

## *Gaff Topsails*. Patrick Kavanagh.

Adrian Fowler

Volume 13, Number 1, Spring 1997

URI: [https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/nflds13\\_1rv04](https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/nflds13_1rv04)

[See table of contents](#)

---

### Publisher(s)

Faculty of Arts, Memorial University

### ISSN

1198-8614 (print)

1715-1430 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

---

### Cite this review

Fowler, A. (1997). Review of [*Gaff Topsails*. Patrick Kavanagh.] *Newfoundland Studies*, 13(1), 102–106.

*Gaff Topsails*. Patrick Kavanagh. Dunvegan, ON: Cormorant Books. 431 p., softcover, ISBN 0-920953-95-6, 1996, \$19.95.

## ADRIAN FOWLER

PATRICK KAVANAGH'S *Gaff Topsails* is a *tour de force*, a brilliantly written and impressively sustained work of poetic fiction on an epic scale, remarkable both in its imaginative sweep and rich texture. Organized around a diurnal structure alternatively reminiscent of James Joyce's *Ulysses* and, closer to home, Al Pittman's *A Rope Against the Sun*, *Gaff Topsails* recounts a day in the life of an Irish Newfoundland outport community. The date, 24 June, the feast of St. John the Baptist and the time of the summer solstice and the caplin scull, is rich in historical, religious and mythological significance. The year, apparently 1948 despite the Doyle's calendar that says 1947, constitutes a critical moment in the cultural development of Newfoundland, falling as it does between the two Confederation referendums that culminated in Newfoundland becoming a province of Canada in 1949. Although no reference is made to the Confederation struggle, the novel is implicitly a distillation of the essence of what Newfoundland had become at the point when it stood poised to enter the modern era.

*Gaff Topsails* addresses the present by leaving it completely out of the picture. The Newfoundland reader, at least, cannot be unconscious of what happened for better and worse when the modern era was rudely ushered in, but the characters in the novel have no sense or premonition of what is to come. On the cusp of the new, they remain innocent of the enormous change that is about to overtake them as a people. The effect of this framing and focus is to highlight the distinctive and enduring qualities of the mythic Newfoundland outport culture in contrast to the bewildering mixture of ancient and modern actually experienced. The world of *Gaff Topsails* is a *metaculture*, in other words, not a real one, and Kavanagh's perspective emphasizes how the overpowering importance of the sea, the hostility

of the land, and the remoteness of the outside world rendered this metaculture unique. This is illustrated in the story of Tomas Croft, the Irish castaway who founded the community about a decade before Cabot's landing, and who represents the countless generations who clung to the rock during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. As he accustoms himself to his surroundings and starts to assert his right to be there, we witness the erosion of European culture down to a primitive layer more conforming to the stark realities of the place. Then upon the arrival of the priests, Croft — the son of a monk — reverts atavistically to Christian rule. The priest takes over the role of lighting the fires of the Boo Darby on midsummer's night and becomes the master of the cove: "Thus the ragged band of castaways and outlaws is transformed into a civilization. Violence and debauchery and heathenism give way to order and piety and work." (138) In the long run, however, the natural bedrock savagery re-emerges, like granite from beneath a thin layer of soil, subverting and appropriating the "civilizing" forms of Christianity, and ironically in the process exposing its deeper, more difficult and more universal message of love and sacrifice. Hundreds of years later, on the feast of St. John the Baptist, superstitious rituals involving the sun, the moon and the sea continue to dominate the lives of young and old alike, and the modern representative of Christian culture, Father MacMurrough, has to come to terms with the pagan demons within himself as well as the community in order to defeat the despair that grips him in mid-life and achieve communion with the people he has been sent to serve. Although packed, therefore, with precisely observed details of speech and routine that create a powerful sense of being some place real, the whole tenor of this narrative is in the direction of allegory.

Father MacMurrough is the central human character in *Gaff Topsails*. His homily to the boys and girls of the village on having the courage to embrace love, no matter how frightening it may be, is a personal reflection upon his own experience of having not seized such a moment many years before as a young man in Ireland. Ever since, his life, as a missionary in New Guinea and now in Newfoundland, has been the life of a castaway, like Tomas Croft. An outsider, he feels no more kinship for these descendants of his native Ireland than he did for the natives of New Guinea, a fact that suggests that these people have evolved a distinct culture deriving from their struggle with the place as much as it does that Father MacMurrough, swallowed by loneliness, has lost the ability to be involved in the lives of others. He is saved by another outcast, the alcoholic lighthouse keeper, Johnny the Light, who in his youth had brought about a "salvation of deceit," sustaining a party of lost sealers by feeding them hallucinatory descriptions of their imminent rescue. Then, as now, Johnny pays a terrible price for his blind heroism, losing his fingers, his sanity and finally his life so that others will not die on his watch.

