

Unchanging Verities

Studies of Newfoundland Politics, 1949-2015

Edward Roberts

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Newfoundlanders first won the right to vote for their political leaders in 1832. Political parties, almost entirely sectarian, quickly emerged, and elections became bitter contests, fuelled by patronage and personal ambition. Newfoundland's politics since then have been personal, passionate, partisan, parochial, and tinged with paranoia. This essay canvasses the books that record and describe — with greater or lesser degrees of accuracy — the politics and the political history of the first 66 years of Newfoundland's Confederation with Canada.¹

Politics in Newfoundland came to be a national sport, perhaps *the* national sport. Newfoundland's small population and tribal community culture gave many a personal interest in both the contest and the outcome. Everybody knew the players in the game; both those in the arena and those watching from the sidelines spoke passionately, often to the point of unreasonableness. The coming of highways and radio, and then television, meant that every Newfoundlander became constantly aware of politics and politicians. A deep, sinister current of paranoia soon came to colour their view of both. All the problems of both the island and her people were the fault of "they" — uncaring governments, greedy merchants, and malevolent outsiders. Those blamed for Newfoundland's ills changed over the centuries. Originally, those who governed lived in faraway London; in later years, "they" moved to Ottawa, much closer geographically but still completely

uncaring, while the merchants in Bristol and London were replaced by those in St. John's. But always and ever, the dominant conventional wisdom held that Newfoundland's troubles were caused by somebody else.

By 1934, a century after achieving a measure of self-government, the Newfoundland government was insolvent and the then-Dominion was on the verge of bankruptcy. Britain reluctantly agreed to help the people of the "oldest British Colony," as Newfoundlanders liked to describe themselves, but demanded in return that they surrender their self-government. The hiatus lasted 15 years, until Newfoundland, the smallest of the British Dominions, became the second least populous Canadian province, a status that it retains.²

Confederation — as the union with Canada is known to Newfoundlanders — came into effect one minute before the stroke of midnight on 31 March 1949. Joseph Smallwood, no fool, was not going to permit the union between the two countries to take place on April Fool's Day! The leading proponent of Newfoundland becoming part of Canada, he became the first and principal beneficiary of his homeland's new status. He dominated the province's political and public life for the first 25 years after Confederation, and as well played a major role in the larger firmament of Canadian public life. Three of his successors — Brian Peckford, Clyde Wells, and Danny Williams — also became important voices in the national debates of their day, while Jack Pickersgill, Don Jamieson, and John Crosbie, all of whom represented Newfoundland constituencies in the House of Commons, were leading figures in the federal politics of their times.

One can question why Newfoundland's politicians enjoyed such prominence, but there can be no successful challenge to the fact that they did. Their consistent ability to "punch above their weight" led to intense media coverage, and in turn to a plethora of books by and about the men — and they were almost all men — who bestrode the public stage of the new province, books that range from scholarly studies to well-crafted popular works to self-serving memoirs by major players in the arena and by others whose parts were relatively insignificant. Taken

together, they provide a vivid picture of a vibrant, colourful, and turbulent political culture unequalled in Canada.

In 1981 Robert Paine, who taught anthropology at Memorial University for many years, published a very short book, *Ayatollahs and Turkey Trots: Political Rhetoric in the New Newfoundland; Crosbie, Jamieson and Peckford*. Penetrating and persuasive, his analysis of Newfoundland's political cultures is compelling and his insights are thought-provoking. Paine, honoured late in his life with appointment as a Member of the Order of Canada, was without partisan bias. Although he focuses upon only three significant events — the 1977 Liberal leadership convention, the 1979 Conservative leadership contest, and the general election that followed it — his analysis offers a wonderful introduction to Newfoundland's politics since Confederation. It is the book to be read first.³

Smallwood became the first Premier of the new Canadian province of Newfoundland on 1 April 1949, when the province's first Lieutenant-Governor — Sir Albert Walsh — asked him to accept the job. His fellow Newfoundlanders soon ratified his appointment, in a general election held at the end of June. He went on to win five more elections decisively between 1949 and 1966. More precisely, in Pierre Trudeau's beautifully mordant phrase, "he won six and a half" in all, including the indecisive result of the October 1971 contest, which resulted in Frank Moores's accession to the premiership in January 1972, when the election results were finally settled.

Although Smallwood loomed large over the province's political life both federally and provincially throughout the first years of its existence, no serious study of either the man or his political career appeared for nearly 20 years, until Richard Gwyn's *Smallwood: The Unlikely Revolutionary* was published in 1968. Gwyn, an established and respected national columnist, had already made a name for himself with the publication of *The Shape of Scandal* (1965), a solid, well-received account of the political scandals that beset Lester Pearson's Liberal administration in Ottawa. He acknowledges, in his Author's Note, that "Premier J.R. Smallwood made this book possible by

granting me his full co-operation” but Gwyn emphasizes that “he bears no responsibility for my judgments, nor had he any say in shaping them.”⁴ I can attest to the truth of both statements, because I was Smallwood’s Parliamentary Assistant at the time and was among those who spoke freely and frequently to Gwyn. The book is a well-researched and well-written account of Smallwood’s early life, much of which was then largely unknown to most of his fellow Newfoundlanders, and a balanced account of his achievements and failures during the first 18 or 19 years of his time in office.

