In Peckford’s mind, history had inflicted a debilitating psychic wound from which it was not certain that Newfoundland could recover. The past haunted the present, making it difficult to break from historic patterns of subjugation and failure.

Peckford’s arguments were part of a larger debate over the state of Newfoundland’s culture and the impact of Confederation. His most vocal supporter in the academic community was F.L. Jackson, a philosophy professor who wrote provocatively on a range of topics. Jackson echoed Peckford’s passionate tone and nationalistic language, and his columns and articles outlined the province’s grievances over its mistreatment by Ottawa.<sup>63</sup> Like Peckford, Jackson contrasted the ancestral virtues of Newfoundlanders with their repression at the hands of outsiders, but he was skeptical of what he saw as artificial attempts to reinvent traditional culture. In

61 Ibid., pp. 104-5.

62 Ibid., p. vi.

63 Jackson presented his views in a series of columns in the *Evening Telegram* and in articles, such as, “Can Newfoundland Survive? Thoughts on Traditional Values and Future Prospects”, *Newfoundland Quarterly*, 75 (1979), pp. 3-11; “Local Communities and the Culture Vultures”, *Newfoundland Quarterly*, 81 (1986), pp. 7-10.



*Surviving Confederation*, he condemned ersatz traditions which misrepresented the island's true history:

In short, much of the enthusiasm for cultural heritage must be understood as basically reactionary, that is, as grounded, not in a first-order interest in history or traditions, but in a *rebellion against the present*. For this reason it is notorious that heritage-worshipers are often satisfied with the most outrageous caricatures of the past, for what is primary for them, after all, is not the past itself, but how far some idealized picture of it can help compensate for the feeling that something is missing in the life of the present: a certain reality, authenticity and connectedness. It is the need for such compensation that moves people to dote on the life of the immediate past and superficially to affect it.<sup>64</sup>

To learn the truth about Newfoundland, he argued, "it is essential to set a basic fact in focus: as a truly viable and successful society, Newfoundland has never yet existed; or more positively put, it has yet to come into its own".<sup>65</sup> He asserted that the first two attempts to organize a socio-political system – under proprietary colonies in the 17th century and then responsible government two centuries later – failed miserably, while the current attempt as a province in Canada had yet to be proven successful. According to Jackson:

This experience has taken its toll. Five centuries of the plundering of Newfoundland's resources on the part of outsiders traditionally unconcerned with the advancement of the local people, has left historical bruises that are still clearly visible. They left a legacy of political impotence, a chronically retrograde economy and a cultural life thwarted by the unrelieved rigours of bare subsistence, isolation and alienation. It forced Newfoundlanders to become a people characteristically wary of political institutions and inclined to prefer the harsh, meagre life in ungoverned villages, relying on luck, grit, native ingenuity and the capricious benevolence of exploiter-masters, to building and trusting political institutions of their own.<sup>66</sup>

Thus Newfoundland history represents a kind of post-traumatic stress disorder. False nostalgia for a happy past was a dangerous drug that worsened the problem; the only way out was to implant a new progressive political culture.

Despite this iconoclasm, Jackson took a conspicuously conservative approach to the writing of history. He disapproved of recent attempts to overturn the traditional model of Newfoundland history, arguing that it did little to serve the public good, and he condemned the recent wave of revisionist scholarship:

Nationalistic or Marxist moralizing of this kind has the fault that it always demands of history that it ought to have been other than what it was, and is

64 F.L. Jackson, *Surviving Confederation: A Revised and Extended Version of "Newfoundland in Canada"* (St. John's, 1986), p. 21. Original italics.

65 Ibid., p. 35.

66 Ibid., p. 37.

continually trying to re-write it and correct its perceived errors. The result inevitably is that old wounds are re-opened and prevented from healing; vengeance becomes insatiable, old animosities constantly renewed. It is of course true that the Irish have been in their history victims of British conquest, but so too were the British of the Norse and Normans, the Gauls of the Romans and so forth.<sup>67</sup>

In place of Marxist historiography, which was derided as a “mystification of Newfoundland history”, Jackson seemed to favour reverting back to Prowse’s *History*, though he offered no specific suggestions or citations.<sup>68</sup> Like many commentators who emphasize the importance of history, he was vague on its details, relying instead on familiar platitudes when it served his purposes. Not surprisingly, Jackson himself was accused of spreading atavistic myths about the island’s cultural virtues.<sup>69</sup>

In essence, this view of history was Prowse without the progress. Stripped of Prowse’s faith that Newfoundland was liberated from its past, Jackson’s historical framework embraced a type of scorched-earth liberalism:

Persisting economic insecurity and corruption in public life thus bred into Newfoundlanders an excess of surly indifference and instinctive passivity in political matters such as one would expect to find among peoples of a much less privileged cultural heritage. It feeds a suspicion of change and progress that is not easily overcome. The vision and rhetoric of leaders like Carson, Bond, Coaker, Smallwood, or Peckford may on occasion break through for a time, but the impulse to retreat into the at least familiar certainties of the bare-subsistence life, relying only on God and fickle salvation at the hands of unsympathetic benefactors, is never far from the surface. . . . Confederation has changed this basic picture hardly at all.<sup>70</sup>

Variants of this type of nationalism can be seen in the work of other writers – Ray Guy, David Benson and Patrick O’Flaherty, for example – who argue that Newfoundland history is an unbroken tale of mistakes and missed opportunities.<sup>71</sup> This conception of history keeps important elements of Prowse’s original thesis, such as the notion that settlement and property rights were strictly forbidden in early Newfoundland, but rejects his basic attitude toward the past.

