

Dictionary of Newfoundland and Labrador Biography. Eds.
Robert H. Cuff, Melvin Baker, and Robert D. W. Pitt.

William McKim

Volume 6, Number 1, Spring 1990

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/nflds6_1rv01

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Faculty of Arts, Memorial University

ISSN

1198-8614 (print)

1715-1430 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

McKim, W. (1990). Review of [*Dictionary of Newfoundland and Labrador Biography*. Eds. Robert H. Cuff, Melvin Baker, and Robert D. W. Pitt.] *Newfoundland Studies*, 6(1), 122–125.

REVIEWS

Dictionary of Newfoundland and Labrador Biography. Eds. Robert H. Cuff, Melvin Baker, and Robert D. W. Pitt. St. John's: Harry Cuff Publications Ltd., 1990. vi, 408 p. \$49.95.

WILLIAM MCKIM

WHILE I WAS WAITING in a doctor's office the other day, boredom forced me to scan an ancient copy of *Maclean's* magazine. There I found an essay by Ray Guy. Since I was struggling to write this review at the time, one passage in the Guy article caught my attention. "Newfoundland has scads of history, but little of it is formalized between hard covers," he wrote. "We have to make do with a sort of thick stew of anecdotes, ancient and modern, a sort of free form tribal memory."

This is true; there is not enough written about our past and the lives of the interesting characters who populated it, and very little of what is written is in a form that is easily accessible. The *Dictionary of Newfoundland and Labrador Biography* (DNLB) is an attempt to fill that void. It claims to be a "modest attempt." Compared to its national counterpart, the *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, this is also true.

I suppose it is only natural that the first interest of most people who look at a book like the DNLB is to find out who is there and who is not. I spent a while thumbing through its pages checking out this and that person, but before I get to that, let me tell you something about the basic organization of the book.

The DNLB is a single volume of about 400 pages, printed in a readable type and attractively bound with a shiny red and black hard cover. Each of the 1,500 biographies provides us with the year and place of birth and death. The DNLB also lists the dates and terms of church and government appointments; election to public office; and leadership of unions, political

parties, and public service organizations. Also listed are awards and honours, publication of books, establishment of business enterprises, and other such worthy endeavours and accomplishments. For most entries it then goes on to provide a brief narrative description of the person's life, career, and contribution to Newfoundland and Labrador.

The first thing I noticed was that there seem to be some inconsistencies between the biographies. We are always provided with the year of birth, but for many biographies the birthdate is missing. In addition, there is some ambiguity about places. Some entries designate "London, England," while others simply say "London," which could mean London, Ontario. We are told who the person was married to, who his (or her) parents were, and who his (or her) children were, only if said spouse, parent, or offspring are also in the DNLB. This is unfortunate because one important use of a volume of this nature would be to help the reader unravel the complex relationships within and between Newfoundland's old influential families.

The narrative summaries are usually brief, and range deservedly from nothing at all for William R. Smallwood to three and a half pages for Joseph R. Smallwood. Most are a paragraph or two. This brevity is a bit unsatisfying, but it is to be expected when 1,500 biographies are fitted into a single volume.

The DNLB has an extensive cross index of biographies according to area of contribution or profession (medical, civil servant, writer, athlete, etc.), geographic region, and religion (a typical Newfoundland touch). It even has a separate list of women (but not men). I suspect that compiling this index presented the editors with no problem. It would not surprise me if such lists were kept from the start to make sure that no region, religion, or professional group would be slighted by having one or two fewer entries than some other, but then I'm an incurable cynic.

I did a quick, unscientific accuracy check, with surprising results. I chose five people I know who are listed in the DNLB and sent them a copy of their biography, requesting comments on accuracy and appropriateness. All five found at least one error. These errors ranged from a subtle difference in interpretation of fact to the misspelling of the person's name. The DNLB also seems to have a problem with dates. These five people identified three incorrect dates: one date was in error by one year, a second was out by ten years, and the third was thirteen years off. Two of my informants had written several books and both indicated that the DNLB missed at least one of them. In one case, a book coauthored by two people appeared in the biography of one author, but was missing from the biography of the other. These five biographies were compiled by three different contributors. I suppose the five might not be representative of the other 1,495, but my little experiment certainly does not inspire the sort of confidence in the DNLB we might reasonably expect. The problem may lie in the fact that the biographies in

general are not compiled from original sources. These errors may reflect either transcription errors or errors in other secondary sources.