Smallwood’s role in Newfoundland’s political world is reflected in almost every book written about the first quarter-century after Confederation. Harold Horwood was elected as a Liberal to the first House of Assembly after Confederation as the first Member ever to represent Labrador, but did not seek re-election in 1951. He recounts his life during those years in *A Walk in the Dreamtime: Growing Up in Old St. John’s* (1997), the first volume of his autobiography. Horwood fell out with Smallwood in the early 1950s, and subsequently became an implacable foe; his daily political column in the *Evening Telegram*, the most influential newspaper in the province, published six times a week in St. John’s, was read by everybody interested in political matters. Not given to modesty, he describes it in *A Walk in the Dreamtime* as “the major force in Newfoundland journalism in the 1950s.”⁵

In 1989 Horwood published *Joey: The Life and Political Times of Joey Smallwood*, a full-scale biography of his friend-become-enemy. He was a keen observer. Anybody who wants to understand Smallwood should read Horwood’s book, but in doing so should realize that his analysis and his factual accounts alike are coloured by their troubled and turbulent relationship. The two men were friends and close colleagues, intellectually and politically, during the campaign that preceded the two Confederation referenda in the summer of 1948, but soon — and bitterly — grew apart after Smallwood became Premier. Neither ever offered an explanation for the enmity that grew up between them: Smallwood denigrated Horwood (*I Chose Canada*, 287–88: “his interest in the [Confederation] movement fluctuated”)

in his autobiography, while Horwood said only that he had become convinced “that the economic development scheme run by Smallwood and Valdmanis was heading for disaster.”⁶ The only congruence between their personal accounts of those years is that each spelled the other’s name correctly, and the only common theme is that each came to believe that the other had renounced the common ideals they had shared during the years before Confederation.

Smallwood has had several other biographers. William Callahan, a cabinet colleague in Smallwood’s later years and an ardent admirer of both the man and his works, published *Joseph Roberts Smallwood: Journalist, Premier, and Newfoundland Patriot* (2003) with financial support from the Liberal administration of the day. His book is a useful compendium, notwithstanding its provenance, but it should not be taken as either a full or impartial account of its subject’s life. Reg Smallwood’s biography of *My Brother, Joe* (1995) is a fond reminiscence of his brother that deals with Smallwood’s family background, unfamiliar territory to most of those who followed his career. It has all the strengths and all the weaknesses usually found in such a book. Three other Smallwood biographies should be regarded as being curiosities rather than useful accounts. They are Ray Argyle’s *Joey Smallwood: Schemer and Dreamer* (2012); Robert Moon’s *Peril and Glory* (1966); and Bob Moss’s *Joey’s Story: Private Financing of Elections, a Form of Prostitution* (2012). The titles are accurate summaries of the authors’ theses. Argyle’s book is replete with factual errors; Moon’s is almost incoherent;⁷ and Moss’s is suffused with accusations and statements that are implausible as well as unprovable.

Smallwood’s own memoir, *I Chose Canada* (1973), is at one and the same time vintage Smallwood and a superb example of the failings of those who write memoirs in an effort to shape the historic record. The book is verbose and a classic *apologia pro vita sua*. Smallwood presents himself as a man who never made a mistake, was quick to forgive his opponents, and was frequently misunderstood by those whom he sought to serve. Most, indeed almost all, political memoirs are self-serving, but Smallwood’s set a new standard for the

genre, on the high or low end as one prefers. He also either inspired or wrote four other books of a personal nature, which are useful only in what they reveal (often unconsciously) about him. They are: *Just Call Me Joey*, edited by James R. Thoms (1969); *To You with Affection from Joey* (1969); *The Time Has Come to Tell* (1979), and *No Apology from Me* (1979).

Born in December 1900, Smallwood was 48 years old when he became Premier; he died 43 years later, just before his ninety-first birthday. He worked tirelessly during his 22 years as Premier to perpetuate his claim as a Father of Confederation, and in particular as the man who alone brought Newfoundland into Canada. He spent much of his life embellishing that claim deliberately and, many felt, maliciously. He despised Gordon Bradley, his lesser-known partner in the successful campaign to bring Newfoundland into Canada. Smallwood was the voice and in many ways the driving spirit of the Confederate cause, but it was Bradley who provided both respectability and the political perspicacity that were essential to the result. Elected to the House of Commons and appointed to the St. Laurent cabinet in 1949, immediately after Confederation, he served only one term in the House of Commons and then accepted appointment to the Senate, where he languished in obscurity until his death in 1966, being succeeded in both the Commons and the cabinet by Jack Pickersgill. Smallwood never ceased to disparage Bradley's role privately, and paid scant homage to him publicly. Smallwood, who was in Panama at the time, did not return to Newfoundland to attend Bradley's funeral. James Hiller, a highly regarded Newfoundland historian, has written a brief biography of Bradley. The essay, "The Career of F. Gordon Bradley: A Research Note," appeared in *Newfoundland Studies* and is a refreshing and necessary antidote to Smallwood's description of Bradley's role in the campaign. Smallwood's domination of Newfoundland's political scene reached its peak in September 1966, when he and his fellow Liberals won 39 of the 42 seats in the House of Assembly. His decline thereafter was steady and relentless. He described it well in one short phrase in June 1968, after the Liberals lost six of the seven

seats in the House of Commons notwithstanding Pierre Trudeau's victory across Canada — "the tide went out."⁸

John Crosbie, elected to the House of Assembly as a Smallwood Liberal in 1966, played a major role in bringing the Smallwood era to its end. His resignation, together with Clyde Wells, from Smallwood's cabinet in May 1968 was a milestone in the political collapse of Newfoundland's first Premier. Wells did not stand for re-election in 1971, and stood aside from elective politics for nearly 15 years, but Crosbie, after unsuccessfully challenging Smallwood for the Liberal leadership in the fall of 1968, ran for the Progressive Conservatives and became a prominent member of the PC ministry formed by Frank Moores in January 1972. He subsequently went to Ottawa and served as Finance Minister in 1979 during Joe Clark's brief term as Prime Minister. (Crosbie's budget was a major factor in Clark's defeat in the House of Commons and Trudeau's subsequent return and electoral triumph.) He survived to fight another day, and became one of the leading ministers in Brian Mulroney's cabinet between 1984 and 1993, when he left active politics and turned to writing his memoirs. *No Holds Barred: My Life in Politics* (1997) is an important addition to the literature of the Smallwood era, although a reader comes quickly to realize that it is as much a work of advocacy as analysis and accuracy. Michael Harris's *Rare Ambition: The Crosbies of Newfoundland* (1993) is an insightful and informed account of Crosbie and his family, beginning with his namesake grandfather, Sir John Crosbie, a consequential figure in Newfoundland's political and commercial life in the first third of the twentieth century. It is a useful corrective to Crosbie's own book.

