

***White Tie and Decorations. Sir John and Lady Hope Simpson in Newfoundland, 1934-1936.* Peter Neary, ed.**

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J.K. HILLER

THE DEPRESSION precipitated a serious financial crisis in Newfoundland, and by late 1932 default on the public debt was a real possibility. Alarmed by the possible repercussions, the British government appointed a royal commission chaired by Lord Amulree, and events began to move with almost indecent speed. Amulree and his colleagues produced a report recommending what the British government had decided would be the best solution: the suspension of responsible government and its replacement by an appointed commission, in return for the rescheduling of, and a guarantee on the public debt. The report minimised the impact of the Depression, and placed great emphasis on what was described as a history of misguided, incompetent and corrupt government. The deal was bulldozed through the Newfoundland legislature, which voted itself into temporary oblivion, and passed the British Parliament without difficulty. The contrast with the interminable deliberations of royal commissions and other enquiries in our own era is very striking.

Early in 1934 the Commission of Government took office, consisting of three British and three local appointees, chaired by the governor. The Commission remained in charge until 1949, far longer than anyone had expected. It constitutes a unique episode in British imperial history, and deserves more attention than it has received; but since political history is as unfashionable in Canada as straight-forward dominions history has become in imperial history circles, this is hardly surprising. Only Peter Neary, deeply interested in politics and bureaucracy, has adopted the Commission as a subject of serious analysis. His important monograph, *Newfoundland in the North Atlantic World, 1929-1949* (1988), presented a positive and detailed view of the Commission which was in marked contrast to earlier, more negative assessments.

The first phase of Commission government, from 1934 to the outbreak of war in 1939, is of particular interest. This was the period in which an experimental

government, rushed into existence, was searching to define what it could and should do. These letters, written by one of the first British commissioners and his wife, provide a human counterpoint to Neary's earlier narrative, and a singular viewpoint on the early Commission years.

The Hope Simpsons arrived in Newfoundland in February 1934, and left in September 1936. Sir John [JHS], well into his sixties, came to take up the post of Commissioner for Natural Resources. Both he and his wife (known as Quita [QHS]) came from the commercial *haute bourgeoisie* of northern England. Oxbridge-educated and well-read, they came from Nonconformist backgrounds, later becoming low-church Anglicans. JHS was also influenced by the Oxford Group, later known as Moral Re-Armament, a non-denominational, evangelistic movement which stressed moral regeneration and spiritual reconstruction.

JHS had had a varied career, beginning in the Indian Civil Service, which he left in 1916. Thereafter he moved from job to job — farmer, politician, League of Nations officer — a mobility which may explain the financial insecurity which apparently led him to apply for the Newfoundland position. His services were readily and probably gratefully accepted ('by return of post'), since these were not sought-after postings. His British colleagues on the Commission were the governor, Sir Murray Anderson, and a Treasury official, E.N.R. Trentham (Finance), both of whom were already in Newfoundland. The third British commissioner, Thomas Lodge (Public Utilities), combined civil service with business experience, and was, like JHS, hard-up. QHS reported excitedly how his investments had all gone wrong (37). The three original Newfoundland commissioners (F.C. Alderdice, J.C. Puddester and W.R. Howley) were chosen for political and denominational reasons and given the junior portfolios.

This unlikely government was presented with a difficult and ill-defined job. Not only did it have to administer a country which was technically bankrupt and poleaxed by the Depression, but it also had to define its own role and powers. Was it to act as a trustee in bankruptcy or as a reconstruction agency? How far was it independent, and how far subject to control from London? How was it to relate to the Newfoundland people, long accustomed to a direct, democratic and almost intimate political process?

Such fundamental problems glimmer through the Hope Simpsons' letters, but are never addressed at any length. These are personal documents, with all their inherent strengths and weaknesses. John and Quita wrote to their children and a few other relatives as frequently as they could, the most lengthy letters coming from Quita, who had more spare time. These letters are private and protected. The Hope Simpsons felt it necessary to convince their correspondents that all was well; hence a tone that is relentlessly upbeat, or at least stoic, no matter what the reality might have been. Public issues were introduced, but only briefly, since recipients would have had little understanding of the situation in Newfoundland, and perhaps not much interest. Moreover, these are the letters of a late middle-aged couple who

had grown up in an age when British imperial sentiment was at its most strident, and British self-confidence most secure.

