

The 1855 Election in Bonavista Bay: An Anglican Perspective

J. K. Hiller

Volume 5, Number 1, Spring 1989

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/nflds5_1doc01

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Faculty of Arts, Memorial University

ISSN

1198-8614 (print)

1715-1430 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this document

Hiller, J. K. (1989). The 1855 Election in Bonavista Bay: An Anglican Perspective. *Newfoundland Studies*, 5(1), 69–76.

DOCUMENT

The 1855 Election in Bonavista Bay: An Anglican Perspective

J.K. HILLER

THE DECADE OF THE 1850s was a period of considerable political and sectarian tension in Newfoundland. The predominantly Roman Catholic Liberal party, actively supported by the Catholic clergy, controlled the House of Assembly, and mounted a campaign for responsible government, which was eventually granted in 1855. The Liberals were supported by most Methodists in the colony. Like the Catholics, Methodists resented the virtual stranglehold which the Anglican establishment held on political power and patronage; they resented the increasing hostility towards nonconformity manifested by the High Church party within the Church of England; and they feared the consequences of Bishop Edward Feild's demand for separate Anglican schools. Many Churchmen saw this as an unholy and treacherous alliance, which would result, under responsible government, in the colony being handed over to Irish Catholic politicians dominated by their priests. Thus they fought responsible government from the opposition seats in the Assembly, and in the Legislative and Executive Councils; and when they saw that the battle was lost, they looked to the future with fear, uncertainty and pessimism.¹

The following document describes some of the events that occurred on the south side of Bonavista Bay during and after the election of May 12, 1855, which inaugurated responsible government. It was written by the Rev. John Moreton, the Anglican missionary at King's Cove, and reflects the deep-

seated fears and prejudices which he shared with many other churchmen. Most Anglican clergy were paid by the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel (SPG), and were required to submit quarterly and annual reports on the state of their missions. Moreton's second-quarter report for 1855 is concerned entirely with the election, which evidently disturbed him a great deal.

Born in London in 1822, Moreton applied to the SPG for a position in Newfoundland in 1852, having been urged to do so by his brother, the Rev. Julian Moreton, who had come to the colony in 1849.² John Moreton was at that time working in London as a solicitor's clerk. The SPG, concerned at his lack of formal education and his apparently uncertain health, refused to accept him as a missionary, but he went to Newfoundland at his own expense.³ After training and ordination in St. John's, Moreton was sent to King's Cove in 1853.

The mission extended from Salvage to Knight's Cove, and contained a population of about 3,000, of whom half were members of the Church of England, the balance being Roman Catholics. The rest of Bonavista Bay, which under a new distribution of seats returned three members to the Assembly instead of one as before, was almost entirely Protestant.⁴ Thus Moreton found himself living among a substantial Roman Catholic population which formed the core of Liberal support in the district. King's Cove itself, with a population of 473 was 68% Catholic; Keels (pop. 454) 41%; Open Hall (or Hole, pop. 193) 57%; and Broad Cove (pop. 265) 100%.⁵ The bay as a whole was a Conservative bastion, and that party's candidates could expect to receive strong Anglican and mercantile support. But in the King's Cove mission, Father Matthew Scanlon decided to promote a Liberal candidate, James Stewart. His chances were slim, but if Moreton is to be believed, Scanlon hoped that a judicious mixture of luck, bad weather and intimidation would squeak Stewart into the Assembly.