Frank Moores, who succeeded Smallwood as Newfoundland's second Premier in 1971, left no known memoir, although those who knew him have no doubt that he could have told many interesting tales. The only full-length account of his political career is *Frank Moores: The Time of His Life* (2008), by Janice Wells. She makes no attempt to hide her admiration for both the man and his work but does not delve deeply into the facts of his career during his seven years as premier. She apparently made no effort to seek information about

Moore from anybody beyond his close friends and colleagues and spends little time discussing either the details or the merits of any of the controversies in which he was involved during his years in politics, and particularly his term as Premier. Her book is entertaining but far from definitive.

Given Joseph Smallwood's lengthy term as Premier and his domination of Newfoundland's political scene for 30 years, there is a surprising dearth of other memoirs by and biographies of his colleagues and contemporaries. The most important are those by Jack Pickersgill, whose political career spanned the last years of Mackenzie King's prime ministership, the entirety of that of his successor Louis St. Laurent, and the greater part of Lester Pearson's. While Pickersgill never lived in Newfoundland, he became closely involved in its politics during the years before Confederation and subsequently represented Newfoundland's harmoniously named Bonavista-Twillingate constituency for 12 years, winning six successive general election victories between 1953 and 1965. He and Smallwood first met in August 1946 in Ottawa, where Smallwood — an all-but-unknown aspiring Newfoundland politician — had come seeking support in the very early days of his campaign to bring Newfoundland into the Canadian Confederation. Their friendship blossomed and their political partnership developed during the first years of the St. Laurent administration. By 1953, Pickersgill, until then, officially at least, a non-partisan civil servant — “clear it with Jack” was the advice legendarily given to generations of ministers during the last King years and St. Laurent's early ones — had become such a partisan figure that he either had to retire from the public service or seek a seat in the House of Commons. Smallwood seized the opportunity. He convinced Pickersgill to seek one in Newfoundland, and supported him avidly. Pickersgill won an overwhelming victory in Bonavista-Twillingate in August 1953 and never looked back. An important member of the St. Laurent cabinet, he became a prominent voice for the Liberal Opposition in the House of Commons between 1958 and 1963, and an even more influential minister in the cabinet formed by Pearson in 1963. He and Smallwood worked together

closely, almost intimately, for all those years, but their friendship foundered in 1966, when Pickersgill resigned from the cabinet and from his seat in the House of Commons. He did so simply because he realized it was time for him to leave the political arena, although he remained in public life as the first chairman of the newly created Canadian Transport Commission. His support of Smallwood the politician deteriorated subsequently to the extent that he supported Smallwood's principal opponent when the former Premier attempted unsuccessfully to recapture the Liberal Party's leadership in 1974.⁹

Pickersgill was one of the few — and perhaps the only — colleagues whom Joe Smallwood ever accepted as being his equal. The two men as a team were forceful and effective advocates for Newfoundland. Smallwood was able to ensure that at least five of the seven Newfoundland Members of Parliament were Liberals throughout Pickersgill's term in Ottawa, and Pickersgill in turn made certain that Smallwood's requests for federal assistance were received warmly and funded generously. But Pickersgill was his own man, a powerful parliamentarian during his 13 years in the Commons and an even more powerful member of the St. Laurent and Pearson cabinets. He never hesitated to differ from Smallwood privately but seldom did so publicly. And while Smallwood accepted Pickersgill as being his equal in the partnership, he constantly chafed at it privately. Perhaps the best evidence of this is that Smallwood never forgave him for deciding — and then announcing — his decision to retire from the cabinet and Parliament without first discussing it with him. Pickersgill saw Newfoundland politics and Smallwood at first-hand; this, combined with his background in public life, enabled him to write a unique account of the Smallwood years. He subsequently published no fewer than three volumes of recollections (*My Years with Louis St. Laurent*, 1975; *The Road Back, by a Liberal in Opposition*, 1986; and *Seeing Canada Whole*, 1986), all of which speak at length about Newfoundland and his connections with Smallwood and his fellow politicians. *Seeing Canada Whole*, his memoir, is the most substantial and most detailed. His other two books focus on their stated subjects, but nonetheless offer useful

insights into Newfoundland. The trio add much to our knowledge of Smallwood the man and the politician.

Don Jamieson took Pickersgill's place as Newfoundland's minister in Ottawa. He was an important member of Pierre Trudeau's cabinet between 1968 and 1979, when he became leader of the Liberal Opposition in the House of Assembly during Brian Peckford's first term as Premier. Jamieson was an articulate and skilled communicator and a perceptive observer. His two volumes of memoirs — *No Place for Fools* (1989) and *A World unto Itself* (1991) — are extremely well written. His account of his years in public life is balanced and shows no rancour. Too little known, they are a substantial addition to our knowledge of both Newfoundland and Canadian politics during the 40 years, from the National Convention to the Trudeau era, in which he was active in public life.

