

The Greatest Fishing Station in the World. William Wilson.

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[See table of contents](#)

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The Greatest Fishing Station in the World. William Wilson. (Originally published as *Newfoundland and its Missionaries*, Part I, 1866). With an introduction by Stanley Sparkes, ed. Glovertown, NF: Glovertown Literary Creations, Inc., 1996. viii, 103 pp., \$29.95, softcover, ISBN 1-895607-06-x.

PHILIP E.L. SMITH

NEWFOUNDLAND had perhaps more than its share of colourful and bizarre missionaries in the 18th and 19th centuries, and all three major denominations contributed generously to that galaxy. Rogues, screwballs, cranks, lechers, twits, drunks, contumacious con-men, ex-apostates, fanatics, melancholics, perhaps a lunatic or two—you can find candidates for all these categories alongside the hard-working, dedicated and inoffensive majority. No wonder Bishop Feild in his earlier years used to despair of the poor quality and bad behaviour of some of his Anglican clergy. He was not alone.

The Reverend William Wilson was no scoundrel, madman, libertine, or boozier, but he was unorthodox to the verge of eccentricity. After all, how many of Newfoundland's clergy, however guilty of the fairly banal faults listed above, were ever formally accused of practising astrology, fortune telling, black magic or witchcraft? That happened to Wilson in 1833 and nearly got him expelled from his church. He was brash, contentious, hotheaded, pugnacious, and tactless. He could be insubordinate, he was zealous in stamping out what he saw as immorality, he had no use for militant Papists and Puseyites, he was chauvinistic. Wherever he went he raised hackles, rubbed important people the wrong way, and antagonised his colleagues and superiors. He never rose very high in the ranks of the Methodists or got the best churches. Perhaps he was not interested. He was officially censured twice for poor judgment. His flocks were sometimes glad to see the last of him. By

1833 it was alleged that all Methodist congregations in Newfoundland shunned him as "a common pest." In one Nova Scotian community he was physically assaulted by his church enemies. He must have been a trial to many people. Yet I find him a rather engaging character, quirky and erratic but basically genial and compassionate. His ebullience, inquisitiveness, intellectual strivings, and literary productivity are enough to set him apart from the herd. I once tried to persuade the editors of the *Dictionary of Canadian Biography* to include him in their array of worthies; they decided, alas, that he was not important enough.

We know little about him before he came to Newfoundland. Born in 1798, probably in Lincolnshire, he converted from the Church of England to Wesleyan Methodism in his teens, was ordained in London in 1820, and was immediately sent out to Newfoundland where Methodism was finally getting off the ground. In the next 14 years the little firebrand served in nine circuits between Fortune Bay and Bonavista Bay, married Elizabeth Finch of Trinity, and began building a large family and a reputation as a maverick. It was in 1833 while at Trinity that some of his hostile colleagues accused him not merely of astrology, fortune telling and the "Black Art", but also of defamation of character and of "indelicacy towards a Female" (he had performed a difficult gynaecological operation on a married woman). He defended himself pugnaciously and with some success, but he had accumulated too many demerits to be tolerated further. Some time earlier his long-suffering superiors had considered shipping him off to the West Indies or back to England. Now he was ordered out of Newfoundland and, reluctantly, he went to Prince Edward Island in 1834. In the next 35 years he served mainly rural circuits in PEI, Nova Scotia and New Brunswick. In 1844, after more ructions, the Nova Scotia district tried to banish him to the fevers of British Honduras, but he pleaded poor health and they relented. He died in harness in 1869 at Point de Bute, near Sackville, NB. Perhaps by then he had cooled down.

What marks Wilson off from most of Newfoundland's missionaries is not his exuberance and zest for work but his keen observations of his physical and social surroundings, his deep interest in the present and past of his adopted country, and his writings. He also had some competence in practical medicine and surgery, he was apparently a good musician and a skilful boatman, and he was adventurous. In 1827 he volunteered to open a mission among the aborigines of southern Labrador, even started learning the Inuit language, but, unfortunately for the mission, by a fluke he missed being selected. He had an interest in aborigines, and in 1823 he visited the Beothuk women Shanawdithit, her mother and sister in St. John's, producing one of the best accounts we have of their appearances and behaviour. He was probably the only missionary in Newfoundland who ever opted to move with his family into the woods to live rough with his transhumant flock, at Burin in the winter of 1826-27; there he wrote one of the best descriptions of a winter tilt on record. He was a scholar manqué in many respects, and largely self-taught. He wrote long and mainly unpublished letters and reports back to the