Father Scanlon was a forceful character. P.K. Devine, the historian of King's Cove, wrote that "short, stocky and rotund, he ruled his parish by fear," his flock being subdued by "The energy of his unwieldy swagger, the sullenness of his thick-lidded eyes, and the pugnacious set of his lower lip."⁶ Stewart was a Scot who had come to King's Cove, probably in the 1830s, as a bookkeeper for the firm of James MacBraire and Company. The firm closed in the early 1840s, and Stewart eked out a living as a teacher in the Protestant school. For all that, he had a certain local status as a J.P., a member of the road and school boards, and through his marriage to Rebecca Brown, daughter of William Brown, a substantial local trader. Long settled at King's Cove, Brown had represented Bonavista Bay in the first House of Assembly (1832-6), though apparently illiterate and a poor speaker.⁷

Of the three Conservative candidates, two had previously represented the bay. Robert Carter had for a long time been a prominent figure in New-

foundland society and politics, becoming Colonial Treasurer in 1849.⁸ He had sat for Bonavista Bay from 1842 to 1852, when he had been succeeded by another of the 1855 candidates, John H. Warren, a St. John's merchant.⁹ The third candidate, whom Moreton does not name, was a lawyer, Matthew Walbank.¹⁰ This trio had an easy election. But in the King's Cove area there was evidently a significant amount of violence and intimidation as Father Scanlon and his allies did their best to elect Stewart. The incidents which Moreton describes are reminiscent of those reported from Conception Bay twenty years earlier,¹¹ and reflect the deep racial and religious animosities which lay beneath the surface of Newfoundland society.

It might also be argued that such actions were an expression on the political stage of hostility to a colonial and local elite that was traditionally both English and Protestant. Part of that elite, Moreton saw himself as an isolated pillar of righteousness set amid a swamp of ungodliness, ready to suffer if need be for his church and faith. From the evidence of his later reports, however, it seems that his apocalyptic fears for the future soon passed. Though he complained bitterly of what he perceived as Catholic bias in the funding of local schools, and protested when Stewart was rewarded for his candidacy with a teaching position in a new Catholic school, he rapidly came to terms with the new political regime, which made little difference to his day-to-day life. In any event, Moreton soon became preoccupied with his health. In 1858 he was complaining that his physical strength was "much impaired and shattered," mentioning a persistent cough, bronchitis, pleurisy and shortness of breath.¹² He blamed this on a poor outharbour diet, "not tasting fresh meat for months together and even an Egg or a drop of Milk not procurable except for a Short Season or on rare occasions."¹³ By the summer of 1859 Moreton was dying. His brother Julian visited him in August: "It was, we knew too well, our last intercourse upon earth," Julian wrote.¹⁴ John Moreton died at King's Cove on October 10, 1859.¹⁵

Mission of King's Cove Quarterly Report to 30th June, 1855.¹⁶

In the past Quarter I find nothing extraordinary to communicate unless the conduct of our Romish neighbours during & subsequent to the late political changes.

Statesmen at home I believe to be all profoundly ignorant concerning the affairs of this poor Colony or such a tissue of falsehoods or misrepresentations would never be unanswered or even ventured to be uttered as I read some months since in a speech of Mr. Scully¹⁷ in the House of Commons.

I remember 15 years ago seeing a letter in the Times from the Revd. Sir Harcourt Lees¹⁸ of Dublin concerning several alleged Incendiary Fires as, the Houses of Parliament, the Exchange & the Tower Armoury, in which that Gentleman after adverting to Papineau's Conspiracy in

Canada, solemnly warned the British Government of a deep laid plot for subverting the Government of this Island in which he named Dr. Fleming¹⁹ (the late Romish V.A.) and a Father Troy²⁰ as the chief conspirators. The public was rather startled at these revelations, but our Rulers were unmoved & politicians laughed at the story & asserted that the Revd. Bart. was a maniac.

But whether Sir Harcourt Lees was sane or insane is of little moment: the Romanists have been allowed to develop & mature their schemes until at length they have completely obtained the ascendancy *politically*: and I think it will be seen in time, not only *so*.

I too will venture to prophecy (even at the risk of being called insane) and I feel confident in the assertion that no very great time will elapse before at least an attempt will be made to annex this Island to the American Union.