Two other books offer popular accounts of Newfoundland's premiers. *All in Good Time* (2002), allegedly Brian Tobin's autobiography but written — as Tobin acknowledged at the book's outset — with the help of his “exceptional and patient collaborator, John Reynolds,” is a spirited, friendly account of Tobin's seven years as Newfoundland's Premier, in succession to Clyde Wells. Bill Rowe, an active and at times successful politician between 1966 and 1992, offers a gossipy, almost salacious account of Smallwood and Moores, the first two post-Confederation premiers, in *The Premiers Joey and Frank: Greed, Power, and Lust* (2013). As Rowe acknowledges in his Author's Note, “The book is not a work of historical research. It consists almost entirely of my own memories and reminiscences”¹⁰ The book became a best-seller, but must be read with an awareness that his desire to tell a good tale often overcame the reality of what actually happened. While the same comment could be made about many of those whose recollections are surveyed in this essay, Rowe's account is in a class by itself.

William J. Browne and Peter Cashin were prominent in Newfoundland's political life for four decades, from the 1920s until the 1960s. Each strongly, and often bitterly, opposed Smallwood. Cashin and Smallwood were the two dominant figures in the National Convention;

Cashin, who had entered the House of Assembly in 1923, became the most prominent voice in the group that wanted Newfoundland to reclaim responsible government rather than join Canada. His memoir, *Peter Cashin: My Fight for Newfoundland* (which I edited and published in 2012), did not appear until 35 years after his death. Cashin offers a spirited account, inevitably one-sided of course, of the years he was at the centre — the stormy centre — of Newfoundland's political life. He was a formidable orator, equal to if not better than Smallwood, although his political skills were nowhere near as great as those of his long-time rival. He held nothing back in his account, which is both unique and informative, and entertaining in the bargain. Browne, first elected in 1924, was a leading voice in the Conservative Party during the decade after Confederation, serving as a member of both the House of Commons (and in John Diefenbaker's cabinet) and the House of Assembly. His two-volume memoir, *Eighty-Seven Years a Newfoundlander* (1981 and 1984), is wordy and filled with minutiae, but there is much gold among the dross.

Most Newfoundlanders are familiar — indeed, very familiar — with both politicians and political issues. The activities of the province's government, and to a lesser extent those of the national government in Ottawa, directly affect almost everybody in the province, a phenomenon heightened by the relative weakness of municipal governments compared to those in other provinces. Politics are important and very personal, and passions often run high. There need be no surprise, then, that the province's political literature is graced with a wide variety of books in addition to the memoirs and biographies of its leading figures. The secondary literature spans a wide spectrum, ranging from the polished recollections of men who served for years as ministers of the Crown to the self-published exculpatory reminiscences of Hughie Shea.

Only three (including John Crosbie) of Smallwood's cabinet colleagues wrote memoirs of their years with him. Herbert Pottle's *Newfoundland, Dawn without Light: Politics, Power, and the People in the Smallwood Era* (1979) is the most important. Pottle was an unlikely

politician. He grew up in a fishing community, earned a Ph.D. in psychology from the University of Toronto, and eventually became a member of the British-appointed Commission of Government, with special responsibility for Home Affairs and Education. He was one of the two Commissioners who publicly supported the Confederate cause, and together with the other, his colleague Herman Quinton, became a minister in the first Smallwood cabinet in 1949. He won election to the House of Assembly in that year's general election, and was re-elected in 1951. In 1955, Pottle stunned the political community by resigning from the cabinet and the House because of his total disagreement with Smallwood's economic development policy and with government policy generally. (He told Smallwood of his intention to resign moments before he stood in the House to announce his resignation.) He spent the rest of his life working for the United Church of Canada and international organizations; he never again lived in Newfoundland. His memoir is thoughtful and cast in measured tones. Disillusion suffuses every page. His indictment of the Smallwood years — which he wrote some years after Smallwood was forced out of the premiership — is powerful, solidly founded, and remarkably non-partisan. Regrettably, the book was not well marketed when it appeared, and is little known today. His criticisms are as valid today as when he wrote them.

Fred Rowe (another Ph.D., in education) was a leading member of Smallwood's cabinet for more than 20 years, until the collapse of the Smallwood government in 1972, and was closely involved in most major moments in Newfoundland's politics over those years. He described them in *The Smallwood Era* (1985), and covers much the same ground in *Into the Breach: Memoirs of a Newfoundland Senator* (1988), which recounts his years as a senator after he lost his provincial seat in the 1971 general election. Both offer an insider's view of life with Smallwood by a colleague who admired him but was also aware of his flaws. Notwithstanding this, Rowe remained a staunch supporter of Smallwood until the very end, even to the extent that he withdrew as a candidate to succeed him as Liberal leader when Smallwood re-entered

the campaign that began in 1968 with his announcement that he intended to resign as leader in the aftermath of that year's federal general election, in which the Liberals lost six of the seven seats they held at dissolution.

Shea's political memoir, *Shea's Newfoundland Seduced* (1976), is more interesting because of the events he describes rather than because of Shea himself. His political career was brief. Elected to the House of Assembly in a St. John's seat as a Progressive Conservative in the October 1971 general election, he was catapulted into prominence when he subsequently crossed the House to join the Liberal Party to protest Frank Moores's failure to give him a cabinet seat, and then flamed out spectacularly with his defeat, running as a Liberal, in the March 1972 general election two months after unsuccessfully seeking the Liberal leadership. Shea never again sought any role in the province's public life.

Walter Carter's political career, by contrast, was one of a multitude of electoral victories. His career was unique. He ran six times as a Progressive Conservative (PC), five as a Liberal, and twice as a non-partisan civic councillor. In all, he won 11 of the 13 elections he contested — two for the St. John's City Council, six for the House of Assembly (four as a Liberal and two as a Conservative), and three for the House of Commons (all of them as a PC). He lost only twice: in 1979 as a PC in an attempt to return to the House of Commons and in 1984 running for the Liberals against John Crosbie federally in St. John's West. Over the years he served in the cabinets of Frank Moores, Brian Peckford, and Clyde Wells. *Never a Dull Moment* (1998) is an entertaining tale of his life and political career.

