BOOK REVIEW

Rhea Rollmann. *A Queer History of Newfoundland*. Chapel Arm, NL: Engen Books, 2023. ISBN 978-177478-144-9

The first major work of queer historical research to come out of Newfoundland and Labrador, Rhea Rollmann's *A Queer History of Newfoundland* combines extensive archival research and over one hundred original oral history interviews to document a century of queer history on the island of Newfoundland and provide much-needed queer perspectives on the province's past. In so doing, it breaks new ground in both the field of Newfoundland and Labrador studies and the Canadian queer historical field. Rollmann writes from an understanding of silence around queer issues and queer pasts as a form of oppression, and thus an understanding that recording queer people's histories in their own voices is an act of love and resistance that disrupts heteronormativity past and present. She notes her decision to take a more journalistic approach in the book rather than a scholarly one—a wise choice, I would contend, to ensure this important inaugural queer historical text's accessibility to readers outside academia—but the book still provides a solid introduction to some of the methodological and ethical underpinnings and struggles of queer historical work for those unfamiliar with the area and raises critical questions about queerness, identity, place, and power in this place that set the stage for future academic analyses in this area.

Rollmann quickly makes clear that popular conceptions of queerness and homophobia in Newfoundland among queer and heterosexual people alike are constantly defined against perceptions of queerness

and homophobia on the mainland. In her introduction, she highlights two pervasive popular myths that she seeks to disprove in the following chapters: first, the idea that queerness is somehow a "mainland" or recent phenomenon, and second, the notion of "Newfoundland exceptionalism," or that there exists an intrinsic cultural uniqueness in Newfoundland that precludes the existence of homophobia here, at least to the extent seen elsewhere. The latter myth manifests in two common "competing claims: that on the one hand NL is a conservative Christian society deeply resistant to change; and on the other that it is an exceptionally tolerant society in which ills such as racism or homophobia don't really exist, thanks to a shared heritage rooted in poverty and struggle that has forged us to be the friendliest people in the world." She notes the utility of these myths to institutions of power in the province as components of "a type of homophobia that is rooted in a sort of epistemic murk": a coercive atmosphere of silence, confusion, and fear that compelled queer individuals to stay quiet and closeted, thus "rendering the direct application of official repression often unnecessary" (247–8). This, in turn, also made it incredibly difficult to galvanize queer people to organizing action, unlike in large mainland cities where high-profile incidents of mass repression, such as the 1981 bathhouse raids in Toronto, resulted in collective anger that propelled activism forth and ultimately produced political gains. Rollmann explores how the question of "how much closetry is necessary, and how much is irrational"—as Toronto activist Ken Popert put it in a 1976 article he penned about queer activism in Newfoundland—persistently came up in Newfoundland queer circles in the 1970s and 1980s, and how intergenerational tensions arose in the early 1990s when a younger cohort of queer activists in Newfoundland embraced sex-positive and visibility-based tactics following the example of mainland organizers. She argues that the movement of queer people between Newfoundland and the mainland enriched the activist scenes in both places: Newfoundland-born activists made their mark outside of the province using skills and lessons learned at home, and non-Newfoundlanders who moved to the province contributed fresh ideas and expertise to

the queer, feminist, and labour movements here. Crucially, she also explores recurring tensions between native Newfoundlanders and non-Newfoundlanders on the island over the appropriateness of certain activist tactics originating on the mainland, and ways that queerness as a whole was cast as foreign by those in positions of power in the province.

While Rollmann covers the entire twentieth century in the book, she makes her most valuable contribution in her descriptions of queer organizing and especially of queer space from the 1970s onward. Canadian queer researchers, especially within academia, have heretofore devoted their attention almost exclusively to major cities such as Toronto and Montreal, and the particular activist forms and queer spatial configurations that emerge in those places. There are enormous regional gaps in the scholarship, with a particular dearth of studies of Atlantic Canada, and smaller cities in general have gone understudied. Descriptions of metropolitan gay villages and "ghettos," bathhouses, all-gay bars, clubs, and gay businesses—almost always predominantly gay male spaces—proliferate to such an extent in the literature and in popular images of queer culture that it can be difficult to imagine what queer space might have historically looked like in places with lower populations that could not have supported such institutions. Rollmann casts light on the situations and spaces in Newfoundland where queer identity, community, and sex can be located: the section of the Queen Elizabeth II library with books on homosexuality becomes a hallowed space for young queers to learn and envision themselves as part of a community of others, invisible to them but communicating in the margins of the books (207); a house on palatial Waterford Bridge Road becomes an unofficial community centre to which townie and outport queers flock to socialize, and then find themselves conscripted into organizing efforts (102–3); a predominantly gay bar downtown becomes a place of connection between gays and straights, thanks to its extended hours making it a destination for straights after the other bars close (473–4); the small Women's Centre on Military Road becomes a hotbed of lesbian organizing work and a steady meeting base for the local gay and lesbian organization, GAIN, and the Graduate

