

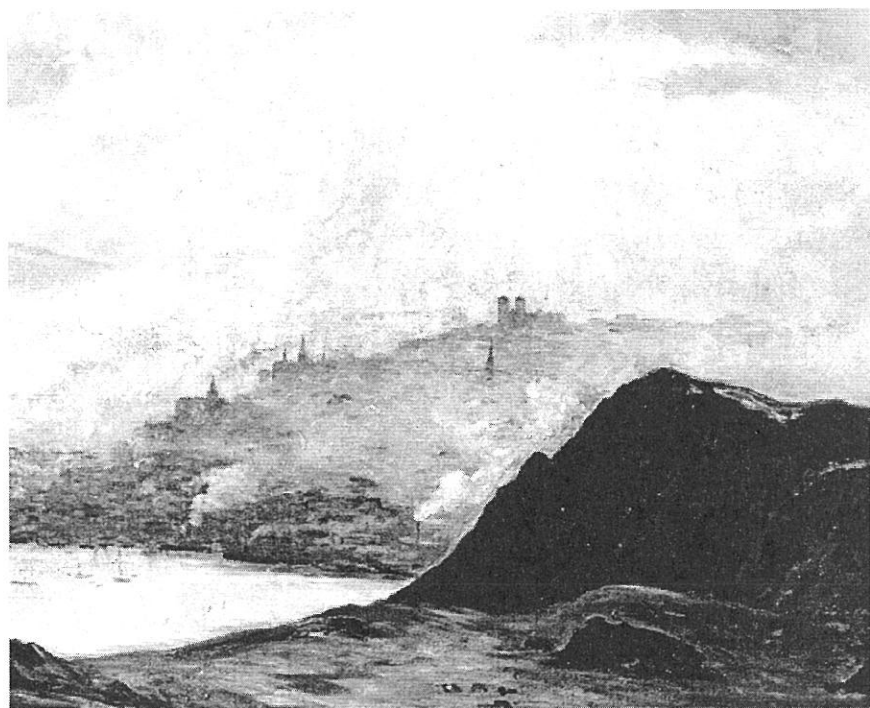
Maurice Cullen's "Misty Afternoon, St. John's, Newfoundland": Unfinished Business of Confederation?

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ON 9 DECEMBER 1948, two days before the terms of union between Newfoundland and Canada were signed in Ottawa, William R. Watson (1887-1973) of the Watson Art Galleries, 1434 Sherbrooke St. West, Montreal, wrote to Prime Minister Louis St. Laurent (1882-1973) proposing a gift for the soon-to-be Province of Newfoundland.¹ The gift he had in mind, available through his gallery, was the picture "St. John's Harbour, Newfoundland" (originally and now also known as "Misty Afternoon, St. John's, Newfoundland") by the prominent Canadian artist Maurice Galbraith Cullen.

Cullen was born in St. John's on 6 June 1866 and was the son of James Francis Cullen and Sarah Ward, who had married in Montreal in 1865.² James Cullen was a metal worker, originally from Torbay, Newfoundland.³ Around 1870 the Cullen family moved to Montreal and Maurice Cullen grew up, went to work at age fourteen as a sales clerk, and had his first art training in that city.⁴ Thanks apparently to an inheritance from his mother, who died on 17 August 1887, Cullen was able to sojourn in Paris and study at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts.⁵ Following his return to Canada in 1895, he lived the life of an aspiring professional artist working in the French impressionist style.

In 1907 Cullen visited Newfoundland, where his father was now again living. Paintings inspired by this visit were shown at an exhibition in December 1907 sponsored by the Art Association of Montreal.⁶ On 3 November 1910 Cullen married Barbara Pilot in St. John's.⁷ She was a widow with five children, one of whom, Robert Wakeham Pilot (1898-1967), went on, under Cullen's tutelage, to become a celebrated Canadian artist in his own right. After his wedding, Cullen



Maurice Cullen, *Misty Afternoon, St. John's, Newfoundland*, 1910, oil on canvas, 122.8 x 153.4 cm, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, purchased 1949

returned to Montreal, where he rented a house. He was back in Newfoundland during the summer of 1911, and in the autumn of that year moved his new family to Montreal.⁸

