

# The Critic's Eye: Stuart Pierson on Newfoundland

Adrian Fowler

---

Volume 25, Number 1, Spring 2010

URI: [https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/nflds25\\_1re01](https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/nflds25_1re01)

[See table of contents](#)

---

## Publisher(s)

Faculty of Arts, Memorial University

## ISSN

0823-1737 (print)

1715-1430 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

---

## Cite this article

Fowler, A. (2010). The Critic's Eye: Stuart Pierson on Newfoundland. *Newfoundland Studies*, 25(1), 115–128.

## REVIEW ESSAYS

# The Critic's Eye: Stuart Pierson on Newfoundland

ADRIAN FOWLER

STUART PIERSON PROBABLY would have approved of at least half of the title given to the posthumous publication of his reviews and essays on Newfoundland, *Hard-headed and Big-hearted: Writing Newfoundland*, edited by Stan Dragland (St. John's: Pennywell Books, 2006). But the "Writing Newfoundland" half would, I suspect, have elicited vintage Pierson scorn. With its once (but no longer) daring suppression of the idiomatic preposition between the participle and the object, this staple of postmodern provocation would have inspired a paragraph, if not a page, of gleeful dismantling (emphatically *not* deconstructing) on his part. The first half of the title, a phrase of his own creation conjured up for an imagined work, would likely have pleased him. Hard-headed and big-hearted he was, as this collection amply demonstrates, forever questioning the rationality and factuality of what he read or heard said about the place, yet always conveying respect, appreciation, and occasionally affection for the people and the culture. Pierson takes Newfoundland seriously, more seriously at times than some of his subjects might wish. He considers with relentless scrutiny every ponderous pronouncement by experts and every

cherished chestnut of the locals. When in doubt, he sometimes performs a kind of thought experiment, referring the issue in his imagination to his neighbours on Prescott Street, as though some needle of authenticity in these gritty descendents of Johnny Burke might be utilized to navigate academic disputes or puncture the puffery of cultural chauvinism. Thus he scoffs at photographs designed for the tourism market that present a cuisine that is upscale and non-indigenous — mandarin orange covered cheesecake, trout on a bed of lettuce garnished with grapes, tomatoes, maraschino cherries and lemons — and he objects to redevelopment schemes that erase old neighbourhoods thought not to be compatible with a modern city, as though they were dirt to be swept under the rug when strangers come to visit. He is sympathetic to a view that he associates with Newfoundland artists, writers, comics and poets. He calls it “Newfoundland pastoral” rather than Newfoundland nationalism: “because there isn’t much politics in it.” It is a point of view characterized by “a vague regret that Newfoundland did not try to make a living as an independent, perhaps poorer, but more dignified, country” (124). Some might say this perspective is romantic (Pierson himself uses the term), even hypocritical, condemning Newfoundlanders to live horizon-limited lives in order to satisfy someone else’s notion of cultural integrity. Certainly it would seem at odds with the aspirations of a younger generation of Newfoundlanders, represented by writers such as Lisa Moore and Michael Winter, for whom international cuisine and international travel are experiences Newfoundlanders have as much right to as anyone else. But Pierson is not a purveyor of rural nostalgia. He is a champion of the urban and does not accept dependency theory notions that the metropole sucks the life out of the periphery. At the same time, he is sympathetic to what may be called the traditional values of Newfoundland life and is inclined to advocate on behalf of the dispossessed, marginalized in the headlong rush to emulate the greed and vulgarity of modern mass culture.

*Hard-headed and Big-hearted* is a fitting tribute to Stuart Pierson’s Newfoundland writings, eloquently and movingly introduced by Pierson’s colleague, James Hiller, and expertly edited, with a characteristically thoughtful Afterword, by Stan Dragland. I did not know Pierson personally although I did read many of his reviews in the *Newfoundland Quarterly* and *Newfoundland Studies* and, as is usually the case in Newfoundland, some of my friends were friends of his. We were introduced briefly at one of Grenfell College’s conferences on universal themes in the early nineties — I don’t recall whether it was *Time and Space* or *Creativity and Discovery* — but we shared a reserve that regrettably, I feel now, did not lead to further acquaintance. A vivid sense of what he was like as a person and a teacher, in particular from the viewpoint of a student and aspiring scholar, can be found in Jerry Bannister’s excellent review in an earlier issue of *Newfoundland and Labrador Studies* (Vol. 23, No. 2, 2008).

