

A Settlement of Memory. A Novel. Gordon Rodgers.

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A Settlement of Memory. A Novel. Gordon Rodgers. St. John's, Killick Press, Creative Publishers, 244 p., softcover with French flaps, \$15.95, 1999, ISBN 1-89294-05-X.

JAMES K. HILLER

THIS NOVEL is based on the life and times of William Ford Coaker, the populist leader of the Fishermen's Protective Union, and one of the most important yet misunderstood figures in twentieth-century Newfoundland history. But this is not another *Colony of Unrequited Dreams*. Unlike Wayne Johnston, who quite openly appropriated and reinvented Joseph R. Smallwood, Gordon Rodgers distances himself from his subject. His Coaker is named Tom Vincent, and is unlike the original in some important ways.

Coaker was a teetotaler with homosexual tendencies; Vincent likes drink and women. Coaker faded from the political scene during the 1920s, as much by his own volition as by the machinations of his enemies; Vincent is assassinated by a deranged constituent, the occasion unintentionally engineered by his nemesis, Prime Minister Claude Caines. Rodgers does not attempt to introduce any "real" historical figures either, though Caines may be based on Sir Richard Squires, and the journalist Hammond Janes on the young Smallwood. This is essentially an imagined story taking place during a defined period in Newfoundland's past — a traditional historical novel, in fact. Rodgers does not seem to have made any deliberate attempts to alter the larger historical context, though in these post-modern times, it is difficult to be certain about such things.

Born in St. John's, orphaned, and with little formal education, Vincent becomes manager of a store at Reach Run Island in his mid-teens, where he experiences an improbable sexual liaison with "Elizabeth." He leaves the merchant business in disgust and becomes a telegrapher. Back at Reach Run, news of the 1892 St. John's fire delivers him from his past. He is baptized by total immersion, and works as a pioneer farmer for 15 years. He becomes a healer, meets George Gill, his faithful future lieutenant, tries his hand at fishing, and then decides to found the Fishermen's Collective. As with Coaker, this takes place at Herring Neck.

The organizing campaign, resisted only in Roman Catholic settlements, eventually finds its centre on Our Island, a feudal barony controlled by the local “merchantmen,” the Woolfreys. And here Vincent finds his true love, Madeline Lane, a fisherman’s daughter engaged to Wes Woolfrey. It is on Our Island (readers who had problems with Annie Proulx’s placenames should send her an apology) that Vincent decides to build a new settlement at what he calls Union Cove. The novel then follows the courtship of Madeline and Wes, and the development of Union Cove, complete with full electrical service (light and heat) to all houses, an electric fish drier (“the world’s first”), and a rail/ferry link to the mainland. The chronology implies that this all happens before the Great War.

Then a really curious incident takes place: Vincent faces the underground opposition of a substantial number of Collective members who, disguised in mummies’ garb, meet in the settlement’s only, boarded-up (why?) church. He deals with them by torching the church while they are meeting inside; the dissidents flee, and that’s that. No investigation, no penalties. No new church, it seems.

Opposition appears from the Woolfreys. Wes organizes an alliance of the “merchantmen” along the coast to stabilize and lower the price of fish. Since he and Madeline have now moved to St. John’s, Vincent carries the campaign to Wes’ new doorstep and, in effect, forces the government to intervene. Always fighting the demon drink, Vincent then leads the Collective into the 1913 election and sweeps thirteen seats, a campaign covered by Hammond Janes of the St. John’s *Evening Mail*. Vincent can somehow find plenty of booze after prohibition begins during the Great War, but conscription is — as with Coaker — the real problem. His vote for conscription triggers a huge personal and alcoholic crisis, his recovery watched over by Gill and the divine Madeline, who has left the unsatisfactory and violent Wes, now intent on a divorce. Convalescence merges into enthusiastic love-making. And then the denouement, an account probably based on the expedition which A.B. Morine stupidly authorized against moonshiners in Bonavista Bay, which leads to Vincent’s assassination.