The population of this Island may be about 100,000 and according to the Census of 1845 the Protestants were in a majority of about 3,000. Yet so well instructed & drilled were the Romans and so ignorant & indifferent & divided the Protestants that in the late House of Assembly the former had 9 representatives and the latter only 6. With this majority the Rebels defied the Governor & Council and stopped the Supplies, so that for the past 12 Months, Magistrates, Constables, &c, and poor Schoolmasters have been kept out of their Stipends and we have also been deprived of our Circuit Courts, so that Criminals go at large unpunished. Last Summer, while I was in St. John's attending the Bishop's Visitation a party of Romans returning to Tickle Cove from a Wake at Open Hole effected an entrance into the Church at Red Cliff, broke the Windows, the Reading Desk, the Altar Railing, and danced in the Church. And when the Constable (who is also Schoolmaster and Lay Reader at Tickle Cove) spoke to some of them concerning it, they beat him most unmercifully, threw him down, kicked him, and it is supposed broke some of his ribs, & for many days his life was in danger. The Magistrate was also thrown down in the fray. Yet, from the stoppage of Supplies, there was no Circuit of the Judges last Fall and the Offenders go yet unpunished, save the mockery of the Priest having pretended to give one man "*the Stick*."

Having obtained from the British Government the concession of Responsible Government and passed a Bill increasing the Representation from 15 to 30 Members (who receive each £60 a Session & promise *two* Sessions in the year) they proceeded to a General Election on Saturday the 12th of May.

Bonavista Bay returns 3 Members. Three Candidates were in the field. Mr. Carter, a former Representative of the Bay & Colonial Treasurer; Mr. Warren, the late Member; and another Gentleman²¹ who had great influence from his connexions. It was hopeless for a Roman Catholic to attempt to oppose as the Protestants in the whole Bay number about three fourths of the population. Yet as early as the month of January, the Priest,²² resident then in Bonavista, now here, induced a very needy man,²³ once a Book-keeper in the days of King's Cove's prosperity, but now without the means to preserve his family from starvation, but who occupies the position of J.P. here, an *occasional* attendant at Church but an inveterate drunkard and the constant companion of the Priest — this man, I say, the Priest induced to contest the Election and he accordingly commences his Canvass *on Sunday* the 21st January when, after coming to Church in the morning he spent the afternoon in canvassing at Broad Cove. No effort or intrigue was at all spared to obtain his return, but though by Marriage connected with a vast number of Protestants on this side of the Bay — his Father-in-law²⁴ alone having 80 Grandchildren & 30 or 40 Great Grandchildren & the old man also possessing much influence having once been Member for the Bay — the Protestants were more than suspicious and except from the Methodists of Bonavista where he attended Meeting during his canvass, he obtained very small support beyond that of the party who put him forward. But the population is scattered — very many reside on the numerous Islands with which the Bay is studded, and neither these nor a large portion of those on the main would be able to vote if the wind or weather should not be propitious on the polling day, and at the former Election the Writ was not received in time on the North side. Then the Romans are almost all located on the Western side of the

Bay within my Mission. So calculating on these chances as regarded the north, & relying on their power to intimidate the few Protestants in this quarter, they went to the Poll.