In addition to Johnny the Light and the priest himself, the other important characters in Father MacMurrough's adopted community are the young lovers,

Michael Barron and the sixteen-year old girl known only as Mary; Michael's shy and pious younger brother, Kevin; and the founder of the village, Tomas Croft. Again, although we come to know the myriad unique details of their lives, the characters have an emphatic symbolic dimension. Michael and Mary are archetypal young lovers. Their friends, Gus Gallant and Wish Butt, Moira Nolan and Alice Keating, embody on a less exalted and more realistic plane the emotional turbulence of adolescence. Kevin Barron represents an inverted response to the anarchy of the flesh, a fearful shrinking from the mysteries of life, and, observing this, Father MacMurrough recognises in Kevin the decisive tendency of his own youth, which is why he detests the boy. Tomas Croft's mythic properties are especially obvious. Like the thousands that followed him for two centuries, he is an illegal settler who quickly grows in stealth and savagery, at turns hiding from British naval vessels and raiding and burning their settlements. He lays about with his muckle to slaughter great auks and Red Indians alike. He marvels at the big black water dogs native to the country, at blueberries the colour of robin's eggs, and the seemingly limitless abundance of sea birds. His first solitary encounter with the wind, the rock, and the teeming untamed vitality of the place is literally orgasmic. He witnesses the arrival of John Cabot in the *Matthew*, and nearly a century later, Sir Humphrey Gilbert's party in the *Golden Hind*, the *Swallow*, the *Squirrel*, and the *Delight*. Finally he marries the legendary Irish princess, Sheila nGira, and rules over a dynasty of "wrackers" and masterless men.

The present-day inhabitants of the village are ruled by the same imperatives, and the imagery, symbolism, and vocabulary of their world picture derive from Tomas Croft's experience and represent an accumulation of lived experiences since his time. Overlaid one upon another, these constitute a recurrent pattern of responses to the place, learned by heart like verses of the Bible or a poem from a school book, so that the words of the experience are hardly separable anymore from the experience itself. When Michael Barron and his buddies imagine themselves to be swilers and rogues and Mary fantasizes about being a princess rudely carried off by a coarse pirate, they are not just exercising their imaginations — they are embracing the collective memory of their community and preparing for adulthood in terms of its narratives. They are engaging in initiation rites marking the transition to full participating members of their culture.

Such are the elements of the gender stereotypes available to the youth of the village. They explore these in their imaginations with the crude energy of adolescents, their playfulness having acquired an edge that sometimes wounds, opening an abyss of self-conscious silence amidst a torrent of obscenity, or, in the case of the males, triggering a physical violence that painfully masks uncertainty about their sexual identity. Kavanagh's portrayal of the psychology of this turmoil is one of the triumphs of the novel. The girls are no less crude and no less funny than the boys in dealing with their emerging sexuality. In the case of Michael Barron and Mary, however, sexual awakening is accompanied by an intense longing for beauty.

More in tune with their real needs, they are impatient with the awkward cynicism of their friends.

The symbolism of sex, nature and religion is elaborately intertwined in the book: the field gun, the pitcher plant, hands joined loosely in prayer, the centaur, the tunnel in the iceberg, the pointed shape of a stained glass window, the shaft of glacial ice that Michael presents to Mary, the caplin spawning on the beach. The phallic and vaginal imagery might be considered overdone Freudianism were it not so skilfully merged with other images connecting sexuality with these other universal forces. The overwhelming urgency of youthful sexuality with all its pitfalls, terrors and promise is faithfully and, I think, insightfully depicted. In *Gaff Topsails* sex is a natural force that closes down some characters and opens up others, prompting some to self-immolating acts of cruelty or retreat and others to breathtaking moments of self-transcendence.

An important symbol representing the natural environment in which these human interactions take place is the iceberg that sits precariously grounded in the cove. A thing of beauty to Michael and Mary, it is an object of opportunity and peril to the wary fishermen, and a playground for the young males of the village. The focal point of Mary's erotic fantasies, it is a test of manhood for Michael and his companions. The entry of the boys into the womblike interior of the berg is a moment charged with sexual, religious and existential significance in which basic human needs and aspirations are risked within an environment of awe-inspiring magnificence and danger.

The major character of *Gaff Topsails*, by this declension, becomes the place itself and the community it sustains. A Catholic outpost evoking St. Brendan's in Bonavista Bay or Tilting on Fogo Island, the village is imagined to be close enough to the Gaff Topsails on the central plateau in the middle of the island that the train going through them can be heard on still nights in the cove. Places as disparate as Isle aux Morts, Motion, and Heart's Content are referred to as being in the vicinity. Geography, like history, is collapsed and shuffled and a multitude of defining elements of the language, legend and lore of Newfoundland are deployed and manipulated so that we are in no doubt that this is a mythical village, like no village that ever existed in Newfoundland, and, on another level, like them all. But the mythic sense that this way of life is almost beyond time is undermined at the climax of the novel. When Father MacMurrough finally joins his people in their paganistic gathering around the bonfire, a rotting dory is thrown on the flames. At that moment a "drunken little, rat-faced man cackles 'Burn yer boats, boys!'" — a quotation that is both a topical representation of the Confederate vision for the new industrialized Newfoundland and a mournful anticipation of its outcome. (426) The slogan, popularly attributed to the chief architect of Newfoundland's union with Canada, J.R. Smallwood, signals not the demise of a society — although transfigured, Newfoundland continues to survive — but the demise of the *mythos* that informed the culture of that society.

This is the story that Patrick Kavanagh's novel recounts and it is a virtuoso performance. It is a story of elemental passions and heroic struggles. The characters, ordinary humans in every sense, live a heightened existence thanks to the challenges of inhabiting a remote and hostile environment. A place of cruel beauty, apparently impervious to domination by human ideology or ingenuity, it pitilessly punishes all forms of *hubris* and demands bravery and sacrifice in love and in life. It is a world, unlike ours, in which the difference between failure and success cannot be obscured with words. Kavanagh creates a complex, multi-layered vision, shaping elements of history, folklore and geography to depict a harrowing soulscape that justly inspires fear but also incites a willingness to hazard everything in order to live. This is indeed the province of myth. In leaving the present out of the picture, however, Patrick Kavanagh has set up an inescapable contrast with the fallen world of reality. In this way, his novel, although a monument to an imagined past, also represents an eloquent comment on our actual present.