67 Ibid., p. 55.

68 F.L. Jackson, “The Marxist Mystification of Newfoundland History”, *Newfoundland Studies*, 6, 2 (1990), pp. 267-81; F.L. Jackson, “People and Place: The Academic Celebration of Outport Life”, *Newfoundland Studies*, 7, 2 (1991), pp. 203-10.

69 James Overton, “A Newfoundland Culture?”, *Journal of Canadian Studies*, 23, 1 (1988), pp. 5-22.

70 Jackson, *Surviving Confederation*, pp. 37-8.

71 Ray Guy, *You May Know Them as Sea Urchins, Ma’am*, ed., Eric Norman (St. John’s, 1975), pp. 104-22; David Benson, “Dutch Arses and Cargo Cults”, *TickleAce: A Journal of Literary and Visual Art*, 37 (2000), pp. 70-86. O’Flaherty’s views appear to have changed over time: in 1975, for example, he argued that Confederation represented a break in the pattern of historic failure; 20 years later he is far less sanguine. See Patrick O’Flaherty, “Looking Backwards: The Milieu of the Old Newfoundland Outports”, *Journal of Canadian Studies*, 10 (1975), pp. 3-9; Patrick O’Flaherty, *Come Near at your Peril: A Visitor’s Guide to the Island of Newfoundland*, 3rd ed. (St. John’s, 1998), pp. 14-27.

The “Newfcult” which so irritated Jackson was part of a larger cultural revival that began in the 1960s. The provincial government had facilitated this process – Smallwood himself took pains to encourage Farley Mowat’s interest in Newfoundland – and the celebration of local heritage became linked with the tourism industry.<sup>72</sup> By the 1970s the province was in the midst of what Sandra Gwyn termed “The Newfoundland Renaissance”. Gwyn charted the remarkable expansion of new work in a wide range of fields: theatre groups such as Codco; artists such as Gerry Squires and Mary Pratt; and writers such as Ray Guy and Harold Horwood. Yet mixed with Gwyn’s enthusiasm was a lament for a lost heritage. “The old order that produced all of us”, she noted, “is being smashed, homogenized, and trivialized out of existence”.<sup>73</sup> She quotes Patrick O’Flaherty as saying that writers such as Ray Guy were “the last of the real Newfoundlanders”.<sup>74</sup> The passage into industrial modernity which Prowse had trumpeted as a national victory was now mourned as a cultural loss. At the heart of this perspective was the belief that the island’s golden age lay not in a modern future of material wealth but in an idyllic past of outport culture. Ray Guy himself has admitted that this romantic view drew in large measure on nostalgia for a past that never actually existed, but he claimed that it was necessary as a way to combat the propaganda of the Smallwood regime.<sup>75</sup>

The province’s cultural renaissance was part of a much broader phenomenon which has swept western societies for more than 30 years. As Gerald Pocius has argued, Newfoundland has followed a broader pattern whereby the weakening of traditional communal ties engenders a drive to recapture (and reinvent) local heritage.<sup>76</sup> Within the university community, this process manifested itself in the burgeoning fields of historical anthropology and folklore. Customs like mummering, which Prowse dismissed as quaint traditions, were now treated as serious topics for scholarly research.<sup>77</sup> Folklorism has also been used to promote the expanding tourism industry, and it has helped to fuel the rise of nationalist sentiment. As James Overton points out, government agencies and business elites have supported the fabrication of “traditional” cultural commodities – i.e., tourist-friendly myths and stereotypes – in

72 James Overton, “Sparkling A Cultural Revolution: Joey Smallwood, Farley Mowat, Harold Horwood and Newfoundland’s Cultural Renaissance”, *Newfoundland Studies*, 16, 2 (Fall 2000), pp. 166-201.

73 Sandra Gwyn, “The Newfoundland Renaissance”, *Saturday Night*, 91, 2 (April 1976), p. 45.

74 Ibid., p. 45.

75 According to Guy, “After Confederation and before it, there was an inferiority complex in Newfoundland – especially when the Yanks marched in here, and they all had teeth and were plump. After Confederation, Joey and his crowd harped on it for their own aggrandizement. The world started in 1949 (according to Smallwood) – before that, there was only depravity, poverty and corruption”. See Mark Paddock, “The Ray Guy Philosophy”, *The Express*, 3 February 1993.

76 Gerald Pocius, *A Place to Belong: Community Order and Everyday Space in Calvert, Newfoundland* (Montreal and Kingston, 1991), pp. 21-4 and 272-9. For an overview of the international context, see David Lowenthal, *The Heritage Crusade and the Spoils of History* (Cambridge, 1998), esp. chapter 1.