The luminous picture "Misty Afternoon, St. John's, Newfoundland" dates from this period of his life. The canvas was inspired by his 1910 visit to Newfoundland and was included in the show of the Royal Canadian Academy that opened in Montreal on 24 November of that year.⁹ The picture measures 122.8 cm by 153.4 cm¹⁰ and depicts St. John's from a height of land near Signal Hill. The city is shrouded in mist but the Roman Catholic Cathedral of St. John the Baptist is visible through the vapours as are a number of other prominent St. John's landmarks. One of Cullen's contemporaries described the canvas as "a majestic gallery picture."¹¹ In 1982 the art historian and curator Sylvia Antoniou wrote that "Cullen's Newfoundland paintings were a search for his historical roots."¹² "St. John's Harbour, Newfoundland" was his "most ambitious" Newfoundland work and typified his "developed 'impressionism.'" "It glistens and vibrates and gives the effect of cloud-filtered sunlight shimmering on the water and the mist-covered city. The water itself is rendered in hundreds of small brush strokes in tones of bluish-grey.

Nevertheless, there is no uniform pattern of brush stroke to define the surface. The verdant foreground is painted quite smoothly and evenly defining the forms of the grass-covered land and the cliff. The harbour city and mist are rendered a homogeneous mass."¹³

In his 1949 letter to Prime Minister St. Laurent, William Watson, the author of *Maurice Cullen, R.C.A.: A Record of Struggle and Achievement* (Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1931), described "St. John's Harbour, Newfoundland" as the artist's masterpiece.¹⁴ "This great painting," he wrote, "should definitely be in a public Gallery or place, and it occurred to us that it would be both a magnificent and appropriate gesture if the Dominion of Canada could acquire this painting, and present it to Newfoundland on becoming our tenth Province." Watson included a photograph of the picture with his letter but noted that this did not do the painting justice: "The photograph hardly conveys the extraordinary quality of the lighting. It is a misty day through which the sun is breaking with golden light. Art critics and connoisseurs would confirm that it is one of our really important Canadian paintings. You will note that it is of an imposing size in concord with its great subject." Watson offered to send the picture to Ottawa for consideration and specified a "nominal" asking price of \$2,500.

St. Laurent referred Watson's letter and enclosure to the attention of Harry Orr McCurry (1889-1964), the director of the National Gallery of Canada.¹⁵ On 15 December 1948 McCurry told Watson that he doubted whether the government of Canada would be willing to act on the latter's suggestion.¹⁶ McCurry did, however, promise to bring the matter to the attention of the Board of Trustees of the Gallery and to let Watson know their response. McCurry also had this pointed message for Watson: "If the National Gallery should be interested in acquiring the picture I trust you would be willing to make us a much more attractive price."

Watson shot back on 23 December as follows: "If Mr. St. Laurent has turned our letter over to you, it seems to me he has entirely missed the point of our original correspondence, which was that the painting by Cullen (a Newfoundlander) of Newfoundland, should be presented to that country on becoming our tenth Province. For the picture to end up in the National Gallery was not our idea at all, but of course if you are going to kidnap it this way, I suppose it could only be counted as another feather in your cap."¹⁷ As for price, Watson noted that Cullen had wanted \$5,000 for the picture and that he wanted only half as much. His price was "most attractive" considering the "size and uniqueness" of the work.

For his part, despite his initial scepticism, McCurry was by now launched into an initiative of his own that built on Watson's original idea. His scheme was "that the Government of Canada present to Newfoundland a small group of suitable pictures to form the nucleus of an art gallery for the new province."¹⁸ The proposed gift would be conditional on the province undertaking "within a reasonable time, to provide suitable accommodation for the pictures" and, ultimately, it was hoped, "suitable space for the development of a full fledged art gallery." Cullen's picture

would be the “most important” of the pictures to be transferred but the collection would also include some of the pictures done in Newfoundland during World War II by Canadian war artists. The presentation of these pictures would be timed to coincide with the date of union.

