

Two Views of Labrador

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JOHN C. KENNEDY

William Rompkey *The Story of Labrador*, Montreal, Kingston: McGill-Queen's Press, 2005, ISBN 0773529950-22-4.

Cleophas Belvin *The Forgotten Labrador: Kegashka to Blanc-Sablon*, Montreal, Kingston: McGill-Queen's Press, ISBN 07735-31513.

THESE TWO BOOKS are descriptive histories, written in an accessible, academic, and non-theoretical style, and published by McGill-Queen's, Canada's leading publisher of northern books. Belvin introduces the 'forgotten Labrador,' the 400 km long coastline between Kegashka and Blanc Sablon, Quebec's lower north shore. Newfoundland Senator Bill Rompkey tells "the story of Labrador," the mainland portion of the province of Newfoundland and Labrador. There are many strengths and some weaknesses with both volumes.

The nine chapters of Belvin's short (168 page) history are ordered chronologically, beginning with natural resources and prehistoric peoples, proceeding through successive periods of European exploitation and settlement, and concluding with events since the cod moratorium in 1992. He uses archival research to reconstruct the coast's history and identifies the location of the documents, along with specific finding aids within Canadian, Quebec, and Newfoundland and Labrador public archives. A 'bibliography' lists both archival and published sources. Consequently, if another researcher wished to check on a point or examine one of Belvin's sources, and was in the appropriate library or archive, the researcher would be able to do so.

Belvin lucratively mines the Labrador Boundary Documents and related data to reconstruct the French Regime in the region, between 1660-1760. He appreciates the tremendous importance of the American fishery; the difficulties of bringing

some measure of ‘law and order’ to the lower north shore; and the conflicting interests of institutions such as the Roman Catholic Church, the Church of England, and the Grenfell mission on the coast. Belvin’s descriptive approach provides little interpretation of the history he recounts and he does not propose any theory or explanation accounting for the region’s development.

Unlike more empirical methodologies, such as those of the social sciences, Belvin’s archival method introduces only a minority of the coast’s people. We meet the prosperous and literate minority (including Captain William Jones, Louis Chevalier, Samuel Robertson, and John Goddard), some of whom wrote journals or other accounts. However, we learn much less about others, the poorer and presumably less literate majority, referred to in the section called ‘feast or famine.’ Put differently, Belvin’s archival method distances both him and his readers from people’s lives within coastal kitchens, fishing stages, or sealing stations.

The distance from which Belvin writes may also explain the potentially confusing way he presents certain topics. For example, after initially introducing the Innu (formerly called Naskapi or Montagnais ‘Indians’) and Labrador Inuit, he later amasses these distinct cultural groups as ‘native peoples,’ leaving readers uncertain about which people is being discussed in specific parts of the text. While the actual ethnicity of aboriginal groups is not always clear in historic accounts, some readers might have preferred Belvin to quote verbatim the actual descriptions from original sources, even if only in a footnote. Belvin also lumps Labrador’s six species of seals as ‘seals’ rather than identifying specific species exploited, such as, for example, harbour or hooded seals. Important here is that historically, the netting of harp seals twice annually was fundamental to European life on the lower north shore. However, in one of Belvin’s early descriptions of the ‘seal hunt’ he writes, “sealing at that time [spring] was carried on mainly along the mainland, where seals would go to warm themselves in the sun” (p. 33). Although such behaviour sounded to this reviewer more like ringed seals basking in the spring warmth than harps, subsequent sentences on the page returned the reader to more conventional descriptions of how harp seals were netted.

Belvin includes a small map that might have been more detailed to include all places mentioned in the text. He also provides an album of historic photos, mostly from the Library and Archives of Canada, that might have been referred to in the text. For example, one photo depicts harp seals, stored frozen in a wooden enclosure, awaiting spring flensing and the rendering of oil. The image might have augmented Belvin’s description of the important harp seal fishery. But these criticisms aside, Belvin’s short history succeeds in introducing the ‘forgotten’ Labrador to a broader audience.