77 See, inter alia, John Szwed, *Private Cultures and Public Imagery: Interpersonal Relations in a Newfoundland Peasant Society* (St. John’s, 1966); Melvin Firestone, *Brothers and Rivals: Patrilocality in Savage Cove* (St. John’s, 1967); Herbert Halpert and G.M. Story, eds., *Christmas Mummering in Newfoundland: Essays in Anthropology, Folklore, and History*, 2nd ed. (Toronto, 1990).

order to further their own socio-economic interests.<sup>78</sup> Equally important, folklorism in Newfoundland, as elsewhere, has tended to embrace an implicit anti-modernism which divides society into the authentic (traditional, rural, plebeian) and the counterfeit (modern, suburban, bourgeois). As Ian McKay argues:

[T]he national identities created through the use of such categories could not and did not include everyone. Treating some people (normally peasants) as “Folk” (and hence the privileged bearers of “national essence”) only worked if there were some who were not “Folk.” These found themselves caught at the wrong end of a polarity. As the “Folk” became ever more essential to the Nation and their “culture” became identified as its cultural core, those who were unmistakably not of the Folk came, within nationalism, to be defined more and more as “unnatural,” cosmopolitan, uprooted, and unwholesome.<sup>79</sup>

With this approach came a philosophy of history that contrasted the unspoiled past with the corrupted present. Change became equated, as McKay notes, “with degeneration and deviance – an entropic vision that is the unifying thread of the Folk concept to the present day”.<sup>80</sup> By the 1980s, the teleology which had been so central to Prowse’s entire conception of history had fallen out of intellectual fashion. How did his *History* fit into this new paradigm?

When the revisionist scholarship was integrated into the province’s school curriculum, Prowse was no longer portrayed as an important historian. In a new high-school course on Newfoundland culture, students were assigned *Our Newfoundland and Labrador Cultural Heritage*, a hybrid textbook designed to bridge the gap between history and social studies.<sup>81</sup> It included a short commentary on Prowse: he was cited as one of the 19th-century authors who “recorded many of the myths and descriptions of Newfoundland and its people which are deeply imbedded in folklore – the oral tribal memory of the people”.<sup>82</sup> The text summarized Prowse’s career briefly, noting that his *History* “has been reprinted several times and still makes interesting reading”.<sup>83</sup> As for the nature of Newfoundland history, the authors tried to strike a balance between progressive optimism and cultural relativism. While claiming that contemporary culture “is both the result and a reflection of the past history and experiences of generations who have lived here”, they also concluded that there never existed a “golden age, and certainly old Newfoundland culture has little

78 James Overton, *Making a World of Difference: Essays on Tourism, Culture and Development in Newfoundland* (St. John’s, 1996), esp. chapters 5-7. On the concept of folklorism, see Elke Dettmer, “Folklorism In Newfoundland”, in G. Thomas and J.D.A. Widdowson, eds., *Studies in Newfoundland Folklore: Community and Process* (St. John’s, 1991), pp. 169-76.

79 Ian McKay, *The Quest of the Folk: Antimodernism and Cultural Selection in Twentieth-Century Nova Scotia* (Montreal and Kingston, 1994), p. 13.

80 Ibid., p. 13. On the problem of constructing a static “traditional” folklore, see also Pocius, *A Place to Belong*, pp. 272-99.

81 Keith Matthews, E. Rex Kearley and Paul Dwyer, *Our Newfoundland and Labrador Cultural Heritage* (Scarborough, Ontario, 1984). When I took the Newfoundland culture course in 1985, no one (including the teachers) took the curriculum very seriously, despite the textbook’s grand tone.

82 Matthews, Kearley and Dwyer, *Our Newfoundland and Labrador Cultural Heritage*, p. 302.

83 Ibid., p. 304.

relation to contemporary life".<sup>84</sup> This dichotomy between the remote past and the modern present appears similar to Prowse, but the authors expressed doubt over the prospect of progress, asserting that "it is difficult to decide what kind of people we are, and what kind we might be in the future".<sup>85</sup> Newfoundland, it would seem, was at a cultural crossroads. The authors made the interesting choice to conclude their textbook by citing the anthropologist Gerald Sider, whose notion of *the ties that bind*, "sums up the fundamental nature of our culture better than anything else we have seen".<sup>86</sup>

Gerald Sider's work was the most controversial of all the cultural studies published in the 1970s and 1980s. In his monograph, *Culture and Class in Anthropology and History*, Sider uses Newfoundland to illustrate a Marxist model of the connection between social relations of production and exchange and concurrent popular customs.<sup>87</sup> Sider envisions culture as the point where class becomes dynamic and thus where lines of antagonism and alliance come together and apart. In order to reveal how culture forms and shapes social relations, Sider chose to examine Newfoundland when it was supposedly in the grip of merchant capital. Like Prowse, he assumed that merchants completely dominated the working population. Sider argued that the credit system suppressed capital formation and prevented the emergence of local alternatives to merchant credit as well as an outport middle class. As a result, modern social relations failed to develop in the colony. To describe this quasi-capitalist, or traditional, society Sider claimed that Newfoundlanders oscillated between the polarities of tribespeople and peasants. The primary effects of the truck system materialized in acute social tensions. Sider asserts that customs such as mummering arose as a means to adapt to this strained environment through the reorganization of social relations and redistribution of certain resources within the fishing class. In spite of Sider's complex theoretical model, his basic argument of mercantile oppression was strikingly similar to Prowse's thesis.