Trained as a historian of science, Pierson was a scholar in the old-fashioned sense, with wide-ranging intellectual interests and a broad general knowledge of

classic texts and works of art. In a feat that is rare, even perhaps eccentric, he either minutely remembered or constantly refurbished reading from his undergraduate courses in history, literature and philosophy. One can reconstruct from his work the outlines of a “great books” curriculum from a certain era, impressively alive. He was a stickler for rigorous writing and thinking and was fond of quoting authorities such as H.W. Fowler, R.G. Collingwood and George Orwell. The great American stylist E.B. White turns up, although not, surprisingly, in the company of William Strunk, Jr. No doubt Pierson’s grounding in, and respect for, canonical texts will be sufficient grounds for dismissal in the minds of some readers. Although I am not of that persuasion, I do find some of his linguistic and stylistic prescriptions and proscriptions a little passé. But Pierson’s understanding of good prose goes beyond the “rules.” He is not just a scholar, he is a writer, and this book is engrossing because his writing draws you in. Along the way, his alertness to the absurdities that arise unbidden from thoughtless sentence construction is part of the reason he is such good company — as when he cites the following: “All around this settlement are to be seen the tiered flakes and fish rooms of the inhabitants, clinging to the rough craggy rocks” — and comments wryly that the photographs in the collection under discussion contain mostly “rivers and noble fish. Very few clinging inhabitants” (269).

Perhaps the most remarkable quality of Pierson’s writing about Newfoundland is its questing nature. Never does he fail to acknowledge the complexities of the issue. A good example is his review of *Merchant Credit and Labour Strategies in Historical Perspective*, edited by Rosemary Ommer (Fredericton, NB: Acadiensis Press, 1990), which contains the proceedings of an academic conference on the role of the merchant in the history of Newfoundland and other regions of North America. The book presents various learned perspectives on this controversial subject. Were merchants the villains of popular myth, holding the poor fishermen (farmers, fur-traders) in unwilling bondage? Or were they risk-takers, vital sources of credit in cash-strapped economies that could not have survived or prospered without them? Were they patrons who often sustained their clients in bad times? Or were they exploiters who retarded the advance of more progressive social and economic structures? As a specialist in historiography, Pierson is well-placed to account for these differing points of view, and his summary is lucid and fair. Ultimately, with refreshing candour, he gives vent to his frustration with the irresolvable nature of much historical debate: “I hate the on-the-one-hand, on-the-other place in which I now find myself” (44). In the end, nearly throwing in the towel, he offers a few observations about what he *supposes* he thinks about the subject. It is his most indecisive review. Yet in threading his way scrupulously through these intricate disquisitions and in concluding with a question — “Is there a way to decide who is right?” — Pierson gives the reader a powerful sense not only of the scholarly passion of historical enquiry but also the elusiveness of historical “truth” as the disci-

pline strives to go beyond “myth” and base itself strictly on reason and evidence. The review is a lesson in intellectual honesty.

The distinction between history and literature is an issue that much preoccupied Pierson. Trained as a professional historian to insist on the difference, he was well aware, as a generalist who kept his reading up to date, of the blurring of the boundaries that has been one of the chief legacies of postmodern critical theory. I would be hard pressed to recommend a more masterful explication and demystification of this issue than the seven-page middle section of Pierson’s review of John Steffler’s *The Afterlife of George Cartwright*. He starts with the idea of text as great leveler: the observation that we can comment on the meaning of one text only by reference to another text, and can justify the privileging of one text over another only by producing another text. He sees the point — “Endless regress is on us” — and, as the devil’s advocate, he can argue the upside: “There is no reason ... why the cadastral surveys we have inherited should be closed to scrutiny, no reason why the boundaries between the trivial and the profound, the important and the ephemeral, the vulgar and the sublime should not be re-examined” (141). Pierson’s choice of the word *cadastral* is characteristic of his literary talent for metaphor and also of his fairness as a thinker. The adjective is associated with surveying and mapping done to determine the ownership of property. It therefore concretely and succinctly conveys a worrisome suspicion about traditional academic enquiry, that sometimes it seems to be all about turf.