At Open Hole, where the Priest was present at the doors, not a single vote was allowed against their Candidate on *pain of death*, but a few escaped to Salvage (an exclusively Protestant Settlement) by Boat & there recorded their Votes. At Kiels the Protestants were outnumbered by the presence of the entire population of Broad Cove, which is all Romish. Here not only was no one allowed to vote against their man, but several Protestants were dragged from their houses, carried to the Booth, and *compelled to vote for him*. One family had their Boat in order to go to St. John's for their summer supplies, & lest they should put in & vote at Bonavista on their way, the rebels took away the Rudder, which was not restored until night after the Poll was closed, and they were forced to man the Boat with three guns all day to prevent further damage. Here in King's Cove the Romans number two thirds of the population and these were reinforced by the Settlers from Stock Cove and Knight's Cove. The Mob took possession of the Polling place & refused admittance to any who did not give a vote to their man. Only two votes were taken against him, the first was an old man over 70 whom they were going to maltreat but one of them begged them to spare his gray hairs: the other, William Samson, arrived out of Clode Sound late in the day — he is 62 years of age and afflicted with Palsy. The instant he had given his vote the mob carried him off by the arms and legs to the Landwash, and with horrid yells & filthy language *threw him into the Sea*. Not another Protestant was out of doors, being too terrified to appear, but I went down myself into the midst of the mob to look for the Ringleader, a Merchant or rather Pedlar here, in order to prevent this, but he had absented himself. I was instantly surrounded & ordered to go up to my house, then one collared me & threatened to "run me by the neck to the Landwash," which the rest seemed ready to do, but upon my boldly commanding him to take his hand off, he did so, but threatened me savagely and poked his finger several times in my face. I am informed he has since told people that I should have been worse used, *but that they believed I carried Pistols!* He has since uttered abominable threats against me.

Twice a month after morning service here I walk to Kiels (5 miles), Broad Cove lying about midway on the Road, and ever since last Fall they have threatened to "cut my coat tails off" as I pass by Broad Cove, because I married a girl from that place to my Schoolmaster here, she conforming to the Church of England. I never regarded these threats and have done much for the Romanists since then, attending many of them when sick & giving them Medicines, there being no Doctor here, and being also sole acting Commissioner for Relief of the Poor during the Winter when their Priest was dead, and they all acknowledge that many of them must have perished but for my judicious husbanding of the Government Meal & Molasses. It is very few Protestants here look for Government relief.

Now however there could be no question as to the danger I incurred in travelling & friends endeavored to dissuade me from walking along as heretofore, but on Sunday, the day after the Election, in the afternoon, I set out for Kiels as usual. My Wife implored me to take some one with me, but what would that avail if the Romans should attack me in force, and if not, it would only be an evidence of fear, besides, like Ezra, "I was ashamed to require a band."

In Kiels, Broad Cove, & King's Cove, I was mobbed, hooted, cursed & insulted, but experienced no personal violence.

Next morning I left by a Boat going to Flat Island whence I hoped to find a passage to Salvage. The Irish manned the Rocks along the Cove and yelled after the Boat until we were out of hearing. I visited Salvage, Barrow Harbour & Little Harbour, and the following Saturday getting a passage to Red Cliff returned home down the Shore on Sunday night (after performing services at Red Cliff & Tickle Cove) with the intention of proceeding in a Boat which I had heard would leave King's Cove for St. John's next morning, where I intended to proceed against the party who assaulted me, but on my arrival home, finding by letters from one of the Members, that the Stipendiary Magistrate²⁵ at Bonavista was coming over to take my deposition, I delayed; and from that time to this I have never heard from him, but it is well known that he *dares*

not come for fear, and if he did come he could only command one (Romish) Constable here and one he might bring with him who is *Uncle to the Culprit*.

On the night of the 22nd a small Schooner belonging to Salvage put in here from stress of weather. At 2 in the morning all hands were below when a large party who had been all night on board a Romish Vessel belonging here boarded them, battered down the Companion, sawed the masts almost off above board & cut away the rigging on one side. The Master fired a gun through the Skylight and the villains decamped & a few hours after their Vessel went out & endeavored to run down a Bonavista Boat. But all this is nothing to what they threaten to do on the Labrador this Summer.

On Friday the 25th as soon as it was dark there was a procession and great shouting, the occasion unknown, and two guns were fired in front of the houses of the Protestants, and on Sunday the 27th after most people were in bed a Tar barrel was fired under the side of a large Boat belonging to one of my people which was hauled up on the Beach.