Sider's book elicited a heavy barrage of criticism from Newfoundland scholars. Critics argued that he exaggerated not only the negative role of merchant capital but also the degree of fragmentation and social tension in outport culture. They pointed out that he employed a narrow view of culture and inaccurately portrayed outport popular customs which, in fact, had little to do with class relations. Sider was also accused of oversimplifying the structure of the fishery and ignoring vital elements, such as the role of religion, state institutions and environmental factors. From a methodological perspective, Sider failed to support his arguments with adequate evidence and employed a fallacious a priori model of the correlation between class

84 Ibid., p. 336. This section of the textbook was titled in Peckfordian language as "The Past Points to the Future".

85 Ibid., p. 336.

86 Ibid., p. 341. The reference is to Gerald Sider, "The Ties That Bind: Culture and Agriculture, Property and Prosperity in the Newfoundland Village Fishery", *Social History*, 5 (1980). Sider had earlier published "Christmas Mummering and the New Year in Outport Newfoundland," *Past and Present*, 71 (1976).

87 Gerald M. Sider, *Culture and Class in Anthropology and History: A Newfoundland Illustration* (New York, 1986).

relations and popular customs.<sup>88</sup> Perhaps the most telling criticism was that Sider had simply ignored much of the historical research conducted since 1960. James Hiller noted that while the seminal work of Keith Matthews and Grant Head on 18th-century Newfoundland appeared in the book's bibliography, "Sider's version of this period reads as if they had never set pen to paper".<sup>89</sup> By resurrecting the old retarded colonization thesis, Sider's work actually promoted Prowse's position in the historiography, forcing scholars again to refute his view of the past.<sup>90</sup>

When Sean Cadigan set out to challenge Sider's arguments, he began his study by addressing Prowse's legacy. Cadigan's doctoral dissertation asserts that Prowse's *History* marked the peak of the traditional school of thought which cast the West Country merchants as the villains in Newfoundland history; it also notes that Sider's interpretation embraced essential elements of Prowse's thesis.<sup>91</sup> Prowse was not the primary target for critical analysis but rather the vehicle through which faulty ideas flowed. The *History* "remains the clearest expression of the liberal view", Cadigan concluded, but it was only a springboard used to discuss other scholars and did not in itself merit extended analysis.<sup>92</sup> He rejected liberal historiography and its conviction that Newfoundland's past could be divided into rungs on a ladder of linear progress. For Cadigan, the history of the 19th and 20th centuries comprised a chronic cycle of missed opportunities to develop a successful economy. Although this argument appears somewhat similar to Peckford's nationalism, Cadigan made his political position clear: "As a Newfoundlander, I do not have much sympathy for Newfoundland nationalists. They must confront history. Federal and provincial policies in Newfoundland over the past fifty years are an extension, not a break, with Newfoundland's pre-Confederation history".<sup>93</sup> A century after its publication, Prowse's *History* appeared finally to be laid to rest.

88 There is not space here to parse the historiography. For critical reviews of Sider, see Ian McKay, "Historians, Anthropology, and the Concept of Culture", *Labour/Le Travailleur*, 8/9 (Autumn/Spring 1981/82), pp. 207-9; J.K. Hiller, Peter Narváez and Daniel Vickers, "Panel Review: Newfoundland's Past as Marxist Illustration", *Newfoundland Studies*, 3, 2 (1987), esp. pp. 266, 268, 270 and 275; Sean Cadigan, "Battle Harbour in Transition: Merchants, Fishermen and the State in the Struggle for Relief in a Labrador Community during the 1930's", *Labour/Le Travail*, 26 (Fall 1990), pp. 135-6; Patricia Thornton, "The Transition from the Migratory to the Resident Fishery in the Strait of Belle Isle", in Rosemary Ommer, ed., *Merchant Credit and Labour Strategies in Historical Perspective* (Fredericton, 1990), pp. 138-42, 164-66; Sean Cadigan, "The Staple Model Reconsidered: The Case of Agricultural Policy in Northeast Newfoundland, 1785-1855", *Acadiensis*, XXI, 2 (Spring 1992), pp. 52-60; Sean Cadigan, "Planters, Households and Merchant Capitalism: Northeast-Coast Newfoundland, 1800-1855", in Daniel Samson, ed., *Contested Countryside: Rural Workers and Modern Society in Atlantic Canada, 1800-1950* (Fredericton, 1994), pp. 154-6.

89 See Hiller's comments in Hiller, Narváez and Vickers, "Panel Review", p. 267.

90 Sider became identified so closely with Prowse that Robert Lewis even lumped them together under the rather curious label "Liberal politicians and historians". See Robert Lewis, "'Representative-beggars of a Set of Paupers': The Politics of Social Welfare and Traditional Newfoundland", *Newfoundland Studies*, 13, 2 (1997), p. 151, n. 11.

