

The Newfoundland Historical Society



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Winter 2002

NEWSLETTER



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PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

Welcome to 2002. Following on the success of our fall lecture series, the Newfoundland Historical Society will begin the winter season with a lecture by Steve Mills entitled *17th Century Planter Household in Renews* on January 31st @ Hampton Hall. Our lecture series will continue until April 25th with the annual general meeting and a lecture by Wileen Keough entitled *Irish Women on the Southern Shore in the 18th and 19th Century*. Once again for 2002, the programme committee has planned a two day symposium to be held March 22 and 23 at the Music Hall, MUN School of Music - this time our topic will be *Newfoundland in World War 11*, an exploration of the social, economic, cultural and political effects of World War 11 on Newfoundland and Labrador. Again this year, the Newfoundland Historical Society has been awarded a \$3000 grant from Canada's National History Society (CNHS) toward a regional initiative; the details of which will be announced. Two members of our executive, Eleanor Dawson and Joan Ritcey have been invited to attend the 2nd PATHS conference in Quebec in February. This conference organized by CNHS brings together representatives of Provincial and Territorial Historical Societies to discuss common interests and concerns.

The Newfoundland Historical Society was dismayed to learn of the appointment of Mr. Doug Oldford to replace Dr. Gordon Handcock as Newfoundland and Labrador's representative on the Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada. Dr. Handcock is a former president of this Society and a prominent academic expert on the history of the province. He served his constituency well during the past six years and had fully expected to be reappointed. As a cultural geographer specializing in the settlement and early history of Newfoundland and Labrador, Dr. Handcock is well acquainted with all of the significant themes, people and events of our history and heritage, making him well suited to represent the province on such matters. By contrast, Mr. Oldford appears to have neither an appropriate academic background nor previous involvement in the heritage community. The role of the provincial representative on the HSMBC is very important and should be filled by an individual who is properly qualified and has the respect and confidence of the heritage sector. The Newfoundland Historical Society has requested an explanation from Minister Coppins on why Dr. Handcock was replaced by Mr. Oldford.

The Newfoundland Historical Society continues to work closely with the Association of Heritage Industries as it works toward fulfilling its mandate of bringing together the heritage community to speak with a single voice. In addition to sponsoring our numerous public events, the Newfoundland Historical Society is continuing its lobbying efforts on behalf of the heritage sector. We encourage you to join in our efforts and look forward to seeing you at our functions.

Eleanor Dawson
President

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Military Video of Royal Nfld.
Regiment "The Blue Puttees", one
and two hour versions available for
\$12 and \$14 from The War Amps at
1-800-250-3030. Their website is
www.waramps.ca.

OFFICE NEWS

Membership

As of December 31st the Society has 474 members, and 386 of these need to be renewed. We need your support. Please send in your payment today.

Office Hours

The office is open Tuesdays and Thursdays from 9:30 a.m. to 4:15 except when the Provincial Archives are closed for holidays or staff meetings. If you need to research our archives on other days please call the Society office ahead of time to make other arrangements.

Reference Requests

From October to December we had 24 visitors, 42 e-mail requests and 46 phone calls. Information was requested on businesses, maps, individuals, pirates, place names, surnames, old books, sports organizations, ships, parks, historic sites and shipwrecks. There were several days before Christmas when there was hardly room to get around the people in the office!

Thanks

Special thanks go out to a wonderful volunteer, Hilda Chalk Murray, who helped us with the mail out of the last newsletter, and to Joan Hiller who helped out in the office and mailed the Newfoundland Quarterly while I was on special leave

Donations to the Archives

Thanks to Mrs. Sheila Ryan of St. John's who has kindly made the donation of a large collection of aids, appeals, excerpts from books, journals, pictures, programmes, proclamations, reports, letters and lectures. Much of this collection relates to the Newfoundland Historical Society and were the holdings of Mr. R. S. Furlong, Q.C. More information will be available when I have had time to review the material.

