

Seaman, Sightseer, Storyteller, and Sage: Aaron Thomas's 1794 *History of Newfoundland*

SARAH GLASSFORD

May 20th brought us early in the morning into sounding which indicated our being on the famous Banks of Newfoundland, therefore not a great many Leagues from the desir'd Harbor of St John's, to which place the *Boston* was bound. As a proof to determine where we was our Ship was enveloped in one of those fogs which eternally hover over the Banks ... A European, who has never been in this part of America, can have but a faint Idea of these Fogs. You frequently can see but a few yards before you, and by getting on Deck for two hours you will get wet to the skin.¹

THUS BEGINS AARON THOMAS's account of his time in Newfoundland in 1794. In 1818 Edward Chappell claimed that his account of Newfoundland was the first produced by any British traveller since Jacobean times,² but some 24 years earlier Thomas, an English able-seaman on HMS *Boston*, had put pen to paper and composed a lively and engaging account of the people, places, and history of Newfoundland, drawn largely from his own experiences there. The result, which Thomas called his *History of Newfoundland*, may be described in the same way Rainer K. Baehre has described shipwreck tales: not only "'stories-in-history' but also 'history-in-stories'."³ Thomas's *History* can be puzzling (though pleasantly so) to a reader, for it mingles the mundane and the marvellous and combines the forms of travel narrative, journal, and letter, all at once.

Eighteenth-century travel literature lies somewhere between documentation and interpretation, and Aaron Thomas's account of his voyage to Newfoundland during the French Revolutionary War rests within this intermediary zone. His *History* has the potential to offer readers a useful window onto life in Newfoundland and the Royal Navy at the close of the eighteenth century; by placing the *History* in its historical and literary contexts, and analyzing Thomas's use of narrative voice in

the text, this article grapples with the question of what to make of a supposedly “factual” account that presents outrageous tales next to realistic-sounding observations.

A close reading of the *History* shows that Thomas used four principal narrative voices, which I have chosen to call the Seaman, the Sightseer, the Storyteller, and the Sage. The Seaman provides factual observations regarding maritime life; the Sightseer catalogues the people, places, plants, animals, weather, customs, and history of Newfoundland; the Sage offers sporadic reflections of a serious nature; and the Storyteller spices up the entire account with lively tales that take liberties with the truth. An examination of the *History* in its broader eighteenth-century literary context reveals the strong influence of both established conventions and contemporary debates in travel literature and epistolary writing.⁴ Finally, a comparison of the *History* with another travel account by Thomas — his *Caribbean Journal* — reveals the extent to which he shaped and refined his Newfoundland narrative, probably with publication and a wide readership in mind. Collectively, these approaches reveal the rich complexity of Aaron Thomas’s *History of Newfoundland*.⁵ Readers who understand his use of four voices, and are aware of the use he makes of eighteenth-century literary conventions, will have an easier time dissecting its content. Various as Seaman, Sightseer, Storyteller, and Sage, Aaron Thomas has much to tell us about Newfoundland, the Royal Navy, and himself, in 1794.

BACKGROUND

Aaron Thomas was born in 1762 in Wigmore, Herefordshire, and grew up in Ludlow, Shropshire, as the third child of seven born to a prosperous farmer and sometime churchwarden, Aaron Thomas Sr., and his wife Mary Pinches. The nature and extent of Aaron Thomas Jr.’s education is unknown, as is his occupation prior to joining the navy. His three brothers had flourishing businesses in London, but Aaron seems to have been the only member of the family not to be similarly successful.⁶ He lived for some time in London, but in 1793 went to Chatham to join the Royal Navy. A lifelong bachelor, Thomas had a close relationship with his family in England, with whom he corresponded regularly throughout his life. He was 32 years old and had a year of service on HMS *Suffolk* behind him when he transferred to HMS *Boston* in March 1794.⁷ While serving on the *Boston*, possibly as a purser’s assistant,⁸ Thomas produced his record of his voyage to Newfoundland. He left HMS *Boston* on 20 March 1797, and served on HMS *Concord*, arriving in the West Indies on 7 September 1797. Sometime thereafter he again transferred ships, this time to HMS *Lapwing*. While serving as Eleventh Gunner (and possibly purser’s assistant) on the *Lapwing*, Thomas kept a journal covering the period from 15 June 1798 to 26 October 1799, the manuscript of which is now held by the University of

Miami.⁹ Taken ill in early September 1799, Aaron Thomas died sometime between 22 and 26 October 1799.¹⁰

It is a mystery how Thomas's *History of Newfoundland* came to rest in a second-hand bookstore near Manchester, England. A travelling Newfoundlander noticed it there and brought it home. It passed through the hands of Robert Winton and the Hon. Stephen Rendell, and the prominent St. John's merchant and politician James Murray bought it in 1882.¹¹ The journal remained in the Murray family, and in 1968, after undertaking extensive background research, Jean Murray published an edited version of the *History*.¹²

The journal Jean Murray inherited is bound in brown leather and written in what she describes as "clear bold handwriting on good paper."¹³ It runs to 693 pages measuring 6½ by 8 inches, and includes introductory remarks, a full index, and a list of watercolour illustrations, most of which were still in the book when Murray inherited it. Asserting in his Preface (which was written later and inserted at the front of the volume) that "none of these sheets has been rewritten,"¹⁴ Thomas goes on to say that "every line was wrote by candlelight, on board the *Boston*, and a part of it when her canvas was afloat in the Wind."¹⁵ We are led to assume that such was the lot of a seaman with literary tendencies in 1794.

NEWFOUNDLAND AND THE ROYAL NAVY IN 1794

Between 1793 and 1815 the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic wars kept England at war with France and the Royal Navy active at sea. When HMS *Boston* crossed the Atlantic in 1794, it was part of a fleet convoying merchant fishing vessels to Newfoundland. Lighter and quicker than the accompanying heavy fighting ships, the *Boston* and its fellow frigates served as the eyes and ears of the convoy.¹⁶ Possessing 425 vessels, the Royal Navy was well-positioned when war broke out in 1793. Although in the end the Royal Navy managed to stave off serious French invasion attempts at home and successfully defended the overseas colonies, for the duration of the conflict the Atlantic passage was more dangerous than usual.¹⁷ Fortunately, Aaron Thomas's convoy encountered no trouble from the French fleet during its Atlantic crossing.

The Newfoundland that Thomas encountered during his visit was in some respects the same as it had ever been, but in other ways it was in the midst of great change. The permanent population of the island remained primarily situated in the Avalon Peninsula and along the northeast coast as far as Notre Dame Bay. Between 1725 and 1775 the winter population had quadrupled, and although single men continued to vastly outnumber single women, the last two decades of the eighteenth century saw an increase in the numbers of women and children in Newfoundland.¹⁸ The formative phase of growth in terms of population and permanent settlement would come during the Napoleonic Wars, especially after 1800, but already in 1794

the lack of women (which led Sir Joseph Banks to remark in 1766 that even his washerwoman received an official invitation to the governor's ball) decreased to the point that Aaron Thomas apparently felt no need to make a comparable observation.¹⁹ As W. Gordon Handcock notes, by the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries "the cumulative effects of female immigration, natural increase, and retention in Newfoundland became quite apparent" as the proportion of females to males slowly began to increase and the population moved toward "the norms of an established and settled society."²⁰

Over the course of the eighteenth century an increasing number of Irish Roman Catholics took up residency in Newfoundland amid what had previously been a permanent population almost exclusively drawn from Protestant southern and western England.²¹ By the late eighteenth century most of the settlements on the Avalon Peninsula (the area in which Aaron Thomas spent the bulk of his time) were in varying degrees mixed Anglo-Irish communities.²² Roman Catholics were subject to more than the usual suspicion from their English Protestant neighbours during the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic wars, as the spectre of Irish rebellion coupled with French invasion haunted the English Protestant population. Capital punishment was used in an attempt to keep the Irish population in check: the executions Aaron Thomas witnessed in 1794 were but one example.²³ The Irish immigration was comprised primarily of young single male labourers, a circumstance which did nothing to ease English Protestant Newfoundlanders' fears.²⁴ Overall, Aaron Thomas's visit to Newfoundland coincides with a period of change in both the size and composition of the Newfoundland population, with attendant social repercussions.

The French Revolutionary and Napoleonic wars themselves — which were the cause of Thomas's voyage to Newfoundland — also had an impact on Newfoundland: over the course of the last two decades of the eighteenth century the migratory fishery declined drastically, while the resident fishery increased to the point of dominance by 1793.²⁵ By the 1790s Newfoundland was no longer a mere fishing station, but had become indisputably settled: "a place well populated, year-round, and operating with a finely balanced system of differing classes of residents — merchants, boatkeepers and servants."²⁶ By 1815 the migratory fishery would come to an end, and the dominance of the resident fishery, growth of the seal fishery, and continued immigration, meant that Newfoundland would soon emerge as a colonial society in all but name.