On Wednesday the 30th the Doctor²⁶ was fetched from Bonavista to a young man who had a fever, and after meeting him at the house of the sick man, I called with him during the Evening on several Patients and ultimately upon the Wife of the Pedlar before mentioned who was also a patient of his and who by visiting my sick parishioner the previous day I thought had evidenced a desire to be at peace. It was after 9 at night but the Doctor was for leaving early in the morning. Coming out from this house, upon opening the Garden Gate, I discovered a line tied from post to post with the intention of throwing me down the steps, and a man round the corner of the fence about to dart forward but who drew back when he found himself foiled. I carried the line in doors & showed it to the Mistress of the house, who expressed great surprize that such ill-feeling should continue "after the Election was over" — she never knew it so in Ireland. We then started for my house, we proceeded about a dozen yards, where the Fish-flakes extend over & darken the Road or footpath, here a man with his fists clenched & raised to conceal his countenance and having a large knife in his right hand sprang from behind a shed and rushed upon me, the knife apparently directed at my eyes. I made a sudden bound aside and most providentially escaped the mischief intended. I ran back towards the Gate, where the woman still stood, & called to her to mark the man as he ran by. The Doctor thinking the fellow had hold of me, struck him with his Stick over the back, and he fled. Again we started. When we came to the dark Avenue the Doctor ran, and as I came after, a pailfull of Water came down from the flake overhead, but fell short at my feet. The Romanists boast that it was *Boiling Water!*

The Doctor returned home next morning being hooted as he left. He called on the Stipendiary Magistrate and related the whole to him, and asked him why he did not go over to take Depositions? His reply was, "*Because if I go there, I am powerless to do anything.*"

Here's protection for British Subjects upon British Soil! Why if the like were to be enacted against and Englishman at Dunkirk or Trieste or any other foreign port, we should straightway hear of a bombardment.

I have been further threatened lately, even in my own house!

The Priest, too, some days after the above attempts to assassinate me, had the audacity to go into the house of one of my flock, an aged man, and *shaking his Stick in the old man's face*, for not supporting their Candidate at the Election, he added, "*And Moreton had better take care of himself.*"

I remember a similar threat by the late Priest (Father Waldron) since dead, that "*it should be the worse for me.*" Of this I was informed by the very man who now contested the Election (James Stewart).

The Winter is the Season most to be dreaded. At present the Romans are nearly all about on the Labrador.

Still I persevere; and have told some of them that I am not to be intimidated nor shall anything deter me from the performance of my duty unless they actually *take my life*.

The Romanists aided by the treachery of the Wesleyans, having obtained a majority in

the House have expelled all the Ministers & Government Officials & divided the honors & emoluments amongst themselves. So we are now without law.

I trust that God Who has delivered me from so many dangers will yet deliver me from the hands of these Philistines!

But to prevent the calamity of a war — civil and religious — which appears inevitable; Is the British Government really powerless? Something should be done to arouse the attention of the Authorities at home.

12th July 1855

John Moreton

Notes

¹For accounts of this period, see Gunn, Greene, and Jones.

²Julian Moreton (1825-1900) served in Newfoundland, mainly at Greenspond in Bonavista Bay, from 1849 to 1861, and then in Labuan and Penang before returning to England in 1874. He wrote a book on his experiences in Newfoundland; see Moreton.

³John Moreton's application and associated correspondence can be found in the SPG papers, series C, Box 11/27 (mfm., Public Archives of Newfoundland and Labrador—PANL).

⁴*Census of Newfoundland, 1857*; and annual statistical reports of the King's Cove mission, 1855 and 1859, in SPG papers, series E.

⁵*Census of Newfoundland, 1857*.

⁶Devine 38-9. Moreton does not identify Scanlon in the report.

⁷Devine 10, 55, 65-6; Tocque 26; Matthews.

⁸Robert Carter (1791-1872) was active in politics from 1832 to 1865. He represented Bonavista Bay for a second term in 1855-9, and then moved to the district of Fortune Bay. See Hiller.