George Clarke offered a far more serious account of political life during his 15 years in the House of Assembly in *Can Anything Good Come Out of Crocker's Cove* (1992), while his wife Frances provided an account of their life and marriage in her memoir, *Do What You Can* (2004). Three other politicians offered differing views of their years in the public eye in autobiographies: Harold Collins, *Always a Straight Shooter* (2004); Norman Doyle, *According to Doyle* (2013); and Raymond

W. Guy, *Memory Is a Fickle Jade* (1996). All served in the House of Assembly, Collins and Doyle in the Moores and Peckford cabinets, and Guy as a one-term Liberal backbencher in the Smallwood years. Doyle, now a senator, was also a member of the House of Commons.

And then there are the interested spectators. Ed Finn, a newspaper man and labour organizer, in *A Journalist's Life on the Left* (2013); Cyril Strong, a long-time labour leader and political organizer, in *My Life as a Newfoundland Union Organizer* (1987); and Nicholas "Nix" Wadden, in *Yesterday's News: Radio and TV Reporting in the Smallwood Era* (2008), were all close to the political scene. Each offers anecdotes and insights, usually from a partisan perspective. But the most interesting of all the books about would-be politicians is Marie-Beth Wright's biography, *Grace Sparkes: Blazing a Trail to Independence* (2014). Sparkes, a passionate anti-Confederate and an equally passionate Progressive Conservative, blazed the trail taken by every woman who sought political office in Newfoundland since Confederation, even though she never came close to winning a seat herself. Feisty, principled, and articulate, Gracie — as she was known universally — kept herself in the public eye until she died at age 95 in 2003. Roger Grimes, the Liberal Premier, lauded her life and career, and Kathy Dunderdale, who became Newfoundland's first woman Premier, delivered the eulogy to the overflow crowd that packed St. James United Church in St. John's for her funeral.

Doug House, who worked as a senior public servant with Brian Peckford and Clyde Wells (and later with Danny Williams), published a scholarly account of his experiences in *Against the Tide* (1999). His book is a rare example of life at the top of Newfoundland's public service. Alex Marland and Matthew Kerby edited *First among Unequals* (2014), an academic symposium that canvassed and analyzed policy and administrative practices during Williams's term as Premier. As with any such undertaking, the chapters vary in quality, but taken together they offer a fascinating insight into the way in which the government of Newfoundland and Labrador actually worked during Williams's seven years as its leader.

Several other scholarly works round out the important substantive literature on Newfoundland's first years as a province. Sidney Noel's *Politics in Newfoundland* (1971) was the first comprehensive study of its subject, and has stood the test of time. Gerhard Bassler (recently retired from Memorial University's History Department) wrote *Alfred Valdmanis and the Politics of Survival* (2000), the only authoritative study of perhaps the most controversial of the men who were active in Newfoundland's public life during the early years of Confederation (and they were almost all men; Hazel McIsaac won a seat in the House of Assembly in 1975, the first woman to be elected since Confederation). A Latvian with a very murky past during the Hitler era, Valdmanis became Newfoundland's Director General of Economic Development in 1950, and the most important civil servant in the province.¹¹ Four years later, he pleaded guilty to defrauding the Newfoundland government of \$470,000 and was sentenced to serve four years in jail. Smallwood survived the inevitable political controversy, but the failure of his administration's economic development program haunted him for the rest of his years in office. Bassler's book is required reading for those who seek to understand Smallwood's obsession with government-led industrial development, which culminated in the debacles of the Labrador linerboard project and the Come-by-Chance oil refinery in the latter 1960s and early 1970s. Doug Letto's *Chocolate Bars and Rubber Boots: The Smallwood Industrialization Plan* (1998) covers the same ground, but much less thoroughly.

Raymond Blake, a Newfoundlander by birth who has taught history at the University of Regina for many years, has written two important books. His *Canadians at Last* (1994, reprinted 2004) provides an authoritative, comprehensive study of the integration of the independent Colony/Dominion of Newfoundland into the Canadian governmental structure in 1949. His recently published *Lions or Jellyfish: Newfoundland–Ottawa Relations Since 1957*, examines eight notable conflicts between the federal and Newfoundland governments, ranging from Smallwood's feud with John Diefenbaker over Term 29 in 1959 to Danny Williams's fight with Paul Martin and Stephen Harper

about equalization in 2003–05. Blake has reviewed the available records thoroughly and discusses them impartially, but does not hesitate to draw conclusions and offer opinions. His study is an important contribution to understanding how and why the disputes arose, and their resolution.

James G. Channing, a career public servant who was Clerk of Newfoundland's Executive Council from 1955 to 1978, during much of the Smallwood era and the early years of Frank Moores's premiership, wrote a detailed insider's account of the intricate process of merging the Newfoundland public service with that of the federal government. *The Effects of Transition to Confederation on Public Administration in Newfoundland* (1982) offers an impeccable account of what happened and why.

Newfoundland's public servants, as their counterparts elsewhere, seldom entered the political fray. At least two, however, have published memoirs of their years working for government. Arthur Colbourne in *The Life and Times of a Not-So-Civil Servant* (2010) and Cyril Goodyear in *Sometimes I Forget* (2012) vividly describe life behind the curtain that usually cloaks the political theatre's stage. Colbourne's book is interesting and revealing, although tinged with bitterness at the way Brian Tobin forced him into retirement in 1996. Goodyear's tale describes his long and varied public career, beginning with his service as a Newfoundland Ranger and culminating in his years as a senior public servant during the Moores and Peckford years, which ended with his appointment as the James G. Channing Chair at Memorial University, sponsored by the government as an acknowledgement of Channing's stellar public service during his long career. Goodyear's recollections are candid, indiscreet, and self-serving. He does not hesitate to air his complaints and grievances about those with whom he worked and the policies he administered, as well as the many disappointments that marked his own career.