Despite these accomplished or impending changes, Newfoundland remained almost completely dependent on the fishery, a fact which contributed greatly to the slow domestic development of the island. Unlike other North American colonies, agriculture was not a significant economic endeavour. Not only did the Newfoundland landscape severely limit opportunities for economic diversification beyond the fishery, but a monostaple economy had proved sufficiently lucrative to the merchant class.²⁷ Throughout the eighteenth century the Royal Navy not only provided

military protection for merchant ships in time of war, but in the absence of representative institutions it served as “the engine of law and authority in Newfoundland,” as one half of a longstanding civil-and-naval partnership in which the civil influence was exerted by merchant interests.²⁸ The first court of civil jurisdiction had been established in Newfoundland in 1791, but there would be no civil governor until 1825. As long as Newfoundland was principally viewed as an industry rather than a colony, naval administration (in conjunction with civil magistrates and courts) made more sense than representative institutions. It was as part of this naval authority, and into this wider context that HMS *Boston*, and with it Aaron Thomas, arrived in Newfoundland in May of 1794. For these reasons Thomas’s *History of Newfoundland* is a valuable account of Newfoundland in a time of broad transition, particularly in the absence of a Newfoundland newspaper for this period.

SOURCES FOR AARON THOMAS’S *HISTORY OF NEWFOUNDLAND*

The *History of Newfoundland* comes at the end of a line of pre-nineteenth-century literature written about Newfoundland which stretches back to the 1620s.²⁹ The earliest works attempted to promote settlement, urged a takeover of the French fishery, or defended the British fishery.³⁰ Closer to Aaron Thomas’s time, two historical treatments of Newfoundland appeared in print.³¹ On one level, Thomas’s *History of Newfoundland* (as the title he gave it indicates) falls into this same category.

The outside cover of Thomas’s leather-bound manuscript bears the title “Memoirs of Newfoundland” in gold lettering. This might be Thomas’s own choice, or a later addition by someone else. The title page (which Thomas refers to as the frontispiece), written in his own hand, bears the title he chose to affix to his journal: “History of Newfoundland.” The frontispiece continues by enumerating the contents of the volume at length, in classic seventeenth- and eighteenth-century style. The title promises to discuss Newfoundland’s Grand Banks, fishery, climate, soil, bodies of water, fauna, charters, initial settlement, tales of the country (never before collected), and also a brief account of the *Boston*’s stops in Spain. In addition, there are to be “a great number of new, and singular anecdotes” of people and places, and a “Dissertation on Friendship,” not to mention “the whole interspersed with a multiplicity of Naval Historical Biographical Sentimental Political Geographical Military. and Moral Sketches.”³² Remarking upon its encyclopaedic nature, Thomas states repeatedly in his preface (added later) that the title page promises more than the actual contents of the journal deliver.³³ Aaron Thomas was only one of many eighteenth-century travel writers who struggled with varying degrees of success to integrate anecdotes and personal narrative with more scientific observation, the latter often taking the form of lengthy digressions.³⁴

The propensity of eighteenth-century travellers to refer to previous histories or travel accounts raises the question of what sources provided Aaron Thomas with

information about Newfoundland. The botany component of the *History* Thomas seems to have undertaken himself: at one point he describes himself as “an unfortunate antiquarian, a bit of a Botanist and something of a Physicist,”³⁵ and on more than one occasion he refers to having collected various specimens of plants or birds. He may have done some general reading on the British colonies in North America. He certainly drew some of his information from Newfoundlanders themselves. Both of his journals demonstrate his habit of talking with local people, and presumably oral tradition and living memory contributed to Thomas’s information about Newfoundland history and life.

Though the interior of the island remained largely a mystery to most Europeans, general maps of Newfoundland could be purchased by 1770.³⁶ Thomas might have bought one before leaving England. Two other sources Thomas might have used were Griffith Williams’ *An Account of the Island of Newfoundland, With the Nature of its Trade, and Method of carrying on the Fishery* (1765), or John Oldmixon’s *The history of Newfoundland: containing an account of its discovery, settlement, encrease, inhabitants, climate, soil, product, trade, and present state* (1741). The scope of these two works approximates Thomas’s ambitions for his own *History*, but he does not seem to have read either of them. He certainly had read a newer, more up-to-date account — John Reeves’ *History of the Government of the Island of Newfoundland*. Reeves had served as chief justice of the new Court of Judicature since 1791, and his *History*, based on the records of the Board of Trade and Plantations in London, appeared in 1793.

Much of Thomas’s section dealing with Newfoundland’s history and governance, particularly the information on statutes and merchant-planter relations, is visibly drawn from Reeves. Thomas’s account embroiders, rephrases, rearranges, or adds to the information in Reeves, but the connection is obvious. In particular, Thomas’s discussion of George Larkin’s 1701 report on the state of Newfoundland is almost identical to that of Reeves, though for some reason Thomas incorrectly gives the date as 1730.³⁷ Thomas’s extensive use of Reeves’ *History* almost certainly constitutes the first example of what Patrick O’Flaherty identifies as a long line of Newfoundland historians who “merely repeated or amplified [Reeves’] ideas, which then passed into school textbooks and the popular imagination.”³⁸ Thomas’s account had no influence on the development of Newfoundland historiography as such, but his reliance on Reeves reinforces O’Flaherty’s argument that Reeves had a disproportionate influence on the writing of Newfoundland history.

AARON THOMAS'S FOUR NARRATIVE VOICES

As for Thomas's *History of Newfoundland* itself, most of the text is far from what modern readers would expect from such a title. At its heart, the *History* offers a narrative of a voyage to Newfoundland. The journal relates some details of the *Boston*'s stop in Torbay, an unexpected stay in the Scilly Islands due to unfavourable winds, and the Atlantic crossing. After leaving Newfoundland the *Boston* stopped briefly in Cadiz and Lisbon. Beyond that, the *History* offers contemplations on various subjects, numerous descriptive passages, and stories meant to shock, move, or entertain.

With these elements in mind — narrative, contemplation, description, and entertainment — a close reading of the text brings to light the four main narrative voices which Thomas employs to convey these elements. Each narrative voice is an individual persona which Thomas assumes. The Seaman provides factual, narrative sections, most frequently dealing with naval matters. The Sightseer describes plants, animals, buildings, people, weather, trivia, general information, history, and sometimes Newfoundland customs, with a tourist's interest in the new and exotic. The Sage offers the occasional moment of serious reflection, comments on matters political, religious, philosophical, or intellectual in nature, and has a tendency to moralize. The Storyteller offers anecdote after anecdote related in the most dramatic or comedic manner possible, and embroiders and exaggerates in the process (as any good storyteller must). A reading of Aaron Thomas's *History of Newfoundland* benefits from an awareness of these shifts in narration.³⁹

Thomas's portrait of himself as narrator, a picture which emerges in the Preface and first few pages, indirectly points to these four narrative voices. He variously claims to possess sufficient life experience to comment upon human nature (the Sage); to be renowned for his ribaldry and humour (the Storyteller); to put aside his melancholy in order to take in the sights and sounds of a new environment (the Sightseer); and to write by candlelight as the ship pitches and tosses on the waves (the Seaman) — although of course this is no ordinary seaman swinging in a hammock below decks, but rather a literate, articulate, and apparently well-educated individual.

AARON THOMAS AS STORYTELLER

Since most literary giants of the eighteenth century did not go to sea, in the words of Philip Edwards, "though we may protest against [Henry] Fielding calling [writers of sea-voyage accounts] Goths and Vandals, we have to accept that they were not great writers."⁴⁰ Though he may not be great, Aaron Thomas is an able and entertaining writer who possesses a definite knack for storytelling. In one amusing account, a young seaman with a habit of yelling "fire" in his sleep ends up becoming a

source of heat himself (able to cook an egg simply by holding it), after setting off a cannon he was leaning on and thereby gaining “sulphurous qualities.”⁴¹ The veracity of this particular incident is certainly in question, but as a story it offers a clever balance between the sailor’s misdemeanour and its eventual results. While in Ferryland, Aaron Thomas tricks an invalid Irishwoman into thinking he is a Catholic priest, and thereby succeeds in purchasing some fowl from her at a price lower than that which she originally sought. His glee at the success of this piece of duplicity permeates the entire anecdote.⁴²

One of the Storyteller’s best yarns is that of the lobsters in Portugal Cove. As lobsters are cleaned outside the public house, a veritable menagerie of animals arrives to eat the remains which are thrown their way. Someone takes it into his head to try a trick with the remaining live lobsters, and attaches a number of them to a white horse’s mane and tail, where they hang like decorations without disturbing the horse. The same process is next applied to a feisty cat’s tail, with more painful results. The frantic animal whips itself into a frenzy, and is somehow conveyed by the onlookers onto the horse’s back, where it promptly digs its claws into the horse’s flesh, causing the horse both pain and alarm. The onlookers derive any amount of amusement from the resulting mayhem.⁴³

Not all of the Storyteller’s tales are so wild, however. In one instance the Storyteller crafts an account of a visit to a dark underground cavern near Shoalstone Point (before the *Boston* has left England) into a story of the supernatural: as the cave narrows and darkens, Thomas thinks of “all my iniquity and evil acts at once,” and fancies he sees spooks and spirits ready to “strike revenge” for each one. By the end of the tale the cavern has become an “abyss of despair.”⁴⁴ The same skill which holds Thomas in good stead when he turns his pen to comedy and drama also works to great effect in creating and sustaining suspense: as the *Boston* enters Placentia Bay, the Storyteller relates in dramatic fashion the silence that settles over a vessel being navigated into a harbour or bay whose approach is littered with dangerous rocks or sandbanks.⁴⁵ In this case the Seaman and the Storyteller have merged to create a captivating account of a maritime reality.