New Publications

Coming in the New Year - *The Beothuk* - by Ingeborg Marshall, published by the Newfoundland Historical Society. Approximately 90 pages, it is an abbreviated treatment of the subject, based on her definitive book, *A History and Ethnography of the Beothuk*. It will be an ideal reference for those who wish a brief but authoritative overview of the Beothuk.

Fall Lecture Series Review

September

For those of you who could not make the first lecture in our series you missed a really great presentation by Don Tarrant. With the aid of a huge computer screen approximately 100 persons present were caught up in the exciting history of the development of a new form of communication in the 1800s. The first image on screen was of Frederick Gisborne, an Englishman who had moved to Canada, an engineer who worked in telegraphy in Montreal and Nova Scotia. He attempted to connect St. John's to other telegraphy centers by way of an underground cable to Cape Ray, however, the cost was too enormous to finish. He traveled to the United States in search of more funding. Cyrus Field became a business friend and was followed by many others. Following the process voyage by voyage, across the Atlantic, over a period of many years it was easy to see how difficult this project was because of not having enough or the right type of cable, snapping cables, inclement weather and too small vessels to carry the

Donors 2001

The Society is grateful to the following people who have made cash donations during the past year:

*Hugh Whitley
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Archival Tidbits

In the olden times in St. John's, New Year's Day was an occasion for great celebration which included a mammoth parade sponsored and carried out by the various societies. Headed by musical groups, including Bennett's famous band, the parade went along the main streets under arches made of wooden frames covered by spruce boughs and other banners and objects. Besides the bands,

cargo, etc. So many attempts were made and failed. But extending telegraphic communication across the Atlantic finally became a dream come true because of the determination of many individuals.

We saw various telegraphic offices around the island and some of the workers. Three operators were required for EACH message sent. Imagine how that compares with the speed of computer e-mail and fax today!

Another image was of Guglielmo Marconi as a young boy with his parents and brother at their home in Bologna, Italy. The invention of wireless communication, the first S signal, all began with Marconi's experimentation as a very young boy, attempting to send messages to his brother at various locations within the vast boyhood home, and then sent further distances away on the family's estate grounds. The boy's father discouraged this activity but Guglielmo persisted in his efforts.

As a young man Marconi visited Newfoundland to introduce his strange new invention. Once again wireless communication came about because one man believed he could connect with the world!

Linda Williams

October

In his lecture Dr. Jerry Bannister discussed the myth and the reality of the "Fishing Admirals in Eighteenth Century Newfoundland." Bannister related the lack of any evidence to support the popular image of a rough and ignorant admiral whose corruption was matched only by the harshness of his punishment of those who found themselves in his court. He went on to analyse the fragmentary evidence of the courts - showing that the admirals concerned themselves with property cases, not criminal matters. Far from being capricious and cruel, the admirals based their decision upon common law and the customs of the fishery. Their decisions were reasoned, and not enforced by the cat-o'-nine-tails as the mythology would have it.

Dr. Bannister's lecture explained how the emerging struggle between fishing admirals and the civil magistrates that had been appointed by the Governor after 1729 resulted in the admirals being condemned by their rivals. Yet, he shows, the authority of the admirals was based upon a superior footing, King William's Act of 1699, while the authority of the magistrates rested only upon orders of the privy council. Ironically this tension allowed the Royal Navy to assume greater authority, dooming the admirals to being a colorful footnote in our legal history. Far from being a scourge upon residents, Bannister concludes, the Admirals were not much different than their peers among the English ship captains.

Jeff Webb

November

"Fictionalizing Newfoundland History"

November's meeting was devoted to a spirited and frank discussion of the question of novels set in Newfoundland's recent past which had been controversial for their blending historical fidelity with inaccurate representations of real people, places and events.