91 Sean Thomas Cadigan, "Economic and Social Relations of Production on the Northeast-Coast of Newfoundland, with Special Reference to Conception Bay, 1785-1855", Ph.D. thesis, Memorial University, 1991, pp. 1-2.

92 Cadigan, "Planters, Households and Merchant Capitalism", p. 151; Sean Cadigan, *Hope and Deception in Conception Bay: Merchant-Settler Relations in Newfoundland, 1785-1855* (Toronto, 1995), esp. pp. vii-xii.

93 Sean Cadigan, "Missed Opportunities: The Rock at Fifty", *The Beaver*, 79, 1 (March 1999), p. 7.



In many ways, Prowse is the Francis Parkman of Newfoundland history. Like Prowse, Parkman is a 19th-century historian who will not go away: to the chagrin of many professional historians, his books are still featured prominently in commercial bookstores. Although Parkman's multi-volume *France and England in North America* (he published the first volume in 1865, but did not complete the work until 1892) was on a much grander scale than Prowse's study, both men saw their work as a type of calling.<sup>94</sup> They each collected enormous quantities of manuscript material, taking great pains to track down previously unexamined documents, and they saw their research as part of a personal mission to uncover a lost past. Prowse told his readers that he worked on his *History* constantly for six years and, as he confessed, "The labour was so enormous that I have several times dropped it in despair".<sup>95</sup> Like Parkman, Prowse was a romantic writer, employing dramatic prose to capture the epic events and the individuals who made history. Both men viewed the past as a heroic struggle between the forces of backwardness and modernity: Prowse's depiction of the clash between the venal West Country merchants and the virtuous settlers was similar to Parkman's narrative of the contest between the French and English for North America. As Newfoundland historians challenged Prowse's assertions, so too did Canadian historians overturn Parkman's thesis.<sup>96</sup> And in Simon Schama's provocative *Dead Certainties*, which attempts to recreate Parkman's mental world, there is even a parallel to Wayne Johnston's *Colony of Unrequited Dreams*.<sup>97</sup>

Yet unlike Parkman, Prowse has not faded into the realm of historical antiquity. Whereas Schama used Parkman's scholarship as a way to explore the question of historical certainty, Johnston viewed Prowse's *History* as the quintessence of historiography. In other words, Johnston was not merely analyzing Prowse's work; he was celebrating it. He saw its status as a forgotten book as symptomatic of a deeper cultural malaise. For Johnston, its fate is intertwined with the troubled legacy of Confederation:

There is a misconception, by some people much encouraged, by others simply allowed to go unchallenged, that Newfoundland was "born" in 1949, that in 1949, Canadian history retroactively became our history, that, for instance, "our" first prime minister was Sir John A. MacDonald. The same misconception is applied to pre-confederate Canadian literature. Our actual history and literature now exist in a kind of limbo where not even many archivists set foot.<sup>98</sup>

94 Francis Parkman, *France and England in North America*, 2 vols. ([1865-92] New York, 1983).

95 Prowse, *History of Newfoundland*, p. xxii. It should be noted that Parkman was a deeply earnest writer who (unlike Prowse) did not indulge in entertaining "olden-time" yarns.

96 On Parkman's place in Canadian and imperial historiography, see Carl Berger, *The Sense of Power: Studies in the Ideas of Canadian Imperialism, 1867-1914* (Toronto, 1970), pp. 143-4; Bruce Trigger, *Natives and Newcomers: Canada's "Heroic Age" Reconsidered* (Montreal and Kingston, 1985), chapter 1; D.R. Owsam, "Canada and the Empire", in Robin Winks, ed., *The Oxford History of the British Empire, Volume V: Historiography* (Oxford, 1999), pp. 146-9.

97 Simon Schama, *Dead Certainties (Unwarranted Speculations)* (New York, 1991), esp. chapter 3.

98 Wayne Johnston, "A History of Newfoundland – D.W. Prowse [and] *The Newfoundland Journal of Aaron Thomas, 1794 – Aaron Thomas*", in Michael Ondaatje, et al., eds., *Lost Classics* (Toronto, 2000), p. 140.



On the question of certainty, Schama explained eloquently, "We are doomed to be forever hailing someone who has just gone around the corner and out of earshot".<sup>99</sup> Johnston sees it the opposite way: the problem is not that the truth cannot be caught but that we fail to see it right under our noses, buried in the great tome of a patriarch.

The medium through which Johnston chose to address these issues was his acclaimed novel, *The Colony of Unrequited Dreams*, a fictional biography of Joey Smallwood. The novel was part of a remarkable wave of historical fiction that emerged in Newfoundland literature in the 1990s. This work includes a range of authors, from E. Annie Proulx and Bernice Morgan (both of whom saw their novels adapted into films), to John Steffler, Gordon Rodgers and, most recently, Michael Crummey.<sup>100</sup> What they have in common is the goal to create a sense of what it was like to live in a certain time and place in Newfoundland. To varying degrees they base their fiction on historical research, and they usually acknowledge the sources on which they relied. In cases such as David Macfarlane's literary memoir, the line between fact and fiction is fairly clear.<sup>101</sup> But in other works the construction of the past is deliberately skewed to serve a literary purpose. For example, John Steffler asserts that while he based much of his novel on primary sources, the "story grew as I handled it, following its own inherent tendencies as well as mine".<sup>102</sup> "Time has been compressed or expanded", he acknowledges, "and events invented or altered according to the narrative's needs".<sup>103</sup> The practice of purposefully merging the present into the past was part of a larger movement in post-modern literature and, as elsewhere, it has been heavily criticized for being intellectually untenable.<sup>104</sup> "The idea that 'all history is fiction'", A.S. Byatt noted pithily, "led to a new interest in fiction as history".<sup>105</sup>