The Storyteller voice seduces the gullible or inattentive by supplying the most interesting sections of the journal; certainly this is Aaron Thomas at his most entertaining. The “singular anecdotes” promised on the title page and scattered liberally throughout the *History* are largely responsible for the liveliness of the entire work, and occasionally beg to be believed. However, the tendency to exaggerate and embroider, to paint things in comic or dramatic light, and to shape the facts to suit the story, which is present in the most obviously tailored of Thomas’s stories, is potentially equally present in the less outrageous of his tales. Most of the Storyteller’s tales appear rooted in actual events and should not be dismissed outright as entirely untrue, but they should certainly be taken with the proverbial grain of salt.

AARON THOMAS AS SEAMAN

The Seaman voice, unlike that of the Storyteller, relates incidents in a straightforward manner, usually with relation to maritime matters. For instance, Thomas writes at one point: “Thursday 27th June. The *Boston* sailed from St John’s yesterday morning and after a pleasant run anchor’d in this Bay this afternoon. We are on a Coasting Cruize, Captain Morris meaning to viset St Pierre (lately taken from the French) and some of the principal out-harbours.”⁴⁶

In early September, while the *Boston* cruises at sea off Cape Spear, Thomas (as Seaman) relates the following:

The Latitude we are now in is about the same we were cruising in a month ago. From the circumstances of our falling in with a number of American Vessels and getting Newspapers from them we used, jocosely, to call these Latitudes our Coffee Room — here we come to read the News. Very few Vessels we boarded from Europe but what gave us Newspapers. As soon as a Sail was discover’d the cry on the Quarter Deck was “I see a Newsman Two Points to our Larboard Beam, I wonder if she is from Europe or America.”⁴⁷

Newfoundland may have been a far-flung outpost of the British Empire, but the seamen of the Royal Navy posted there got their news regardless.

The Seaman is probably the most accurate of the four principal narrative voices, which is no surprise, coming from a sailor. However, though his claims to an imperfect knowledge and a limited experience of maritime matters (having been at sea only a year before embarking for Newfoundland) may be false modesty, Thomas himself was not out swabbing decks and climbing the rigging, and seems to have lived a relatively comfortable existence. Though Thomas displays a thorough grasp of the rudiments of life in the Royal Navy at the close of the eighteenth century, he would later lament his lack of navigational training.⁴⁸ These qualifications aside, the occasions upon which the Seaman speaks are relatively few and tend to be accurate, since they primarily describe the activities of the *Boston* and its crew. Jean Murray’s research on the *Boston*’s log book supports this conclusion.

AARON THOMAS AS SAGE

The moralizing and reflective qualities of the Sage voice are apparent during an incident on the Scilly Isles. After seeing a sign on a building advertising the sale of good liquor at a nearby establishment, Thomas seizes the opportunity to denounce drunkenness and extol the virtues of temperance: “Now I am one of those beings who is persuaded that the immoderate use of strong Liquors is not only a firebrand but the very bane of society,” he declares. “For my part I consider a Dram Shop as a

Whirlpool which draws into its vortex everything that is vicious and infamous.”⁴⁹ The “Dissertation on friendship” promised on the frontispiece is another prominent example of the Sage voice. Although within the discussion of friendship there are several instances of the Storyteller working his craft, the overall tone of this section of the book is reflective, arising, as Thomas tells us, from watching a waterfall at “Titti Whitti” (Quidi Vidi).⁵⁰ “It is an indisputable fact, firmly established in my mind,” he writes, “that no Friendship can exist but what it has *Love* for its basis.”⁵¹

During a stay in Ferryland Thomas is entertained by a Mrs. Tree, whose American-born son has been pressed into service in the Royal Navy against his will. The conversation between Thomas and Mrs. Tree on this subject leads Thomas-the-Sage into “discanting on the Rights of Nations” in his journal, as he reflects on the vagaries of wartime and citizenship.⁵² In another reflective moment, Thomas describes the beauty of a deserted plantation near Ferryland in full August bloom, the abandoned house, store room, fish flake, garden, and burial ground presenting an attractive accompaniment to the rocky terrain, wild raspberries, flowering shrubs, picturesque dead tree, and sea. The scene prompts Thomas-the-Sage to comment that “I could not believe, while I looked on one side of the Picture, how it was that an industrious man could not live in this Paradise ... I thought had I a Partner whom I loved and have seen her here, it must be the Garden of Eden in perfection.” He goes on to add, however, that under several feet of snow, at the height of winter, it would be quite a different story.⁵³

The Sage is the voice of Thomas’s innermost thoughts, musings, and commentary upon various issues of a generally serious nature. One might expect that innermost thoughts would be honest, and the Sage’s comments do reflect upon the personality, ideas, and beliefs of Aaron Thomas. It is important to note, however, that they also reflect what Thomas considered an acceptable version of himself for his audience to encounter. A traveller who decided to include personal reflections in his account strove for four qualities, according to Charles L. Batten Jr.: “his opinions should not be too numerous, they should arise naturally out of the places described, they should be original, and they should not prejudicially conflict with accepted moral or political opinions.”⁵⁴ The Sage demonstrates these qualities throughout the *History of Newfoundland*.

AARON THOMAS AS SIGHTSEER

While the Sage ponders weighty matters, relatively little escapes the Sightseer’s watchful eyes and ears, as each new incident or piece of information is added to his store of experiences. For instance, Thomas compiles a list of “laughable” place names in Newfoundland, including on his short list Stinking Island, Horses Chops, Come By Chance, Tickle Harbour, Hearts Content, and many others.⁵⁵ Upon reaching the Grand Banks amid thick fog, Thomas discusses the shapes, sizes, origins, and

eventual demise of icebergs, something he has just now seen for himself for the first time.⁵⁶ Much later the Sightseer explains that “Every Harbour, every Bay and every Inlet you enter [in Newfoundland] it is surprizing to see the many fresh water streams that rush down with heedless violence to be swallowed up in the boundless Ocean.”⁵⁷ The Sightseer also notes the distinctive accent of native-born Newfoundlanders, who he claims “speak English but ... have a manner peculiar to themselves,” so that “every Out-harbour I viseted on conversing with the people, they would on answering my enquirys say — ‘Yes, *dat* is the way’ or ‘O No, we *tant* do it so; but *den* we do it the other way ...’”⁵⁸ The *History* is full of such observations.

Thomas-as-Sightseer is reasonably reliable, but not infallible. Thomas’s extensive descriptions of things seen and heard and experienced are unquestionably coloured by his proclivity for passing on what he takes for truth, and the modern reader may occasionally question some of this information. One reason for the inclusion of such tall tales is that they add sprightliness and wit to the *History*, attributes that the eighteenth century prized in both conversation and letter-writing. Furthermore, in cases relating to Newfoundland customs (for example, carrying frozen milk home in an apron after milking a cow in winter, or using a goose to clean out the chimney or stop a chimney fire),⁵⁹ Thomas himself may have been taken in by prevaricating Newfoundlanders enjoying a laugh at a curious outsider’s expense. As Percy G. Adams writes, in their quest for information about the world and its peoples, eighteenth-century Europeans were frequently rather gullible.⁶⁰

The index to the 1968 edition of Thomas’s journal corresponds to the pagination of the edited version, and is shaped by the publisher’s assumptions about the interests of modern readers. The index in the original manuscript is far more intriguing, because it indicates what Thomas himself considered to be of significance and potential interest to his readers. Thomas’s extensive index lists numerous subjects, including places, people, birds, fish, animals, emotions, and artifacts. Sample entries include: “Blubber. what it is 610,” “Boatswains Mate. an odd one 637,” “Anger. A vulcano occasion’d by it 649,” “Birds. Some stuffed ones 634,” “Penalty inflicted on masters of Vessels, carrying fishermen as Passengers from Newfoundland to America 586.” An entire page and a half is taken up by listings related to “Friendship.”⁶¹ The contents of Aaron Thomas’s index may all be categorized as relating to one of the four principal narrative voices identified in the text.

