

LOSS, MEMORY AND CULTURAL IDENTITY IN THE DOMINION OF NEWFOUNDLAND

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ABSTRACT

Newfoundland and Labrador reluctantly joined the Canadian Confederation in 1949. It is not well known that a process of renewing and strengthening its place within Canada noted the profound impact of loss in its history, suggesting that unresolved and insufficiently addressed issues of loss lie at the heart of some of its most profound struggles as citizens of Newfoundland and Labrador. This paper brings together ideas and concepts focused on issues of cultural loss and memory within the context of Newfoundland and Labrador in the twenty century.

These ideas and concepts revolved around issues of Englishness versus Canadianness same as Dominionship versus Provinceship. Parallelisms that could be counterparted by those outstanding such as: wildlife, and natural resources; migration and diaspora; languages and dialects; communities and resettlement; wars and tragedies; architecture and heritage; cultural representation and identities; nationhood and governance; marginalization and difference; faith and spirituality; and, home, place, and displacement.

As an illustrative example, the work by Elizabeth Goudie *Woman of Labrador* will be considered. A memoir in which in eighty years, the author witnessed radical changes to Labrador, such as the construction of an airport at Goose Bay during the Second World War. Where once there had been pride and contentment in a harmonious relationship with the land, displacement and despair came as the wilderness was overtaken by military and industrial projects. One of her greatest triumphs was her steady pride in Labrador, her "country," and her ideal of peace among neighbours.

In a critique of the dominant discourses of cultural memory in Newfoundland, the critic Jerry Bannister argues that cultural representations of loss have long played a problematic role in Newfoundland nationalism. Trough the romantic view point of artists and poets, the history of Newfoundland and Labrador, Bannister tells us, has essentially become a "history of bereavement" (2002: 176).

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At the centre of the cultural mythology is an expansive litany of losses: the loss of lives to the sea; the loss of political autonomy under harsh and oppressive British rule from afar; the needless slaughter of young Newfoundland men in the world wars; the final loss of independence in 1949; the forced resettlement of communities in the 1960s and 1970s; the near extinction of the codfish; the loss of our natural resources under Canadian control; the loss of dignity under a humiliating scheme of provincial equalization; the destruction of rural communities; the loss of language, culture, and tradition, etc.

Being conscious about the possibility of ever achieving political autonomy by the referenda of 1948 where confederation with Canada was voted in by the narrowest of margins, these narratives animate a narrow nationalist discourse of “if only”: if only we had kept our nationhood, if only we had negotiated better Terms of Union with Canada, if only we could gain more control over our abundant natural resources, then things could have been better. At the centre of this discourse is a particular fantasy of autonomy and self-control. If Newfoundlanders could control their own fate, then inequality would miraculously disappear. While the argument about the economic value of increased local control might have merit, Bannister argues that the overbearing nationalist outlook in Newfoundland political culture problematically distorts many other contributing factors to Newfoundland’s economic struggles, including, among other things, profound internal social divisions organized around race, class, and gender. In other words, Bannister suggests that, given a long history of internally generated forms of exploitation, Newfoundland’s woes can hardly be blamed exclusively on outsiders.

Bannister’s critique highlights a familiar argument widely treated within in the post-colonial studies. Historically, anti-colonial nationalisms gave form to the dream that a just self-determination free from colonial rule was possible for the former colonies of European empires, and yet the twentieth century has shown us that “almost everywhere, the anticolonial utopias have withered into postcolonial nightmares” (Scott, 2004: 2).

Stuck by essentializing ethnic absolutisms, class inequities, corruption, and the continued problems of global capital, post-colonial nations globally, for the most part, have not been able to materialize the revolutionary dreams of equality and justice. Undoubtedly, this is because nations themselves have limited power to exert autonomous policies in the context of global capitalism, but it is also true because nationalism itself might not embrace as much of an ethic of egalitarianism as the anti-colonial fervour of the previous century suggested.

Nations, Benedict Anderson reminds us, are necessarily defined by their limitations: “no nation imagines itself as coterminous with mankind” (1991: 7). As such, nations

are characterized as much by their refusal of pluralism and cosmopolitan solidarity as they are by the social practices of equality. Nationalism, post-colonial scholars suggest, does not provide us with an ethical social imagination or an adequate program of response to global conditions of inequality and suffering.

In recent years, a number of scholars have begun to examine the impact of nationalist discourses on Newfoundland historiography, culture, and politics (Cadigan, 1995; Bannister, 2002, 2003; Overton, 2000, 1996). Much of this work cautions against the conservative historical fictions produced in the social construction of Newfoundlanders as a homogeneous group threatened by hostile outside forces. While nationalism putatively offers to redress the economic inequity of “foreign” control, it does so through the language of an entitlement based on naturalized identity. Consider recent vigorous debates about who does, and should, benefit from the province’s natural resources.