*The Colony of Unrequited Dreams* also reflected the recent surge in nationalist sentiment in Newfoundland. Nationalism was central to works such as the popular film *Secret Nation*, based on the screenplay by Ed Riche, which suggests that Newfoundlanders are not free citizens of a province in Canada but rather captives in a nation occupied by a foreign power. According to this view, Canada, Great Britain, and some Newfoundland turncoats had colluded to rig the referendum on Confederation. Following literary trends, Riche blended together elements of history and fiction into a new version of the old conspiracy myths.<sup>106</sup> The theme of mourning

<sup>99</sup> Schama, *Dead Certainties*, p. 320.

<sup>100</sup> E. Annie Proulx, *The Shipping News* (New York, 1993); Bernice Morgan, *Random Passage* (St. John's, 1992); Bernice Morgan, *Waiting for Time* (St. John's, 1994); John Steffler, *The Afterlife of George Cartwright* (Toronto, 1992); Gordon Rodgers, *A Settlement of Memory* (St. John's, 1999); Michael Crummey, *River Thieves* (Toronto, 2001).

<sup>101</sup> David Macfarlane, *The Danger Tree: Memory, War, and the Search for a Family's Past* (Toronto, 1991).

<sup>102</sup> Steffler, *Afterlife of George Cartwright*, p. 294 ["Author's Note"].

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 294 ["Author's Note"].

<sup>104</sup> See Stuart Pierson, "Review of John Steffler, *The Afterlife of George Cartwright*", *Newfoundland Studies*, 8, 2 (1992), pp. 202-20; Gordon Inglis, "Truth and Fiction", *Newfoundland Studies*, 16, 1 (2000), pp. 67-77.

<sup>105</sup> A.S. Byatt, *On Histories and Stories: Selected Essays* (New York, 2001), p. 38.

<sup>106</sup> *Secret Nation*, 109 minutes, Newfoundland Independent Film-makers' Co-Operative and Telefilm Canada, 1992. On the use of history in the film, see John Edward FitzGerald, "Newfoundland Politics and Confederation Revisited: Three New Works", *Newfoundland Studies*, 9, 1 (Spring 1993), pp. 103-24.

the loss of nationhood became increasingly prevalent as the 50th anniversary of Confederation approached. In the poetry of Des Walsh, for example, Confederation is depicted as severing the Newfoundland folk from their true identity.<sup>107</sup> Since the mid 1990s, nationalism has become part of mainstream political culture and is a force which can no longer be dismissed as merely a fringe movement confined to the arts community. Prominent members of both the business sector and the provincial government have publicly espoused nationalist views; claiming that Confederation has been a poor deal for Newfoundland, they argue that the 1948 Terms of Union should be re-negotiated.<sup>108</sup> In response to such concerns, the provincial government has established a royal commission to examine Newfoundland's place in Canada and the historical legacy of the Terms of Union.<sup>109</sup>

Within academic history, the debate has centred largely on the referenda, the Terms of Union and the economic impact of Confederation. John FitzGerald has offered an interpretation based on three main arguments: the Terms of Union were negotiated through an extremely unfair and flawed political process; Confederation has not served the province's economic interests; and joining Canada marked the grievous loss of Newfoundland's nationhood.<sup>110</sup> James Overton and Jeff Webb have, among others, challenged FitzGerald's assertions. Overton argues that FitzGerald not only minimizes the degree of poverty in the decades prior to 1949, but also overstates the degree to which rural Newfoundlanders were gullible and easily manipulated by the pro-Confederates.<sup>111</sup> Webb debunks the conspiracy theory that the vote for Confederation was somehow rigged and outlines how nationalist historiography has perpetuated romantic myths rooted in an interpretation of Newfoundlanders as

107 Des Walsh, "March 3, 1999: Notes on an Upcoming Anniversary", *TickleAce: A Journal of Literary and Visual Art*, 37 (2000). The poem was part of a "Special Confederation 50 Issue", edited by Bruce Porter. Walsh's nationalist view of history is not exceptional in the local arts community. In the screenplay "Power of the Unemployed", for example, Chris Brooks and Kathryn Welbourn portrayed the suspension of responsible government in 1934 as the means through which a tyrannical ruling elite oppressed working-class Newfoundlanders. Directed by David Ferry, "Power of the Unemployed" was performed in St. John's by the Resource Centre for the Arts Theatre Company in May 2001.

108 See, inter alia, John Ibbitson, "Newfoundland Looking out to Sea", *The Globe and Mail*, 7 October 2000; Craig Westcott, "New found nationalism: Political and Business elite make the case for a new deal with Canada", *The Express*, 25 February 2001; Dee Murphy, "We Got Gyped: MHA Walter Noel explains why Newfoundland got the raw deal in Confederation with Canada", *Downhomer*, 14, 1 (June 2001), p. 19.