Clearly there is more at work in Aaron Thomas’s *History* than just history. Thomas’s habit of relating anecdotes or offering reflections in the process of describing places or events allows him to casually adopt various narrative voices and drop them just as quickly. Often a change in narrative voice is indicated by a comment such as “this brings to my recollection ...”⁶² or a new paragraph. Readers aware of these four voices and the types of information they tend to present should find it easier to negotiate Thomas’s *History of Newfoundland*.

TRAVEL LITERATURE, IMPERIALISM, AND THE
HISTORY OF NEWFOUNDLAND

The complexities of Aaron Thomas's *History of Newfoundland* emerge even more clearly when the *History* is considered in its eighteenth-century literary context. The novelist Wayne Johnston has described Aaron Thomas as an unselfconscious author:

Thomas wrote to his friend: "Do you know that, as I write these sheets, I fancy I am telling a tale? I sitting on one side and you on the other?"

These are among my favourite lines in all of literature. It is no longer possible for writers to write as unselfconsciously as that, to get halfway through telling a story before they even begin to suspect that they are telling one. His is the innocent amazement of a man who, in mid-composition, discovers he is writing and at the same time has no expectation of ever being read by anyone except his "friend."⁶³

Johnston is too trusting. Aaron Thomas was anything but unselfconscious as he composed his *History*. From start to finish his *History of Newfoundland* is consciously shaped in the tradition of the eighteenth-century travel literature to which he must have been exposed back in England. Given the enormous popularity of travel literature — true travel, imaginary voyages, and travel lies — and Thomas's fondness for reading, it is unimaginable that he was unaware of the conventions of travel writing.⁶⁴

From expensive volumes presented to King George III, to cheap editions sold door-to-door and carried in the public libraries of seaports, and irrespective of the literary standing of the authors, travel literature was universally popular in the eighteenth century.⁶⁵ The popularity of the genre has been attributed to Europeans' curiosity about foreign places, but also to the inherently satisfying nature of the journey narrative: departing, travelling, and returning home again.⁶⁶ An estimated 2,000 sea voyage narratives alone were published in English over the course of the eighteenth century and it has been suggested that the English "were the most copious producers of travel writings in the world" during this period.⁶⁷ And not only were true travel accounts well received, but explicitly fictional ones as well, such as the perennially popular *Robinson Crusoe*.⁶⁸

Whether arising out of conscious imitation or not, echoes of Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* are apparent in Aaron Thomas's description of a picnic on the shores of Little Miquelon. Writes Thomas, "While in this Boat this day it is surprizing how big I thought myself. Columbus, I fancy'd, was a mere Pedestrian to us. Here we were, giving names to Coves and Capes, which I could not but think belonged to some vast unknown region. Louis the Fourteenth was never so big, in his own mind, as I was."⁶⁹ The feeling of being a discoverer, a ruler, and a larger-than-life authority figure constitutes Thomas's version of a *Robinson Cru-*

soe experience. In this particular instance Aaron Thomas, experiencing the power of naming and discovering, might serve as a poster-boy for what Mary Louise Pratt calls “he whose imperial eyes passively look out and possess.”⁷⁰ Thomas also participated in his age’s quest to possess scientific information about the world, including in his manuscript a number of watercolours and information relating to the botany and zoology of Newfoundland. Naming, cataloguing, exploring, and commenting on foreign lands and peoples were inherent parts of British imperialism,⁷¹ and in his own small way Aaron Thomas participated in that process.

AARON THOMAS’S INTENDED AUDIENCE

The question of Thomas’s intended audience is an important one for understanding the *History*. The text itself begins with a direct address, in a conversational tone, to a “friend” also serving in the navy, and the title page concludes with the statement “Addressed to a Friend.” However, on two separate occasions within the first several pages of the *History* Thomas mentions “whoever” might read his account,⁷² and 71 pages later he indicates that his *History of Newfoundland* — at least in his own mind — fits firmly into an established tradition of other literature, especially travellers’ accounts: “It is the custom of modern writer and travellers to introduce Biographical Sketches of their underlings, come they under the denomination of Pilots, Guides, Pioneers or Guards etc. I shall follow the rule of my predecessors in order to make myself look big amongst those who have not the *good fortune* to know me.”⁷³

Letters, straightforward narratives, and diaries or journals were the three most popular forms for travel literature to take during the eighteenth century. The epistolary form in particular was very popular in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, though it was most often simply a device when used in travel accounts.⁷⁴ In 1783 Hugh Blair wrote that some letters, “Though they bear, in the title-page, a Letter to a Friend, after the first address, the Friend disappears, and we see that it is, in truth, the Public with whom the author corresponds.”⁷⁵ Aaron Thomas clearly expected an audience of more than one. Although Thomas’s “friend” (whether real or simply a device) does not completely disappear, Blair’s comments are still applicable to Thomas’s *History of Newfoundland*. At the very least he could expect his “letter” to be read aloud to friends and family of the recipient, or kept to be read and re-read in future.⁷⁶

Before 1900 most travel writers “were simply well-educated people who wanted to make money or a name for themselves or share their pleasure with others”⁷⁷ and it was entirely conceivable that Aaron Thomas’s *History of Newfoundland* might be published, given the demand for travel literature and the fact that Newfoundland remained a mysterious entity on the European periphery. Unlike the European Grand Tour or a journey to the West Indies, an exploration of Newfound-

land and its culture potentially offered British audiences something new and exotic. Like Scotland and Ireland, whose ruggedness and combination of closeness and strangeness appealed greatly to Britons from the 1760s onward,⁷⁸ Newfoundland was both known and unknown. A long-time British possession tied closely to Britain by the bonds of trade, it yet retained an aura of mystery and foreignness, its landscapes, people, and way of life different and fascinating.

During the eighteenth century, most travellers prepared for their own travels by reading guidebooks and previous travellers' accounts. This process was both reassuring and informative, but could also pressure travellers to offer something fresh and unique in their own travel writing, should they choose to undertake any.⁷⁹ The lack of existing accounts of Newfoundland comparable to Aaron Thomas's made for an open market. Of course it is impossible to know whether Thomas ever seriously considered publication, but it seems highly unlikely that he would not at least consider the possibility. And certainly he wrote his *History of Newfoundland* as if he had publication — or at least a broad dissemination among family and friends — in mind.

EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY LITERARY CONVENTIONS IN THE *HISTORY OF NEWFOUNDLAND*

In writing his *History of Newfoundland* as a letter to a friend, Aaron Thomas drew upon the conventions of eighteenth-century epistolary writing, conventions with which he was obviously familiar. As Bruce Redford writes, “the eighteenth-century familiar letter, like the eighteenth-century conversation, is a performance,” characterized by “constant adjustments of voice and mask, text and subtext.”⁸⁰ The four principal narrative voices identifiable in Aaron Thomas's *History of Newfoundland* fit into this framework of eighteenth-century epistolary writing: the Seaman, Sightseer, Storyteller, and Sage are masks that the narrator wears at different points in the text.

Literate eighteenth-century Europeans considered spontaneity the indication of candour, and the theory of epistolary writing throughout the century elevated the spontaneous above the planned, “nature” above “art.” The goal was to produce graceful, unstudied letters which combined sprightly wit with simplicity.⁸¹ Yet it required great skill to achieve this apparent simplicity. Celebrated figures including Jonathan Swift, Edmund Burke, William Cowper, and Horace Walpole claimed to express in their letters “thoughts just warm from the brain without any polishing or dress,” as Alexander Pope professed to do.⁸² Yet the letters of these literary and social elites were not artless; rather, their apparent spontaneity arose from the artistic exertions of their authors. Aaron Thomas was not as sophisticated as the English literary and social elite, but he draws upon the same conventions by emphasizing that writing his *History* is like having a conversation with his friend. Thomas's preface

exhibits similar attention to eighteenth-century literary conventions. Adopting the tone of (false) humility and unworthiness which may be found in the prefaces and dedications of untold numbers of books throughout the early modern period and well into the early nineteenth century, Thomas begins his preface with an apology for the multitudes of spelling and grammatical errors to be found throughout the body of the journal. These he excuses as the product of writing by candlelight on a moving ship, and to his lack of inclination to rewrite the volume. In this case, not only is Thomas asserting his *History* as an unstudied, spontaneous creation, but he is also attempting to sell it on the grounds of its “authenticity”: real seaman, real sailing ship, real spelling errors. Given the proliferation of so-called “travel lies” (that is, fictional travel accounts intended to be read as true) during the eighteenth century, assertions of authenticity were important.⁸³

Whether fact or fiction, travel writing was subject to discussion and debate over the course of the eighteenth century by English writers and critics weighing the relative merits of two approaches, as part of a larger debate over time and space. A newer movement privileged minute and exact particulars of each day, with the distinct possibility that any larger narrative would be overwhelmed and lost in detail, while the older tradition privileged critical and selective accounts focusing on experience and reflection, possibly to the point of ignoring chronological time.⁸⁴ At the same time a separate debate involved questions of self in the travel account. In the late eighteenth century a newer “sentimental” type focused on the inner world of thought and the subjective experience of the traveller. By contrast the older “scientific” type was information-based, and focused on the outer world.⁸⁵ The distinctions between the two sides of these two debates are visible in Aaron Thomas’s own writing. The *History of Newfoundland* follows a basic chronological progression, and includes some dates, but largely consists of reflections and descriptions that do not rely on a placement in time to make sense. The *History*’s discussion of friendship, and Thomas’s assertion that he considers himself “able to judge on the passions of the human mind” because his life experience has endowed him with the tools by which to analyze “the powers by which Mankind is actuated,”⁸⁶ are examples of this strong leaning toward contemplation and the subjective experience. In contrast, Aaron Thomas’s later *Caribbean Journal* leans toward the more chronological and scientific approaches, presenting a constant stream of dates and occurrences, and even indicating the times of day at which various events occurred.