Gordon Inglis, Edmund de Rothschild, and Stephen, Lord Taylor, were relatively minor figures on Newfoundland's political stage, but each played an important role briefly. Inglis, who taught for many

years at Memorial University, wrote *More Than Just a Union* (1985), a readable and authoritative account of the formation of the Newfoundland Fishermen, Food and Allied Workers' Union (NFFAWU). The union, initially led by Richard Cashin and Father Desmond McGrath, was perhaps the most significant socio-political development during the entire Smallwood era and on into the premierships of Moores and Peckford. Inspired in great measure by and modelled in part on William Coaker's Fishermen's Protective Union, the NFFAWU gave Newfoundland's fishermen an effective political voice for the first time since the 1920s.

Rothschild, a member of the well-known British family, was befriended by Smallwood, who was attracted in part by his famous name and his amiability but also by the Rothschild connection with the British Newfoundland Corporation, created by Smallwood to develop natural resources on the island and in Labrador. (The Churchill Falls project was by far the most prominent of these.) His memoir, *Edmund de Rothschild: A Gilt-Edged Life* (1998), is a pleasure to read, and offers an interesting account of Smallwood from a very different perspective than that of the others who have written about him.

Stephen Taylor was a Labour member of the British Parliament who became Lord Taylor, a non-hereditary peer. He was recruited by Smallwood to be Memorial University's President in 1967. (In those days the statute that created Newfoundland's only university gave the cabinet the power to appoint the President.) He served for six years, until 1973. The two men, each strong-minded, soon developed a tumultuous relationship, which survived quarrels such as the one in which the university President, in the presence of several senior university officials and cabinet ministers, called the Premier "a liar" to his face. Taylor's account of his Newfoundland years is a relatively brief part of a very lengthy memoir, but makes fascinating reading. Brash, self-confident, and utterly unafraid of Smallwood, he was instrumental in the creation of Memorial's Medical School, a goal that he and Smallwood both sought eagerly.

Brian Peckford and Joseph Smallwood were the only two of

Newfoundland's post-Confederation premiers who came to office with a clear vision of what they wanted to achieve. Smallwood first sketched his program in *The New Newfoundland* (1931), a paean of praise for Sir Richard Squires, then in the closing stages of his prime ministerial career. He refined and amplified it in countless speeches during the National Convention and in the first years he led the new province. Peckford's vision was set out in *The Past Is the Present* (1983). Douglas House, reviewing it in the *Newfoundland Quarterly*, described the book as "provok[ing] discussion of the issues and enigmas that faced Newfoundland society in the late twentieth century," and opined that Peckford "deserves credit for stating his perspective clearly and succinctly. . . . The new Newfoundland nationalism is not in essence about family incomes and offshore oil, but rather about cultural identity and personal pride." Those who seek to fathom Brian Peckford's 10 years as Premier can learn much from it.¹² Peckford has yet to publish a formal memoir, but *Someday the Sun Will Shine and Have Not Will Be No More* (2012) does offer a brief overview of his years in office, together with a detailed discussion of his role in the Trudeau-era Constitution and Charter debates in the early 1980s. Like Smallwood, he simply avoids discussion of the rather inglorious end of his career.

Clyde Wells became Premier in May 1989, when he led the Liberals to victory over the Progressive Conservatives led by Tom Rideout. (Rideout succeeded Peckford as PC leader, and served as Premier for 45 days, second only to A.E. Hickman's one month as Prime Minister in 1924.) The province's finances were in a parlous state. Peckford, at the January 1989 press conference in which he announced his decision to resign as leader of the PC Party and as Premier, acknowledged that he lacked "the necessary ruthlessness to do what really has to be done as we move into the next decade."¹³ It fell to Wells to restore fiscal probity. He did so by dealing effectively and forcefully with the financial issues that confronted the government.

Wells, committed to a strong central government for the Canadian federation, took a lead among those who opposed Brian Mulroney's ill-fated attempt to rewrite the Canadian Constitution. Mulroney's

initiative culminated in the agreement he wrested from the 10 then-premiers at Meech Lake, where they agreed to a series of amendments to the Canadian Constitution known as the Meech Lake Accord. Deborah Coyne, a brilliant young constitutional lawyer who was one of Wells's principal advisers during Meech Lake and its aftermath, wrote a detailed account — *Roll of the Dice: Working with Clyde Wells during the Meech Lake Accord* (1992) — ending with the collapse of Mulroney's initiative in June 1990. A fervent admirer of Wells and of those who shared Pierre Trudeau's vision of the role of the Canadian federal government, Coyne was not a neutral observer, but her account is detailed, precise, and accurate. Claire Hoy, in *Clyde Wells: A Political Biography* (1992), wrote a colourful journalistic account of Wells's life and career, which was published before the attempts to revise the Constitution culminated in the so-called Charlottetown Accord, in August 1992. Wells supported this second Mulroney attempt at constitutional revision, and convinced more than 60 per cent of his fellow Newfoundlanders and Labradorians to do so in the national referendum held in October of that year. It died, however, because of the lack of support of most voters in the other provinces.

Although it is much too early to speak definitively, Danny Williams may very well rank with Joseph Smallwood as the most important of Newfoundland's political leaders since Confederation. While Williams won only two general elections (2003 and 2007), he did so overwhelmingly. He was blessed with the first — extremely substantial — fruits of the discovery and exploitation of oil off Newfoundland's coast. Nobody has yet attempted to write a biography, but he is the central figure in Bill Rowe's *Danny Williams: The War with Ottawa* (2010), which recounts the bitter fight between Williams and his federal counterparts, Jean Chrétien and Paul Martin, over the financial benefits that Newfoundland would reap from offshore oil resources. Williams won the contest, hands down, when Prime Minister Martin capitulated. Rowe was not a participant in any of the talks, but was relatively close — as a provincial employee — to those who participated in them, although not to Williams himself. His book, which sold

extremely well, is a readable account of what became the greatest success of Williams's political career.