Pierson continues with a brief summary of historical writing from Herodotus to Murray Kempton, from Homer to James Joyce, making it clear how mainstream it has always been for historians to behave like creative writers, and for poets, playwrights and novelists to write history. Oddly he does not question the premise that because all texts are texts, therefore all texts are equal. (If the medium is the message, then of course this is the case, but McLuhan’s dictum only makes sense as metaphor, not as syllogism.) Nor does Pierson suggest a means whereby the very real conundrum of how to distinguish between history and literature might be resolved. Yet his unease about the effacement of the line between the discourses (a word he would have hated) ultimately shapes his review of Steffler’s *Cartwright*: “The literary strengths of his book cause one to ask: why did you need Cartwright at all? The engrossing character of Cartwright as historical figure causes one to ask: once you chose him, why not stick by him?” (150) The first question seems somewhat plaintively to ask: Since you are such a good writer, why didn’t you just stay out of the domain of history? The second seems rather accusingly to demand: With someone as large as life in Cartwright, why didn’t you just write a proper biography? I’m not sure either question makes much sense unless it has already been made clear that history and literature must be kept distinct. After demonstrating with great learning, clarity and impartiality just how hard this is to do, in theory at least, Pierson’s criticism of Steffler’s novel implies that the distinction is not so obscure after all.

But if the reasons Pierson cites for his misgivings are disappointing, his instincts are sure. For all of Steffler's marvelous poetic language, for all his brilliant flights of fancy, the "presentism" and didacticism of his novel in my view *are* weaknesses, but they are literary ones. There is just something too easy about having Mrs. Selby contradict Cartwright's boast about having delivered a child himself; as Pierson puts it, casting her "as politically correct, in order to chasten poor autocratic Cartwright" (141). Again, when Steffler has Cartwright metaphorically devoured by a bear, the verbal virtuosity of the fantasy is almost undone by the facile symbolism of nature's revenge. When Pierson complains that the novel "alternates between being a stick to beat our benighted times with, and being a reproach to Cartwright's own period for not being sound on capital punishment, on women's and Indian rights, and on landscape rights," he is right. Cartwright's attitudes towards women, aboriginals and nature are complex and challenging for our time. Even socially progressive novelists need to be wary of meeting these challenges with appeals to political correctness. The thing about the past is that it is past. Even if we wish to rehabilitate it in our imaginations for literary purposes, we cannot ignore the hard fact that it is beyond recall. The trick, for the novelist as for the historian, is to build a bridge to the present.

Pierson holds *The Afterlife of George Cartwright* in very high regard. The opening words of his review — "Sentences that stop you in your tracks" — convey his unabashed admiration for the poetic genius of Steffler's writing. Nevertheless, for reasons already given, he regards the novel as a "failure," although he tries to assuage this by saying paradoxically that it is a failure "at a high level of achievement" (152). *Failure* is, I believe, far too strong a word to assign to this marvellous novel. But if Pierson's assessment of the novel's flaws is excessive, and his identification of their causes dubious, his unease with certain aspects of Steffler's work is justified. The perceptive amateur critic trumps the seasoned professional historian every time in his literary reviews, but not usually without creating some confusion along the way.

If he is troubled by the liberties Steffler takes with history, Pierson is even more unhappy about the way the past is treated by Wayne Johnston, another writer he admires. Pierson's four reviews of Johnston's early work (*The Story of Bobby O'Malley*, *The Time of Their Lives*, *The Divine Ryans* and *The Colony of Unrequited Dreams*) amount to an important commentary on Newfoundland's most successful novelist. From the first, he is a champion of Johnston's writing. He enthusiastically celebrates Johnston's strengths: his satiric wit, his insight into father-son relationships, his grasp of Catholic culture in Newfoundland, his talent for brilliant structural devices. Pierson's close analysis of characteristic traits is sometimes strikingly insightful, as when he traces the intricate "metaphoric web" of enclosure and whirl in *The Story of Bobby O'Malley*, an elaboration that he accomplishes with impressive critical finesse. Always he reads comprehensively, painstakingly and independently. Thus, he argues that Johnston's fourth and least acclaimed novel,

*Human Amusements*, reveals the author “close to the top of his form, and the neglect of this book, compared with the takeoff of *Colony*, is one of those inexplicable turns of the market unreflective of merit” (231). Similarly, he notes early on that Johnston’s flair for comedy masks a heart of darkness. “The funniness disguises the misery,” he writes of *Bobby O’Malley*, “but cannot transform it. Several times, reading this estimable book, I thought how close it is to [Percy Janes’s] *House of Hate*” (97). As he works his way through the early Johnston novels, however, Pierson increasingly worries about deficiencies in the writing. In *Bobby O’Malley* he observes that Bobby’s mother, Agnes, does not come alive as a fully imagined character and sometimes the narrator’s voice seems superimposed upon her (95-96). In *The Divine Ryans* he finds that the comedy, over-elaborated, crude and juvenile, is at odds with the tragedy of a “homosexual man forced to marry an unsuspecting woman for reasons of family” (131). And in *The Time of Their Lives*, his favourite Johnston novel, he believes that the epic nature of the subject — two Newfoundland families followed through three generations — is poorly served by the sketchy and anecdotal style of the narrative. His criticism is that the implied relationship between the characters and the times in which they lived is largely unrealized because “the elaborate and dramatic dance between this rock and the rest of the world that has twirled on since 1920 figures only in authorial asides” (108).