Given nationally unprecedented conditions of economic suffering in the region due in no small part to a history of uneven development, the assertion that Newfoundland’s resource wealth should be “for us” sounds seductive, or, at worst, quite idealistic. However, the argument that the resources “belong to us” depends on a more insidious erasure of the violent history of First Nations displacement and genocide that led to the development of early colonial society in the New World. For example, we can only imagine that the hydroelectricity “belongs to us” if we forget the flooding of the Churchill Falls plains that destroyed the traditional hunting and burial grounds of the Innu (Wadden, 2001). By virtue of nationalist logic, the Innu, the Mi’kmaq, and, historically, the Beothuk have a far greater claim to the rhetoric of ownership than Newfoundland settler society, but even this argument does not articulate a more cosmopolitan imaginary of collective responsibility for what Hannah Arendt expansively described as our “common world” (1998).

What Arendt is trying to imagine here is a kind of connectedness and ethical obligation to others that resists the logic of geographic borders and ethnocultural solidarities.

Dina Georgis (2006) argues that the significance of post-colonial stories of struggle and loss cannot be deciphered solely through assessing either their truth or falsity or their legitimacy or illegitimacy. Instead, such stories of struggle provide insight into the emotional dynamics of historical traumas and illuminate the narratives we make to survive difficulty. Or, in other words, such stories reveal not a literal truth, but an emotional truth, which demands to be listened to, and accounted for, in our political theories. Indeed, critiquing the rational arguments behind Newfoundland nationalism will mean nothing if we do not also work through this emotional content, which resists logic and “makes reasoned persuasion futile” (Pitt and Britzman, 2003: 759).

As Bannister points out, nationalism is a conservative force in the province; it is obvious that Newfoundland's culture of nationalism can teach us about the emotional topographies of loss and its accompanying fantasies of survival and longing. Bannister suggests that we need to take Newfoundland nationalism seriously as a "real force in the province's political culture"; but what might it mean to take the *affective* force of nationalism seriously? It is something like "nation fills the void" and turns "loss into the language of metaphor", of freedom, self-determination, and prosperity.

In Newfoundland, however, this dream has been bitterly deferred. It "festers" as the unfilled dream of political modernity. What is the significance of this deferral for the ongoing constitution of political cultures in the province? Acknowledging that nationalism is an affective response to social injury is not equivalent to accepting nationalism as a response to unjust social conditions; it is simply the beginning place for the difficult self-reflective work of coming to terms with how loss has shaped our psychic, social, and political relations. Also, it is emotionally engaged, self-reflexive activity, a prerequisite for dislodging the desire for social equality from nationalist structures of feeling.

Consider, for example, what we might learn by reflecting on "Women of Labrador"; originally published in 1973, *Woman of Labrador* is Elizabeth Goudie's enduring and candid story of her pioneering life as a trapper's wife in the early 1900s. She was left alone much of the year to rear eight children while her husband worked the traplines. Independent and resourceful, Elizabeth fulfilled her multiple roles as homemaker, doctor, cook, hunter, showmaker, and seamstress for her growing family. In the span of her eighty years, she witnessed radical changes to Labrador.

Elizabeth Goudie was born April 20, 1902, at Mud Lake, Labrador, the daughter of Sarah Michelin and Joseph Blake. Her ancestors included Inuit, Innu, English and Scots. She spent most of her early years in and around Lake Melville or on the Labrador coast. At 18 she married Jim Goudie, a trapper, with whom she had nine children, one of whom, Joe, served as member of the House of Assembly for Naskaupi (1975- 85) and held several portfolios in the administrations of Frank Moores and Brian Peckford.

In 1963 Jim Goudie died and Elizabeth, with more time on her hands than usual, began to reminisce about her life in Labrador and the many changes she had been witness to over the past 60 years. She soon realized that the knowledge she had must be recorded or her grandchildren and their descendants might never know a vital part of their heritage. She had little formal schooling, but she put pen to paper and wrote the story of her life.

This autobiography contains a wealth of information on life in rural Labrador, her life as a trapper's wife, the changes brought by the establishment of military bases at Goose Bay, the early years of Confederation in Happy Valley. She finished her writing in June 1971.

Its visions are emblematic symbolizations of the social devastation generated by stunted economic opportunity and mass out-migration from Newfoundland communities. The elegiac song calls up the diasporic experience of rupture, displacement, and dislocation. Goudie and her family could be any of the thousands of Newfoundlanders who negotiate, in the dailyness of their lives, the difficult question of whether to leave a place to which you have deep attachment but which is not able to give you the life you want. However, despite its deceptively romantic melody and origins in a moment characterized by neo-nationalist sentiment, it shows us the dangers of a nationalist response to social injury. While her life exemplifies a deep attachment to Newfoundland, there is an idyllic Newfoundland in the text that pre-exists these injuries that nationalism can conjure up to defend against the shame and humiliation in the inability to fulfil the modern dream of political autonomy.

So far; heritage, legacy and memory...

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