

People of the Landwash: Essays on Newfoundland and Labrador. George M. Story.

Philip E. L. Smith

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People of the Landwash: Essays on Newfoundland and Labrador. George M. Story. (Melvin Baker, Helen Peters and Shannon Ryan, eds.). St. John's: Harry Cuff Publications Ltd. xvi, 204 p., introductory essays by Leslie Harris and Gilbert Higgins, bibliography by William J. Kirwin, softcover, \$14.95, 1997. ISBN 1-896338-27-X.

PHILIP E. L. SMITH

REVIEWING THIS BOOK has been an interesting experience. Unlike, I suppose, many of George Story's colleagues and friends I had not before seen most of the essays in it. Now, as I read them for this review, I kept thinking: ah, so that's how he felt! or, there's a side of him I never knew. Let me indulge in a personal digression.

We were born in the same year (1927), a few months apart. He grew up in St. John's and I in a distant, isolated outpost (in "them days" that distinction meant far more than it does today), but we had the same ethnic ancestry and denominational background. After our schooldays our lives took roughly similar routes: undergraduate studies in Canadian universities, spells of non-academic work including some dabbling in journalism, and then graduate studies abroad in the U.K. and U.S. respectively followed by university teaching careers. But our personal paths did not converge until 1976 when we were middle-aged professors, although we were later amused to discover that his time at McGill University in 1948-1950 coincided in part with my period as a wage-slave in the Montreal business world and we almost ran into each other then on several occasions. I finally met him at a noisy academic party one evening in St. John's and we had a brief chat which had no immediate follow-up. Some years later, when I was becoming professionally interested in an obscure but anthropologically intriguing Newfoundland topic (the old tradition of seasonal migration from outposts to winter camps), I rather

hesitantly wrote him asking for some information. He replied quickly, genially and enthusiastically. Shortly afterwards he came to Montreal for several days, and virtually commanded me to write an article on the subject for the fledgling *Newfoundland Studies*. I remember a long walk we took across Mount Royal on a misty fall day when he spoke about his own work and the research of others being done at his beloved Memorial University, and we marveled at the changes that had taken place in Newfoundland education and scholarship since the dark age of our underprivileged youth. We visited one or two of his old haunts downtown, strolled around the McGill campus, and he talked a bit about his undergraduate experiences there. I showed him the site of the apartment on Lincoln Avenue where Ewart Young allegedly converted Joseph Smallwood to Confederation in 1945, and we reminisced (somewhat warily, as I recall) about the politics and emotions of the fateful year 1948 as filtered through nearly four decades of memory. We did not enquire about each other's voting preferences in the two referendums. Although we met a number of times after that, in St. John's, our relationship was for the most part through correspondence at irregular intervals. His last letter was written a month before he died, when he had already been hospitalized, but, characteristically, he made light of his illness so the news of his death came as a shock. I do not suggest we were close friends; we did not know each other all that well although we were comfortable enough together. Our lives and interests touched only tangentially but I always regretted that we had not known each other earlier and that I never heard him give one of his famous lectures or speeches to academic and popular audiences. Reading this book only sharpens the sense of regret and loss. Still, maybe that's the best stance from which to review it: half in, half out of his wide and charmed circle.

Three of Story's former colleagues at Memorial University, with the guidance of Alice Story, have selected fourteen essays that he wrote over the years from 1957 to 1994. Thus they stretch like marker buoys from almost the beginning to the very end of his professional career at the institution. Most have been published before in some form while several were talks that now appear in print for the first time. They vary a good deal in length, from 3 to 24 pages. The majority come well armed with footnotes and bibliographical references. Given that some were published in rather inaccessible places that readers especially outside the province would have difficulty finding, it is good to have them assembled between two covers. The useful bibliography of his published works, prepared by W.J. Kirwin and reprinted here, documents the whole range of his professional writings and interests.

It was a very broad spectrum of writings and interests, and a reviewer might justifiably feel intimidated in assessing even this small sample of Story's work. Tunnel vision was not one of his failings. To do justice to this volume, perhaps one would have to write as elegantly as he did, and possess a comparable range of tastes and skills. Not many of us qualify in either respect. Only items relating to Newfoundland and Labrador are included here — his considerable contributions

in other fields such as poetry, place names, Erasmian studies, and seventeenth-century sermons are only hinted at — yet even in this restricted area the diversity is great and the parochial spirit absent.