By the time he gets to *The Colony of Unrequited Dreams*, Pierson seems to have concluded regretfully that Johnston is given to “a certain disturbing carelessness” in his writing that is centred around, but not limited to, his handling of history (228). The review begins with a famous quotation from James Joyce to his Aunt Josephine asking her to confirm and suggest minute details of Dublin buildings, streets and gossip that he can incorporate into the final two chapters of *Ulysses*. By way of contrast, Pierson then goes on to catalogue an impressive list of historical and geographical inexactitudes, linguistic anachronisms, chronological confusions and grammatical errors in Johnston’s novel. With the heavyweight of modern fiction in his corner, Pierson is emboldened to face down the literati who might defend Johnston by suggesting that such details are of importance “only to pedants, only to those Germanically schooled zealots subject in Max Weber’s phrase to the ‘strange intoxication’ of believing that the fate of their souls depends upon getting right every detail, every particular that many shrug off with a ‘whatever’” (227). He is clearly annoyed by this cavalier attitude.

Getting the details right mattered for Joyce but should it matter for Johnston? This is a question Pierson struggles to answer, with not entirely satisfactory results. Again, as in his review of Steffler’s *Cartwright*, he shows how well he understands the difficulty of establishing a clear boundary between literature and history, citing classic instances beginning with Aristotle. For the third time in this collection he returns to the famous passage in *The Poetics* which claims that poetry (read literature) describes what might be, while history describes what has been. Poetry is therefore more “philosophic” because it makes universal statements, whereas history is of

less import because it merely makes singular statements. There are all kinds of problems with this distinction. To begin, Aristotle's experience of both disciplines was extremely narrow compared to our own. We may even ask whether he would have understood what is meant nowadays by imaginative literature. As well, the text of *The Poetics* is widely regarded as corrupt. Some scholars believe that it was put together from notes of students who heard the great man speak. If we add to this the ordinary hazards of translating from ancient Greek into a modern language, we find ourselves at several removes from what Aristotle may have said, even if we could agree that it should be privileged. Pierson does not raise any of these difficulties, yet he knows that authors have always believed themselves at liberty to mix literature and history. He also knows that modern historians make universal statements as a matter of course when they identify "causes" for what happened. And just how well he grasps the contemporary skepticism over "the fixedness of kind" and "the order of things" can be seen in the following sentences:

Darwin's discoveries have convinced many of us that forms in the natural world possess no eternal permanence, but are only the interim settlements in a constant negotiation amongst internal and external forces. Similarly, in social arrangements among humans, German idealism, Marx, and the astonishing revelations of anthropology have shown that Aristotle's faith in a universal order is simply a dream. There is no one "order," and such orders as do exist do not stay in place forever or even, maybe, for long. The condition we find ourselves in, according to some, is the condition that Plato and Aristotle ascribed to Heraclitus: all is flux after all. This is the condition of postmodernity. (236)

But having opened up the question so eloquently, Pierson abruptly shuts it down: "Before we crack our brains coming down heavily on one side or the other, I think we should wake up to the fact that both 'poetry,' in Aristotle's sense, and history, are essential to our understanding of the world, and that they must be distinct" (237). Of course, this simply begs the question. To the provocative suggestion that "what happened doesn't matter; what people think happened does," he wonders whether this belief can ultimately be sustained in practice: "Law, contract, promise, the elaborate authentication of documents, trust, would be meaningless" (237-238). He definitely has a point. But the discussion reveals a disconnect between the two Piersons: the classically trained disciple of great books and the open-minded explorer of new territory. In this instance, it seems the disciple had heard enough, and put his foot down.

When we come back to *Colony*, therefore, this complex issue still seems unresolved, providing little guidance for sorting out the questions that have been raised. Fortunately when Pierson finds literary reasons for his discomfort he is more convincing. Noting Johnston's close shadowing of Richard Gwyn's biography, he speculates that he may have started out intending to write the definitive Newfoundland novel or national epic only to find his hero totally intractable; there-



