

***Living on the Edge: The Great Northern Peninsula of Newfoundland.* Lawrence F. Felt and Peter Sinclair, eds.**

Melvin Firestone

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## MELVIN FIRESTONE

THIS VOLUME IS COMPRISED of papers dealing with the nature of, and problems of accommodation to, contemporary life in an area of economic marginality. Unemployment on the Great Northern Peninsula is more than three times as great as in Canada as a whole and the service sector less well developed. The average income for individuals is low compared to Newfoundland as a whole, and family incomes are around seventy percent of the Canadian median. Whereas dependence on transfer payments is 11.1 percent in Canada as a whole, and 21.2 in Newfoundland, it is 32.2 percent on the Great Northern Peninsula.

Despite the material difficulties of life suggested by these facts, residents of the area have made a "relatively successful adaptation" based on "flexibility, substitution, and co-operation." The first reflects the ability of individuals to perform various jobs as needed and to manifest a diversity of survival skills. The second refers to "the widespread substitution of personal labour for purchased goods and services, particularly in dwelling construction, food acquisition and a wide range of service activities." The third has to do with the great amount of unpaid mutual aid in the area (for which no specific return is expected two-thirds of the time).

The papers can be divided into those which are based entirely or largely upon household surveys and those based upon ethnographic study. One, however, an evaluation of the Great Northern Peninsula Development Corporation, is based upon the research the authors did for yearly evaluation reports of the GNPDC and knowledge acquired over a decade of research in the area.

The household survey was done in 1988 in 250 households in thirty-six communities and incorporated districts over the Peninsula. The papers so derived are the Introduction, by Lawrence Felt and Peter Sinclair, which deals with theory, changes in the fishery, changes in occupational structure, and demography. "Home

*Sweet Home: Dimensions and Determinants of Life Satisfaction*” by Felt, Kathleen Murphy, and Sinclair, reports that people of the area state a high degree of contentment in their lives based upon family and kin involvement, access to the outdoors for fishing, hunting, and general recreation, and living in a place relatively free of crime. They also feel that to obtain as high a level of satisfaction in an urban area would require higher degrees of skill and training than most of them possess. Nonetheless, people are concerned about their futures, given the collapse of fish stocks and their dependence upon government transfer payments. I am sure that had the survey been done after the fishing moratorium went into effect even more grave concerns would have been voiced. As a dragger skipper said to me in August, 1992, “I won’t starve but I hate to see everything I have built up over the years destroyed.”

“*Everyone Does It: Unpaid Work and Household Reproduction,*” by Felt, Murphy and Sinclair, discusses the extensive number of owner built homes and the large amount of self-provisioning (hunting, berry-picking, wood-cutting, vegetable gardening, auto-repairs, etc.) in the area. A strong division of labor by gender continues on the Great Northern Peninsula.

“*A Long Holiday with Pay?: Youth employment on the Edge,*” by William O’Grady, a study carried out in the St. Anthony area, challenges the idea that young people are uninterested or uncommitted to work. The work ethic remains strong among youth, especially among women and the youngest of both sexes interviewed. But, probably due to experiences with jobs that are low paying and intrinsically unrewarding, those with more employment experience are less committed to work.

“*Is Locally Controlled Development Possible?*” by Felt and Sinclair, is an analysis of the Great Northern Peninsula Development Corporation describing its organizational problems and its departing from local control in the name of business efficiency. The prediction of serious problems for the future, in 1991, when the paper was written, is amended in the Postscript (222) in which it is reported that the Corporation is doing fairly well today.

The ethnographically based papers are, first, “*The Troubled Fishery: Conflicts, Decisions and Fishery Policy,*” by Craig Palmer, who states that problems in the fishery are functions of conflicts among various sectors within it and the ineffective management and support of the Canadian government — and that people feel cut off from effective participation in the development of policy.

Another is “*Living Off the Land,*” by John Omohundro, which discusses the intricacies of gardening, hunting and gathering, animal husbandry, and trapping on the GNP through a contrast of these activities in Main Brook, Conche, and Plum Point. He finds changes in subsistence production linked to larger social and cultural change in the area.

“*Growing Female Roots in Patrilocal Soil: Cod Traps, Fish Plants, and Changing Attitudes Toward Women’s Property Rights,*” by Palmer, describes how

the strong tradition of patrilineal inheritance in the area which contributes to a lack of property rights for women is diminishing somewhat. The change is related to the decline in the inshore fishery which was based upon household labour and led to inheritance by men of fishing equipment and cod trap "berths."

"Maternal Politics: Women's Political Strategies in a Logging Town," by Murphy, shows how in "Northeast Brook" women have been able to take on important political roles in spite of a strong patriarchal tradition. They have been able to do this by extending the legitimate image of women as nurturing mothers and wives into the political sphere.

The volume is well integrated despite the fact that the papers are based on different methods. In fact, the ethnographic material may serve to correct an implicit problem of questionnaires — the difference between what is reported and what is done. This is the case when Omohundro (118) reports that in Main Brook trades and sales are common despite a great frequency of unpaid help and suggests that the greater degree of unpaid help than is reported, in the chapter on unpaid work and household reproduction, may be the result of people being uncomfortable reporting in interviews activities that "smack of close calculation instead of neighbourly generosity. And too, there is sensitivity about income not reported for taxation."

Another methodological problem relates to a footnote (234) to "Maternal Politics: Women's Political Strategies in a Logging Town" by Murphy:

2. The women I met in Northeast Brook and the relationships between us were like those I had known earlier with other Newfoundland women and against which I had measured the ethnographies of Faris, Firestone and Matthews. Perhaps it is not fair to compare my experience of these women in the mid-1970s in a relatively urban community with the rural experiences of Faris and Firestone in the 1960s, but their comments, which were not sensitive to the issues of gender and feminism, had painted Newfoundland women as submissive second class citizens.

Faris' (1972) and Firestone's (1967) monographs were written in those days of ignorance when the masculine bias in anthropology was not as realized as it is today; however, neither of us were speaking of Newfoundland women in general, merely what we saw in two small, isolated outports. Long ago Wix (quoted in Tucker 1886:278) spoke of the behavioural variation that was to be found even in adjacent Newfoundland communities and even today some women in the Strait of Belle Isle region speak of variations in degree of patriarchy in communities in the area. Whether Newfoundland women have been, still are, or are not, submissive, or are in seeming subordination, merely playing an overt role which belies actual power (Porter 1993:50), is yet to be determined — both in general and in local variation.

This book is essential for an understanding of contemporary life in the area. But its scope is not only local as in various chapters there are discussions of how the knowledge obtained influences theory in the social sciences.

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