Some of the more important as well as interesting books about Newfoundland's politics fall into no specific category. William Gilmore's *Newfoundland and Dominion Status* (1988) is a definitive study of the evolution of Newfoundland's political status over the century between the British grant of representative government in 1832 and the coming of the Commission of Government in 1934. Gilmore sweeps away the myths and misunderstandings perpetuated by chauvinists of every ilk that have accumulated over the years. John Martin's *Leonard Albert Miller: Public Servant* (1998) is a brief but fascinating study of the medical doctor who did more than any other to shape Newfoundland's health-care system during his 38 years as a senior public servant, 22 of them as the Deputy Minister of Health.¹⁴

Although the thrust of this essay is to discuss books about Newfoundland's politics and politicians since 1949, those who want a more complete understanding of the post-Confederation era may find several other recent publications helpful. Sidney Noel's *Politics in Newfoundland* (1971), described earlier, is both reliable and useful. Peter Neary's *Newfoundland in the North Atlantic World, 1929–1949* (1988; paperback edition, 1996) ranks with Noel's work as a classic, and is an authoritative source for the period it covers. Douglas Letto's *Newfoundland's Last Prime Minister* (2014) is the only account of the life of Frederick Alderdice, who had the ill fortune to become Prime Minister in 1932 and to preside over the end of the responsible government years, while Gene Long's *Suspended State* (1999), based on his master's thesis, discusses the years between 1925 and Confederation, with a brief coda taking the narrative to 1968. Both are useful supplements to Neary's account of the Commission era.

The definitive record of the National Convention, which debated Newfoundland's fate between 1946 and 1948 as the prelude to the 1948 referenda, is *The Newfoundland National Convention 1946–48* (1995, two volumes), edited by James Hiller and Michael Harrington. Hiller subsequently edited *The Debates of the Newfoundland Legislature 1932*

and 1933 (2010, two volumes), the most accurate record of the proceedings of the last parliament of an independent Newfoundland. (Only a relatively small number of copies were published but they can be found in public libraries throughout the province.) The other essential source for information about the public papers respecting Confederation is *Documents on Relations between Canada and Newfoundland* (1984, two volumes), edited by Paul Bridle. It, too, is readily available in the major libraries throughout the province.

There are two full-length studies of the National Convention and the two referenda. Bren Walsh's *More Than a Poor Majority* (1985) is an impassioned account of both the Convention and the referenda themselves by a perceptive journalist who was a bitter opponent of Confederation. (His father, William J. Walsh, had been a prominent Conservative politician in the years before Commission.) It is far superior to Greg Malone's *Don't Tell the Newfoundlanders: The True Story of Newfoundland's Confederation with Canada* (2012). Walsh, unlike Malone, lived through the era he describes. *Don't Tell the Newfoundlanders* is as impassioned as *More Than a Poor Majority*, but the newer book is shoddy history, as Malone lets his emotions and beliefs get in the way of the facts. The book sold very well, however, which is a striking commentary on the persistence of the myths that becloud much recollection of the years between 1946 and 1949.

Albert Perlin, a journalist, wrote "The Wayfarer" column that appeared regularly for many years in the *Daily News*, one of the two St. John's daily newspapers. Perlin's columns were well researched and solidly based, notwithstanding that he was part of the St. John's establishment of the day. (His wife Vera was a daughter of Sir John and Lady Crosbie.) His opinions were temperate, thoughtful, and couched in eloquent language. They were immensely influential. Francis Hollohan and Melvin Baker published a selection of his columns in *A Clear Head in Tempestuous Times: Observations on the National Convention and the Confederation Issue 1946-49* (1986). Hollohan had earlier published *Albert Perlin: A Biography* (1985).

And, above all, there is the inimitable Ray Guy. A brilliant writer

graced with a sharp wit, his gifts rank him with such great political satirists as Jonathan Swift and Ambrose Bierce. His *Evening Telegram* columns combined his wit with his deep affection for the rural Newfoundland in which he grew up — his home was in Arnold's Cove in Placentia Bay, which he immortalized as “That Far Greater Bay.” They had an immense impact on public opinion during Smallwood's last years as Premier and in the first years of the Moores–Peckford era. Although they are by their nature dated, they read as well today as when they were first published. Most if not all of them have been re-published recently in *Ray Guy: The Smallwood Years* (2008) and *Ray Guy: The Revolutionary Years* (2011). While they should be taken with a grain of salt — and Ray would have been the first to acknowledge this — they are an unmatched and memorable commentary on Newfoundland's politics during his lifetime.

The 66 years since Confederation have brought striking changes to Newfoundland and Labrador. The lives of her people have been changed greatly, mostly for the better, although some still hanker nostalgically after what they believe were the glories of the years before Confederation. The similarities in Newfoundland's political culture and the rhetoric that envelops it and expresses it, however, are equally striking. Radio and above all television have brought politics into every home on the island and in Labrador, just as they have done throughout Canada. But the province's politics — and its politicians — remain rooted in personality, not policy.

