

Reminiscences of J.P. Howley: Selected years. W.J. Kirwin, G.M. Story† and Patrick A. O’Flaherty (eds.). With an introduction by Patrick A. O’Flaherty. “The Publications of the Champlain Society LX.” General editor, Robert Craig Brown. Limited distribution, 925 copies. i-lxxxix, 1-438, (i) - (xxii); Pref.; Intro.; Glossary; Howley’s Intro.; Bibliog., Index; Illustr.; Maps. Toronto: The Champlain Society, 1997. \$65.00, cloth, ISBN 0-9693425-8-6.

ROBIN RIDDIHOUGH

“I WAS IN MY ELEMENT. The great novelty of my new departure, the joy of prospective exploration of the interior what I always yearned for, the freedom from the trammels of city life, and the intense desire to learn something of the great unknown interior of our island, a thing I often longed for, took complete possession of me.” So wrote James Howley five days after his twenty-first birthday, on his first day of employment by the Geological Survey of Newfoundland, July 11, 1868. He was traveling on a horse-drawn wagon to begin exploration in the St. Mary’s Bay area of southeastern Newfoundland.

Howley was born on a farm at Mount Cashel and his enthusiasm for the outdoors never left him. Under Alexander Murray he learned the science and techniques of geology and surveying and was eventually appointed Director of Surveys in 1898. He left the post in 1909 and died in 1918. He wrote extensively on a range of subjects from geography, local history and anthropology to ornithology and agriculture. He believed intensely in the future and potential of his native island.

His reminiscences are a day by day account of his work with the Geological Survey reconstructed by him from his field notes, diaries and memory. They are a daily account of what he felt was important to pass on to later generations and as

such, tell the reader a considerable amount about how he wished to be remembered although perhaps less about his personality and character.

One of Howley's contemporaries, Oscar Wilde, once wrote of a book that "it is a very serious volume. It has taken four people to write it, and even to read it requires assistance." This could well apply to the present volume, started by Howley himself then edited by Story and Kirwin from 1986 and continued after Story's death by O'Flaherty. The Introduction by O'Flaherty runs for 66 pages and provides not only a historical and political context to Howley's life but a commentary on the *Reminiscences*, Howley's actions and opinions. This is well written and indeed becomes so interesting that having completed it, the novelty and discovery of the subsequent 390 pages of *Reminiscences* were a little dulled. It might have been preferable to let the reader find his/her own insights into Howley's mind rather than have some of the best bits extracted.

Once started on the *Reminiscences* themselves, there is no doubt that assistance is required. Although a series of clear fold-out maps is provided throughout the volume there is much inevitable flipping back and forth as you follow Howley from outport to outport and lake to lake. A large map of Newfoundland laid on the table beneath the book proves to be the only sure way to get a feel for the magnitude of the task that Howley was undertaking and the dogged perseverance against the elements that was required.

Apart from the maps there are only six illustrations in the volume. Given that most readers will not have an encyclopaedic knowledge of some of the areas that Howley was exploring, more of Howley's photographs or sketches (perhaps even recent pictures of the same areas) would have been of help.

Despite this, armed with a good map, the *Reminiscences* prove to be a fascinating, if slow, journey around the shores and across the interior of Newfoundland. Howley's approach to geology and food seemed to involve a fair amount of gunpowder — either for "blowing out" geological exposures or in his incessant hunt for deer. On balance equal parts of his reminiscences seem to be devoted to deer and game hunting (even taking pot shots at seals and porpoises) and to geology or surveying. This may be an artifact of his own editing of his field notes. Considering the flies, rain, wind and heat about which he continually complains, remarks such as "It is really astonishing that at this late date (1871) we should be so ignorant of the vast interior country" have their own irony. Some things are also puzzling. In particular an episode in 1882 when he left camp to look for deer, became completely lost for three days, and only found his way back almost by accident. He does not blame himself for not carrying a compass but shortly thereafter seems to expect his men to do so. There are also some interesting sociological undertones to his efforts to introduce rigorous surveying lines into areas in southwestern Newfoundland where the settlers had already moved in and started farming ("I am from St. John's and I am here to help!")

On the geological side he spends many fruitless weeks trying to track down coal seams around St. Georges Bay, and find a few flakes of gold in the mining operations at the head of White Bay. The oil operation north of Bonne Bay that he visits in 1896 seemed to be a paying proposition at a production rate of less than one barrel per day. He even uses some of the oil to rub the knee joint that he injured earlier that season scrambling around the Port au Port asbestos mine. "It seemed to do it good" he comments.

There are considerable challenges in making such a voluminous and detailed series of journals and reminiscences accessible to a modern reader. Kirwin, Story and O'Flaherty, and of course Howley, are to be commended for their scholarship and dedication in bringing the wilds of Newfoundland in the late nineteenth century to vivid life. Through the daily observations of a man who clearly had a limitless curiosity and enthusiasm when it came to his native island, it is possible to glimpse something of why Newfoundland and its inhabitants have such a unique and striking character.

With the publication of this volume it is to be hoped that someone might consider the next step of taking sections of Howley's *Reminiscences*, combining them with modern maps and photographs and challenging the contemporary hiker or tourist to consider what progress or otherwise one hundred years have achieved.