

Kurt Korneski. *Conflicted Colony: Critical Episodes in Nineteenth-Century Newfoundland and Labrador*. Montreal and Kingston: Mc-Gill-Queen's University Press, 2016. ISBN 978-0-77354-780-3

Corey Slumkoski

Volume 32, Number 2, Fall 2017

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/nflds32_2br02

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Faculty of Arts, Memorial University

ISSN

1719-1726 (print)

1715-1430 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Slumkoski, C. (2017). Review of [Kurt Korneski. *Conflicted Colony: Critical Episodes in Nineteenth-Century Newfoundland and Labrador*. Montreal and Kingston: Mc-Gill-Queen's University Press, 2016. ISBN 978-0-77354-780-3]. *Newfoundland and Labrador Studies*, 32(2), 535–538.

Kurt Korneski. *Conflicted Colony: Critical Episodes in Nineteenth-Century Newfoundland and Labrador*. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2016. ISBN 978-0-77354-780-3

Kurt Korneski's *Conflicted Colony: Critical Episodes in Nineteenth-Century Newfoundland and Labrador* is a welcome addition to studies of colonial-era Newfoundland and Labrador history. Through a series of five case studies — or what he terms critical episodes — Korneski reveals a number of themes in the history of nineteenth-century Newfoundland: the difficulty of the St. John's-based government in establishing its hegemony in the western and southern reaches of the colony; the tendency of some historians to treat viewpoints emanating from the Avalon as being representative of the entirety of the island; and the gradual and controversial shift from an economy based almost solely on the fishery to one rooted in landward economic development opportunities such as farming, lumbering, mining, and a railway. These themes help to buttress Korneski's argument that throughout the nineteenth century, as the Newfoundland state expanded and consolidated its authority across the island, the particular concerns of those living along the southern and western coasts often conflicted with those that emanated from the Avalon Peninsula.

The five case studies Korneski has chosen to underscore his argument are the Fortune Bay herring fishery dispute of 1878, conflicts over the salmon fishery in Hamilton Inlet from 1871 to 1883, the social unrest that revealed itself when the colonial government began to shift its focus from the fishery to landward economic development through the construction of the railway, the St. George's Bay herring fishery dispute of 1889–92, and the lobster controversy on Newfoundland's treaty coast that occurred between 1890 and the 1904 establishment of the *Entente cordiale* that ended the French Shore fishery. As Korneski makes clear, these were not the only examples he could have chosen to examine. They were selected for two reasons: first, they “represent regions where several foreign powers had rights and regularly

operated”; second, earlier historians of Newfoundland have “rightly viewed those episodes and/or the themes with which they are connected — negotiations over the fisheries, colonial development policy, the French Shore issue, Anglo-American relations — as central aspects of the history of Newfoundland” (7). Given Korneski’s broader aim of showing how “disparate and internally divided populations . . . developed very specific perspectives, aims, and interests rooted in their locations in a changing web of trans-local and transnational relations” (158), these are well-chosen examples, with each of the episodes receiving a chapter-length treatment. While the particulars of each dispute are unique to its local context, a number of commonalities can be seen across each incident.

Perhaps the most striking commonality is the difficulty that the colonial government in St. John’s had in establishing its authority in areas outside of the Avalon Peninsula. Whether it was attempting to enforce fishing regulations on the island’s western and southern coasts, trying to establish stipendiary magistrates in St. George’s Bay, or building a railway through the interior of the island, St. John’s officialdom consistently found their efforts opposed — sometimes forcefully so — by local populations, with well-entrenched economies and traditions, who were unwilling to bow to the whims of the government of the Avalon. For most historians of colonial-era Newfoundland — indeed, for most historians of the state — this conclusion is not surprising; the imposition of the structures of the state over subjugate populations is often a messy business fraught with conflict and conciliation that plays out variously “on the ground.” However, although the tenor of Korneski’s argument is not novel, the means by which he supports his claim is more path-breaking.

In building his argument around these five critical episodes in Newfoundland and Labrador history, Korneski does an admirable job in providing an overview of the current state of the historiography of nineteenth-century Newfoundland, which is generally rooted in diplomatic and economic history, while simultaneously bringing in a fresh perspective grounded in the methodologies of borderlands and

environmental history. This is where Korneski's book really shines. Each chapter provides a highly detailed contextualization of the various case studies under examination. This allows Korneski to display a mastery of the oft-convoluted diplomatic relations that existed among competing local, foreign, and imperial powers as they jockeyed for control of Newfoundland's vitally important fish stocks along the treaty shore. The influence of borderland history in Korneski's analysis is clearly revealed. Rather than viewing the expansion of the St. John's state as the gradual westward extension of a sort of British frontier across the island, Korneski shows how there were multiple contact zones involving outlier populations, French, American, and Maritime fishers, and St. John's officials. Moreover, these contact zones were fluid and evolving, with relationships between individuals and states constantly being negotiated and renegotiated. By keeping the focus on the contact zones, and really on the people who called those contact zones homes, rather than on government bureaucrats and policies, Korneski has done an admirable job of "refocus[ing] attention away from administrative centres, whether national or imperial capitals, and from negotiations on high, to the everyday lives and relationships of people, rich or poor, outside of officialdom" (8). In this manner, Korneski's use of borderlands history helps him provide a compelling social history of the nineteenth-century treaty shore.

Likewise, Korneski's emphasis on the influence of environmental factors in shaping the human responses to these various episodes is refreshing. Not surprisingly given Newfoundland's reliance on the fishery, the key environmental factor at play was declining fish stocks. Whether herring, salmon, or lobster, the numbers of fish/crustaceans in the river and ocean waters along the Newfoundland coast were in decline because of such factors as increasingly efficient fishery technology, such as larger seines and long lines, and human action, such as American fleets only taking fish of a certain size and discarding up to 75 per cent of their catch (36). Declining fish stocks were of concern to both the residents of these fishing communities, who depended on the fishery for their livelihoods, and to the government in

St. John's, which levied duties on fish exports. Given the importance of this industry to both the centre and the periphery, it is a welcome development to have Korneski integrate the environmental aspect of nineteenth-century Newfoundland development that has largely been cast simply as a diplomatic and economic story.

This is not a book that breaks new ground in the subject matter it covers. Many chroniclers of Newfoundland history, such as John Mannion, Rosemary Ommer, and James K. Hiller, have explored these episodes. But in fleshing out much of the backstory to what have previously been seen as diplomatic or economic incidents, by viewing these moments through the lenses of borderlands and environmental history, and by giving voice to the people who lived along the treaty shore and western coasts of Newfoundland, Korneski both complements and complicates existing scholarship. This is a book that will be of interest to historians of colonial Newfoundland and Labrador and to scholars interested in the relationship between the developing state and its citizenry. It will be a welcome addition to graduate-level courses on Newfoundland in particular and on the Atlantic region more generally.

Corey Slumkoski
Mount Saint Vincent University