Joseph Smallwood dominated the province's politics for the first 20 years of its existence, and he is still vilified by many who were born years after he was ejected from office in 1972. But Brian Peckford and Danny Williams loomed over their years in office just as largely as ever did Smallwood. To seek election to the House of Assembly as a Peckford candidate in the 1980s or as a Williams torch-bearer in the first decade of the twenty-first century was just as likely to lead to a seat in the House as was standing as a Smallwood Liberal in the 1950s and early 1960s. All three developed — consciously, it must be said — personality cults. While each was identified with specific policies, they all

scaled the political heights as defenders of Newfoundland's interests against "they," the ubiquitous and all-powerful strangers who tried to keep Newfoundlanders down. Smallwood fought Water Street and Diefenbaker; Peckford fought Trudeau and Ottawa; and Williams fought not only Jean Chrétien and Paul Martin, both Liberals, but turned against Stephen Harper, his fellow Conservative. Political discourse centred on personalities; policy, and the public interest took a distant second place. The consequence, as dramatic as it was inevitable, was that while all three enjoyed immense popular support, the sheen wore off each of them over time, although both Peckford and Williams were sufficiently perceptive and strong-minded to leave politics before they had to answer to an electorate that had turned on them.

Newfoundland's political literature reports and reflects reality. Her politics have always been insular and they have long been dominated by overweening personalities. Evidence-based policy, to use a current phrase, had little place in the public discourse after Confederation, just as had been the case since 1832. Insularity remained not only the watchword of Newfoundland's politics, as it does today, but too often was its sole substance. Most of us who have reached a certain age remember Pogo, Walt Kelly's immortal comic creation. The little possum, speaking from his home in America's Okefenokee Swamp, famously said "we have met the enemy, and he is us." The aphorism can also stand as a brilliant summary of Newfoundland's politics since Confederation.

NOTES

- 1 The Colony, and in due course the Dominion and the province, were known for several centuries as simply "Newfoundland." The province's official name was changed to "Newfoundland and Labrador" in 2001, but the words "Newfoundland" and "Newfoundlanders" are used throughout this essay to refer to the province and its people unless the context requires otherwise.
- 2 The province's population grew steadily after Confederation, reaching a

peak of 580,000 in 1992, but this had shrunk nearly 12 per cent in the years following the 1992 cod fishery moratorium, to a little under 510,000 by 2007. The moratorium remains in effect today, nearly 25 years later. The provincial population currently is 527,000.

- 3 For those with neither knowledge nor recollection of the 1977 Liberal convention, I stood for re-election as leader of the Liberal Party of Newfoundland and Labrador, an office I had held since 1972. I lost to William Rowe on the fourth ballot; the other candidates were Steve Neary and Roger Simmons.
- 4 Richard Gwyn, *Smallwood: The Unlikely Revolutionary* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1968), xv. In all, there are four separate editions of Gwyn's biography of Smallwood. All were published by McClelland and Stewart in Toronto. The Second Edition, published in 1972, brought Smallwood's story up to the 1972 general election, won decisively by Frank Moores and the Progressive Conservatives. Six new chapters were added to the original 24 chapters of the 1968 edition. The book was recalled at Gwyn's request because the publishers had neglected to make the changes he requested. (See the *Daily News* and the *Evening Telegram*, both on 25 August 1972.) A revised Second Edition was published later that year. The Third Edition was published in 1999, on the fiftieth anniversary of Confederation. It includes an Afterword that brings Smallwood's story forward from 1972 to his death in 1991.
- 5 Harold Horwood, *A Walk in the Dreamtime: Growing Up in Old St. John's* (St. John's: Killick Press, 1997), 225: "My column 'Political Notebook', the major force in Newfoundland's journalism in the 1950s, had been born at Smallwood's suggestion."
- 6 *Ibid.*, 212.
- 7 Smallwood, at my request, signed a copy of Moon's book for me. He said "I sign this on the clear understanding that this is not my book. It is Robert Moon's. He asked me a lot of questions on tape — left out his questions — and publishes my incoherent answers. Joseph R. Smallwood."
- 8 I heard Smallwood make this statement in his very brief remarks at the St. John's Laurier Club, the Liberal Party's social and political headquarters, on the evening of 25 June 1968 while speaking to the press after the Newfoundland election results had become known. See *Daily News* and *Evening Telegram*, 26 June 1968.

- 9 I was re-elected leader of the Liberal Party of Newfoundland and Labrador in 1974 on the second ballot. Smallwood was one of my opponents.
- 10 Bill Rowe, *The Premiers Joey and Frank: Greed, Power, and Lust* (St. John's: Flanker Press, 2013), xiii.
- 11 Smallwood appointed him on the recommendation of C.D. Howe, a powerful member of the King and St. Laurent cabinets. Bassler writes that "Smallwood left the hotel [after his first meeting with Valdmanis in Ottawa in May 1950] convinced that he had found a saviour for Newfoundland." Gerhard Bassler, *Alfred Valdmanis and the Politics of Survival* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000), 249.
- 12 J. Douglas House, "The Past Is the Present: A Personal Perspective on Newfoundland's Future," *Newfoundland Quarterly* 79, 3 (Winter 1984): 36–37.
- 13 *Sunday Express* (St. John's), 22 Jan. 1989, 1; *Globe and Mail*, 23 Jan. 1989, 1; *Evening Telegram*, 26 Jan. 1989, 1. See also Ronald L. Watts, and Douglas Brown, eds, *Canada: The State of the Federation, 1989* (Kingston, Ont.: Institute of Intergovernmental Relations, 1989), 270.
- 14 In the interest of full disclosure, I should note that Dr. Miller was not only a close friend and professional colleague of my father, Dr. Harry Roberts, but was my Deputy Minister during my two and one-half years as Minister of Health, between June 1969 and January 1972. He was a tutor and a friend, and an ideal Deputy Minister. He once told me, during a discussion where we differed, that "you might be the Minister, but I am the Head of this Department!" When I expressed surprise at this, he pulled from the shelf a copy of The Revenue and Audit Act and read to me the section that provided that "the Deputy Minister [shall be] charged with the administration of a Head of expenditure." "There!" he said.

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