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REVIEW ESSAYS

Laying the Blame: John Greene's View of Sectarian Politics

JERRY BANNISTER

Between Damnation and Starvation: Priests and Merchants in Newfoundland Politics, 1745-1855. John P. Greene. Montreal and Kingston, McGill-Queen's University Press (McGill-Queen's studies in the history of religion; Series Two), xii, 339 p., apps., notes, index, hardcover, acid-free paper, 1999, \$49.95, ISBN 0-7735-1880-0.

MUCH OF THE WRITING in Newfoundland history over the past twenty years has been concerned with unearthing the roots of the province's problems. Historians typically set out by identifying a modern failure and then work backwards to analyze its origins in the nineteenth century.¹ This approach is exemplified in the many studies of the beleaguered cod fishery. The debate over the culpability of merchants in the island's economic underdevelopment has produced an extensive literature; although the focus has shifted to the mandarins in the Department of Fisheries and Oceans, this work remains centred on the question of who is to blame for the mismanagement of the fishery. As Sean Cadigan has pointed out, myths and misconceptions continue to cloud our understanding of Newfoundland history.²

After a period of relative atrophy, political history is experiencing a renaissance. Interest in issues such as Confederation, the Commission of Government, and Newfoundland nationalism has risen markedly over the past decade. Though

historians of politics often employ methodologies different from their counterparts studying the fishery, their work shares two basic traits: they tend to explore the past in search of the causes of modern problems, and they seek to identify who is to blame. For example, the debate over Confederation has centred on whether Newfoundland's current economic difficulties are linked to the decision to join Canada in 1949 and whether Joe Smallwood is guilty of allegedly selling out the province's interests to the federal government.³ The Newfoundland Historical Society's symposium on the Amulree Report reflected this general outlook, as conference participants wrestled with the question of who should be held accountable for the loss of democracy in 1934.⁴ This approach is not confined to twentieth-century history: in a wide-ranging study, Patrick O'Flaherty argues that the political crisis of the early 1840s formed a precursor to the suspension of responsible government less than a century later.⁵ Like the debate over Confederation and the role of Smallwood, the study of nineteenth-century politics has focused on whether one of the era's most prominent figures, Bishop Michael Anthony Fleming, instigated the political instability which emerged after the grant of representative government in 1832.

These themes are reflected in John Greene's book, *Between Damnation and Starvation: Priests and Merchants in Newfoundland Politics, 1745-1855* (McGill-Queen's University Press, 1999). Greene organizes his study as an investigation into a major problem in Newfoundland history — what he terms the “sectarian establishment,” which dominated provincial politics and education for most of the twentieth century — and he seeks to explain its advent in the nineteenth century. He explores the origins of the political and educational system which supported the apportionment of power between Protestants and Catholics. For Greene, the study of the past presents an opportunity to trace how things went wrong: he views sectarian politics not as a functional system through which a divided society was governed, but rather a by-product of religious bigotry and political corruption. Greene concentrates on the major public figures in St. John's, particularly Bishop Fleming, and he addresses the question of which faction was responsible for the rise of sectarian conflict in the decades prior to the establishment of responsible government in 1855.

Greene's book makes a series of bold claims. He begins by asserting that neither the political involvement of the churches nor the influence of religion on political life had received intensive study prior to the publication of his book. He attributes this shortcoming in large measure to the apparent lack of public access to archival materials. According to Greene, the delay in establishing proper archival management mirrors a larger pattern of anomalous historical development. He argues that Newfoundland experienced a unique constitutional history and religious demography: on the one hand, it obtained representative government well after it was granted to most other British colonies; on the other, its volatile mix of Protestants and Catholics created a peculiar social environment ripe for sectarianism. Greene proposes to present the first detailed study of how the three main Christian