They are also the letters of people to a great extent insulated from the grim realities of Newfoundland life in the Depression. Like the other British Commissioners, the Hope Simpsons were installed in the comfortable old Newfoundland Hotel, demolished in 1979 to make way for the architecturally anonymous Hotel Newfoundland. They liked living there, and loved their views of the harbour and the Narrows. Their suite was an oasis, a protected retreat from a society which they both found foreign and in many ways difficult. To critics of the Commission, these housing arrangements, however logical, were symbolic. What could imported bureaucrats, insulated in the Hotel, know or understand about the problems of ordinary people? "They live in warmly heated and brilliantly lighted offices and drink tea," Gordon Bradley once wrote. "What have they to do with horizons or hay?"¹

It is quite true that, at one level, the Hope Simpson world was geographically defined by Cavendish Square and Bonaventure Avenue, and socially defined by those invited to white-tie dinners at Government House. JHS was sensitive about the display of decorations, and was genuinely perturbed that he was not allowed to wear a Chinese item called the Brilliant Jade (321). One is reminded of the whites in northern Canada portrayed by Hugh Brody in *The White Arctic* and — closer to home — the attitudes of "outsiders" in Claire Mowat's *Outport People*.²

From all of this comes the sense of British superiority, self-assurance and condescension which infuses the letters and irritates contemporary sensibilities. Who were these extraordinary people? Well, given time and place, they were not extraordinary at all, and were probably more tolerant and sympathetic than many of their class would have been. Against the condescension, and the annoying assertiveness of the instant expert, one must set the Hope Simpsons' genuine interest in Newfoundland, their sense of obligation, and their interesting — and often acute and compassionate — descriptions of places and people. QHS frequently commented on the lives of women and children. Though well aware of their privilege (which they accepted as appropriate to their position), they were also aware of the poverty which surrounded them.

The Hope Simpsons travelled extensively and were moved by the appalling, alien conditions which they observed. "It always comes as a surprise to me when these children talk English," wrote QHS during a south coast tour in May 1935, "— they seem such little foreigners — so wild & furtive. One little figure specially stands out in my memory — a girl child of about six with straight hair & delicate features, standing on the edge of a wharf seeing us off from Grey River — barelegged & barefooted in a grimy white nightgown, snow on the hillside behind her. I wanted to go back & wrap her in my coat & carry her into the house." (160)

So what had caused the country's collapse, and what should be done to bring about its restoration? The letters contain a moral analysis very much in tune with

that of the Amulree report, which the Hope Simpsons, in spite of local experience, saw no reason to alter during their stay. To paraphrase the General Confession, which they would have recited each Sunday at St. Thomas's church, Newfoundlanders had erred and strayed like lost sheep, and had left undone those things which they ought to have done. The blame lay with the shepherds, members of the political and commercial elites, who lacked moral fibre, altruism, and a sense of social obligation and public service. In essence, they were not gentlemen in the English sense of the term.

Shortly after her arrival, QHS wrote that "There has been terrible misgovernment — worse, terrible immorality in the government. The people have been exploited — the natural resources have been wasted & gambled away. Wealthy men hold huge tracts of land ... [and] do nothing to develop it The politicians have demoralized the people So that the people have grown accustomed to having everything done for them The stories we hear!" (42) Near to departure, JHS confirmed that "It is a dreadful island in some ways. Bitter destitution and poverty in one stratum — ample luxury and wealth in another. The chief problem is the moral problem. What is needed is conversion — a turn right round. It is the problem of the individual applied to the mass." (307) "It is a question of national rectitude," he noted later. "That is a *very* weak plant in Newfoundland." (313) And QHS again: "... I can find no fault with the climate & the weather here. It is just the people themselves, I think — a curiously shiftless, improvident people, ignorant, ruined by nearly 100 years of self-government for which they were entirely unfit, lacking the necessary education and lacking also any class of educated & leisured people who could act as leaders." (331)

Trentham's private opinions are unknown, but Thomas Lodge later broadcast what he thought in a book entitled *Dictatorship in Newfoundland*.³ He was less censorious and pessimistic than the Hope Simpsons, describing the Amulree diagnosis as "a plausible half-truth"⁴, but he nevertheless agreed that the Newfoundland problem was "as much moral as material."⁵ But what he meant was that the country needed to have restored to it "a spirit of independence" and self-reliance, and that a genuine collaboration between the rulers and the ruled had to be established. This, he thought, should be the primary job of the Commission. JHS would have been sceptical. He had very little faith in the local elite — his comments about the Newfoundland Commissioners are usually disparaging — and feared what might happen when it took over again sometime in the future.

