

Nancy Earle, ed., *Papers of the Bibliographical Society of Canada* 48, 1 (Spring 2010).

Adrain Fowler

Volume 26, numéro 2, fall 2011

URI : https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/nflds26_2rv06

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Faculty of Arts, Memorial University

ISSN

0823-1737 (imprimé)

1715-1430 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Fowler, A. (2011). Compte rendu de [Nancy Earle, ed., *Papers of the Bibliographical Society of Canada* 48, 1 (Spring 2010).] *Newfoundland Studies*, 26(2), 299–301.

Nancy Earle, ed., *Papers of the Bibliographical Society of Canada* 48, 1 (Spring 2010). Special Issue: "Book Culture in Newfoundland and Labrador." ISBN 0067-6896.

IN HER INTRODUCTION to this special issue of *Papers of the Bibliographical Society of Canada*, Nancy Earle poses overlapping questions: "What can a study of book culture tell us about Newfoundland and Labrador? What can a study of Newfoundland and Labrador contribute to the history of the book?" (10) However the second of these questions is answered, the four articles and six brief notes that constitute this collection, though widely varied in approach and methodology, together offer a fresh perspective on the cultural history of Newfoundland and Labrador.

In the first of the longer essays, William Barker sets out three steps to writing a history of the book in the province. He begins with a fitting tribute to the giant of Newfoundland and Labrador studies, George Story, "probably the most learned person ever on the subject of Newfoundland printing history," who warned that the evidence for such a project would be slim (24). Barker concurs that the years of early settlement, at least, are unlikely to provide sufficient further information to support the development of a detailed narrative or even micro-narratives. But from the advent of print journalism in the early nineteenth century until Confederation with Canada in 1949, he argues that there is a wealth of material in newspapers and serial publications yet to be explored. As for the post-Confederation period, Barker deals with it only cursorily, albeit skilfully, but he acknowledges that this is the one that will certainly yield the richest results for scholars. He also offers an important caveat about ahistorical interpretation. Reading backwards, the evolution of the New Founde Land into the province of Newfoundland and Labrador may seem aimed at the result we now have, but this is not how people living in earlier times experienced this place. Even in the present, it is all too easy to subscribe to a cultural essentialism that minimizes and undervalues difference within the province. This point is even truer of the larger entity of Canada, which is why, Barker argues, "[t]he history of anything to do with Newfoundland and Labrador culture must be written first from the province's own perspective" (46). And he does not mean from the perspective of St. John's.

Earle has taken this warning to heart; this collection explores book culture in a variety of locations throughout the province. Kristina Fagan's account of the publishing of Lydia Campbell's *Sketches of Labrador Life by a Labrador Woman* (1894-95; Goose Bay, Labrador: Them Days, 1980) places Campbell's work in a social context that reveals the high value placed on literacy among Inuit and Inuit Métis of central Labrador. Fagan bluntly challenges the assumptions of post-colonial theorists who place literacy within an "oppositional framework that sees Aboriginal writing as primarily defined by a tension between the 'white' and 'Aboriginal' worlds, or between colonialism and resistance" (50). On the contrary, she cites the anthropologist Hugh Brody to support her claim that the whites who set-

tled central Labrador were not part of any colonizing mission, not being sponsored, or governed in any meaningful way, by any outside agency, religious or political (58). Thus, she refuses to depict Lydia Campbell “as a fragmented or assimilated subject of colonialism,” claiming for her, instead, “a cohesive and positive identity that built on both her Inuit and English parentage” (73).

J.T.H. Connor notes that medical autobiography usually has been studied for what it says about the culture of medicine and rarely as bibliographical artifact embedded in a broader historical-cultural environment. In his essay on “the Grenfell effect,” however, he addresses the milieu that created a market and an audience for the writing of physician Sir Wilfred Grenfell and of novelist Norman Duncan, noting that it was rooted in early twentieth-century anti-modernism that found expression in the arts and crafts movement, the “wilderness” movement, and “muscular Christianity” (79, 96, 85). Connor outlines the influence of this “broad intellectual theme” during the time of its ascendancy and also during its decline. Of particular interest is the way this view was incorporated into tourist guides that advertised Newfoundland and Labrador as a tonic for urban North Americans suffering from neurasthenia (96–97). The message eerily foreshadows the province’s “Lost and Found” tourism campaign 100 years later, featuring spectacular, hyper-real depictions of icebergs and whales, along with impossibly colourful shorescapes and traditional outposts, and the tagline: “Lost: *Stress* — Found: *Peace*.”