churches — Methodist, Roman Catholic, and Church of England (referred to as Anglican) — participated in colonial politics and how, in turn, religion manifested in the island's political culture. He aims to examine not only colonial governance, but also the impact of social factors, particularly class, on electoral politics. This is a tall order indeed. He cites several prominent scholars — most notably Philip McCann, Raymond Lahey, Cyril Byrne, and Hans Rollmann — but he asserts that their articles do not comprise a definitive body of work.⁶ For constitutional history, he relies on the monographs by Gertrude Gunn and A.H. McLintock.⁷ Greene rather surprisingly declares that McLintock's 60-year-old book is still the best study of the pre-1832 era⁸ (290). In covering more than a century of Newfoundland history, he sets out to go where no historian had gone before.

Some of these assertions are problematic. Greene fails to recognize the great strides made in archival management over the past 20 years, and his criticism of the churches for reputedly obstructing access to primary sources can no longer be justified. Greene also misrepresents the state of the secondary literature, which is certainly not as barren as he asserts. For reasons that are entirely unclear, Greene largely overlooks four well-known historians who have written on topics directly relevant to his study: Keith Matthews, Patrick O'Flaherty, Sean Cadigan, and John FitzGerald. Although Greene makes use of Keith Matthews' D. Phil. thesis, he neglects to comment on Matthews' seminal article on the St. John's reform movement which, among other things, dealt with the issue of sectarianism.⁹ Patrick O'Flaherty's important studies of politics and religion in this period receive no comment whatsoever, although O'Flaherty's critique of Matthews' "Class of '32" thesis is usually seen as a turning point in the historiography.¹⁰ Greene makes no mention of John FitzGerald's work on Bishop Fleming and only passing reference to Sean Cadigan's path-breaking monograph.¹¹ These omissions seriously limit the book's contribution to Newfoundland historiography. Greene is, of course, completely free to ignore whomever he likes, but this raises serious concerns in an academic publication.

Greene's book does not provide a comprehensive account of religion and politics from 1745 to 1855. The first chapter attempts, in less than twenty pages, to examine developments in the 80 years from 1745 to 1825: such a brief overview sheds little new light on the eighteenth century. Topics such as the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel are dispatched quickly, while the establishment of the Roman Catholic Church in 1784 — one of the most important events in Newfoundland history — receives surprisingly scant attention. Greene combines a mixture of familiar interpretations, such as the hackneyed notion of "retarded growth," with some curious assertions and unsupported generalizations. For example, he maintains that while the Irish waited for the arrival of a Roman Catholic priest to perform baptisms or marriages, Protestants were not particularly discriminating about who administered the sacraments; but he provides no evidence or references to support this claim (17-19). At other points he resorts to reductionist statements which oversim-

plify complex historical issues. In referring to the Judicature Act of 1824, for instance, he informs the reader that “recognition as a colony terminated more than 300 years of wandering in the constitutional wilderness” (26). Yet a system of government had been in place well before the grant of official colonial status in 1825.¹² Similarly, when Greene turns to nineteenth-century social conditions, he summons up the traditional image of starving fishing families living subserviently under rapacious merchants, but this interpretation is at odds with the secondary literature¹³ (27). The dangers of ignoring recent historiography emerge in other sections of the book, such as Greene’s confusing discussion of law and politics in the eighteenth century (21-22).

Greene focuses overwhelmingly on the 25 years from the beginning of Bishop Fleming’s tenure in 1830 to the grant of responsible government in 1855. Only two of the ten chapters (excluding the introduction and conclusion) deal with the crucial period from the 1790s through the mid-1820s, when the island’s first reform movement and newspaper press emerged. Although Greene himself admits that his study is tilted toward the tumultuous events of the 1830s and 1840s, his thesis relies on an analysis of the early development of the three mainstream churches: the Church of England was never officially established in the eighteenth century, leaving it weak until the late 1820s; the Roman Catholic Church was for the 50 years after its establishment in 1784 a “loyal servile body,” which maintained excellent relations with the Protestant elite; and until the nineteenth century the number of Methodists grew slowly in the face of hostility from the Church of England (7-9 and 269-73). According to Greene, this historical legacy provided the fuel for the conflict which erupted in the 1830s, when Bishop Fleming began to challenge the *modus vivendi* maintained by his predecessors. By devoting less than a fifth of his book to this pivotal era, Greene glosses over key issues, such as evidence of ecumenical customs. We are told that it was “common for mixed-couples to be married at the Catholic church in the morning and in the Anglican church in the afternoon,” but Greene never explains how this practice originated or why it died out (37).