When Charles Jost Burchell (1876-1967), the Canadian High Commissioner in St. John’s, heard of this proposal, he declared it a “splendid thing” but cautioned that there was “no art gallery or other place in Newfoundland” where the pictures could be exhibited.¹⁹ In the circumstances, he thought it best that the pictures be first exhibited in the building (Canada House, Circular Road) that housed the High Commission: “This Mission has a very fine office building containing eighteen rooms in all. They include a very large reception room on the ground floor, and a very large conference room on the second floor. The hallways are also very wide and commodious on both the second and third floors.... All our offices have very high ceilings. The conference room is about 25 ft. x 33 ft. in size, and the reception room is still larger.” Concomitant with the installation, the High Commission would inform the Newfoundland Commission of Government that the pictures would be presented immediately upon arrangements being made “to properly house them and place them on exhibition.” While the pictures were at Canada House, the High Commission could arrange for them to be viewed by the members of the St. John’s Art Club of which Sadie L. Organ (1908-1974),²⁰ the librarian of Memorial University College, was president.

In February 1949 Sadie Organ reported to McCurry that Burchell (whose office of High Commissioner would soon disappear given the union scheduled for 31 March 1949) had asked her if the St. John’s Art Club would be interested in sponsoring the exhibition of the pictures to be sent from the National Gallery.²¹ This matter had been discussed at the last meeting of the Club but the organization could not give a definite reply until it knew the number of pictures involved, the names of the artists, the proposed date of the exhibition, and whether the exhibition would be limited to the pictures it was proposed to give Newfoundland or whether the show “would be rounded out with other pictures by Newfoundland or Canadian artists.” “You are without doubt aware,” Organ ventured, “that Newfoundland, to our shame be it said, has neither an Art Gallery nor an Art School. It is to be hoped that your contemplated gift to the nation may lead to a movement which will culminate in some attempt to remedy both these disgraceful defects.”

McCurry responded very positively to Sadie Organ’s enquiry. “All that needs to be done,” he told her, “would be for the Government of Newfoundland to accept the gift and ask some appropriate existing body, like the St. John’s Art Club, to act for them and take charge of the pictures until such times as some special provincial authority can be provided to take over the work. I am sure if this is done it will lead to the establishment of an art Gallery, and perhaps also an art school, in St. John’s. You of the Art Club have done such splendid work there for many years, that we are anxious to assist in any way in the larger development which should come. If

all goes well, you will soon join the Canadian Confederation politically, and we might well signalize the fact that we are joining cultural forces also by some such action as I have suggested.”²²

Against this backdrop, Watson sent “St. John’s Harbour, Newfoundland” on approval by express from Montreal to the National Gallery in early March 1949.²³ The “mighty Cullen,” he had earlier noted, “would need a good cleaning before being sent to our new Sister.”²⁴ The trustees of the National Gallery viewed the picture on 17 March but considered the asking price too high even though McCurry had previously bargained Watson down by 20%.²⁵ The trustees were also critical of the frame and insisted that the picture would need a new one before being sent to Newfoundland. Nevertheless, a decision was made to purchase the canvas, which Vincent Massey (1887-1967), the chairman of the trustees, was to present to Newfoundland in the name of the National Gallery.²⁶

Watson resisted any further reduction in price — McCurry wanted a 10% discount for cash²⁷ — but agreed to pay for the new frame the trustees wanted. “It was a surprise to hear,” he wrote to McCurry, “that the Trustees did not appreciate your Scottish bargaining in that you had succeeded in knocking off a cool 20% from the already low price for so important a painting. They should have complimented you on your astuteness.”²⁸ With this, the deal was done; on 20 October 1949 the National Gallery issued a purchase order in favour of the Watson Art Galleries in the amount of \$2,000.²⁹ In the meantime, however, the response in Newfoundland had remained tentative. In July 1949, after McCurry had noted her failure to comment further on the proposed gift, Sadie Organ expressed surprise; her understanding from Burchell, who had by now departed St. John’s, was that “the whole matter was in abeyance.”³⁰ On 6 September 1949 Jules Leger (1913-1980),³¹ executive assistant to St. Laurent, told the Prime Minister that McCurry would be pleased to put the “grand tableau” by Cullen at his disposal.³² The picture, Leger wrote, had been offered to the Newfoundland government but it did not seem likely that it would be accepted. In any case, it would be more highly appreciated if it came from St. Laurent’s office. Leger suggested to St. Laurent that the picture be placed “sur le pan de mur qui fait face à votre bureau.” In accordance with this plan, the picture was transferred the same month from the National Gallery to the Prime Minister’s office.³³

