

The Ocean and Its Stories: Non-Fiction in Newfoundland

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Marjorie Doyle

I've been asked to consider how non-fiction in Newfoundland is contributing to a cultural dialogue in this province, but I cannot write about what I do not hear. Is there a lively exchange on a different frequency, pitched for poets' ears? Do I miss it because the clumsy hammer bangs too loudly in the lowly forge of non-fiction?

I do hear talk of "Newfie." A congenial sobriquet, some say, abhorred only by intellectuals and snobs. From others: A word that spawned an image that begat a concept that presses on our chests and makes it hard to breathe. "Newfie" is the cornerstone of Wenteism, that quick take on Newfoundland embraced by Canadian media and politicians. The Bond Institute maintains that "Newfie" – a deceptively friendly-looking arrangement of six letters – lies at the heart of the difficulties between The Hero Premier and Ottawa. But it is the four letter word "loss" that lives longest in the conversations I hear, a word no longer broad enough to encompass all that falls there, as inadequate as an umbrella shared by a crowd. Cod, outports, resources, home.

"I want to belong," Larry O'Toole confesses in the opening of his memoir *Heart's Longing*, an honest, moving, unsentimental account of the émigré experience. Belonging: the fibre of Newfoundland. But Larry O'Toole was not so sure he wanted in. He couldn't leave fast enough. When he headed home years later ready to face down – or retrieve – his past, he found his school demolished, "as though someone had mugged me of my childhood."

Wayne Johnston wanders around the agonizing issue of Confederation in his family memoir *Baltimore's Mansion*. In the telling of his father's and grandfather's stories, he roams the worn but unfinished territory of Newfoundland nationhood. The political and public turn private and personal. The Master of Newfoundland Letters – Fielding so real I expect to see her at Regatta – delivers more unforgettable scenes like the unfair match between Peter Cashin and Sister Joseph, the folds of whose habit could have produced "a hundred pairs of pants for the Major." All this in a land with "potholes so large and enduring that we gave them names."

What stands out in a perusal of Newfoundland non-fiction, more than a particular preoccupation or consistency of theme, is the amount of it. Some of it good.

Roberta Buchanan is leaking her memoir to us in small drops, whetting our appetite for her precise language and lean vivid descriptions, from the child on the train in South Africa (“The Killing Jar” in *A Charm Against the Pain*) to, elsewhere, in progress, the young English professor newly arrived in St. John’s. More, please.

Mina Hubbard was frozen in time as a Labrador explorer until the sleuth Anne Hart traced her, chased her (*The Woman Who Mapped Labrador*). Mina steps out from the parade of Newfoundland figures whose life is reduced to a dictionary entry, and stands revealed as lecturer, intellectual, wife, mother; and we learn of her sorrows.

I struggle to garden, and I like to laugh. With relief I discover humourist, Janice Wells (*The Gin and Tonic Gardener* and *Definitely Not Martha Stewart*). She moves house a lot – her filo pastry has frequent flyer points – and she once found her martini glass “wrapped in swaddling underwear and lying in an enamel roaster surrounded by the nativity scene.” She’s an empathetic chronicler of the diurnal challenges of a woman surviving on ideas and energy when cash and jobs are gone missing. Divorce isn’t funny but is bearable when “former ’usband” becomes FU. In the collected pieces of humour and heartbreak come small, contained, poignant moments with her aging father. He fell one day. After she called for help, “my big, strong father started to weep silently and I curled up on the floor behind him and wept too, while we waited for them to arrive.”

In the slow rise from colonialism, some Newfoundlanders tank up on open line fuel where, encouraged by the host and with nothing to say, they rant to thousands of people *who listen*. This fertilizes one of the great social and cultural afflictions of modern Newfoundland – a blossoming confidence unaccompanied by insight, like a shrub that grows thorns, but no rose. Non-fiction has been embraced in this egalitarian conviction (note the “con”) that anyone can do anything. I probably *can* run the Tely 10 – if they let me begin now, carry on through winter, and collapse into a hearse at next year’s finish line. If you are literate, then you can *write*. Few people aspire to write a film script, novel or poem – that takes talent, technique and has something to do with, god forbid, art. Not so non-fiction. The cursor moves across the screen, a key is confidently tapped and lo! A new page one sees light. Joe and Jolene Blow record their stories but, in the absence of language that might move us or draw us in, they don’t reach beyond a small

circle. The nominal census and the telephone directory report and record; personal and community history must go beyond that.

My ears are cocked to the ocean, and its stories. Our waters swallow canoeists, fishers, swimmers, oil workers. I am gripped by radio reports, devour the papers; I need every detail. We're said to be an expressive, musical people, but where is that lyricism in our literature of the sea? Endless soulless anecdotes about shipwrecks leave the insomniacs clamouring for audio books of these catalogues.

Swelling nationalism has created a market for all things Newfoundland. Publishers bring out books they believe will sell, but the audience demanding literary non-fiction is small. Thus many doubtful products appear among local books of non-fiction – you know, the ones “flying off the shelves.” (What a sight!)

Newfoundland culture, society and art are driven by a slow recovery from colonialism. When a homeland has been disparaged as a backwater, later generations will want to pick over their past, air it out, figure it out, or maybe paint it rose. Hang on to it anyway, because so much else has been lost. But heritage has replaced history, and knowing Granddad knit twine is not enough if we are still arguing over whether settlement was forbidden, still unclear about our rights to waterfront access.

A squawk from a child's clarinet makes me cry, as does the diabolical term “recreational” fishery. A tear plops, too, as I watch the line of Newfoundland non fiction snaking out from the presses – poorly produced books, squatty photos, chapters that begin in the middle of the page, grammatical errors – even in the title.

Jurors for this year's Book Awards were greatly excited by the academics. I am reluctant to mention the scholar Patrick O'Flaherty as I've been with him – many times, and twice in a dory – but to pass over him does not seem right. His narrative history keeps Newfoundland anchored in facts lest our past disappear entirely in mythology and rhetoric.

Yet, as Art Johnston says overright his young son, the writer-in-waiting, on their epic train journey across the island:

“If we all faced facts, there'd be no one left in Newfoundland. There's nothing in the facts to keep us here.”

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