Despite his claims to the contrary, the *History of Newfoundland* did not emerge fully formed from Aaron Thomas’s head: his claim not to have rewritten a single line is rooted in the eighteenth-century valorization of spontaneity as a mark of honesty and authenticity. He refers in the conclusion of the *History* to subjects he meant to elaborate on and details that he omitted, and says that his notes “which remain undigested” will be tucked away somewhere to “become a wreck and rot in everlasting oblivion” in contrast to the journal-letter which he suggests the friend will

soon receive.⁸⁷ Though Thomas may not have re-copied the text once it was on the page, the actual words on the page did not simply tumble there by accident.

A BRIEF COMPARISON OF THE *CARIBBEAN JOURNAL* AND THE *HISTORY OF NEWFOUNDLAND*

Aaron Thomas's *Caribbean Journal*, held at the University of Miami Archives, is a leather-bound volume of 374 pages, of which approximately 367 contain handwritten material. All but the last three entries (which deal with his illness and death) are written in Thomas's handwriting. The *Caribbean Journal* is a vastly different document from the *History of Newfoundland*. To begin with, it purports to be nothing but a journal. In fact, the first page of text is titled "Journal."⁸⁸ The volume contains charts, pen sketches, and transcriptions of letters to and from friends and family; it also reveals much more personal information than does the *History of Newfoundland*. Interestingly, the *Caribbean Journal* contains some letters written in a mixture of English and Portuguese, with the occasional lapse into French. Every so often a word will be spelled backwards.⁸⁹

Because Thomas died before he could re-shape the contents of the *Caribbean Journal*, it offers a convenient window into certain aspects of the *History of Newfoundland* which were especially shaped. For instance, the *Caribbean Journal* paints a picture of an Aaron Thomas who is kind, moral, well-educated, family-oriented, religious, and interested in people of all levels of society. This contrasts greatly with the immoral, ribald, irreligious picture Aaron Thomas paints of his own character in the opening of the *History of Newfoundland*.⁹⁰ Thomas could have changed considerably since 1794, but his declarations in the *History* might also have played to the well-established eighteenth-century stereotype of seamen as "less than civil," for the entertainment of his intended audience.⁹¹

Another conspicuous difference relates to life in the Royal Navy, in particular sex, drunkenness, and violence: the *Caribbean Journal* is full of all three, whereas there is relatively little violence and almost no sex or drunkenness in the *History of Newfoundland*. The *History*'s account of the Atlantic passage, for instance, is filled largely with tall tales and anecdotes that make life in the Royal Navy seem less difficult than it must have been. This is not to say that Thomas was not aware of the harsher aspects of life at sea. On the contrary, he had a very dark view of the regular seaman's life in the navy. Writing to his brother William, Thomas commended him on helping Aaron's nephew receive some navigational training in preparation for a career in the Royal Navy. Adding that he would never send his own child to sea without similar preparation, Thomas concluded that "— to be before the Mast is starvation and murder indeed."⁹² Because the *Caribbean Journal* focuses on the daily events of life aboard HMS *Lapwing*, this darker side of life in the navy is re-

vealed. The *History*, on the other hand, takes place largely on the island of Newfoundland, and revolves around Thomas's observations there.

The *Caribbean Journal* contains three types of entries: daily entries depicting life in the Royal Navy and anecdotes of people onboard and ashore; groupings of proverbs, truisms, and other thoughts which Thomas calls "Miscellaneous and Nautical Remarks";⁹³ and records of his personal correspondence. But although the *Caribbean Journal* contains these three major kinds of entries, it does not use the same distinctive narrative voices discernible in the *History of Newfoundland*. The Seaman, Sightseer, Storyteller, and Sage are present only as shadows of themselves: they lack the brilliance and polish they possess in the *History of Newfoundland*. The disparity between the Storyteller of the *History* and that of the *Journal* is most striking. Whereas the Storyteller's colourful and cleverly presented anecdotes enliven the entire *History of Newfoundland*, in the *Caribbean Journal* even the most unusual of circumstances or situations falls flat by comparison. Entries in the *Caribbean Journal* are frequently jumbled up, with letters and poems and other additions separating pages of what should be continuous narrative. Most entries read as if Thomas wrote things down as they came to him, and paragraphs are full of dashes and abrupt changes of subject. But at the same time, to each daily entry is appended the date, and frequently the time that events took place. The *History of Newfoundland* is much less concerned with dates.

It could be that Aaron Thomas simply changed his writing style over the years between the creation of the *History* and the *Journal*. Alternately, reading the *Caribbean Journal* suggests what the *History of Newfoundland* might have looked like originally. It was quite common during the eighteenth century for travellers to create a series of field notes, logbooks, or letters while travelling, then write up a journal (often with publication in mind) after the fact by drawing upon these notes. Such narratives were often edited or ghost-written in order to aid their commercial success.⁹⁴ Aaron Thomas's manuscript never saw publication during his lifetime, and the similarities between the *Caribbean Journal* and the *History of Newfoundland* discourage the idea that the *History* was ghost-written, but certainly he was following convention if he did in fact create the *History* from a series of notes kept during his trip to Newfoundland. In support of this idea are the four pages in his *Caribbean Journal* which Thomas titled "Detached memorandums, relating to Newfoundland, which I overlooked in my history of that country; compiled in 1794."⁹⁵

In sum, the principal difference between the *Caribbean Journal* and the *History of Newfoundland* is the lack of polish in the *Journal*. Though Thomas's *History* cannot compare to the brilliance of Henry Fielding's *Journal of a Voyage to Lisbon*, the fictional travels of Jonathan Swift's Gulliver, or even the exhaustive cataloguing of sights undertaken in Daniel Defoe's *Tour Thro' Great Britain*, in comparison to the raw material of the *Caribbean Journal* the *History of Newfoundland* emerges as a highly polished and consciously shaped piece of work.⁹⁶

CAN WE TRUST AARON THOMAS'S *HISTORY OF NEWFOUNDLAND*?

Even after placing Aaron Thomas's journal in its historical and literary contexts, the question remains: what are we to make of this journal? How reliable is Thomas as a historical source? Aaron Thomas was not the only eighteenth-century British seaman to create a record of his time in Newfoundland from the decks of a Royal Navy vessel: Joseph Banks in 1766, and Edward Chappell in 1813 are two who did likewise.⁹⁷ Banks's records are justly celebrated as the first extensive and properly documented scientific collections from the region, while Chappell's account includes footnotes and a no-nonsense approach to debunking some myths and misconceptions perpetrated by early writers and explorers of Newfoundland. If Banks viewed Newfoundland through the eyes of a scientist, and Chappell through the eyes of a well-read sailor, Aaron Thomas viewed it primarily as a sightseer and storyteller. The language of botany and zoology that pervades Banks's journal, and the predominant concern with maritime matters that informs Chappell's narrative each serve to enforce a sense of authority and reliability in these two accounts: they are largely unembellished recitations of observations or occurrences, and for that reason they secure our confidence and belief. Thomas's narrative, on the other hand, possesses a more lighthearted, conversational tone, and (as we have seen) liberally mixes philosophical reflections and amusing anecdotes along with maritime matters and descriptions of Newfoundland people, places, and things.