Here we find displayed some of the themes he found stimulating and that he in turn invigorated. Language and dialect, of course, from one of his earliest published lectures “Dialect and the Standard Language,” in which he discussed Newfoundland speech before the St. John’s Rotary Club in 1957, at a time when many still saw it as quaint, unregulated, illogical versions of standard English. Story emphasized the legitimacy of studying the speech from a scholarly rather than an antiquarian viewpoint; who can now ignore its ultimate fruit, the *Dictionary of Newfoundland English* of 1982 and 1990? Songs and ballads and balladeers get two items, reflecting his appreciation of popular culture, particularly in nineteenth and twentieth century St. John’s. Mummers and mummering are treated in historical perspective in a chapter from another well-known volume, *Christmas Mumming in Newfoundland* (1969), that he co-edited. From the same book is his piece “Newfoundland: Fishermen, Hunters, Planters, and Merchants,” a long, wide-ranging and penetrating analysis of Newfoundland social and cultural history that I am tempted to call the best thing in the present volume. His “Notes from a Berry Patch” of 1972 was written for the Royal Society of Canada and inspired by an essay of the American poet Wallace Stevens; here he politely scolds those theorists and synthesizers of Canadian literature who know less than they should about the popular literary culture and language of the newest province. Two brief essays, “The Flat Islands Newfoundlander” (1974) and “A Note on Confederation from Below the Salt” (1978), are more political in tone and, if I read them correctly, reflect Story’s ambivalence toward post-Confederation events. We see in the first his concern, well before the present fisheries crisis, about the erosion of outport culture, and in the second his chagrin at the role, that of a kind of poor cousin, Newfoundland has been obliged to play since 1949. Then there are portraits of three men prominent in Newfoundland’s past. Judge Daniel Prowse is examined in two essays, both reprinted from the *Newfoundland Quarterly*. (Am I wrong in thinking that Prowse, historian and raconteur, public personality and notable eccentric, dedicated angler and hunter, the “man of wonderful enterprises,” was in some sense a role model for Story? It crosses my mind that, given his zest for ships, navigation instruments, and Horatio Hornblower, he would have been delighted to emulate “Admiral” Prowse’s erratic exploits pursuing bait and rum smugglers from his government cruiser down on the South Coast in the 1880’s.) The study (also from the *Newfoundland Quarterly*) of “Old Labrador,” the eighteenth-century Captain George Cartwright, is another instance of his taste for the eccentric individual of heroic proportions; here he proposes a new way of reading the famous 1792 *Journal*, as a work analogous to the ship’s log of an eighteenth-century mariner such as James Cook. The geologist and surveyor James P. Howley is treated in a short paper that heralds the recent (1997) publication of Howley’s journals by the

Champlain Society, a massive work that Story himself actively promoted and co-edited but did not live to see appear. These portraits contribute to a feeling that Story, like a fair number of intellectuals, admired men of action of a literary bent who passed much of their lives out of doors. Some of that side is also illustrated in the essay with the deliberately ambiguous title, "Guides to Newfoundland," where he discourses on the men, both European and Indian, who for several centuries have guided and instructed those visiting explorers and hunters and anglers — Cormack, Selous, Millais, England and others — who in turn contributed much to the published literature on Newfoundland and Labrador and its people. The last paper, "Proverbs," comes full circle, for it is based on a talk he gave to the same Rotary Club less than two months before his sudden death in May, 1994; it is a lively discussion before a lay audience of the treasure of local proverbs of many kinds that he and his colleagues at the university collected over the years, and of what they reveal about the popular culture of the settlers of the island and Labrador over the four centuries since the first recorded example in 1521.

This résumé of the book may seem deplorably succinct and thin, but no matter; readers are simply being encouraged to get a whiff of its contents and style and then have the pleasure of reading the book itself. After inspecting the bibliography of Story's published work I realize, sadly, that I'll almost certainly never come anywhere near reading everything else he wrote. But for those who want to see more clearly George Story as the passionate Newfoundlander, and Newfoundland as refracted through the prism of his subtle mind, this is a rewarding collection. These are gentle essays, with more than a hint of a twentieth-century Charles Lamb about them. They are thoughtful and well-crafted, warm without sentimentality or excessive whimsy, marked by the same good-natured equanimity he ascribes to Prowse, and by a temperance and a tolerance that are qualities to be cherished in the often testy atmosphere of his native town. There is an evident love of the glorious quip (Farley Mowat as "Canada's leading literary strip-miner" — a classic), the playful paradox, and the occasional dash of impish hyperbole, along with a layered prose style that demands constant attention. The pragmatist philosopher, Richard Rorty, maintains that within "the academy" the humanities have been a refuge for enthusiasts. If so, Story, a humanist to his fingertips, was a splendid example of such a refugee enthusiast and perhaps a member of a dying breed. Let us hope this book helps to make him and his views better known outside and inside the academy, and outside of as well as in Newfoundland.

There is a lot to be said for honouring a scholar by republishing a selection of his best work rather than commissioning one of those orthodox adulatory festschriften, pastiches of uneven quality, that too often flop in spite of good intentions. Story's former colleagues did well to choose the former strategy, by creating a book he had hoped to prepare in the retirement years that were denied him. Apart from the brief preface by the editors, a reprinted tribute by his university contemporary, Leslie Harris, and some touching reminiscences from his boyhood friend, the late

Gilbert Higgins, they have opted for letting him speak in his own unmistakable voice with a minimum of interference or commentary. Letting George be George.