Like Belvin’s book, Rompkey’s short (171 pages of text) ‘story’ is ordered chronologically, beginning with chapters on what Rompkey calls the ‘Originals’ and Europeans, and proceeding forward in time. Both Belvin and Rompkey appreciate that the formal administration of Labrador was recent and that throughout

much of its history, Labrador was actually governed by what Rompkey appropriately calls 'substitute governors.' Rompkey appears here to use Diamond Jenness's (1965) chapter 'An Experimental Triumvirate' as a template, following Jenness's description of governance initiatives by the Moravians, the Newfoundland government, and the Grenfell mission. In any event, Rompkey's chapter on 'Substitute Governors' and his chapter on 'The Government' are thorough and generally accurate. Both chapters explain Labrador's dependent and sometimes disparaged status as a colony of the Great Britain's colony of Newfoundland (see, for example, p. 59). Here and elsewhere in the book, Rompkey concurs with those who have long lamented Newfoundland's condescending attitude toward Labrador and its people. Rompkey consistently sides with 'Labradorians' and his solidarity with Labrador appears real.

Chapter 6, 'Then and Now,' is also strong, presenting good descriptions of the founding of iron mining and hydroelectric towns in Western Labrador, the New Labrador Party, the Voisey's Bay nickel mine, and other recent developments. Rompkey's residence in and experience with Labrador since 1963 may explain the strengths of sections of this chapter. Clearly, Bill Rompkey is an experienced Labrador hand, and indeed something of a legend along the coast. His book is nicely illustrated by a collection of photos, mostly his own, although not referred to in the text. The book also contains a helpful map and index.

The major weakness in Rompkey's otherwise good book is his failure to acknowledge the source of most of his information. Thus, although direct quotations and *some* specific sources are acknowledged by footnotes, the vast majority of the text appears to be taken without citation from the smorgasbord of Labradoria listed in the Bibliography. There are many systems of referencing (such as, for example, the author-date system proffered by the *Chicago Manual of Style*, 1982: 399-435), and proper documentation of one's sources accomplishes two important scholarly goals. First, it recognizes the contributions of previous authors, and secondly, it enables readers to retrieve and re-examine the data or interpretations of an author. A few examples illustrate some of my many concerns with Rompkey's referencing system.

There are many works listed in Rompkey's Bibliography which do not appear to have been used at all in the text, or not used when they could have been. In his description of the 'awakening' of 1804 among Northern Labrador Inuit (a period of accelerated Inuit conversions to Christianity), Rompkey describes the possible role that Moravian education may have played in causing the 'awakening' before admitting his own uncertainty about cause (p. 42). Yet among the sources listed in Rompkey's Bibliography, is Brice-Bennett's fine 1981 MA thesis. Chapter 2 of that thesis ('An Account of the Remarkable Awakening') is, in my opinion, the most plausible explanation of why the awakening occurred in the Labrador literature. Brice-Bennett argues that the 'awakening' was caused by Inuit women seeking to improve their social status (1981: 98-100).

In other cases, Rompkey provides sources that are not retrievable for one reason or another. For example, in his fascinating account of Rev. Henry Gordon's anger over the Newfoundland government's insensitive response to his request for assistance following the 1918-19 epidemic, Rompkey quotes Rev. Gordon, as presented in Archdeacon Francis Buckle's 1998 history of the Anglican Church in Labrador. On checking Buckle, however, one finds that Buckle lists a dozen (incomplete) sources at the end of his chapter, without specifying which one contains Rev. Gordon's angry comments. Consequently, short of contacting Rev. Buckle, neither his book nor Rompkey's use of it would allow someone to retrieve the source of Gordon's quote. Many of Rompkey's footnotes citing primary sources are incomplete. One footnote, for example, is referenced as 'Archives of Newfoundland Labrador, letter from R. Harris to H.L. Pottle, 1953,' although no file numbers, box names, or other identifying information is provided. From my experience in PANL, this letter would be very difficult to retrieve. I could go on, but conclude simply by suggesting with respect that Rompkey take greater care in documenting future works. My criticism detracts from what would have been, with proper documentation, a much better book.

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