fore, he gave up and invented Sheilagh Fielding, “a character like himself,” and allowed her to hijack the novel. According to this scenario, Smallwood does not get developed in a way that illuminates the historical record or even distinguishes him sufficiently from the author. The “historical dimension” in *Colony* “seems flat,” and the characters “play out their lives against backdrops selected at random from the prop room.... The inevitabilities that work their ways through their lives do not bring in place and time in a convincing way” (238). This is, I believe, fair comment. Johnston’s signature talents — his satiric edge, his flair for the fantastic, his comic love of the absurd — sometimes overpower his characters, making them sound more like their author than themselves. As well, the historical background *is* sketchy and sometimes the details *are* wrong. The truth is that Johnston cannibalizes history. He uses what he comes across for his own purposes but does not do the hard work necessary to get the facts right. For the reader who realizes that at the time of the sealing disaster of 1914 there was no “apron” on the north side of St. John’s harbour, that there was no “Harbour Drive,” that these features were not part of the old country of Newfoundland but developments made possible by Confederation with Canada — these errors may seem unforgivable. Certainly the failure to incorporate the powerful imagery of the old wooden finger piers that jutted out into the harbour — standing in such stark contrast to the massive concrete dock that took their place — is an unnecessary and unfortunate loss. What a perfect metaphor to depict pre- and post-Confederate Newfoundland! But is this inaccuracy a fatal flaw? Similarly, Smallwood’s trek across the ice on his visit to the South Coast may strike Newfoundlanders as jarring since this is the only part of the island that is relatively ice free. It is too bad that Johnston couldn’t have found a more plausible location for this event. But does this blunder undermine the impact of the novel?

There are many inaccuracies of this kind in *Colony*, too numerous to mention here. Pierson’s list is more complete than any other I have come across, although even he doesn’t get them all. But how seriously should we take them? The answer is, I think, that these errors are annoyances for the initiated, and in some cases represent missed opportunities for greater effect, but their impairment of the quality of this work of fiction is negligible. Furthermore, it is possible to get so caught up in this multitude of small howlers that one fails to give Johnston credit for some impressively strong evocations of place and time: the sheer imaginative power of the scenes of Smallwood walking the rails and lost on the Bonavista branch line with Fielding, or the amazing description of him crossing the ice-fields (however unlikely their location), or his breathtaking encounter with the caribou herd from the Buchans Plateau. These scenes are writ large. The reader appreciates them as likely containing a certain essential truth while suspecting that they may not be strictly factual. Or take Smallwood’s “eureka” moment when he realizes that the remote outports of Newfoundland — embodying in a way the distinctive culture of the place more strongly than the larger, more connected communities and towns — had only a weak concept of Newfoundland as a country, if they had such a concept at all.

This insight is strikingly reflective of recent scholarship by Eric Hobsbaum and others on how nationalism is invented, superimposing itself upon a nation-less past and erasing evidence of its own creation. Here Johnston must be applauded for imaginative historical thinking.

Pierson is closer to understanding how Johnston should be read when writing of *Bobby O'Malley*. He suggests that the work in some ways echoes the “playfulness with abstractions like space, time, and mind” that characterizes the fiction of Jorge Luis Borges, Gabriel Garcia Marques and Italo Calvino. Johnston is a satirist and fantasist rather than a realist. But though such writers slip the surly bonds of historical verisimilitude, they often have important things to say about the past. In *Colony*, for example, Fielding's “Condensed History” provides, among other things, a biting satiric perspective on revisionist interpretations of Newfoundland history.

If Pierson's training as a historian is sometimes a handicap, however, it is often one of his strengths. He typically attacks his subject by surrounding it with an intellectual or social context, or by approaching it from the side, or even from behind, by a tangent freighted with fresh thought. When he settles down to review *The Prints of Christopher Pratt*, he starts with a two-paragraph essay on the origins of stoicism, relocating the philosophical stance to its roots in the ancient societies of Greece and Rome rather than presenting it as an idea sufficient unto itself. This enables him to present a contextual definition of the word *patrician*, which he then applies to the work of Pratt. This introduction encourages the reader not only to reconsider his or her understanding of the meaning of stoicism, but more importantly, to view Pratt as occupying a position within a community rather than existing grandly, *sui generis*, on his own.

Similarly, when it comes to considering the writing of Ray Guy, Pierson places Guy within a literary tradition that goes back at least as far as Mark Twain to the establishment of newspapers “that were the political schoolrooms for the kind of mass democracy emerging toward the end of the [nineteenth] century” (81). The list he provides of writers in this category demonstrates how carefully he has thought about this, as does the fact that he puts Stephen Leacock, G.B. Shaw, Max Beerbohm and H.L. Mencken in a related but slightly different category, and sees the detective writers Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandler, Howard Engel and Ross Thomas as also having deep affinities with this style. Pierson's demonstrated expertise about the subject gives weight to his insights — that these writers all came from small towns to work in the city, that they were populists who distrusted modern market society, and that they were, most of them, hard drinkers. All of this has the effect of dispelling Ray Guy's uniqueness, which is not to say that he is not unique, of course, but that he is not unique in many of the ways Newfoundlanders may think he is. Pierson thus connects Guy's Newfoundland with a larger human community, showing how it is a part of the whole as much as apart from the whole.