Between Damnation and Starvation is a study of organized politics and church hierarchies. It focuses on the activities of political parties; popular politics is considered insofar as it affected the agenda of the middle classes or the ruling elite. Its consideration of popular opinion is generally restricted to examining public disturbances and periodic outbreaks of rioting reported in the newspaper press.¹⁴ Greene’s study also reveals relatively little about the cultural attitudes or political activities of the island’s merchants. He repeats the conventional view that the powerful fish magnates were overwhelmingly Protestant in religion and intractably Conservative in politics. The complex motivations and perceptions of the merchant class, which was rarely as politically unified as Greene presumes, are left largely unstudied. To his credit, Greene situates his study within the context of socioeconomic relations, and he makes reference to the secondary literature on the truck system (303, n.11). He pays close attention to how the shifting alliances between the

middle and upper classes contributed to the development of sectarian politics. Yet the true subject of his study is the colony's bourgeoisie: when he discusses middle-class reformers, such as William Carson and John Kent, Greene's prose becomes lively and his analysis reaches its stride. In tracking the careers of the St. John's reformers, he sheds new light on several interesting issues, especially the controversy over the Newfoundland School Society. Greene's lucid discussion of the rather byzantine feuds over the island's school system is the book's most important contribution to Newfoundland history.

Greene views religion through the political lens of the three churches he chose to examine. He does not discuss the Presbyterian Church or the other Protestant denominations active in the nineteenth century. He also employs curious semantics, referring to "Roman Catholic priests and Anglican clergy" as if the latter were not priests (34). The book's title infers that it deals only with Catholic clergy, but Greene takes pains to integrate the Church of England and the Methodists into his analysis. In incorporating both the Protestant and Catholic churches into a single study, he makes an admirable attempt to counteract the recent tendency to balkanize the study of Newfoundland society into separate English and Irish histories. As Greene rightly points out, sectarian politics emerged out of the relationships between the island's three largest denominations. He studies the three churches from the perspective of their competition for parishioners and political influence; neither the creeds of those sitting in the pews nor the attitudes of the local clergy are explored in detail. What interests Greene is the question of which faction is guilty of poisoning the island's political environment.

Greene lays the blame for the rise of sectarian politics squarely on the shoulders of the Conservatives and the Church of England. While the basis of the Conservatives' support remained the merchant elite and the High Church Anglicans in St. John's, the Liberals built a coalition which successfully bridged class and denominational boundaries to pressure the British government into granting responsible government in 1855. "In order to combat the responsible-government movement," Greene concludes, "the Conservative party enlisted the aid of religious bigotry" (273). Resurrecting the rallying cry of "Protestant Union," the Conservatives sought to exploit existing prejudices by pandering to fears that the Roman Catholic Church was attempting to take away the rights of Protestants. This propaganda had profound repercussions: the fragmentation of the public school system and the redrawing of electoral boundaries along denominational lines eventually became imbedded in the island's political culture. Thus the old ruling class managed, in Greene's words, to engineer the "sectarianization" of electoral representation (9).