The archival paper trail next jumps to 1951 when Robert Newton (1889-1985), former president of the University of Alberta, Director of the Research Council of Alberta, and trustee of the National Gallery, was commissioned by Memorial University to “make a survey” of that institution “and to prepare a programme for its development over a period of years.”³⁴ On 13 May 1951, having met Sadie Organ in St. John’s, Newton reported to McCurry that he had found her “a very bright young woman actively interested in the Fine Arts” but “very worried” about the lack of “fireproof quarters in which to hang valuable pictures.”³⁵ With this in mind, Newton confided that he would be recommending to the Board of Regents of

Memorial "that the University start a little art gallery of its own and attempt to get its share of travelling exhibitions, including those of the National Gallery."³⁶ In reply, McCurry now offered this comment on developments *vis-à-vis* the stalled Newfoundland project: "At the time the colony joined the Canadian federation we offered to present a group of pictures to form a nucleus of an art gallery for St. John's, but the response from the St. John's Art Club was not very enthusiastic. One of the pictures, in fact the *pièce de résistance*, was a very fine painting by Maurice Cullen, who was a Newfoundlander."³⁷

Newton also found time while in Newfoundland to scout a suitable location for the Cullen painting: "I looked especially into the question of a suitable place to hang the Maurice Cullen painting and had in mind to recommend to the Trustees that this be offered to the Government to hang in the Legislative Building in St. John's. Government House is another possible place but it is already very well supplied with pictures, although some of them are personal property of the present incumbent."³⁸ "Moreover, I felt that more people would see the Cullen picture if hung in the Legislative Building, which incidentally appeared to have no pictures to speak of except the [Frederic] Steiger portraits of Governors and Premiers which were hung while we were there. If you think it advisable to put this item on the agenda of the forthcoming meeting, I should be pleased to report exactly what I found."³⁹

McCurry accepted this suggestion and put the pending Newfoundland business on the agenda of the 1 June 1951 meeting of the trustees. On this occasion, the trustees agreed that "the Prime Minister should be requested to write to the Premier of Newfoundland offering them the picture on condition that it be hung in the Legislative Chambers."⁴⁰ Whether this letter was written remains an open question,⁴¹ but it is doubtful whether Joseph Roberts Smallwood (1900-1991), the energetic and ambitious premier of Newfoundland, would have turned down such a prize if it had ever been offered to him. When it came to transfers from Ottawa, Smallwood was a great believer in the law of capture. Moreover, he had a deep interest in the history of Newfoundland and in promoting the cultural heritage of the new province.

In any event, the picture remained in the Canadian capital. In September 1952, McCurry told Jean Chauvin (1895-1958) of Poirier Bessette & Cie., Limitée, Montreal, another trustee and Cullen enthusiast,⁴² that "the problem [had] more or less solved itself"; the Cullen canvas was now on loan to the House of Commons and officials there wanted to keep it for the duration of the Commonwealth conference then in session.⁴³ "As soon as it is free," McCurry promised, "I will see what can be done to carry out the Board's original intention of presenting the picture to Newfoundland."

This proved another non-starter, and in August 1952 Chauvin broached the matter again, this time with Harry Stevenson Southam (1875-1954), Vice-President of the *Ottawa Citizen* and Vincent Massey's successor as chairman of the trustees

of the National Gallery.⁴⁴ Having heard on the radio that the new Governor General of Canada — Vincent Massey had been appointed to this position on 17 February 1952 and sworn in on 28 February 1952 — was about to visit Newfoundland, Chauvin suggested that the Cullen (“bought a long time ago with the intention of offering it to the then new province of Newfoundland”) be presented during the vice-regal tour: “Don’t you think it would be a very fine occasion to ‘deliver the goods’ to our new compatriots? I am sure that you and the Director have thought of it.” Once again, however, nothing happened.