In case anyone is wondering about the identity of BKJ, the initials appearing after a dozen or so entries (including A. S. Bursey, A. B. Garrigus, and E. Vaters), he is Burton K. Janes, whose name is not given on the contributors' page.

While I am not impressed by its accuracy, I rate this book highly on browse value. Idly thumbing through its pages, I have come across many interesting facts I was not aware of before. Did you know, for example, that early in his career Geoff Sterling was actually a correspondent for *Time* and the *Chicago Tribune*? Father Duffy's Well was a place of significance for me during my student days, but I had not realized who Father Duffy was until I read the DNLB, which gives a brief account of the priest's battles with a prominent St. Mary's merchant. Believe it or not, I had never heard of Wilson Kettle before I read the DNLB. There is a man who made a significant contribution to the province!

Now the part that I'm sure most of you are interested in — who's in and who's out? The dictionary attempts to cover the last 500 years of Newfoundland history. This is a bit overambitious for a single volume, especially if it only includes 1,500 entries. It is inevitable that many deserving individuals have been left out. In the foreword, the editors list their selection criteria. In order to be included, a person would have to have made a significant contribution to, or had an impact on, developments in Newfoundland and Labrador. The definition of "significant contribution" is provided only for politicians. In that case a significant contribution means being either Premier or Prime Minister, or sitting in the House for ten years. Unfortunately, the editors leave out Newfoundlanders who have achieved prominence outside Newfoundland if their accomplishments had no direct impact on the province. This means that people like Gwynne Dyer, for example, are not mentioned.

Given the vague nature of these criteria, it is not surprising that it is difficult to predict who you will find in the DNLB. I suppose this whole process might be thought of as a big Rorschach Inkblot Test. Each of us, if asked to come up with names of people who we think made significant contributions would generate a unique list. Such a list, however, would tell a good deal about the perspective and values of its creator. So it is with the editors of the DNLB — and so it will be with me when I tell you who I think is missing. This is fair. Any review probably tells as much about the reviewer as the reviewee.

Here are some of the entries that appear, to me at least, to be anomalies. We find that John Nolan, Ted Withers, and Bob Cole are there, but Bob Lewis, Aubrey MacDonald, and Rex Murphy are not. Dorothy Inglis is there, but Ed Smith and Bob Nutbeem are not. Father Jim Hickey is there, but

Sister Nolasco (Mulcahy) is not. Morley Hodder is there, but Hans Rollmann, Lynn Jackson, Michael Langford, and John Scott are not. Denis Parker is there, but Neil Rosenberg is not. Max Dyke is there, but Gonzo Gillingham is not. Most politicians of interest (and many of no interest) are there, but the unbelievable omission of Senator Eugene Forsey must be noted.

Men of the cloth appear on nearly every page, but scientists are as scarce as hen's teeth. This is probably because many branches of science have no regional interest. We find that giant squid researcher Fred Aldrich is there, but whale man Jon Lien, and Art May, distinguished biologist and expert on North Atlantic cod stocks (former head of the Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council and now President of MUN), are not. In fact, Newfoundland's only Nobel Prize nominee, Ranjit Chandra, has been ignored.

All this leads me to suggest that this book could be the basis of a good party game. You might, for example, provide guests with a list of politicians, lawyers, etc., and have them guess which ones are in the DNLB and which ones are not.

If you are the sort of person who rushes out and buys your own personal copy of every Newfoundland reference book some scholar feels compelled to compile, if your sense of patriotism requires you to have your own copy of the *Dictionary of Newfoundland English*, *Family Names of the Island of Newfoundland*, and Smallwood's *Encyclopedia of Newfoundland and Labrador*, then your library will be incomplete without a copy of the DNLB. But if you anticipate using it for any purpose other than gracing your coffee table or playing party games, I suggest that you wait for the next edition and let your local library invest in this one. At the very least you should do an accuracy check of your own and determine whether the little errors detected by my informants are isolated to a few entries or are symptomatic of a more general problem with the book.

The DNLB is something I would browse through in a bookstore, to the point of being told by a salesperson that patrons were not permitted to bring ice cream into the store, but I do not think that I would fork over the \$50.00 for my own personal copy.