He takes a sympathetic view toward Bishop Fleming, who is portrayed as a victim of anti-Catholic prejudice. In depicting the Catholic Church before Fleming's episcopate as a "servile body," Greene misrepresents the difficult political course Bishop O'Donel had to navigate as he worked to establish the Church in the

decades after 1784.¹⁵ Greene asserts that Fleming became involved in the 1832 election campaign only to defend his own character and to protect Catholic rights. By linking Roman Catholics so closely to the Liberals, Greene emphasizes the role of the St. John's middle class; but he says relatively little about the Catholics who opposed Bishop Fleming. Derided as "Mad Dog Catholics" or "Orange Catholics," men such as Patrick Kough were deliberately targeted by some priests in what Greene terms an "abuse of their office" (116). Although he discusses the political disputes associated with the campaign against Mad Dogs, Greene misses an opportunity to explore one of the keys to understanding sectarianism: the creation of a unifying identity through the persecution of designated outsiders. Just as some Conservatives and government officials exploited anti-Catholic bigotry to further their own interests, so too did Liberal forces draw on anti-Anglican sentiment when it suited their purposes. Greene issues a blanket condemnation of all Conservatives for their use of anti-Catholic rhetoric, but he claims that the reformers' use of sectarianism was limited to only a few over-zealous priests who acted behind Fleming's back (271). Greene's book should be read alongside Patrick O'Flaherty's monograph, which paints a very different portrait of Bishop Fleming.¹⁶

In seeking to assign guilt for the emergence of sectarianism, Greene presents a skewed picture of religion and politics in nineteenth-century Newfoundland. The main problem lies not in the analysis itself but rather in the entire notion that sectarian politics is necessarily a failure for which blame can or should be allocated. This creates a perspective whereby politics is seen essentially as a struggle between heroes and villains, and we learn far more about the former than the latter. Whereas figures such as William Carson, Bishop Fleming, and Philip Little are discussed at great length, the Conservatives and their merchant supporters appear as a one-dimensional cabal. Prominent merchants such as Thomas Brooking and George Robinson are ignored, despite their major role in the reform movement, while Henry Winton is confined to a relatively minor part in post-1832 politics.¹⁷ In many ways, Winton's public life mirrored the broader pattern of sectarian politics, as he transformed from a strong supporter of the campaign for representative government into a harsh critic of Bishop Fleming. Like his counterpart John Shea, who edited the *Newfoundlander*, Winton used the *Public Ledger* to champion the cause of reform in the late 1820s. Winton's politics changed in the face of the sectarian strife of the 1830s, especially in the aftermath of the violent attack he suffered in 1835.¹⁸ To be sure, sectarian resentments continually surged beneath the political surface; but to understand why the relative peace of the 1820s collapsed after 1832, the dramatic shift within the political outlook of figures such as Winton needs to be considered. Sectarian politics in Newfoundland has never adhered to a single linear model; rather, it has ebbed and flowed in cycles according to the changing currents of power.

This leads to the broader issue of whether sectarian politics should be treated necessarily as a historical failure. The emergence of institutional sectarianism —

through vehicles such as denominational education, specially-designed electoral boundaries, and the apportionment of public offices according to religious affiliation — provided a means to distribute and negotiate power in a sharply divided society. This was, when judged against the ideal of a just society, a regrettable development. However, when viewed from a broader historical perspective, the rise of sectarian politics appears no more unjust than the power-sharing arrangements in many other societies in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.¹⁹ What is exceptional about Newfoundland is not its history of sectarianism but rather the fact that it never became another Ulster. Newfoundland may well have been a “little Northern Ireland” for a few weeks during 1948, but the two societies clearly followed two fundamentally different paths.²⁰ Newfoundland did not experience frequent or widespread outbreaks of deadly violence — episodes such as the Harbour Grace affray were the exception, not the rule, of public life — and it never witnessed anything like the ongoing conflict in Northern Ireland, which has claimed thousands of lives.²¹ When we examine our own history of religious bigotry and corrupt politics, we would do well to keep in mind that Newfoundland has been largely successful in avoiding the type of virulent sectarian strife which continues to plague societies around the world. Viewed in this light, our sectarian establishment appears to have been more of a solution to systemic conflict than a cause of it.