The Hope Simpsons combined attributes of the Indian Civil Service mentality with those of Christian Socialism, and their views were comparable to those of Wilfred Grenfell, who had arrived in the country some 40 years earlier. He had almost immediately identified four major problems: the credit system in the fishery; denominationalism; an insufficiently diversified economy; and an incompetent elite. JHS found Grenfell exasperating, but agreed that the fishery had to be better managed, and the fishers given a fair return; the role of the churches in education

had to be reduced (if not eliminated); and economic diversification was essential. As for democracy, both would have subscribed to Pope's couplet: "For forms of government let fools contest; / Whate'er is best administer'd is best." JHS was instrumental in creating the Newfoundland Fisheries Board, and ensured that Ray Gushue was in charge. He was an enthusiastic supporter of the perhaps eccentric Markland experiment, seeing this as a model for future rural development schemes. His devotion to efficient administration is evident throughout, and his legacy was the Ranger Force. It is perhaps significant that he was the only commissioner to have a settlement named after him.⁶

Serious and probably rather humourless, JHS was conscientious to a fault. He worked hard, and was often tired out. QHS wanted to be useful, but seems to have been lonely and somewhat unsure of her role. Both were happy enough to leave Newfoundland when the time came. But the letters display an infectious and genuine delight in the physical environment. The Hope Simpsons enjoyed the vagaries of the climate, their expeditions around the island and through the interior, putting up with primitive conditions without complaint, counting themselves lucky to have had the opportunity. JHS enjoyed the fishing, and they both liked nothing better than driving round the roads of the Avalon in their car. They were "good sports."

It is easy to criticise the way in which collections such as this are put together. Editors have to make decisions about organisation and presentation which are not always easy, and can be controversial. Readers are always liable to think that the job might have been done differently, and I am no exception. First, it would have been instructive if Peter Neary had from time to time juxtaposed what JHS was writing privately with what he was writing officially, since this would have provided a much fuller presentation of his thinking about Newfoundland. Second, readers not familiar with the historical context might have appreciated fuller annotation. For instance, the Westbury Kean case is mentioned by both Hope Simpsons in a number of letters, and was the main reason why they went to London late in 1935. The case sparked an important confrontation between the Dominions Office and the Commission, which the latter lost. Nothing in the letters explains this outcome. There is a blank from mid-November 1935 to mid-January 1936, and no cross-reference to the brief explanation in the Introduction. A third point is the amount of repetition. Again, one example must suffice. Sir Humphrey Walwyn arrived as governor early in 1936. His shortcomings are reiterated in many of the letters that follow, understandably, since the Hope Simpsons had to live and work with him, but were all the references worth including?

This collection ends suddenly in September 1936: "They dressed the ship with flags for us as we came into Sydney harbour, and the customs & immigration people took their cue accordingly, & we had no examination" (343) Privilege to the end. If the Hope Simpsons wrote letters about Newfoundland after that date, they are not included. Did they? Did JHS ever write a reflective piece about his

Newfoundland years, a private mirror of Lodge's book? I suspect not, since he would have been immediately absorbed with the next stage of his life, but he would probably have agreed with Lodge that all had gone well until the Westbury Kean case turned a government-in-commission into "a civil-servant-in-commission,"⁷ a situation aggravated by Walwyn's arrival. And having come to know the Hope Simpsons through their letters, one wonders how they managed in retirement. The Introduction tells us the basic facts, but was the experience as shabby genteel as JHS feared it might be?

The Hope Simpson letters contain much of interest, and Peter Neary is to be congratulated for finding and publishing them. The tone and content of the letters may annoy many Newfoundland readers (and fascinate others), but the documents must be read in context, and be seen as a contribution towards a fuller understanding of the Newfoundland experience in the 1930s. We need to know about, and understand, the rulers as well as the ruled. The letters are, as Neary says, a valuable and generous — if elitist — window onto an important period in the country's history.

Notes

¹*The Fishermen's Advocate*, 7 March 1941.

²Hugh Brody, *The People's Land. Eskimos and Whites in the Eastern Arctic* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975); Claire Mowat, *The Outport People* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1983).

³Thomas Lodge, *Dictatorship in Newfoundland*. (London: Cassell, 1939).

⁴Lodge, *Dictatorship*, 5.

⁵Lodge, *Dictatorship*, 162.

⁶Port Hope Simpson in southern Labrador.

⁷Lodge, *Dictatorship*, 253.