This conversational, entertaining quality is what makes Thomas's journal such an engaging and enjoyable read, and in truth the suspiciously implausible anecdotes which show Thomas at his most skilful as a storyteller are not nearly so numerous as are his more factually grounded observations. The same eye for detail which makes him a good storyteller also serves him well as an observer of Newfoundland and its people. For example, in his 1895 *A History of Newfoundland From the English, Colonial and Foreign Records*, D.W. Prowse included an extensive extract from Thomas's journal detailing a dinner party for Royal Navy officers held on St. Pierre, as a footnote to Prowse's discussion of the British seizure of St. Pierre and Miquelon during the French Revolutionary War.⁹⁸ Much more recently, Thomas's lengthy description of the murder of Lieutenant Lawry and subsequent executions in St. John's, and his depiction of the (in his view obsolete) fishing admiral system, appear in Jerry Bannister's *The Rule of the Admirals: Law, Custom, and Naval Government in Newfoundland, 1699-1832*, while Thomas's enthusiastic appraisal of the invigorating qualities of spruce beer is cited in Kevin Major's *As Near To Heaven By Sea: A History of Newfoundland and Labrador*.⁹⁹

Thomas is not entirely unknown outside the academic world, either. Bunny Crumpacker's new work *The Sex Life of Food: When Body and Soul Meet to Eat* mentions Aaron Thomas's comments on the tastiness of Newfoundland dog meat, while many websites for dog lovers quote Thomas's broader discussion of Newfoundland dogs.¹⁰⁰ Thomas's notice of a distinctive Newfoundland accent is incor-

porated into the introduction to the *Dictionary of Newfoundland English*, and his mention of an encounter between his Irish guide and some wolves is included in John Maunder's 1982 article on the Newfoundland Wolf.¹⁰¹

Aaron Thomas writes believably on a range of other subjects. He displays a tolerant, if sometimes condescending, attitude toward the large Irish population on the island in his personal encounters with them, and describes the ever-increasing economic dependence on fish merchants which kept many from realizing the dreams of improved fortune which brought them to the island in the first place.¹⁰² Conversely, he displays little sympathy for the two Irishmen executed for their part in the murder of the *Boston's* Lieutenant Lawry (which took place in the context of a mob attempt to rescue a number of Irish inhabitants who had been pressed for naval service), stating that they "most deservedly met their deserts."¹⁰³ Women feature prominently in many of his encounters with local inhabitants, and although most appear variously as ignorant, ill-tempered, or obstinate, occasionally they are portrayed as witty, shrewd, or pleasant.¹⁰⁴ At various points Thomas discusses aspects of the Newfoundland diet, writing at some length on the catching, processing, and uses of cod, squid, lobster, and capelin, and mentioning the high cost of provisions on the island, the short growing season, and the vagaries of keeping livestock. He also discusses various berries available and types of plants used for tea, and (as mentioned) sings the praises of spruce beer.¹⁰⁵ Thomas comments on the lack of churches, clergy, and consecrated burial grounds in most outports, and Newfoundlanders' improvised response to this situation;¹⁰⁶ he also explains the popular winter pastime of "tilting" on a frozen lake inland from St. John's.¹⁰⁷ He describes from personal experience Aquafort, Capelin Bay (Calvert), Ferryland, Little Miquelon, Placentia, Portugal Cove, Quidi Vidi, St. Pierre, St. John's, and Torbay, and from information gleaned from others, Funk Island and Labrador.¹⁰⁸ Although Aaron Thomas never wintered in Newfoundland himself, he gathered much information about the severity of winter there, and the seriousness of frost-bite.¹⁰⁹

While the *Boston* cruised at sea, Thomas used the time to write an outline of the history and development of Newfoundland, its population, geography, flora and fauna, and aboriginal inhabitants — for all of which he claims to have "consulted the best Authoritys extant."¹¹⁰ Thomas also provides a surprisingly sympathetic description of the expelled French inhabitants of St. Pierre and Miquelon.¹¹¹ His description of the tense silence that prevails on deck when a ship navigates carefully into a harbour is only one instance of many in which Thomas contributes to our understanding of life in the Royal Navy.¹¹² Clearly Aaron Thomas's predilection for telling his stories in an engaging fashion should not be taken as a sign that everything he writes is untrue or exaggerated. On the contrary, he offers a wealth of information about Newfoundland and life in the Royal Navy circa 1794.

CONCLUSION

Eighteenth-century travel accounts geared toward a general readership aimed at “blending pleasure with instruction in order to achieve an artistically pleasing experience.”¹¹³ Without question, Aaron Thomas’s *History of Newfoundland* manages to blend the educational and the entertaining, in large part due to his use of four different narrative voices: the Seaman, who provides factual, specific, and day-to-day observations one would expect from a sailor; the Sightseer, who offers descriptive material ranging from plants and animals to the weather and customs of Newfoundland; the Sage, who sporadically interjects serious reflections of an intellectual or moral nature; and the Storyteller, who enlivens the whole with dramatic and comedic anecdotes.

Considered in the broader context of eighteenth-century travel writing, it becomes clear that Aaron Thomas’s *History of Newfoundland* conforms to the literary conventions of the time. Not only did Thomas mix elements of epistolary writing with those of the standard journal and travel log, but he drew on contemporary literary debates to appeal to a readership wider than that of the friend to whom he claimed to be writing. The degree to which Thomas revised and consciously shaped his *History of Newfoundland* becomes apparent when one compares the *History* with Thomas’s *Caribbean Journal*. This journal of Thomas’s time in the West Indies lacks the four narrative voices Thomas used with such effect in his Newfoundland account, and consists of a stream of unadorned observations and incidents, correspondence, and snippets of research. It seems reasonable to suggest that this is what the *History of Newfoundland* originally looked like. Aaron Thomas was by no means the first traveller to re-shape his experiences to fit convention: during the eighteenth century published travel accounts were almost always touched up, altered, and edited versions of original material. Authors used their diaries, notes, guidebooks, friends’ recollections, their own memories, and published histories in order to re-construct their journeys. As they did so, many submitted at least in part to the urge to improve the truth.¹¹⁴ As the Storyteller, Aaron Thomas indulges this urge in his *History of Newfoundland*; as the Sage, Sightseer, and Seaman, he sticks much closer to the facts as he knew them.

It requires a certain degree of flexibility to navigate the various literary forms and conventions and sometimes indistinct boundaries between so-called “fact” and “fiction” found in the *History of Newfoundland*. However, armed with a knowledge of Thomas’s four literary masks, readers who persevere will find that the *History* has much to tell them about Newfoundland and the Royal Navy, and even about Aaron Thomas himself, at the close of the eighteenth century. Thomas’s *History of Newfoundland* is a lively and informative work about a unique corner of the British Empire, written by an Englishman who participated in two of his age’s great obsessions: travel, and travel writing. It certainly deserves more attention than it has thus far received.

Acknowledgement

Special thanks to Dr. Jerry Bannister for suggesting I look at the Aaron Thomas journal, to Dr. Ian Steele for his guidance and encouragement throughout the development of this paper, and especially to Miss Jean Murray for her kind hospitality and for allowing me to see the manuscript journal while I was in St. John's.

Notes

¹Aaron Thomas, *History of Newfoundland* (1794), 45. The account was published as *The Newfoundland Journal of Aaron Thomas, 1794*, ed. Jean M. Murray (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1968), but Thomas entitled it *History of Newfoundland*. All references to the account itself will be referred to hereafter as *History of Newfoundland* or *History*, with page references corresponding to Murray's published version. All quotations retain their idiosyncratic spellings and grammar.

²Edward Chappell, *Voyage of His Majesty's Ship Rosamund to Newfoundland and the Southern Coast of Labrador, of Which Countries No Account Has Been Published By Any British Traveller Since the Reign of Queen Elizabeth* (London: printed for J. Mawman, 1818), i. Though the title mentions Elizabeth I, the introduction cites the reign of James I as the date of the last voyager's account of Newfoundland.

³Rainer K. Baehe, ed., *Outrageous Seas: Shipwreck and Survival in the Waters Off Newfoundland, 1583-1893* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press for Carleton University, 1999), 14.

⁴See Mary Baine Campbell, "Travel Writing and Its Theory" [chapter 15], *The Cambridge Companion to Travel Writing*, ed. Peter Hulme and Tim Youngs (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

⁵This article does not attempt to delineate every reliable and unreliable aspect of the *History*. Instead, it provides some examples so that others may explore the *History* themselves.

⁶Jean Murray, "Introduction" to *The Newfoundland Journal of Aaron Thomas, 1794* (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1968), xiii, xix-xx.

⁷Murray, "Introduction," xii.

⁸Although he never calls himself a ship's purser, in both the Newfoundland and Caribbean accounts Aaron Thomas describes himself undertaking tasks traditionally associated with the duties of the purser, including procuring supplies onshore. See N.A.M. Rodger, *The Wooden World: An Anatomy of the Georgian Navy* (London: Collins, 1986), 87-98.

⁹Thomas mentions in his 1798-1799 journal that he kept another journal between the Newfoundland account and this Caribbean one, but nothing is known about it.

¹⁰"Introduction" to "Aaron Thomas: The Caribbean Journal of a Royal Navy Seaman, 1798-1799," curated by Elizabeth H. Locke and William E. Brown Jr., Coral Gables, FL: University of Miami Archives and Special Collections of the Otto G. Richter Library, 30 April 1999. <<http://www.library.miami.edu/archives/Thomas/introduction.html>> (accessed 22 November 2005).

¹¹James Murray, "History of Newfoundland," *The Centenary Magazine* 1.3 (June 1896), 20.

