

Book Reviews

The Rock Observed: Studies in the Literature of Newfoundland. PATRICK O'FLAHERTY. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1979. x, 222 p. ill., maps, ISBN 0 8020 235 17 \$15.00.

Patrick O'Flaherty's *The Rock Observed* takes nine well documented chapters to survey the literary responses to Newfoundland from an account of John Cabot's brief landing on the island in 1497 to the work of contemporary writers such as Harold Horwood, Percy Janes, and Farley Mowat. Readers who want a handy collection of some of the primary sources that O'Flaherty considers should consult the anthology *By Great Waters* (University of Toronto Press, 1974), compiled by Peter Neary and Patrick O'Flaherty. *The Rock Observed*, aided by useful maps and illustrations, presents the chronological unfolding of Newfoundland's history and its literature. Successive chapters deal with the literature of discovery and early settlement, with three eighteenth century missionary reports, with books by two pioneers Cartwright and Cormack, with the sentimentalization of Newfoundland by historians, and with the literary use of Newfoundland either as a backdrop for children's adventure stories and romances or as content for works of realism. The title of the book notwithstanding, O'Flaherty's analysis suggests that the rock of Newfoundland has as often been fancifully imagined as faithfully observed: commentators have been determined to see Newfoundland variously as a rich haven for the settler, a country of sublime prospects, a potential garden paradise, a salubrious "Health Resort" (possessing "a bracing climate with no trace of malaria. Sunstrokes are entirely unknown"), and "Nature's Great Post Office" with the potential to be the communications link between Europe and North America.

One of the first images in the book is of Sir Humphrey Gilbert returning from his 1583 voyage to Newfoundland, sitting aft in his ship the *Squirrel* and shouting, as the boat is "devoured" by "outrageous seas", "We are a neere to heaven by sea as by land." The last brief chapter concludes with another bleak image: in the spring of 1914, George Tuff, second hand on the sealing boat the *Newfoundland*, followed orders to lead 131 men across the ice after seals in a gathering storm, and seventy seven men froze to death. In between these images, O'Flaherty's survey of Newfoundland literature presents the historical experience of a people whose centuries of struggle with the rock and with the sea have made them "a race apart". They have endured wrecks and sea drownings, the dangers of the seal hunt, the periodic failures of the fish, potato blights, seasons of intense hardship and sometimes famine, savage frosts, and calamitous fires; and they have survived.

Therefore O'Flaherty is sometimes impatient with what he calls the "fallacies" of observers who ignore the actual rock and its people. Newfoundland, he implies, deserves better than she has received from interpreters who indulge themselves either in lamentations for a mythicized, sorrowful past or in dreams for a glorious, improbable future. By quoting liberally from primary sources, O'Flaherty allows to speak for themselves a number of writers whose preconceptions, expectations, and interests shape their ways of seeing: condescending English missionaries who complain about the weather, the food, and the immortality and backwardness of the people; romantics like William Cormack and Leo-

nardo Hubbard, who mistake, to their great cost, a journey through the Newfoundland and Labrador hinterland for a jaunt around the Lake District; apologists like Stephen March, who accounts for Newfoundland's evident lack of progress in agriculture, not by the sterility of the soil and the severity of the climate, but by "the want of stone wall fence"; and historians whose thesis about Newfoundland (that planters and settlers were persecuted by west country merchants, tyrannical admirals, and fishing interests and were effectually driven off the land into a sort of Acadian exile) is defective in nothing but truth.

The book is dense, detailed, and requires careful reading, especially from anyone relatively unfamiliar with Newfoundland history and literature. But it is enlivened by vivid, well defined portraits of observers of Newfoundland life and by brisk assessments such as these: Edward Chappell "was one of the first writers to caterwaul in public over the fate of the Beothuks"; Edward Wix "was an ecclesiastical snoop and prig"; Sir Richard Bonnycastle represented "imperialist bluster and military pomposity"; D. W. Prouse "enveloped the history of the country more thoroughly than ever in a cloud of misunderstanding"; Harold Horwood's success has been to "provide a distorted picture of Newfoundland to foreign readers".

As this last comment about Horwood implies, O'Flaherty admires the accurate observation of Newfoundland life, especially the life of the "common people", and he is generally unsympathetic to the genre of romance. He is therefore on safer ground when he discusses explorer and settler literature and historical writing, in which accuracy is a central virtue, than when he evaluates poems and fiction, in which the faithful presentation of Newfoundland life may not necessarily coincide with other literary values in the way that O'Flaherty implies that it must. The chapter on Pratt, "Emigrant Muse", which discusses the influence of Newfoundland on Pratt's life and writing, is ambivalent, praising Pratt as Newfoundland's greatest poet but regretting that Pratt did not emulate Thomas Hardy's desire and ability to depict the everyday life of the common people. The only other writer to merit an entire chapter is Margaret Duley, whose writing improved from an early attempt "on the level of mere romance" expressing a "disdainful attitude toward the outports" to a mature work *Highway to Valour* showing a compassionate interest in outport life and a sympathetic depiction of its people. This chapter on Margaret Duley will be useful in drawing wider attention to the work of a novelist who writes starkly and vividly of her country: "[Mageila's] narrow world had brought her close to the slaying-knife, the axe, and the baited hook striking at the fruit of the sea. Blood, blood, she thought unhappily. . ." (*Highway to Valour*). This passage captures the double awareness of life and death that O'Flaherty's book convincingly shows is part of the continuity of Newfoundland experience.

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"God's Galloping Girl": The Peace River Diaries of Monica Storrs, 1929 to 1931.

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"God's Galloping Girls", the nickname affectionately given to Monica Storrs and her missionary companions by the settlers they served in the Peace River area, provides a catchy title for this publication of several of her diaries. Like the diaries of a great number of priests and missionaries who came to North America, the Storrs' diaries record some of the earliest history of the Alberta localities visited by Monica and from a broader perspective than one might expect of a church worker.