The publication of Johnston’s *Colony* sparked a controversy, agitating the waters of Newfoundland literary criticism, over whether authors of novels set in the past had an obligation to “get it right.” Most reviewers greeted Johnston’s novel with enthusiasm, but Rex Murphy in the *Globe and Mail*,¹ and the late Stuart Pierson in *Newfoundland Studies*² argued in their own ways that historical accuracy is important. There was a real, historical Smallwood living in a real, historical Newfoundland, and both deserved to be represented accurately. Johnston did not do this, taking liberties with Smallwood’s character and career, with his portrayal of the people Smallwood encountered, and even with the geography of the places where he lived and travelled. Johnston had not “got it right,” and it was important that he should have done so. Following this line of thought, Gordon Inglis has written that

If the setting is a real time and a real place that we know, we expect the author to get it right. If it is a real time and a real place that we do not know, either through experience or study, we expect the author to have done the homework....³

Ronald Rompkey, though, thinks that such “fact-mongers” miss the point. Johnston was creating a counter-factual world, not writing history, and was not bound by rules of evidence. The book was not about the “real” Smallwood — assuming that one can actually know who that was — but about Newfoundland the place, about Newfoundland society and identity, and about what might have been. Novelists are free to create their own realities, and *Colony* was an exercise in post-modernism which, as Pierson complained, blurs the boundaries between fact and fiction by insisting that we are all storytellers.⁴

Historians generally find the post-modern critique of their discipline difficult to accept. Most of us in the trade admit the impossibility of establishing an objective, definitive and final historical truth, but we are also governed by the premise that a reasonably accurate account of the human past is both possible and necessary. We have also learned to appreciate the traditional historical novel, which derives from the same assumptions. The *Oxford Companion to English Literature*, for example, observes that “In [a] serious [historical novel] there is a real attempt at accuracy and credibility,” and then leads the reader on to “Faction,” defined as “fiction based on and mingled with fact.”⁵ In each of these related categories the historical setting and atmosphere should be evoked as accurately as possible. Johnston is by no means alone in challenging these conventions. The past has become fair game for the contemporary novelist it seems, but how far can he or she go?

Like Johnston, an author may choose to make selective changes. Another alternative is to abandon any pretension to historical accuracy, which is what Howard Norman does in *The Bird Artist* (New York, Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1994), ostensibly set in early twentieth-century Witless Bay. The livers catch sea bass, drink coffee, and their sexual behaviour is distinctly contemporary. There is a library, a lighthouse and a restaurant. The Beothuk are still around, and some Moravians live down the shore. But most Newfoundland authors remain concerned about authenticity, and play by the old rules, like Kevin Major in *No Man's Land* (Toronto, Doubleday, 1995), a novel which displays considerable knowledge about the experience of the Newfoundland Regiment before and during the battle at Beaumont Hamel. But sometimes there are slips. For instance, Lillian Bouzane improbably makes Mathye Caboto, wife of Zuan (Giovanni) Caboto, a composer, and choir director at a church in Venice.⁶

Similarly, Gordon Rodgers seems to want to get it right. *A Settlement of Memory* was written before much of the current discussion about the Newfoundland historical novel began, but with *Colony of Unrequited Dreams* in mind. However, this readable novel contains some troubling historical inaccuracies and improbabilities which do not seem to have been intentional. Rodgers is neither Norman nor

Johnston and *pace* Rompkey, fact-mongering is in fact relevant. For example, the use of the word “collective” as a noun rather than an adjective was extremely rare before the 1920s. Electric heating — in the sense which I think Rodgers means — did not appear until much later. It is questionable whether an ambitious union leader would have isolated his town on an island. A St. John’s newspaper would not have sent a reporter to cover an election campaign on the northeast coast in 1913, but would have relied on partisan local stringers. Divorce was unobtainable in pre-confederation Newfoundland. The dead were not waked in funeral parlours, but at home. The sexual mores of our own times cannot be freely projected back into the much more inhibited past, and the idea of a Newfoundland settlement existing without church or clergy (resident or visiting), as in the case of Union Cove, is unlikely — particularly since Vincent, for all his boozing and sexual athletics, was apparently born again.