¹²Murray, "Introduction," viii. An excerpt from the *History* had previously appeared in D.W. Prowse, *A History of Newfoundland from the English, Colonial and Foreign Records* (London: Macmillan, 1896; reprint, 1972). Presumably the well-connected Judge Prowse learned of the manuscript's existence through personal contact with the Murray family.

¹³Murray, "Introduction," viii.

¹⁴Thomas, *History of Newfoundland*, 3.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, 3.

¹⁶Warren Tute, *The True Glory: The Story of the Royal Navy Over a Thousand Years* (London: Macdonald & Co., 1983), 90.

¹⁷Richard Harding, *The Evolution of the Sailing Navy, 1509-1815* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995), 136-137.

¹⁸John J. Mannion, ed., *The Peopling of Newfoundland: Essays in Historical Geography* (St. John's: Memorial University of Newfoundland, Institute of Social and Economic Research, 1977), 1, 6.

¹⁹A.M. Lysaght, *Joseph Banks in Newfoundland and Labrador, 1766: His Diary, Manuscripts and Collections* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), 146. Thomas was aware, however, that women were greatly outnumbered by men. The ratio apparently did not strike him as untoward. See the population figures for 1787 in Thomas, *History of Newfoundland*, 174. Note: the figures Thomas includes in his account are actually those for 1789, and come from the returns of the Newfoundland fishing admirals, as provided to the Board of Trade in London. Not only does he cite the wrong year, but Thomas also misquotes several of the figures. "A State of the Newfoundland Fishery in the Years 1699, 1700, 1714, 1715, 1716, 1749, 1750, 1751, 1764, 1765, 1766, 1767, 1768, 1769, 1770, 1771, 1772, 1773, 1774, 1784, 1785, 1786, 1787, 1788, 1789, 1790 and 1791; taken from the Returns of the Admirals who commanded on that station," Public Record Office, Colonial Office 194, vol. 2; 23-24.

²⁰W. Gordon Handcock, *Soe longe as there comes no women: Origins of English Settlement in Newfoundland* (Milton, ON: Global Heritage Press, 2003), 95.

²¹C. Grant Head, *Eighteenth Century Newfoundland: A Geographer's Perspective* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1976), 91.

²²Handcock, 89.

²³Jerry Bannister, *The Rule of the Admirals: Law, Custom and Naval Government in Newfoundland, 1699-1832* (Toronto: Osgoode Society for Canadian Legal History / University of Toronto Press, 2003), chap. 6. Bannister notes that in Newfoundland as in Georgian England, "the Irish received a disproportionately harsh share of capital punishment" (215). For Thomas's description of the death of Lieutenant Lawry and subsequent executions, see Thomas, *History of Newfoundland*, 178-180.

²⁴John J. Mannion, "Old World Antecedents, New World Adaptations: Inistioge (Co. Kilkenny) Immigrants in Newfoundland," *Newfoundland Studies* 5 (1989), 121. Although single males were predominant, almost one-third of immigrants (from Inistioge at least) were women.

²⁵Head, 217; Patrick O'Flaherty, *Old Newfoundland: A History to 1843* (St. John's: Long Beach Press, 1999), 107.

²⁶Head, 230. Judge Reeves asserted much the same thing in his writings and reports to London of 1791 and 1793. John Reeves, *History of the Government of the Island of Newfoundland* (London: printed for J. Sewell, J. Debrett & J. Downes, 1793; reprint, 1967), 145.

²⁷Sean T. Cadigan, *Hope and Deception in Conception Bay: Merchant-Settler Relations in Newfoundland, 1785-1855* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995), 14-15.

²⁸Jerry Bannister, "The Naval State in Newfoundland, 1749-1791," *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association* N.S. 11 (2000), 19.

²⁹Many of the earliest accounts of Newfoundland and Labrador are excerpted in Peter Neary and Patrick O'Flaherty, eds., *By Great Waters: A Newfoundland and Labrador Anthology* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1974).

³⁰This body of literature includes: John Ward Dean, ed., *Captain John Mason, the founder of New Hampshire, including his tract on Newfoundland, 1620; the American Charters in which he was a grantee; with letters and other historical documents* (Boston: the Prince Society, 1887); Captain Richard Whitbourne, *A Discourse containing a loving invitation both honourable and profitable to all such as shall be adventurers, either in person, or purse, for the advancement of his Majesties most hopefull Plantation in the New-found-land, lately undertaken* (London: Felix Kyngston, 1622); Captain Richard Whitbourne, *A discourse and discovery of New-found-land, with many reasons to proove how worthy and benefiiciall a Plantation may there be made, after a better manner than it was; together with the laying open of certaine enormities and abuses committed by some that trade to that countrey, and the means laid down for reformation thereof* (London: Felix Kyngston, 1623); Sir Richard Whitbourne, *Westward hoe for Avalon in the New-found-land, As Described by Captain Richard Whitbourne, of Exmouth, Devon, 1622*, ed. T. Whitburn (London: Sampson Low, Son, and Marston, 1870); Captain Griffith Williams, *An Account of the Island of Newfoundland, With the Nature of its Trade, And Method of carrying on the Fishery. With Reasons for the great Decrease of that most valuable Branch of the Trade*, with Captain Thomas Cole, *The State of the Newfoundland Fishery, with a Plan Proposed to the Administration the 12th of May, 1761, to exclude the French from that Trade* (London: printed by Captain Thomas Cole, 1765).

³¹John Oldmixon, *The History of Newfoundland: containing an account of its discovery, settlement, encrease, inhabitants, climate, soil, product, trade, and present state* (n.p., 1741), and Reeves, *History of the Government of the Island of Newfoundland*.

³²Thomas, *History of Newfoundland*, 1.

³³*Ibid.*, 3-4.

³⁴Nigel Leask, *Curiosity and the Aesthetics of Travel Writing, 1770-1840: "From an Antique Land"* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 7.

³⁵Thomas, *History of Newfoundland*, 29.

³⁶W.H. Whiteley, "James Cook and British Policy in the Newfoundland Fisheries, 1763-7," *Canadian Historical Review* 54 (1973), 269.

³⁷To compare the two accounts see Reeves, 34-46, and Thomas, *History of Newfoundland*, 172. As previously noted with regard to Newfoundland population figures, Thomas was not given to accuracy with dates when drawing his information from outside sources.

³⁸Patrick O'Flaherty, *The Rock Observed: Studies in the Literature of Newfoundland* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1979), 54.

³⁹I am mindful of Patrick O'Flaherty's admonition that "any writer who summarily reduces the complexity of Newfoundland's past or present to a ready formula must be re-

garded with great suspicion” (*The Rock Observed*, 186), and that literature is included in this as well. However, I believe that this particular way of approaching Aaron Thomas’s *History of Newfoundland* explores rather than reduces that complexity.

⁴⁰Philip Edwards, *The Story of the Voyage: Sea-Narratives in Eighteenth-Century England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 220.

⁴¹Thomas, *History of Newfoundland*, 47-49.

⁴²*Ibid.*, 114-116.

⁴³*Ibid.*, 67.

⁴⁴*Ibid.*, 12.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*, 98-99.

⁴⁶*Ibid.*, 77.

⁴⁷*Ibid.*, 154.

⁴⁸Aaron Thomas to William Thomas, 29 July 1799, in Aaron Thomas, “Aaron Thomas: The Caribbean Journal of a Royal Navy Seaman, 1798-1799,” curated by Elizabeth H. Locke and William E. Brown Jr., Coral Gables, FL: University of Miami Archives and Special Collections of the Otto G. Richter Library, 30 April 1999. <<http://www.library.miami.edu/archives/Thomas/introduction.html>> (accessed 22 November 2005), 346.

⁴⁹Thomas, *History of Newfoundland*, 21.

⁵⁰*Ibid.*, 146. Here Thomas is following the convention of presenting reflective commentary only as it arises naturally out of his travels. See Charles L. Batten Jr., *Pleasurable Instruction: Form and Convention in Eighteenth-Century Travel Literature* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), 110.

⁵¹Thomas, *History of Newfoundland*, 147.

⁵²*Ibid.*, 110-112.

⁵³*Ibid.*, 116-119.

⁵⁴Batten, 110.

⁵⁵Thomas, *History of Newfoundland*, 126.

⁵⁶*Ibid.*, 45-47.

⁵⁷*Ibid.*, 123.

⁵⁸*Ibid.*, 137.

⁵⁹*Ibid.*, 187 (milking), 157 (geese).

⁶⁰Percy G. Adams, *Travelers and Travel Liars 1660-1800* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1962), viii.

⁶¹The index is found on the back pages of the original manuscript journal.

⁶²Thomas, *History of Newfoundland*, 36.

⁶³Michael Ondaatje, Michael Redhill, Esta Spalding, and Linda Spalding, eds., *Lost Classics* (Toronto: Alfred A. Knopf Canada, 2000), 144-145. The reference is to Thomas, *History of Newfoundland*, 54.

