

REVIEWS

People of the Bays and Headlands: Anthropological History and the Fate of Communities in Unknown Labrador. John C. Kennedy. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995. xxxi, 296 p., maps, bib., photos, \$50.00, cloth (ISBN 0-8020-0646-9); \$22.95, softcover (ISBN 0-8020-7600-9).

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JOHN KENNEDY HAS WRITTEN a fine anthropological history of the “unknown Labrador,” that 300 km stretch of coast south of Groswater Bay with a population of just under three thousand people. The task of historical reconstruction proved difficult for this region because of the scarcity of written records. Nevertheless, archival research and field work in various communities —including the seasonal settlements of Lodge Bay and Cape Charles — in the period from the late 1970s to the early 1990s, have allowed Kennedy to tell a very interesting and important story. This study could provide a model for the kind of detailed regional historical study that is so badly needed in this province.

The region in question has a long, often turbulent, pre-European and post-European settlement history. Since the seventeenth century this history has been dominated and to a large extent determined by the commodities to be found on the land and in the sea — fish (cod, salmon, herring), sea mammals (seals and whales), timber and furs. The region’s strategic location has also been important, particularly in time of war.

Until the early nineteenth century the institutions of government were either totally lacking or present only in very rudimentary form in the region. One

consequence of this was that “anarchy and disorder were common.” (75) Conflicts over resources abounded, merchants raided one another’s property, and theft was not unknown as people from various countries competed for control of resources. French merchants had been granted concessions on the coast prior to the Treaty of Paris (1763), sometimes coming into open conflict with Inuit in the region. After the Treaty of Paris and the granting of control of the area to the British, merchants from that country and from Newfoundland more systematically exploited its resources. The commodities of value were whale and seal oil, cod and salmon. Conflicts with local Inuit continued. In 1767 men on both sides were killed, boats and equipment damaged and Inuit women and children captured by troops from Fort York in Chateau Bay. (27)

Activity on the coast was not confined to the Inuit, and to seasonal visits of the British and French. The Americans fished the coast from the 1640s through the 1870s. An annual migration of fishers from the Island of Newfoundland developed in the late 1700s and continued, although eventually in a quite limited way until World War II.

There was little permanent settlement of the region by people of European descent until the period 1830-70. And the actual settlement of the area involved a high degree of intermarriage between men of largely European origin and Inuit women. Much of the settlers’ attention was focused on the exploitation of the cod fishery. For this purpose more than forty seasonal fishing stations were developed on the coastal headlands. There also developed a characteristic pattern of migration to spend the winter months in family-based groups in the more sheltered bays where fuel was more readily available and trapping could be pursued. This pattern of migration is known as seasonal transhumance.

Kennedy deals in some detail with the nineteenth-century transition from a migratory, seasonal fishery to a resident fishery involving settlers and planters. This transition, it is suggested, hinged on the activities of merchants who provided both credit and provisions and markets. But while access to merchant credit made possible the development of the region it is Kennedy’s argument that it also limited returns to the producers of commodities. Even to survive many people purchased goods from and sold their products to itinerant traders on more favourable terms than were available locally.

During the best of times people survived, while most of the fruits of their labour fell into the hands of the larger merchant firms that dominated commerce in the region. People did struggle against this domination, however, they did this less by organized resistance than by dealing with transient US and Canadian merchants. But such action was risky. It could lead to local merchants denying credit.

One of the main stories told in the book is that of the gradual breakdown of the settlers’ pattern of seasonal transhumance (migration) under the pressures of centralization. The seeds of this transformation were sown in the period 1900-1949 which Kennedy describes as “the twilight of the traditional settler lifestyle, the era

romanticized by contemporary Labradorians in song and story.” (127) While many economic developments in this period — whaling, the herring fishery and trapping — proved compatible with the dispersed lifestyle of the settlers, other developments acted as a powerful centralizing force.