“The past is a foreign country.” L.P. Hartley’s phrase is fast becoming a cliché,⁷ but it bears repeating because it expresses a real truth. There are continuities, and the past and the present are inevitably interlocked, but one can never assume that the people one meets in the past lived, behaved, thought or spoke as we do, and this caution applies to the historical novel as much as to the writing of plain history. The most prominent exponents of the historical novel know this, and take great pains to make their context accurate and believable — for example Peter Ackroyd, Thomas Keneally, Mary Renault, or Barry Unsworth.⁸

A bit more care and research would have made *A Settlement of Memory* a better and more convincing novel, and perhaps a more subtle one. Coaker can be seen as the flawed leader who lost his way, as the outport crusader defeated by the St. John’s merchant establishment, or as the ambitious promoter who exploited and betrayed his followers. Rodgers’ Vincent might have helped us understand which of those he was, or perhaps something else, and the obstacles which men like him faced in early twentieth-century Newfoundland. Rompkey rightly says that Johnston helps us understand the historical Smallwood, and *Settlement* could have illuminated its own subject more than it does. Paradoxically, a dose of the post-modernist elixir might have been just what Rodgers needed to help us understand why Coaker and the FPU did not make a more lasting impression on the country’s history.

This review was received by Newfoundland Studies before its author became the journal’s editor.

Notes

¹*Globe and Mail*, 3 October 1998.

²*Newfoundland Studies* 14, 2 (1998), 282-301.

³Gordon Inglis, "Truth and Fiction," *Newfoundland Studies* 16, 1 (2000), 69.

⁴Ronald Rompkey, "Newfoundland and Labrador: Colonial and Post-colonial Writing," Unpublished paper, n.d. I am grateful to Dr. Rompkey for allowing me to see a copy of this paper. At the time of writing this review, Stan Dragland's 2000 Pratt Lecture on Johnston was unavailable.

⁵Margaret Drabble (ed.), *The Oxford Companion to English Literature* (5th edition. Oxford University Press, 1985), 463, 336.

⁶Lillian Bouzane, *In the Hands of the Living God* (Winnipeg, Turnstone, 1999). Though women in late fifteenth-century Europe certainly wrote and performed music, it was within conventual or private, not public settings. I am grateful to Dr. Jane Gosine for information on this point. Rose Tremain dropped a similar clanger in her much-praised *Music and Silence* (London, Vintage, 1999), set for the most part in seventeenth-century Denmark. A sub-plot hinges on the visit of a paper-maker to Scandinavia to find wood supplies — but the technique of making paper from wood pulp was not invented until the nineteenth century.

⁷The first line in L.P Hartley's 1953 novel, *The Go-between*.

⁸Gordon Inglis commends Patrick O'Brian and George MacDonald Fraser.

From Red Ochre to Black Gold. Edited by Darrin McGrath. St. John's, Flanker Press, 210 pp., trade pbk., \$16.95, 2001, ISBN 1-894463-17-x.

PHILIP HISCOCK

GARRY CRANFORD'S FLANKER PRESS in St. John's has been producing books at a rapid rate, about two dozen titles over the past two or three years. Some of these books are dependable reprints of local books of popular history — three of Cassie Brown's books are examples. Others are more recent — for example, the White Bay author Earl Pilgrim has had several titles published, including the best-selling *Will Anyone Search For Danny?* (1986). Local history and collections of themed essays are also represented in a list of commendable range and quality.¹

In mid-2001 Flanker published *From Red Ochre to Black Gold*, a collection of essays edited by Darrin McGrath, who is well known in Newfoundland both as a sociologist and as a public figure. He has taught at both campuses of Memorial University, and has lobbied, written letters, and called open-line shows on topics related to what he sees as the decline of Newfoundlanders' access to the outdoors and its fruits. Some of the essays here are relevant to this topic.

No doubt as a result of teaching courses about this province's society and culture, McGrath was aware of the need for an eclectic collection focusing on cultural and social issues in the past and present. It's a problem I have faced, too, teaching