Anthropologist and novelist Gordon Inglis opened the evening with an

individual musicians performed on accordions, fiddles and even tin whistles. There was one decoration that went on top of the arches which was known as "The Burning Mountain". *Offbeat History, Michael Harrington, Evening Telegram, 1966.*

Oldest Wooden Timber Built Structure to be Preserved

The Moravian Mission in Labrador will be preserved thanks to \$162,000 in federal funding. The money will assist the Agvituk Historical Society in the stabilization of the building's interior and exterior. Of the eight missions erected in the province between 1782 and 1850, the Old Mission on Labrador's north coast is all that remains.

10 Buildings Receive Heritage Status by Heritage Foundation of Newfoundland and Labrador:

- The William Henry Pynn House, Quirpon (oldest on N. Peninsula)
- Corner Brook Public Building (used in Gordon Pinsent's film "The Rowdyman")
- Curling Bank of Montreal, C.B.
- St. George's Courthouse
- Precious Blood Church, St. Andrew's, Codroy Valley
- The Squires Barn & Carriage House, Mount Scio Road
- Kelvin House, St. John's
- The House, Rennies Mill Road
- The Joseph & Caroline Tilley Property, Summerville
- The Beckett Property, Old Perlican

Congratulations Susan Felsberg of Mud Lake, Labrador won the Lieutenant-Governor's history essay competition. See her entry *So Many Small Things: Mud Lake and the Labrador* on p.22 of Summer/Fall 2001 issue of Newfoundland Quarterly.

One of the feature articles was by our volunteer Hilda Chaulk Murray.

emphatic statement that there had been an unspoken agreement between authors and readers that the author would be faithful to the historical setting, but that recent authors had broken this contract. He suggested that if authors wanted to set a novel in a real place or have a real person as a character they had a duty to get the facts right.

The renowned author Joan Clark conceded none of these points, and argued that some critics of historical novels threatened works of the imagination with their insistence upon literalism. She suggested that creative writers should be judged by aesthetic criteria alone, and that insisting that authors conform to some imagined authentic rendering of the past amounted to censorship.

Professor of English Ronald Rompkey explained his view that authors creating a literature that altered the past was one of the ways in which a nation understood itself and broke the bounds of colonialism. Thus the Newfoundland historical fiction which twists real events in order to deal with the mythologies and icons of our past is important in creating our identity.

Under the able moderation of Joan Ritcey the audience engaged in the debate with each of the invited speakers. While no resolution to such questions can be expected, the evening was as engaging as it was enlightening.

Jeff Webb

Hall of Honour Award

The Newfoundland Quarterly was honoured on October 29th when Harry Cuff, Editor-in-Chief was presented a Hall of Honour Citation by the Newfoundland and Labrador Arts Council. It was the 100th anniversary of the publication founded by John Evans in 1901, a forum for some of our most talented writers of fiction, prose, current events, poetry, book reviews and biographies. Photography of notable artists have graced its covers.

Cyberspace Archives

Heritage institutions in this province will partake in a pilot project Community Memories of the Canadian Heritage Information Network (CHIN). Using U.K. user-friendly software they will create archives which will be added to the new Community Memories section of the Virtual Museum of Canada. Heritage participants are from Newtown, Bay Roberts, Bird Cove, Carbonear, Corner Brook, Labrador, Marystown, Gander, Port Union and Trinity. *Lara Maynard, Torbay Heritage Committee.*

Hilda Neatby Prize

Since 1983 the Canadian Committee on Women's History has presented this award at the annual meeting of the Canadian Historical Association. This encourages the publication of scholarly articles on women's history and gender history in Canadian journals and books. Two prizes are awarded, one for an article in English, and the other for an article in French. Nominate any articles that have appeared in publications in 2001. Send with three copies of the article before March 1, 2002 to: The Canadian Historical Association, c/o Hilda Neatby Prize, 395 Wellington Street, Ottawa, Ontario K1A 0N3.