Some of the factors affecting centralization were economic — the exploitation of particular resources and the availability of work. But just as important was access to social services, initially provided by the Grenfell Mission, but later by the state. Over time people tended to concentrate in those communities where work and services were available. And the resettlement programs of the late 1960s and early 1970s reinforced this trend in the region, reducing the number of winter settlements in the region to eleven.

The chapter on the work and impact of the Grenfell Mission is particularly interesting, as is the discussion of the opening up of the region for the cutting of pit props for the British market in the 1930s — a scheme that led to the foundation of Port Hope Simpson and made wage work available locally. From the 1940s on work was also available in connection with coastal military installations and further afield at the air base in Goose Bay.

The strengths of the book are many. However, if there is something to be debated and discussed it is perhaps Kennedy’s treatment of resettlement and the question of dependence that is central to chapters 10 and 11 of the book. Here one of the arguments is that centralization produced dependence — and vulnerability. (for example, 5, 206) One of my concerns here is how you define, demonstrate and account for dependence and vulnerability.

One of the most striking points that emerges from the book is that people in the region have always been dependent on nature, on the availability of resources, on the existence and state of markets for commodities, on the existence and good graces of merchants, on the availability of work, etc. — economic conditions varied considerably both within the region and cyclically as the fortunes of the basic commodities produced by people in the region fluctuated on the world markets. This dependence made people vulnerable and life uncertain and extremely hard. Many were forced to leave or migrate temporarily in search of work.

Did centralization, either in connection with the Grenfell Mission or the government resettlement programs of the late 1960s and early 1970s increase peoples’ vulnerability as is claimed on page 205? Well, it very much depends on how you look at the question of vulnerability. It could be argued that access to medical services reduced vulnerability, lessening the chances that people would die from measles or influenza — in Sandwich Bay some 69 of the 300 inhabitants died during the influenza epidemic of 1918-1919. Income support lessened peoples’ vulnerability to the hardships associated with temporary scarcity of resources, illness, etc. What is described as dependence on the state can from a somewhat different viewpoint be seen as providing a degree of independence from the vagaries

of the market, nature, and, in this case, merchants. The alternative to dependence on the state is not independence, but a different kind of dependence.

Part of my unease over the use of the word “dependence” is that it has become an emotive, pejorative and politically loaded term in these harsh and ugly times when the poor and unemployed are being attacked politically. We must be wary of using the term when it has become an indispensable tool in the kits of those who are hell bent on cutting social programs in order to deal with the problem of “dependency” at the same time as the state retreats from responsibility for the job creation that would help people be independent of state support.

My concern is also that occasionally a hint of moralism finds its way into Kennedy’s analysis when he talks of people “*craving* an expanded array of consumer goods and increased government services” (5) and “*soaring* demands for social services during the late 1950s and 1960s.” (208) Even if not intended, the implication here is that such needs and demands were perhaps unreasonable or that it was inability to control demands that led people into dependence on state support. The other side of this is the implication that, if people had curbed expectations and limited their requirements, then they could have remained independent. I don’t think this is Kennedy’s argument because he reserves one of his final and most acerbic comments for the political strategy of those who would now have rural people “reclaim the precious independence they once enjoyed.” (244) My concern is that the comments cited above weaken Kennedy’s argument and play into the hands of those who are now asking rural people to become “sustainable,” that is, able to support themselves without state assistance.

What is to be the fate of the small communities of the area? Places like Lodge Bay are losing population — from 129 in 1979 to 98 in 1992. In the same period the number of students in the school was halved. Other communities have been less drastically affected by economic problems and cuts to state programs. Until the cod moratorium people in the region were doing reasonably well, in fact, better than in many other parts of the province. This was due largely to the fact that substantial employment was created in the booming crab fishery. Now crab quotas have been reduced and many people do not qualify for Employment Insurance. As Kennedy suggests “the years to come will prove very difficult for people of the bays and headlands.” (244)