Methodist Missionary Society in London; many of them are spiced with fascinating details on local events, customs and conditions (e.g., his analysis of the shore fishery in 1825, his description of the forest fire threatening Port de Grave the same year, his account of the spring famine at Bonavista in 1832). He kept voluminous personal journals, the raw materials for his letters, reports and other writings, that have, unfortunately, disappeared. I sometimes fantasize about unearthing the journals in some obscure archive or family attic, but so far all enquiries have failed. He was an amateur historian and wrote articles for Methodist magazines and papers on various topics including Newfoundland. And he wrote two books. The first, *The Modern Crusade; or the Present Russian War: its Cause, its Termination, and its Results: Viewed in Connection with Scripture Prophecy* (Boston, 1855), is forgotten today. In this weird volume Wilson's mystical mind-set is revealed as he sought to predict the outcome of the Crimean War and the futures of Russia, Turkey, Islam and Britain through labourious dissection of passages in the Book of Ezekiel. That work gained him a mild rebuke from his superiors in England who deplored such follies. (But the funny thing is, Wilson did predict the eventual collapse and dismemberment of the Russian empire. You don't suppose ... ? Nah, impossible.) The second, of course, is *Newfoundland and its Missionaries*, written at the invitation of the Newfoundland Methodist district — which presumably had now forgiven him — to mark the centenary of Laurence Coughlan's arrival, and published in 1866 in Cambridge, Mass. It is a classic of Newfoundland literature, and out of print since its first and only edition. Few libraries own it. Antiquarian booksellers ask high prices for good examples. It has recently been copied on microfiche by the Canadian Institute for Historical Microreproductions, Ottawa, but that is not much help to non-academic readers.

Which brings me, finally, to the book being reviewed. It puzzles me. It is offered as Part I of Wilson's 1866 book but for some unstated reason it bears a different, rather meaningless title. It consists of four chapters (103 pages of text) plus a 6-page Introduction by Mr. Sparkes. These chapters treat the following subjects: geography, natural features, settlements, fauna and flora, minerals, history of discovery and colonization up to 1860, and some statistics on the fishery. Unhappily, Part I is the least valuable part of the original book. It is downright boring, consisting of dry geographical facts, irrelevant statistics, and tedious (and often inaccurate) historical data that Wilson plucked from miscellaneous printed sources. Part II is by far the longer portion of the original (18 chapters, 344 pages) and, although an unruly hodge-podge, contains the real meat. Various chapters treat the origin and growth of Methodism in England and Newfoundland and its triumphant rise in the face of persecution, and offer useful sketches of individual Methodist missionaries up to mid-century. Much more interesting, however, are the chapters dealing with such topics as the codfishery, the seal hunt, the economy, schools and education, customs of the people, drinking habits, houses, gardens, weddings, funerals, modes of transport, winter life, the Beothuks, and others. These

are based on Wilson's own observations and experiences in Newfoundland. They have the smell of authenticity, and they still make good reading. I wonder why Sparkes, if he had to choose, didn't reprint Part II instead, or at least the more interesting portions of it.

The Introduction appears an attempt to show (1) that Wilson contributed greatly to "colouring Newfoundland Methodism with a distinctively academic and scholarly hue which it enjoys to this day", and (2) that much in Wilson's book is relevant to Newfoundland's present situation: the cod stocks were allegedly decimated in the 17th century too, church and state conspired in 1820 (the Lundrigan affair) to corrupt justice as they did in recent child abuse cases, and Wilson's optimistic predictions of Newfoundland's economic future in the face of detractors are vindicated by Hibernia, Voisey's Bay, etc. One cannot help feeling the second aim at least is pretty far-fetched. The general tone of the Introduction recalls the old nationalistic school of Newfoundland history. Much of it reads like Wilson, Harvey and Prowse uncritically warmed over, e.g., the legendary settlers victimized by the "foolish and wicked" Western Charter, burned out and expelled for living within six miles of the coast. The dark hint that one day an independent Quebec might provoke a war by reviving France's old fishing rights on the former French Shore of Newfoundland is, to put it gently, mind-boggling. Sparkes would have done better to concentrate on Wilson, the man and his life. As it is, readers will not get much feeling for the real Wilson or his contributions from reading this Introduction.

This expensive little book is well bound and attractive externally but the proof-reading was not careful enough. On several pages there are awkward gaps caused by missing lines (48, 54), while elsewhere (55-56) some lines are duplicated. The editor has inserted a few footnotes and several maps. A portrait of Wilson would have been nice. I see that the Provincial Government contributed financially to its preparation. To my mind the money would have been better spent in producing a good facsimile edition of the entire original volume at a reasonable price. That's what many of us who want to own a copy of Wilson's book would appreciate.