Notes

¹This generalization disregards what I would term the “optimist’s school,” i.e., those who see Newfoundland and Labrador as breaking with its past and entering a new age of prosperity and confidence. Whereas Kevin Major’s recent book proclaims a new era of optimism, most historians of modern Newfoundland, such as Sean Cadigan and Miriam Wright, emphasize the legacy of past failures over future promises. See, *inter alia*, Kevin Major, *As Near to Heaven by Sea: A History of Newfoundland and Labrador* (Toronto: Viking, 2001), esp. xiv-xv; Sean Cadigan, *Hope and Deception in Conception Bay: Merchant-Settler Relations in Newfoundland, 1785-1855* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995), 162-70; Miriam Wright, *A Fishery for Modern Times: The State and the Industrialization of the Newfoundland Fishery, 1934-1968* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 2001), ch. 8.

²Sean Cadigan, “Whose Fish? Science, Ecosystems and Ethics in Fisheries Management Literature since 1992,” *Acadiensis* 31, 1 (2001), 171-95. For reviews of the broader historiography, see James K. Hiller, “Is Atlantic Canadian History Possible?,” *Acadiensis* 30, 1 (2000), 16-22; Olaf U. Janzen, “Newfoundland and the International Fishery,” in M. Brook Taylor (ed.), *Canadian History: A Reader’s Guide, Volume 1: Beginnings to Confederation* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994), 280-324; Jerry Bannister, “‘A Species of Vassalage’: The Issue of Class in the Writing of Newfoundland History,” *Acadiensis* 24, 1 (1994), 134-44.

³For a review of the literature on Confederation, see Jeff Webb, “Confederation, Conspiracy and Choice: A Discussion,” *Newfoundland Studies* 14, 2 (1998), 169-87.

⁴Garfield Fizzard (ed.), *Amulree's Legacy: Truth, Lies and Consequences Symposium* (St. John's: Newfoundland Historical Society, 2001).

⁵Patrick O'Flaherty, *Old Newfoundland: A History to 1843* (St. John's: Long Beach Press, 1999), esp. ch. 7.

⁶Phillip McCann, "Culture, State Formation and the Invention of Tradition: Newfoundland 1832-1855," *Journal of Canadian Studies* 23 (1988), 86-103; Phillip McCann, "Bishop Fleming and the Politicization of the Irish Roman Catholics in Newfoundland, 1830-1850," in Terrence Murphy and Cyril Byrne (eds.), *Religion and Identity: The Experience of Irish and Scottish Catholics in Atlantic Canada* (St. John's: Jespersen Press, 1987), 81-97; Cyril Byrne (ed.), *Gentlemen-Bishops and Faction Fighters: The Letters of Bishops O'Donel, Lambert, Scallan and Other Irish Missionaries* (St. John's: Jespersen Press, 1984); Hans Rollmann, "Religious Enfranchisement and Roman Catholics in Eighteenth-Century Newfoundland," in Murphy and Byrne (eds.), *Religion and Identity*, 34-52; Hans Rollmann, "Laurence Coughlan and the Origins of Methodism in Newfoundland," in C.H.H. Scobie and J.W. Grant (eds.), *The Contribution of Methodism to Atlantic Canada* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1992), 53-76; Raymond Lahey, "Catholicism and Colonial Policy in Newfoundland, 1779-1845," in Terrence Murphy and Gerald Stortz (eds.), *Creed and Culture: The Place of English-Speaking Catholics in Canadian Society, 1750-1930* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1993), 49-55; Raymond Lahey, "Michael Anthony Fleming," *Dictionary of Canadian Biography* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1988), vol. 7, 292-300 [hereafter *DCB*].

⁷Gertrude Gunn, *The Political History of Newfoundland, 1832-1864* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1966); A. H. McLintock, *The Establishment of Constitutional Government in Newfoundland, 1783-1832: A Study of Retarded Colonisation* (London: Longmans, Green, 1941).