Pierson's tendency to interpret Newfoundland within a larger framework does not have the effect of diminishing the value or the distinctiveness of the history and culture of the place. Rather, its intent appears to be the opposite, analogous to the way in which the *Dictionary of Newfoundland English* created a sense of pride in Newfoundland dialects by connecting them to dialects in other parts of the world, especially West Country England and Southeastern Ireland, and taking them seriously by asserting them to be worthy of the highest level of scholarly scrutiny. A similar aim seems to underlie Pierson's contextualizing. Perhaps because this was his special passion as a reviewer and critic, he is merciless when attempts by outsiders to "fit Newfoundland in" are sloppy and condescending.

Thus, in his review of *The Canadian Encyclopedia*, Pierson admits at one point: "It strikes me, and it may strike you, that this is a thoroughly bad-tempered review. I don't know whether to apologize or not" (14). From a certain point of view, it almost seems as though he should. He himself acknowledges the challenges of writing a satisfactory encyclopedia in a period "when we accept history and time as fundamental categories rather than as phenomena, as fleeting, apparent only, and therefore superficial" (10). Yet his litany of complaints ultimately adds up to something more than a list of cheap-shot criticisms. The way in which *The Canadian Encyclopedia* ignores rather than addresses the problems inherent in describing societies with separate if ultimately converging histories comes to be better understood as the review unfolds, and the utter lack of acknowledgement of these difficulties, and their significance, comes to appear more and more egregious. Pierson here, through an accumulation of seemingly small criticisms, accomplishes the same task that G.M. Story achieved in his critique of *The Literary History of Canada* in his essay "Notes from a Berry Patch." It is a recurrent and defining characteristic of the province's relationship with the rest of Canada: not just the difficulty of fitting Newfoundland in but a failure to understand that there is such a difficulty, sometimes followed by exasperation and impatience when it is pointed out that there is one.

A similar but broader issue is the subject of Pierson's previously unpublished review of the Volume II of the *Historical Atlas of Canada*. Here the main problem seems to be not just fitting Newfoundland but Canada itself into a structure that is essentially quantitative and diagrammatic. He begins his review with two quotations — one from Jorge Luis Borges and the other from Eavan Boland — indicating the kind of distortion inherent in the science of mapping. He complains about the self-congratulatory tone of some of the introductory material. And he argues that the *HAC* disguises the realities of historical happenstance and contingency by presenting an idealized version of present-day Canada as a destination past events teleologically sought. "The *HAC* yearns to *create* or at least ritually sustain Canada," he insists, and this "is not the kind of thing a *Social Sciences* and *Humanities Research Council* should be bankrolling. It ain't science and it ain't research. It's barely humanities, for there's hardly *anyone* in it" (62, Pierson's italics). This was a

brave — some might say foolhardy — charge to make, and one can understand why journal editors were nervous about publishing the piece.

For that reason, the uncomfortable question of censorship arises. Granted editors have the right and even the obligation to ensure that reviewers are fair, but does this justify the suppression of what is ultimately a carefully and thoughtfully articulated comment, however unorthodox it might be? Some of Pierson's criticisms may seem pedantic or quirky. He does not like pie charts because they lack precision and he objects to maps that visually represent, for example, the degree of settlement or exploration that had taken place at a given point in time, considering them meaningless. It is not self-evident, to me at least, that Pierson's dismissal of these tools is valid. Nevertheless, he has some very compelling criticisms of the *HAC* which he categorizes puckishly with such phrases as "old-dog-trayisms," "Donation-of-Constantine" objections, "grand-abstraction-in-action," and "tool-as-cause." Although the nomenclature of this system of classification is humorous, Pierson's criticisms are not frivolous. On the contrary, they are well-defined and well-supported by evidence from the text. It is hard to escape the conclusion that journal editors were afraid of this review because they didn't want to insult the academic establishment in Canada by associating themselves with a piece of writing that devastatingly called into question what was being hyped as a great national project.