Films and Publications

Filming for *The Shipping News* began during the worst winter in St. John's at New Bonaventure, Dunfield and Trinity Bight. Starring in the film are Kevin Spacey, Judi Dench, Julianne Moore and Cate Blanchett. The movie opened in theatres on December 26. Woof Designs of St. John's knitted more than 400 sweaters for the entire cast and crew. It all began with an order for a few woolen watch caps to keep them warm during outdoor shoots. Then they enquired about a few sweaters. Seems they are a big hit! More were ordered for the post-production people. The Shipping News is rumoured to high on the 2001 Oscar nomination list.

William Hurt was in St. John's shooting *Rare Birds*, a big budget screen adaptation of local author Ed Riche's 1997 novel. Filming took place in Outer Cove, Petty Harbor-Maddox Cove, Cape Spear and St. John's including a half day at Memorial's QE II Library. Local actor Andy Jones stole the show, according to some viewers who saw previews. It was praised at its September screening at the Toronto Film Festival.

Les Editions Anglo-Saxon <http://www.anglosaxonedition.com> presents *Hundred and Twenty Years of Remorse, a treasure hunter searching for his past*. Marcel Robillard, writes about his adventures and misadventures as a diver. He explored 400 wrecks in the Newfoundland and Labrador region. He tells the story of the "Anglo-Saxon", a ship that sank off Cape Race in 1863 with 446 persons aboard and the S.S. Falcon that sank in 1851, at Ferryland, Newfoundland.

Marconi Celebrations Come to A Close

The provincial Marconi celebrations year, *Receiving the World*, ended on December 12, 2001, the hundredth anniversary of Marconi receiving the first transatlantic wireless signal. A whole calendar of celebratory events took place around the province during the year. The Historical Society was involved with one of these events, in helping to plan the Marconi Morning Plenary of the Wireless Vision Congress held at the St. John's Convention Centre, September 25-28. This session gave the 500 delegates some Newfoundland history. Paul O'Neill, Don Tarrant and Alan Ruffman spoke on the history of communications, Marconi's life and the importance of Marconi's achievements in Newfoundland. The Wireless Vision editorial committee will publish selected papers from the congress in the near future.

Joan Ritcey

Looking Back

Knights of Columbus Fire of '42

St. John's was cold and dark on the night of December 12, 1942. Advertisements in the paper and on the radio informed citizens they must use certain prescribed materials to block out every bit of light from windows and entrances and allow only a very minimum of light was to be cast from the headlights of cars. Security was tight. Very few people were seen on the icy streets, but a barn dance was underway at the Knights of Columbus on Parade Street, a program that was broadcast live on radio station VPCM each week. About 400 Canadian and American servicemen and 100 Newfoundland civilians were gathered inside passing idle time in the canteen, chatting and dancing to the music from the jukebox. The entertainment had hardly begun when the partying was interrupted by a woman shrieking "fire, fire". Radio listeners at home heard several explosions and then radio signals from the hall went dead, to be replaced by recorded music. When the lights at the Knights of Columbus went out half of St. John's waited in suspense for news on the radio. Others rushed to the scene.

Inside the Knights of Columbus people rushed to the four exits; some were locked, covered with plywood and nailed tight. The doors opened inward. People were confused. There seemed to be no way to get out. People stumbled around in the dark in the small canteen between the chairs and tables and people that filled the room, fighting to find an opening. While lights had been installed at the exits they were not connected to a separate electrical panel. When the fire had first been seen at the back of the auditorium, flames were already devouring the one existing electrical panel.

Later, firemen believed the fire started upstairs in a cupboard where cartons of toilet tissue were stored. Some thought an enemy agent saw an opportunity to torch a building and a good number of servicemen stationed in St. John's at the same time. It is a fact that German U-boats were off our coast. Several British iron ore carriers had been sunk off Bell Island earlier that year.

The fire ate through the roof and raged without detection until half an hour later, however, the poisonous gases locked between the building layers had already begun its work. Upstairs one serviceman opened the door of the storage cabinet, thinking it was a washroom, and discovered the blaze. In fright he fled to the stairs only to find flames blocking his way down. Another serviceman saw what