⁸McLintock's arguments have been outdated since at least the late 1970s, when Keith Matthews published a systematic demolition of the retarded development thesis. See Keith Matthews, "Historical Fence Building: A Critique of the Historiography of Newfoundland," *Newfoundland Quarterly* 74, 1 (1978), 21-30; reprinted in *Newfoundland Studies* 17, 2 (2001), 143-165.

⁹Keith Matthews, "The Class of '32: St. John's Reformers on the Eve of Representative Government," *Acadiensis* 6, 2 (1977), 80-94.

¹⁰Patrick O'Flaherty, "The Seeds of Reform: Newfoundland, 1800-1818," *Journal of Canadian Studies* 23, 3 (1988), 39-56; Patrick O'Flaherty, "Government in Newfoundland before 1832: The Context of Reform," *Newfoundland Quarterly* 84, 2 (1988), 26-30; Patrick O'Flaherty, "William Carson," *DCB* (1988), vol. 7, 151-56.

¹¹John Edward FitzGerald, "Michael Anthony Fleming and Ultramontaniam in Irish-Newfoundland Roman Catholicism, 1829-1850," *CCHA Historical Studies* 64 (1998), 27-44; John Edward FitzGerald, "Conflict and Culture in Irish-Newfoundland Roman Catholicism, 1829-1850" (PhD thesis, University of Ottawa, 1997). In addition to his discussion of the reformers in his book *Hope and Deception*, Cadigan examined Newfoundland politics in "The Staple Model Reconsidered: The Case of Agricultural Policy in Northeast Newfoundland, 1785-1855," *Acadiensis* 21, 2 (1992), 48-71.

¹²Keith Matthews made this point a generation ago in his *Lectures on the History of Newfoundland, 1500-1830* (St. John's: Breakwater Books, 1988), ch. 22. Matthews' *Lectures* were originally published in 1973.

¹³For an overview of the secondary literature on the problem of merchant-settler relations, see Sean Cadigan, "Planters, Householders and Merchant Capitalism: Northeast-Coast Newfoundland, 1800-1855," in Daniel Samson (ed.), *Contested Countryside: Rural Workers and Modern Society in Atlantic Canada, 1800-1950* (Fredericton: Acadiensis Press, 1994), 150-79.

¹⁴On popular politics, see Linda Little, "Collective Action in Outport Newfoundland: A Case Study from the 1830s," *Labour/Le Travail* 26 (1990), 7-35.

¹⁵For a more balanced examination of Bishop O'Donel, see R.J. Lahey, *James Louis O'Donel in Newfoundland, 1784-1807: The Establishment of the Roman Catholic Church* (St. John's: Newfoundland Historical Society, 1984).

¹⁶O'Flaherty, *Old Newfoundland*, chs. 7-8.

¹⁷On the role of merchants in the pre-1832 reform movement, see Jerry Bannister, "The Campaign for Representative Government in Newfoundland," *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association* n.s., 5 (1994), 28-40.

¹⁸See Patrick O'Flaherty, "Henry David Winton," *DCB* (1985), vol. 8, 467-70; Patrick O'Flaherty, "The Road to Saddle Hill," *Newfoundland Quarterly* 89, 3 (July 1995), 21-26.

¹⁹The relative absence of crosscutting cleavages in Newfoundland society for most of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries made it extremely difficult to create and sustain a functioning liberal democracy. On the challenge of forging sustainable power-sharing arrangements in societies sharply divided along religious lines, see the classic work Arend Lijphart, *Democracy in Plural Societies: A Comparative Exploration* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977), esp. 75-81.

²⁰John Edward FitzGerald, "The Newfoundland Referenda Campaigns of 1948," *The Beaver* 78, 1 (February/March 1998), 3.

²¹For an antidote to the romantic myths surrounding the sectarian conflict in Ireland, see Peter Hart, *The I.R.A. and Its Enemies: Violence and Community in Cork, 1916-1923* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), esp. ch. 12.