109 Premier Grimes has insisted that separation is "not on the government's agenda". See "Vic Young to head up commission on Confederation", *The Telegram*, 20 April 2002.

110 See John Edward FitzGerald, "The Orthodoxy Unchallenged: On Raymond Blake's *Canadians at Last*", *Newfoundland Studies*, 11, 1 (Spring 1995), pp. 127-44; John Edward FitzGerald, "'The True Father of Confederation': Archbishop E.P. Roche, Term 17, and Newfoundland's Confederation with Canada", *Newfoundland Studies*, 14, 2 (Fall 1998), pp. 188-213; John Edward FitzGerald, "'The Difficult Little Island' That 'Must Be Taken In': Canadian Interests in Newfoundland During World War Two", *Newfoundland Quarterly* (Spring 2001), pp. 21-8.

111 James Overton, "Poverty, Dependence and Self-Reliance: Politics, Newfoundland History and the Amulree Report of 1933", in Garfield Fizzard, ed., *Amulree's Legacy: Truth, Lies and Consequences Symposium, March 2000, Papers and Presentations* (St. John's, 2001), p. 65. See also James Overton, "Economic Crisis and the End of Democracy: Politics in Newfoundland During the Great Depression", *Labour/Le Travail* 26 (1990), pp. 85-124; James Overton, "Academic Populists, the Informal Economy and Those Benevolent Merchants: Politics and Income Security Reform in Newfoundland", *Journal of Peasant Studies*, 28, 1 (October 2000), pp. 1-54.

victims.<sup>112</sup> These issues were discussed during a special conference, “Encounters with the Wolf”, convened to mark the 50th anniversary of Confederation. At the end of the conference Johnston gave a reading from *The Colony of Unrequited Dreams* and afterwards fielded questions about Smallwood.<sup>113</sup>

Lost in the discussion over the accuracy of Johnston’s portrayal of Smallwood has been his treatment of Prowse. The *History* was a central plot device – in the scandal which forces Joey Smallwood from Bishop Feild School, it is used to write the incriminating letter – and Smallwood’s rival is the grandson of Judge Prowse, whom he visits. Johnston depicts Prowse as an old man possessed by history:

It was years since he had done any real work on the revised edition, though he went every day to his study and wrote page after page of illegible scrawl that his family had long since stopped trying to decipher. He had filled hundreds, thousands of pages with this scrawl. It was as if the judge were writing in some type of language of his own invention, the only one in which he could properly complete his book; as if he had advanced in his art to the point of inscrutability and now was writing for no one but himself.<sup>114</sup>

This possession infects Smallwood himself after he leaves Bishop Feild. His father informs him that they were now all ruined because of Prowse’s *History*, which he called The Book. While his father rages against “That cursed Book”, Smallwood compulsively carries it with him throughout his journey of self-discovery.<sup>115</sup> Over the course of the novel, The Book transforms into a type of secular Bible that impels him to seek the truth about the past. The exiled Newfoundlanders are also compared, through the voice of the character Hines, to the wandering Jews:

Hines, in his sermon/column, forever likened Newfoundlanders to the Jews, pointing out parallels between them. There was a “diaspora” of Newfoundlanders, he said, scattered like the Jews throughout the world. He saw himself as their minister, preaching to his flock from his column, most of which began with epigraphs from the Book of Exodus. So often did Hines liken Newfoundlanders to the Jews, we likened him to Moses, asking each other in the morning if Moses had come down from the mountain yet, meaning had he shown up yet for work.<sup>116</sup>

Smallwood himself is depicted as a type of prophet: his arduous journey across the island enlightens him about the plight of his own folk, instilling in him the mission to see them through to the promised land, i.e., Confederation.

The key to the novel is Johnston’s conception of Newfoundland history. In place

112 Jeff Webb, “Confederation, Conspiracy and Choice: A Discussion”, *Newfoundland Studies*, 14, 2 (Fall 1998), pp. 169-87.

113 The symposium was organized by the Newfoundland Historical Society and held in February 1999 at St. John’s. The “Wolf” (i.e. Canada) is an allusion to a verse in a popular anti-confederate song, circa 1869.

114 Johnston, *The Colony of Unrequited Dreams*, p. 49.

115 *Ibid.*, p. 65. See the following chapter titled “The Book”.

116 *Ibid.*, p. 191.

of religion, he gives Smallwood a conscience based on his relationship with history. When readying himself to return from exile, he experiences an epiphany:

I tried to convince myself that I was ready to return, that only by leaving had I learned to live here. But I wondered if I, too, had reached the limits of a leash I had not until now even known I was wearing and was, like my father, coming home not because I wanted to, but because I was being pulled back, *yanked back by the past*.<sup>117</sup>

In Johnston's portrait of both Smallwood and Prowse, history is not a temporal space but rather a spiritual inheritance from which they (and, by extension, all Newfoundlanders) cannot escape. Smallwood assumes the guilt for their collective failure to live up to the greatness of the land, and the scar of history becomes a type of original sin. *The Colony of Unrequited Dreams* is, in many ways, similar to Edmund Morris's controversial fictional biography of Ronald Reagan.<sup>118</sup> Like Morris, Johnston was criticized for projecting too much of himself onto his subject and veering into autobiography.<sup>119</sup> Yet as important as the problem of whether he accurately represents Smallwood is the question of whether he got Prowse right. Prowse might have been haunted in his old age, but his *History* certainly was not: in it he affirmed the capacity of Newfoundlanders to transcend their legacy of oppression and forge a new age of progress. Prowse's cultural memory was not eclipsed by the blurring of the past into the present, and he would have spurned the notion that we are yoked to a tortuous history of misfortune.