⁶⁴“Books are truly perishable things. What numbers have I spoiled since I came afloat. This day I sent ashore to Mrs. Wainrights, the history of Corsica, printed in Italian in Naples. My Turkish & Italian grammar Horaces Odes, and several other Books, all spoiled by Salt Water getting into the chest in which they were kept.” Thomas, “Caribbean Journal,” 21.

⁶⁵Percy G. Adams, ed., *Travel Literature Through The Ages: An Anthology* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1988), xix.

⁶⁶Casey Blanton, *Travel Writing: The Self and The World* (New York: Simon & Schuster Macmillan, 1997), 2.

⁶⁷Edwards, 1-2; Jean Viviès, *English Travel Narratives in the Eighteenth Century: Exploring Genres*, trans. Claire Davison (Aldershot, Hants, UK: Ashgate, 2002), 24.

⁶⁸See Henry Clinton Hutchins, *Robinson Crusoe and Its Printing, 1719-1731: A Bibliographical Study* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1925).

⁶⁹Thomas, *History of Newfoundland*, 88. Compare this to several passages in *Robinson Crusoe*: “to think that this was all my own, that I was King and Lord of all this Country indefeasibly, and had a Right of Possession” (73); “I was Lord of the whole Manor; or if I pleas’d I might call myself King, or Emperor over the whole Country which I had Possession of. There were no Rivals. I had not Competitor, none to dispute Sovereignty or Command with me” (94); “the whole Country was my own meer Property; so that I had an undoubted Right of Dominion” (174). The preceding quotations are drawn from Daniel Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe*, ed. Michael Shinagel (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1994).

⁷⁰Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London: Routledge, 1992), 7.

⁷¹Peter Hulme and Tim Youngs, “Introduction” to *The Cambridge Companion to Travel Writing*, ed. Peter Hulme and Tim Youngs (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 8.

⁷²The two direct references to an audience of more than one are: “*whoever* looks on the inside [of this book]” (4), and “*whoever* casts their Eye on [the book], I suspect will differ in opinion from me” (5), Thomas, *History of Newfoundland*.

⁷³*Ibid.*, 71-72.

⁷⁴Adams, *Through The Ages*, xxi-xxii.

⁷⁵Hugh Blair, *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres*, with an Introductory Essay by Rev. Thomas Dale (London: William Tegg, 1865), 444.

⁷⁶Herbert Davis, “The Correspondence of the Augustans,” *The Familiar Letter in the Eighteenth Century*, ed. Howard Anderson, Philip B. Daghljan, and Irvin Ehrenpreis (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1966), 9.

⁷⁷Adams, *Through The Ages*, xvi.

⁷⁸Glenn Hooper, “The Isles/Ireland: The Wilder Shore,” *The Cambridge Companion to Travel Writing*, ed. Peter Hulme and Tim Youngs (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 174, 176-180.

⁷⁹James Duncan and Derek Gregory, eds., *Writes of Passage: Reading Travel Writing* (London: Routledge, 1999), 7.

⁸⁰Redford, 2.

⁸¹Blair, 2, 443-444.

⁸²Alexander Pope, qtd. in Howard Anderson and Irvin Ehrenpreis, “The Familiar Letter in the Eighteenth Century: Some Generalizations,” *The Familiar Letter in the Eighteenth Century*, ed. Howard Anderson, Philip B. Daghljan, and Irvin Ehrenpreis (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1966), 272.

⁸³The authenticity of Thomas’s account has recently been bolstered by the University of Miami’s acquisition of Aaron Thomas’s journal from his time in the West Indies. In this journal he copied letters to and from family members which Jean Murray in the 1960s had already traced to Aaron Thomas through research in English parish records. His death in the West Indies in 1799 also supports the journals’ claims to authenticity.

⁸⁴Stuart Sherman, *Telling Time: Clocks, Diaries, and English Diurnal Form, 1660-1785* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), chap. 5-6.

⁸⁵Blanton, 13.

⁸⁶Thomas, *History of Newfoundland*, 5.

⁸⁷*Ibid.*, 205.

⁸⁸“Yesterday I filled up my last Journal Book,” writes Thomas, “consisting of 483 pages. It was begun the 24th of November 1796. This day I have entered upon another God only know wither I shall live to fill it up.” Thomas, “Caribbean Journal,” 2.

⁸⁹For example “Caribbean Journal,” 318. As the curators write, “Whether Thomas does this in an effort to disguise the content of the letters or to stave off boredom will remain unknown.” “Introduction” to “Caribbean Journal.”

⁹⁰Thomas, *History of Newfoundland*, 4.

⁹¹Jonathan Lamb, *Preserving the Self in the South Seas 1680-1840* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 114.

⁹²Aaron Thomas to William Thomas, 29 July 1799, in Thomas, “Caribbean Journal,” 346.

⁹³“Introduction” to “Caribbean Journal.”

⁹⁴Elizabeth Vibert, *Traders’ Tales: Narratives of Cultural Encounters in the Columbia Plateau 1807-1846* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1997), 34.

⁹⁵“Introduction” to “Caribbean Journal.” These four pages are not included in the transcription posted on the University of Miami Library’s website, but are found in the original manuscript of the journal, 22-25.

⁹⁶Henry Fielding, *The Journal of a Voyage to Lisbon*, ed. Harold E. Pagliaro (New York: Nardon Press, 1963); Daniel Defoe, *A Tour Thro’ Great Britain*, 4 vol., ed. Samuel Richardson (New York: Garland Publishing, 1975); Jonathan Swift, *Gulliver’s Travels*, ed. Christopher Fox (Boston: Bedford Books of St. Martin’s Press, 1995).

⁹⁷Lysaght, *Joseph Banks in Newfoundland and Labrador*; Chappell, *Voyage of His Majesty’s Ship Rosamund*.

⁹⁸Prowse, 574-575; Thomas, *History of Newfoundland*, 91-93.

⁹⁹Bannister, *The Rule of the Admirals*, 213, 219, 179; Thomas, *History of Newfoundland*, 178-180; Kevin Major, *As Near To Heaven By Sea: A History of Newfoundland & Labrador* (Toronto: Penguin Canada, 2001), 164-165; Thomas, *History of Newfoundland*, 59-62.

¹⁰⁰Bunny Crumacker, *The Sex Life of Food: When Body and Soul Meet to Eat* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2006), chap. 1. <<http://btobsearch.Barnesandnoble.com/booksearch/isbninquiry.asp?z=y&btob=Y&ean=9780312342074&displayonly=CHP#CHP>> (accessed 26 April 2006). For Newfoundland dogs, see, for example, the website of The Newfoundland Club of America, which features excerpts from Aaron Thomas on its “The Newfoundland in Literature and History” page: <http://www.newfdogclub.org/Main_Sub_Pages/ws04_lit_hist.htm> (accessed 26 April 2006). Thomas, *History of Newfoundland*, 52-53, 174.

¹⁰¹G.M. Story, W.J. Kirwin, and J.D.A. Widdowson, “Introduction,” to *Dictionary of Newfoundland English*, 2nd ed. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999), 2, <<http://www.heritage.nf.ca/dictionary/introp2.html>> (accessed 26 April 2006). Thomas, *History of Newfoundland*, 137. John E. Maunder, “Museum Notes — The Newfoundland World,” [originally in *The Osprey* 13.2 (June 1982): 36-49] <<http://www.therooms.ca/museum/mnotes8.asp>> (accessed 26 April 2006). Thomas, *History of Newfoundland*, 59.

¹⁰²Thomas, *History of Newfoundland*, 137, 72.

¹⁰³Ibid., 180.

¹⁰⁴Ibid., 64-66, 105-106, 108-116, 155-156.

¹⁰⁵Ibid., 181-182 (cod and squid), 66-69 (lobster), 78-81 (capelin), 175 (provisions), 74-75 (growing season), 155-157 (livestock), 140-143 (berries and plants), 59-62 (spruce beer).

¹⁰⁶Ibid., 106-107.

¹⁰⁷Ibid., 56-58.

¹⁰⁸Ibid., 108-110 (Aquafort), 77-78, 110-114 (Capelin Bay and Ferryland), 84-90 (Little Miquelon), 97-98 (Placentia), 70-71 (Portugal Cove), 145-146 (Quidi Vidi), 83 (St. Pierre), 51, 184 (St. John's), 106 (Torbay), 126-128 (Funk Island), 136 (Labrador).

¹⁰⁹Ibid., 120, 124-125, 158, 180.

¹¹⁰Thomas, *History*, 121. See chap. 10 and 12 for this overview of Newfoundland history, geography, and demography, which was drawn at least in part from Reeves and the returns of the Newfoundland fishing admirals for 1789.

¹¹¹Ibid., 94-95.

¹¹²Ibid., 98-99.

¹¹³Batten, 25.

¹¹⁴Adams, *Travelers and Travel Liars*, 132.