Pierson's ability to create an original perspective on a subject by framing or reframing it socially or historically is most impressive in his essay on Ron Hynes's CD *cryer's paradise* and in his unfinished essay on Christopher Pratt, Mary Pratt and Gerald Squires. Characteristically, he begins his analysis of Hynes's work with what at first sight seems a highly improbable comment on angels and the Book of Genesis, which he develops brilliantly into the central insight and hook of the piece: that the values of country music are medieval, belonging to a world that is Manichean in nature — that is, split between good and evil, God and the Devil — in which the primary moral struggle is between loyalty and treachery. From this, it follows "that the oaths and promises and solemn declarations upon which the structure rested had to be *forever*" (172). In this world, country represents an idealized environment in which the traditional virtues of truth, honour and fidelity are upheld and the city represents a fallen environment in which vice thrives. On the way to discussing the songs on *cryer's paradise*, Pierson makes compelling distinctions between country music on the one hand and American pop music of the 1930s and 1940s, modern rock music, and the blues on the other. He reminds the reader of the Platonic dualism of the medieval world view and the parallel dualism between the instinctual and the institutional, between love and marriage, which gradually became blurred as the middle class concept of romantic marriage evolved and triumphed. He is at pains to caution the reader to understand that country and western music is no more country and western than the Holy Roman Empire was holy, Roman or an empire. The terms denote *aspirations*, not *realities*. Similarly, although

in concept romantic marriage is forever, in practice it is notoriously unstable. By this declension, Pierson finally gets to Ron Hynes.

His point, many pages in the making, is that although most of the songs found in *cryer's paradise* illustrate the values and the vocabulary of country music, most of them are also ultimately “potboilers.” One of them, however, breaks free of the conventions of the genre to become the “real thing” — a song out of time and place, a powerful fusing of words and music to emotion and thought, a song that is not a song but a poem. The work Pierson singles out for all this praise and attention is “Atlantic Blue,” written by Hynes in response to the sinking of the *Ocean Ranger*, and it is certainly merits the elaborate contextualizing it is accorded in this mesmerizing essay.

Admittedly, there are times when the wheels threaten to come off the hurtling train of thought and the cars seem about to jump the tracks. On more than one occasion the reader is left wondering whether the author’s promise to return to an important point really has been kept. Even the acknowledged “point of this essay” — that Hynes was ultimately unable to “jettison the original, modern, poetry that was in him” — which, we are told, would “make its entrance in due course,” is unprepossessing, to say the least, when it finally turns up (178). A few innocuous distinctions are made: that the opening couplet puts us immediately into a realm far from Nashville, that the personification of grief is a characteristic of the blues rather than country, that the region of feeling is wider and deeper and the responsibility more inclusive than in hurtin’ music, and so on. In the end the weight of Pierson’s analysis of “Atlantic Blue” derives from a skillful close reading of the words and music of the piece. Ever honest in argument, he admits in contradiction to his main point that the “essential medievalism of country-and-western ... controls ‘Atlantic Blue’ at its crux,” that although “it feels ‘modern’ in the starkness of its sensibility and in its rejection of a beneficent providence, the song depicts a woman kept from suicide by a relation of stewardship.” (206). He also observes that country-and-western “tries to gather us again around the hearth and at the barn dance” and this, I suggest, is exactly the effect, if not the intent, of “Atlantic Blue” (213). Despite Hynes’s attempt to universalize the song by stripping it of specifics tying it to the *Ocean Ranger* tragedy or even to Newfoundland, its ability to break hearts probably depends upon listeners who can culturally identify with the experience of loved ones lost at sea. No doubt this is why the song did not impress Max Ferguson when Pierson tried to get him to play it on CBC FM (399, Endnote 118). Whether Pierson’s argument has been “proved” is, however, beside the point. As Jerry Bannister points out, for Pierson the journey is more important than the destination. The mountain of learning, intelligence and imagination he assembles in discussing Ron Hynes’s “Atlantic Blue” vastly enlarges our understanding of the complex web of values and conventions to which the song is related. But ultimately the essay is a monument, lovingly constructed, to the achievement of “Atlantic Blue,”

and how the song so eloquently captures a modern embodiment of a tragedy that is archetypal in the history and culture of Newfoundland and Labrador.

Pierson died while still writing his review of the art of Christopher Pratt, Mary Pratt and Gerald Squires. He was working to a boldly creative scheme based on the traditional deck of cards. Typically, he begins by reminding us of the history of their employment, tracing them back to Indian and Persian divinatory rituals to their development in the middle ages as a game, shorn of the supernatural function represented in the Tarot pack. The affinities with the ancient game of chess are noted. Then he proceeds to his discussion of the three artists in terms of the king, the queen and the jack. It is a provocative idea — exploratory, suggestive, satirical and mischievous — that moves the reader beyond bland and facile treatments of these artists, and beyond their own often compelling views of themselves, to a perspective that is much richer and more challenging.