⁹John H. Warren (1812-85) was a prominent St. John's merchant whose insolvency in 1851 apparently precipitated his move into politics. He was a member for Bonavista Bay in 1852-69, and again in 1874-8. He became a Legislative Councillor in 1878. See Baker; Name Files, Maritime History Archive (MHA), Memorial University of Newfoundland.

¹⁰Little is known of Walbank (1824-74) except that he represented Bonavista Bay (1855-65), and later became Chief Clerk and Registrar of the Supreme Court. Gunn incorrectly identifies him as a planter (200). Name Files, MHA.

¹¹See Little.

¹²“Quarterly Report to Lady Day, 1858,” SPG papers, series E.

¹³Quarterly Report, 30/9/55, SPG papers, series E.

¹⁴Quarterly Report, 31/12/59, SPG papers, series E.

¹⁵Quarterly Report, 31/12/59 (William Kirby), SPG papers, series E.

¹⁶SPG papers, series E, Missionaries' Reports, 1853-9, Diocese of Newfoundland (mfm., PANL).

¹⁷Vincent Scully (1810-71), Irish lawyer and MP for Cork, 1852-7 and 1859-65. He wrote a number of pamphlets on the Irish land question.

¹⁸Sir Harcourt Lees (1776-1852) wrote pamphlets in support of the Protestant ascendancy in Ireland.

¹⁹Michael Anthony Fleming (1792-1850) came to Newfoundland from Ireland as a priest in 1823, and became Bishop in 1830. He actively supported the Liberal party. See Lahey.

²⁰Father Edward Troy (1797-1872) was active in the Liberal cause during the 1830s. See Creighton.

²¹Matthew Walbank.

²²Father Matthew Scanlon.

²³James Stewart.

²⁴William Brown.

²⁵William Sweetland (1798-1864) had been stipendiary magistrate at Bonavista since 1836. *Blue Book*, PANL.

²⁶The doctor referred to here must have been a member of the Skelton family of Bonavista, but it is unclear which one. Dr. John Skelton died in 1859, aged 68. Two of his sons, George (b. 1828) and John (b. 1830) also became doctors, and both practiced in Newfoundland. I am grateful to Mr. David Bradley for this information.

References

Blue Book, 1855. PANL.

Baker, Melvin. "Warren, John Henry." In *Dictionary of Canadian Biography* (DCB), vol. 11. Ed. Frances G. Halpenny and Jean Hamelin. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1982, 910-11.

Census of Newfoundland, 1857.

Creighton, Phyllis. "Troy, Edward." In DCB, vol. 10. Ed. Marc La Terreur. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1972, 687-8.

Greene, John P. "The Influence of Religion in the Politics of Newfoundland, 1850-1861". Diss. Memorial University of Newfoundland, 1970.

Gunn, Gertrude E. *The Political History of Newfoundland 1832-1864*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1966.

Hiller, James. "Carter, Robert." In DCB, vol. 10. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1972, 141.

Jones, Frederick. "Bishop Feild, a Study in Politics and Religion in 19th Century Newfoundland." Diss. Cambridge University, 1972.

Lahey, Raymond. "Fleming, Michael Anthony." In DCB, vol. 7. Ed. Halpenny and Hamelin. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1988, 292-9.

Lawton, J.T. and P.K. Devine. *Old King's Cove*. n.p.: n.p., 1944.

Little, Linda. "Plebeian Collective Action in Harbour Grace and Carbonear, Newfoundland, 1830-1840." Diss. Memorial University of Newfoundland, 1984.

Matthews, Keith. "MacBraire, James." In DCB, vol. 6. Ed. Halpenny and Hamelin. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987, 417-20.

Moreton, Julian. *Life and Work in Newfoundland; Reminiscences of Thirteen Years Spent There*. London: Rivingtons, 1863.

SPG papers, Series E, Missionaries' Reports, 1853-9, Diocese of Newfoundland, mfm. PANL.

Tocque, Philip, comp. *The Newfoundland Almanack, for the Year of Our Lord 1849*. St. John's: the author, 1849.