

Linda Cullum, Carmelita McGrath, and Marilyn Porter, eds.
Weather's Edge: A Compendium.

Linda Kealey

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The effect of sandwiching the fictional story between these two accounts of historical research enriches the book and provides its young readers with some idea of how we find out about the past. The story itself equips its readers with a new lens on that past. For a simple and relatively undemanding story, it achieves effects of some complexity.

Margaret Mackey
University of Alberta

Linda Cullum, Carmelita McGrath, and Marilyn Porter, eds. *Weather's Edge: A Compendium*. St. John's: Killick Press, 2006, ISBN 1894294955

A COLLECTION OF ACADEMIC and creative works on women in Newfoundland and Labrador, *Weather's Edge* is a follow up to *Their Lives and Times: Women in Newfoundland and Labrador: A Collage* (1995). Featuring many well-known writers such as Bernice Morgan, Helen Porter, Lisa Moore, and Mary Dalton, among others, the volume also introduces the reader to lesser-known academics and women from Newfoundland and Labrador's past. Among the latter are Fanny Ryan Fiander, writer and journalist, Louisa Flowers, a Labrador resident who lived off the land, Moira Baird Bowring, upper-middle-class mother of four, and Labrador writer and diarist, Frances Pye. A dozen pieces tackle social policy problems that affect women's lives. Brenda Grzetic's "Between Life and Death" deals with the restructuring of the fishery and its effects on women who fish, a study that is complemented by Sharon Taylor's essays on the meaning of community in the context of TAGS (The Atlantic Groundfish Strategy) and Barbara Neis' and Susan Williams' "The New Right: Gender and the Fisheries Crisis: Local and Global Dimensions." Among the other policy studies, Jane Robinson reports on an initiative to change gendered housing policies to provide safe, affordable, accessible, and healthy places for women and their children. Brenda Kitchen reflects on the challenges of continuing sexism for women in the military, Lori Yetman contends that sexism has gone underground in the twenty first century and Donna Malone's study of young women, bars, and sexual violence makes specific recommendations on how to address the problem. Diana Gustafson's focus on the health of women and young girls provides some worrisome statistics about the province in general (Newfoundland and Labrador has the highest per capita use of food banks in Canada; the provincial rates for heart attack and strokes exceed the national rate by 20 per cent and 18 per cent respectively) and specific markers for women. In 2003, for example, life expectancy for women in the province was one and a half years lower than the Canadian average. Gustafson reminds us that inadequate incomes, lack of affordable housing, fewer opportunities for recreation and exercise, and food insecurity make it more likely that poor women will suffer from preventable illnesses.

These observations find resonance in the short stories and poetry that dot the collection. Beth Ryan's story, "Light Fingers," of a minimum wage waitress who previously worked as a domestic underlines the limited choices for working-class, poor women who live on the margins. This theme is also reinforced in Bernice Morgan's story "Unfinished Houses" which traces Lenora's opportunity to return to a prosperous St. John's after years of living with her chemical engineer husband in Ontario. A chance viewing of her childhood friend Marion on television as she is arrested for the cold-blooded murder of her father convinces Lenora that "the past is a dark hole" to which she cannot return. Lenora got out and became middle class while working-class Marion, pregnant at 17, dropped out of school after her shotgun wedding and eventually divorced her husband after their youngest child married.

While the past may be a dark hole, this collection provides numerous examples of some fascinating aspects of women's history in Newfoundland and Labrador, from Willeen Keough's "The 'Old Hag' Revisits St. Brigid" to a study of rape crisis work in St. John's by Lynn Hartery. Keough's essay pinpoints the powerful roles played by Irish-Newfoundland women in popular and Catholic religious activities on the Southern Avalon peninsula from the eighteenth to the twentieth centuries. The Irish Catholic Presentation Sisters discussed by Melanie Martin provided thousands of young women with an education and for some, a vocation and profession as members of the order. The profession of nursing was also beginning to open up to women in the latter half of the nineteenth century as Terry Bishop-Stirling's essay on Agnes Cowan, nurse and hospital matron, demonstrates.

Carla Wheaton, Kathy McManus, and Sara Flaherty's essays address themes in twentieth century women's history — the social construction of women as consumers, the role of women in university extension work, and the impact of law and the courts on private life. Using advertisements, Wheaton examines the development of department stores in the process of creating the female, domestically defined consumer. McManus's study of Florence O'Neill documents her important influence in the field of adult education. Sara Flaherty's "Out of Date in a Good Many Respects" covers new ground in legal history arguing that the Supreme Court of Newfoundland, despite reluctance to use its power, had jurisdiction over judicial separation cases through the Judicature Acts of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The court, she argues, chose not to recognize its own authority thereby making it very difficult for couples to end unhappy or abusive marriages.

Weather's Edge is a vibrant collection of recent works from the disturbing poem, "Firewater" by Christine (Kisitinis) Poker ("Everything changed when I saw/My father grab my mother by the hair") to the awe-inspiring "Recollections — Louise Belbin: Beach Woman" (Belbin "made fish" on the beach at Grand Banks: "When I was going to have Emma, I was on the beach all that summer. She was born the 10th of October and I was off the beach no time when she was born, perhaps two or three weeks.") Although the editors opted not to divide the contributions into

sections, preferring to organize “in a series of sequences or chains of writing,” this reader would have found some thematic divisions useful in thinking about this book as a potential text for classroom use. The editors might also have used their editorial pens to correct minor errors such as the dating of Commission of Government in 1934 (not 1932). These quibbles aside, *Weather’s Edge* succeeds in providing readers with a glimpse of recent writings on women in Newfoundland and Labrador. In addition, the volume is handsomely produced with a signature cover by artist and designer Beth Oberholzer.

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Ronald Rompkey. *Literature and Identity: Essays on Newfoundland and Labrador*. St. John’s: DRC Publishing, 2006, ISBN 0-9781496-4-5

TO RATE THE SCHOLARS of Newfoundlandia would certainly be a mug’s game. There are so many and so many good ones. And then there would be the question of who should do the rating. Presumably not me. I am an English professor from Saskatchewan who fell in love with Newfoundland, with Newfoundland history, with Newfoundland music, and on down — or up — the list. I can claim only to be a dabbler, with a bit more knowledge of Newfoundland than most, but much less than many.

And yet perhaps my experience as an English professor makes me strangely appropriate. Newfoundland has a fine tradition of English professors who have combined literature and history, such as Patrick O’Flaherty. The classic examples are probably the dictionary trio, Story, Kirwin, and Widdowson, but another who comes to mind is E.R. Seary, who remains a prime source for the Newfoundland obsession with onomastics: “That’s not a Newfoundland name.” “It is too.” The author of the present volume, Ronald Rompkey, University Research Professor in the Department of English at Memorial University, is yet another. At least part of him is certainly a literary historian. His work on Sir Wilfred Grenfell is well aware of Grenfell as author. Still, much of Rompkey’s work, including much in this volume, is literary rather in the style of his own prose than in the subject matter. While it is for the most part clear and direct, a “plain style,” there are moments of a robust sententiousness, as in his description of the sailors depicted by Erle Spencer: “Men are still taking risks and receiving their reward.” (9) He admits that Spencer was “interested in Newfoundland as a setting for melodrama and romance, a *terra incognita* suitable for staging far-fetched adventure.” (3) Rompkey continues, “But let us not dismiss him immediately as a sentimentalist.” (3)

I highlight that last phrase because of what it says about Rompkey. While his intention is to lay out the facts, to say who these people were, what their books are and what was the culture they represented, he drops periodic hints of who he is. The