Thus, Christopher Pratt's work is interpreted in relation to the king who represents cosmic order and who "rules by rules." His duty is to turn curves (representing the recalcitrant flesh) into "manageable straight lines" favoured by architects and surveyors. Although fascinated by women and ships, he is also repelled by them because they resist the geometry of the intellect. Getting specifically to Pratt's work, Pierson devotes the first part of his commentary to the provocative painting "Me and Bride," which explicitly confronts the tensions between flowing and straight lines, between body and mind, but before long he settles on his annoyance with Pratt's "disingenuous" reflections. The commentary Pratt provides, according to Pierson, is well-written but takes away from the art "first because loquacious Pratt will not tell us anything that goes deep within him, and second because he tries to convince us, and maybe tries to convince himself, that each of his works tries to solve a technical problem" (286). If you are going to entitle your book "Personal Reflections on a Life in Art," Pierson seems to think you should be prepared to give up the secrets of your work. This is, perhaps, a naïve and unwarranted expectation of an artist. But Pierson pursues Pratt relentlessly and is particularly peeved by the refusal of the painter and his champions to acknowledge what he considers to be an obvious indebtedness to Alex Colville.

Mary Pratt, the queen in Pierson's paradigm, fares better in his consideration. The queen is the "fountain of mercy." In heaven, and on the chess board, her power is in her flexibility. "Not so much order, but serenity in managing the inevitable disorder of household life, is her genesis" (285-286). Therefore, it is no surprise that, for Mary Pratt, "the central, moral action of humanity, and therefore of human painters, is *giving*" (298). Everything in her work is an offering. There is, however, a dark side, "a sheen of dissolution, rot, and death" (299). This is why her paintings are disturbing rather than serene. It is at this point that Pierson's essay gives evidence of incompleteness. He begins a discussion of the nudes but only lays out the ground rules, not getting to commentary on specific works by either of the Pratts.

Nevertheless, his four paragraphs on Gerald Squires — “the jack” — clearly indicate the direction of the final design. The jack, or the knight, “represents the country, the protection of which it is his duty to ensure. He is obsessed with the land and with ancestry, for these establish his claims to legitimacy.” His “mandate is historical, that is, derives from ancestral, rather than celestial, relations” and he is more in touch than the king or queen with “the deeper currents of popular feeling” (285). Pierson cites a comment by James Wade to substantiate his view of Squires as the jack. Squires has transformed our relation to the land in Newfoundland and Labrador. We see it differently because of his paintings, drawings and prints. The tangled grass, the stunted spruce and “var,” the omnipresent rock, “twisted and gnarled and cracked into unexpected and unruly forms, the opposite of anything the king ever saw or depicted.” These comments not only assist in differentiating the work of Squires from the Pratts but also suggest the role he has played in the expression of cultural identity in the province. Yet, typically open-minded, when Pierson turns to consider the religious nature of Squires’s work, in particular his emphasis upon redemption, he contemplates the need to abandon “the social metaphor,” admitting a weakness in his neat schema (303).

Reading “King, Queen, Jack” is an eerie experience because the essay poses an idea of startling originality, introducing it with characteristic polish and charm, then becoming fragmented and rough-hewn as the reader encounters the sketched out and unrevised sections of the piece, including parts actually labeled as “fragments” and numbered apparently to assist in fitting them into the evolving analysis. That the essay ends mysteriously in mid-sentence only adds to the sense of breakdown, as though Pierson had lost the race to get his ideas down on paper before he died. “King, Queen, Jack” gives a strong sense of the writer at work, painstakingly building his ideas and dragging them laboriously into the light. Interestingly, the struggle more clearly conveys the enormous intellectual energy at play than any of the completed essays or reviews. There is something heart-wrenching in seeing the design unfulfilled, a reminder of the inescapable fact of human mortality, all the more acute because by the end of this collection the careful reader may feel that he or she has developed an intellectual intimacy with Stuart Pierson: an appreciation for his doggedness, his honesty, his crankiness, his humanity and his humour.

Increasingly, it appears that Pierson was pursuing a vision of criticism as an art form rather than as a species of scholarly enquiry and debate. This may seem strange in light of the high level of scholarship that he brought to his writing, but Pierson’s work goes beyond the traditional conventions of scholarship, in particular adherence to Enlightenment epistemology. Although he would not have been comfortable with its transformation into a “meta-narrative,” he was himself in the end seeking a different kind of truth. His writing, while always fearlessly logical, appeals finally not so much to the mind as to the imagination.