

## Melvin Baker and Peter Neary. Joseph Roberts Smallwood: Masthead Newfoundlander, 1900–1949

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Volume 37, numéro 1, 2022

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1101758ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1101758ar>

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Éditeur(s)

Faculty of Arts, Memorial University

ISSN

1719-1726 (imprimé)

1715-1430 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Slumoski, C. (2022). Compte rendu de [Melvin Baker and Peter Neary. Joseph Roberts Smallwood: Masthead Newfoundlander, 1900–1949]. *Newfoundland and Labrador Studies*, 37(1), 1–4. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1101758ar>

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## BOOK REVIEWS

Melvin Baker and Peter Neary. *Joseph Roberts Smallwood: Masthead Newfoundlander, 1900–1949*. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2021. ISBN 978-0-228-00631-2

Melvin Baker and Peter Neary's *Joseph Roberts Smallwood: Masthead Newfoundlander, 1900–1949* is an important book about an important figure. As the authors suggest in their preface, Smallwood is “arguably the most important public figure that Newfoundland produced in the twentieth century and one of its leading writers and thinkers” (xiii). While much of the historiography of Smallwood — books like Harold Horwood's *Joey* and Richard Gwynn's *Smallwood: The Unlikely Revolutionary* — has understandably tended to focus on Smallwood's role in public life, Baker and Neary's examination of Smallwood's role as a writer and a thinker makes this a significant contribution both to the literature on Newfoundland's first post-Confederation leader and to twentieth-century Newfoundland history more broadly. Indeed, this book can be considered the first intellectual history of Smallwood that situates him and his writings — at least until 1949 — in their contemporary cultural, political, and social milieus.

Unlike other works on Smallwood that have tended to cast his pre-political life as a prelude to his important role as the leader of Newfoundland's confederate cause, Baker and Neary's book makes this period of Smallwood's life the focus of their story. They reveal that the general shorthand for Smallwood's pre-confederate life — an expatriate Newfoundlander in New York who flirted with socialism and returned to Newfoundland and experienced a series of economic successes and

failures before finally finding success on the airwaves and in politics — does not adequately reveal how extraordinarily influential this period was for Smallwood. As the authors make clear, Smallwood's long tenure as premier of Newfoundland must be understood in the terms of his life prior to Newfoundland joining Canada.

Baker and Neary reveal the intricacies of Smallwood's early life and career over the course of three chapters. The first chapter covers the period from Smallwood's birth until the formation of the Commission of Government in 1934, the second examines the time from the Commission of Government until 1945, and the third takes the story through until Newfoundland's 1949 entry into Confederation. Throughout, Baker and Neary paint a surprisingly nuanced and insightful portrait of Smallwood. We learn of the difficult early years of Smallwood's marriage to Clara, how he was often away from his family on what her family (and often Clara herself) viewed as one scheme after another. We see the profound influence of William Coaker, head of the Fishermen's Protective Union, on a young Smallwood, and the difficulties Smallwood faced as he tried to organize cooperatives on the western coast of Newfoundland. And we get a glimpse of Smallwood's innermost thoughts, around such circumstances as his struggles to make ends meet while in London, his disappointment with the Commission of Government, and the successes of the Confederation campaign. Through his writings we see first-hand Smallwood's quick wit and humour, often applied with devastating effect to his political adversaries, a trait that would serve Smallwood well in his post-Confederation political endeavours. What emerges in these pages is not the curated version of Smallwood presented in his own *I Chose Canada*; it is an unvarnished and intimate look at the evolution of the future Newfoundland premier gleaned from a careful reading of his voluminous writings on a variety of subjects.

The authors' impressive use of many heretofore unexamined and under-utilized sources is this book's key scholarly contribution. Not only did they comb through Smallwood's own writings — his published and unpublished books, magazine articles, newspaper columns, and radio

scripts — they also explored several collections held at Memorial University's Archives and Special Collections, at Memorial's Maritime History Archive, at The Rooms Provincial Archives, and at Library and Archives Canada. In addition, they included material from the privately held F. Gordon Bradley Papers and the Melvin Baker Research Collection, and they uncovered various other publicly and privately held sources that help illuminate Smallwood's early years. The result is an impressive feat of scholarship that will serve future scholars well as a sort of reference work on pre-Confederation Smallwood sources.

That is not to say that this is a work without flaws. The authors' presentation of their subject is at times overly sympathetic. For instance, in their discussion of Smallwood's writings on the coming of independence to Jamaica, Baker and Neary assure readers that Smallwood certainly did not hold racist ideologies. This, however, seems to be contradicted by Smallwood's own writings on the matter, which are rooted in outrage that a nation that was 98 per cent Black was granted independence while Newfoundland continued to languish under the Commission of Government. While his views on race were likely no more extreme than those of his contemporaries — and may well have been more progressive given his time spent abroad — this certainly suggests that Smallwood accepted the legitimacy of a racial hierarchy and he seemingly viewed white Newfoundlanders as more worthy of political independence than Black Jamaicans. I also wished at times that the authors had provided greater insight into rationales behind Smallwood's actions. For example, when detailing Smallwood's transition from socialist sympathizer to Liberal supporter, Baker and Neary chalk it up largely to a matter of political pragmatism; he realized that the only access to formal political influence lay with one of the two established parties. While that may be true, I would have liked more insight into the extent to which this ideological transition was reflected in his thoughts and writings. Was it simple pragmatism or did this political shift reflect a broader evolution in Smallwood's political philosophy? The book also eschews scholarly conventions by not offering a full introduction or conclusion. After a brief note on sources and

preface it jumps directly to a straightforward narrative history of Smallwood from his birth until Newfoundland's entry into Confederation. A more conventional approach, with an introduction and conclusion that highlighted central findings, would have allowed the authors to better synthesize key themes in Smallwood's pre-Confederation life and career.

It should be recognized, though, that these criticisms may reflect deliberate choices by the authors. As noted above, and as the authors make clear in their preface, this work is intended to serve as a sort of guide to Smallwood's writings for future scholars who may write of him, either for the lengthy *Dictionary of Canadian Biography* entry that will eventually be published or for a potential scholarly biography of Smallwood that seems long overdue. Given this aim, the quotation-heavy, narrative-driven format — one that seems almost reluctant to cast judgement on Smallwood — makes sense. Since the book is designed as a sort of gateway into Smallwood's writing, the authors may be trying to avoid "poisoning the well" for future scholars by refraining from casting too strong a judgement on their subject. And as an entry point to Smallwood's pre-Confederation writings and political thought, this book is highly successful. The authors can rest assured that no future work on Smallwood, and perhaps no future work on twentieth-century Newfoundland, will overlook their contribution. But truly, this book is more than just an access point into the sources of Smallwood's pre-Confederation years. It is a robust chronicle of Smallwood's life and thought up until Newfoundland joined Canada. This is a considerable scholarly achievement that will find a welcome space on the bookshelves of scholars of Newfoundland and of Atlantic Canada, as well as on those of a more general readership interested in a fuller exploration of Joseph Smallwood's formative years than has been previously published.

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