House across the street from it host to GAIN's legendary dances (122; 183). Far from being a local-interest-type history relying on readers' familiarity with the places mentioned to give meaning to its content, the book abounds with three-dimensional descriptions of spaces in St. John's, queer and otherwise, that provide readers with a powerful sense of what it could be like to exist in these spaces, drawing heavily on Rollmann's oral history interviews.

Indeed, fittingly in a province where oral tradition holds such a significant place in both popular cultural identity and academic work, Rollmann's book is thoroughly conversational: she does not simply extract brief quotations from her narrators to back up her points, but also lets them tell their stories in their own voices at considerable length. This choice of approach differs from those taken in many similar scholarly texts, but it suits the book's purposes well, leaving the reader with a fuller sense of familiarity not just with the arc of the events being described, but with the loves, desires, struggles, and idiosyncrasies of the individuals peopling these histories. The chapter featuring a conversation between Rollmann and Daze Jefferies on trans archival research was a highlight of the book and a unique addition to its content; it reminds readers that there is no singular "queer history of Newfoundland" (or of any other place) to be uncovered, and that queer research is better characterized as an intimate, painful, personal, and embodied series of encounters, never complete and always shaped by the experiences, biases, and carefully-made decisions of the individual researcher. Rollmann and Jefferies relate their respective experiences with queer research to one another and raise pertinent questions about responsibility in queer historical research, about how to hold (and sometimes *with*hold) and write about the intimate histories of those who are no longer alive and thus cannot "consent to entanglement or relationship with the researcher or writer," as well as how to responsibly engage living people with trauma in the sometimes painful research process (404–6). While not an academic text, I would have liked to see more analysis of Rollmann's particular interview methodology, further discussion of her own positionality as the interviewer, and a breakdown of the demographics of her interviewees, so that readers unfamiliar

with oral history and future historians looking to build on her work might have a more precise sense of what kinds of stories are missing from this volume (through no fault of her own, but due to the research method's natural shortcomings) and the particular ways that the stories included were produced.

Rollmann notes that the intention of this book is not just to recount histories of queer people in Newfoundland, but to read the history of Newfoundland itself from queer perspectives (18). Her chapters on the period from the 1970s onward do, indeed, provide valuable queer glimpses of a changing Newfoundland—for instance, of how queer teachers experienced the last years of the repressive system of denominational education, and how its collapse in the early 1990s was part of a "quiet revolution" of sorts that also saw the first legislative introduction of human rights for queer individuals (341). To a much lesser extent, she also looks at the earlier half of the twentieth century from the perspectives of a few notable queer individuals and couples, both Newfoundland-born and expatriate, though she is candid about having to cut substantial portions of this earlier section from her initial one-thousand-page draft. It certainly made sense for the book's purposes to prioritize more recent history, so I understand this choice; however, I did feel that this paring-down left the first section feeling somewhat disjointed. The opening chapter on "Early Beginnings" opens with anecdotes about a queer couple in Green Bay in the 1950s and a Petty Harbour-born activist who made his mark organizing early Pride Weeks in Toronto in the 1980s, then describes a 1924 article in the *Evening Telegram* by a reverend from Trinity that appeared to celebrate homoerotic male love, then profiles a handful of early-twentieth-century queer figures in Newfoundland before jumping back to the latter half of the century to profile nine of the living queer Newfoundlanders Rollmann interviewed. These are all fascinating stories that illustrate specific points she makes, of course, but the reason for putting them all in the same chapter and the connections between them were not totally intuitive and could have been more precisely drawn to improve the overall flow of the chapter and set the book off to a stronger start.

Such are the perils of covering so much previously uncovered ground in a single accessible text, and undoubtedly the material cut from the first section of the book could take up a volume of its own. As a whole, however, *A Queer History of Newfoundland* is a highly insightful, well-written, creative, and engaging read. It marks a significant step forward for the fields to which it contributes and for the queer community of Newfoundland, and hints at exciting possibilities for future Newfoundland queer research.

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