In her essay, “*Death on the Ice* and the Newfoundland Imaginary,” Nancy Earle cites Homi Bhabha’s observation that cultural or community identity emerges in “the overlap and displacement of domains of difference,” the “in-between spaces,” where “identities are negotiated through a process of contestation and collaboration” (121). Earle’s inquiry into the research, editing, and writing of Cassie Brown’s book constitutes a case study of this process. Among her many insights is an acute observation concerning Brown’s treatment of the *Newfoundland* sealing disaster compared to Wayne Johnston’s in his *Colony of Unrequited Dreams*. Whereas Brown’s book, based on the testimony of sealers themselves, describes men leaving their assigned watches and seeking out members of their family and home community as the desperation of their situation became clear, Johnston’s narrative, based on Brown but fictionalized, has men joined in a final embrace who, previous to their journey to the ice, had never met. In short, where Brown’s account emphasizes family and community, Johnston’s points to a larger collectivity. Earle also shrewdly detects in Johnston’s retelling of the story “anxieties about the writer’s connection to Newfoundland culture and identity.” This tension is expressed through the portrayal of the puny and bespectacled journalist, Joey Smallwood, locked below deck, peering through a porthole at the exploits of the sealers, men of action, heroically braving the hazards of shifting ice and blinding snow (149).

The brief “Notes” include Mary Dalton’s meticulous description of a nineteenth-century notebook, which accidentally came into her possession; Vicki Hallett’s account of her post-doctoral research on poet and postmistress, Phoebe

Florence Miller, author of *In Caribou Land* (1929); Meaghan Walker's study of the making of the autobiography of William Morris Barnes; Robert Paine and Larry Felt's report of the history of ISER Books; Stephanie McKenzie's short history of Scop Publications Inc.; and Shirley Greer's elucidation of 15 "artists' books" that she devised from four letters written by the Methodist minister, Rev. W.H. Dotchen. The range is from a recovered list of books in the library of a mid-nineteenth-century tradesman to a cutting-edge art project designed, among other things, to raise "awareness of materials, of colour, of presentation and of scale" and to "provide the reader/viewer with an opportunity to construct meaning beyond what might be expected with a traditional book" (185). These short comments represent an intriguing glimpse into how perceptions of the significance and function of text have changed and are changing.

After all this, Barker's (and Story's) caution about how much we know, or can know, about book culture in Newfoundland and Labrador seems merited. Another caveat, however, might be to avoid assuming that because the evidence is often lacking, therefore little must have been going on. We have only to consider the book list of Michael Coady and John Murphy to grasp the probability that many private collections have dissolved into the mists of time leaving behind no evidence. Perhaps a study of educational attainments would help to fill in these gaps, indicating at least what books individuals might have read. Perhaps an analysis of books used in school curricula might improve our sense of the book culture of ordinary people, especially since it seems that in previous generations these books often were retained rather than discarded, providing a recurring opportunity for enlightenment and pleasure, and a means of maintaining literacy skills. And what about self-publishing? In post-Confederation Newfoundland and Labrador, self-publishing would seem to rival the output of the "legitimate" publishing companies. This raises many questions, besides the interesting ones J.T.H. Connor addresses in discussing Robert Ecke's *Snowshoe & Lancet: Memoirs of a Frontier Newfoundland Doctor, 1937-1948* (Portsmouth, N.H.: Peter E. Randall, 2000), yet, it seems otherwise to have escaped comment.

In attempting to define how reading and writing have influenced and expressed the lives of the people of Newfoundland and Labrador, this collection reframes a number of recurring issues concerning the culture of this place. The effect is intellectually energizing. The collection is also remarkable for its impressive para-textual materials — excellent maps produced by the Map Room at Memorial University's QEII Library and high-quality illustrations of the book as artifact.

Adrian Fowler
Memorial University