With the publication of Kevin Major's survey of Newfoundland history last year, Prowse's legacy has come full circle. Major was careful to integrate recent historical research into his book, but he adopts an essentially traditional framework of virtuous settlers battling against long odds to build a successful society.<sup>120</sup> Like Prowse, his narrative becomes more journalistic as he discusses relatively recent events, such as Clyde Wells's administration, and he offers an optimistic appraisal of the future. Where Prowse took pains to show that the colony was rebounding from the great fire of 1892, Major seeks to show how the province has successfully dealt with the cod moratorium of 1992. He stresses the benefits engendered by offshore oil exploration, but this is not really analogous to Prowse's fervent belief in railways and the telegraph. Though they both believe in progress, for Major the primary engine of change is culture, not technology. As he explains in his preface:

There's a new confidence at work in this province. We are thankfully past the era of looking over our shoulders for direction. We assert our own perspective, lashing back at national media who see us as quaint money-grabbers in Confederation. We seemed to have turned a corner when Clyde Wells faced down the federal government over Meech Lake. Then Brian

117 Ibid., p. 211. My italics.

118 Edmund Morris, *Dutch: A Memoir of Ronald Reagan* (New York, 1999).

119 Stuart Pierson, "Johnston's Smallwood", *Newfoundland Studies*, 14, 2 (1998), pp. 282-300.

120 Major had participated in the wave of historical fiction in the 1990s with his novel *No Man's Land* (Toronto, 1995), which blended together factual and fictitious accounts of the Newfoundland Regiment in the First World War.

Tobin hung foreign fishing practices out to dry. Mary Walsh taking the sword to pompous politicians week after week on national television is clearly a boost. As is Rex Murphy's vocabulary.<sup>121</sup>

Despite the differences in emphasis and style, Prowse would have approved of the faith in progress. His legacy as a historian has been attacked and misrepresented over the past century, but it is still alive and kicking.

The enduring popularity of Prowse's *History* is due, in the final analysis, to its having entered the realm of heritage. Whether it is factually accurate or relies on nationalist legends matters less than its iconic place in Newfoundland culture. With Frank Holden's one-man play, Prowse himself has become a character in the local heritage industry.<sup>122</sup> The role of Prowse's work in the propagation of popular myths is not, in itself, particularly alarming. The problem is that the book exists in a type of cultural no-man's-land, where the line between history and heritage has become muddled.<sup>123</sup> As David Lowenthal explains, this confusion raises important issues:

In domesticating the past we enlist it for present causes. Legends of origin and endurance, of victory or calamity, project the present back, the past forward; they align us with forbears whose virtues we share and whose vices we shun. We are apt to call such communion history, but it is actually heritage. The distinction is vital. History explores and explains pasts grown ever more opaque over time; heritage clarifies pasts so as to infuse them with present purposes.<sup>124</sup>

As a royal commission sets out to assess the province's place in Confederation, it would be wise to keep in mind the difference between history and heritage.

JERRY BANNISTER

121 Kevin Major, *As Near to Heaven by Sea: A History of Newfoundland and Labrador* (Toronto, 2001), p. xiv. Major's proclamation of a new age of confidence should be taken with a grain of salt, since similar pronouncements have appeared regularly over the past 40 years. In 1969 Premier Smallwood himself had declared, "The old inferiority complex is gone . . . and our people now are . . . bold and self-confident, perhaps even cocky". Quoted in Paine, *Political Rhetoric in the New Newfoundland*, p. 7.

122 Frank Holden, *Judge Prowse Presiding: A Play about the Rugged World of 19th Century Newfoundland* (St. John's, 1987), pp. 1-44. The first production of the play was directed by Marion Cheeks and staged at the LSPU Hall in June 1986.

123 More than a thousand copies of the new edition of Prowse's *History* have been sold since April 2002. When asked in a recent interview to comment on problems with securing a supply of Norwegian sealskin book covers, Gavin Will, the publisher of the new edition, claimed: "I think he [Prowse] would say that this is another example of how outsiders have taken advantage of Newfoundland's resources for their own benefit". The newspaper story goes on to assert: "Originally published in 1895, Prowse's *A History of Newfoundland* remains a standard reference book for history buffs and academics curious about the culture and history of the province, and has become widely recognized as one of the finest colonial histories ever written". See Will Hilliard, "Order for sealskin covers takes publisher to Norway", *The Telegram*, 22 July 2002.

124 Lowenthal, *The Heritage Crusade*, p. xv.