On 17 June 1953, Harold B. Goodridge (1901-1989), who taught Geography at Memorial and was a well known local artist, called on Robert H. Hubbard (1916-1989), Curator of Canadian Art at the National Gallery, to discuss cultural developments in Newfoundland. The Newfoundland Museum, Goodridge reported, “was being reconstituted in the Provincial Library building but that there would be no room for art exhibitions there.”⁴⁵ On the bright side, he and others were “working on preliminary plans for including an Art Gallery in the new University Library to be built within the next few years.” Goodridge said that he regretted the Cullen picture had not been accepted by Newfoundland; the project had “fallen into the wrong hands.” If the National Gallery intended to reopen negotiations about the picture, Goodridge asked that he be included in the discussions.

At the end of the day (and for whatever reason), Newfoundland lost a great opportunity and “Misty Afternoon, St. John’s, Newfoundland” was incorporated into the permanent collection of the National Gallery of Canada (no. 4949).⁴⁶ The Gallery has preserved the picture and exhibited it to great advantage and deserves much credit for its curatorial efforts. Without doubt, the Cullen is one of the Gallery’s finest Canadian works and is a national treasure. The picture is not, however, as well known in Newfoundland as it might be, even though the Province eventually acquired the exhibition space it so badly lacked at the time of Confederation. In 1961 Memorial University launched the art gallery that Newton had advocated and that Harold B. Goodridge and his associates had promoted. The first curator of the gallery was the artist Christopher Pratt (1935-) who was then in the first phase of his distinguished international career. In 1968 the gallery moved to the newly built St. John’s Arts and Culture Centre and assumed an enhanced provincial mandate while maintaining its university function. Finally, in 1994, the gallery was designated the Art Gallery of Newfoundland and Labrador (AGNL).⁴⁷

The progress made in the 1960s and 1970s helped foster a burst of artistic creativity and enterprise in Newfoundland and Labrador that continues to this day. This was most welcome but by the time it occurred the idea of a national gift of pictures to the Province seems to have been forgotten — both in Ottawa and St. John’s. With the building of a new gallery in St. John’s — to form part of the imaginative project of “The Rooms”⁴⁸ at Fort Townshend — perhaps the time has come to revisit an idea from the 1940s that had much to recommend it and that embodied an inclusive spirit of cooperation and goodwill. Certainly the exhibition

— even temporarily — of “Misty Afternoon, St. John’s, Newfoundland” in The Rooms would nicely conclude what is arguably some unfinished business of Confederation.

I am grateful for research assistance to Cindy Campbell, Cheryl Gagnon, Michael Williams, and Greg Spurgeon, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, Michael Stevenson, Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade, Government of Canada, Ottawa, John Neary, Massey College, University of Toronto, Peggy Ellis, London, Ontario, Thomas J. Burchell, Halifax, Nova Scotia, Melvin Baker and Deborah Andrews, Memorial University of Newfoundland, St. John’s, Christopher Pratt, Mount Carmel, St. Mary’s Bay, Newfoundland, and Edythe Goodridge, Eastport, Bonavista Bay Newfoundland.

Notes

¹National Gallery of Canada, curatorial research file (hereafter NG), Maurice Cullen, “Misty Afternoon, St. John’s, Newfoundland,” William R. Watson to Louis St. Laurent, 9 December 1948.

²Sylvia Antoniou, *Maurice Cullen* (Kingston: Agnes Etherington Art Centre, 1982), p.3.

³*Ibid.*, p.3.

⁴*Ibid.*, p.3.

⁵*Ibid.*, p.4.

⁶*Ibid.*, p.19.

⁷*Ibid.*, p.19.

⁸*Ibid.*, p. 30. Cullen went overseas as a Canadian war artist in the Great War. He died at Chambly, Québec, 28 March 1934.

⁹*Ibid.*, p.30. The canvas is signed “M. Cullen 1910” in the lower right corner (see NG, “Condition and Treatment Report,” 20 May 1983.

¹⁰See <<http://cybermuse.gallery.ca/ng/>>. The 1983 “Condition and Treatment Report” gives the dimensions as 153.0 cm x 122.1 cm.

¹¹Antoniou, *Maurice Cullen*, p.30.

¹²*Ibid.*, p.30.

¹³*Ibid.*, p.33.

¹⁴NG, William R. Watson to Louis St. Laurent, 9 December 1948.

¹⁵NG, Guy Sylvestre to William R. Watson, 11 December 1948.

¹⁶NG, H.O. McCurry to William R. Watson, 15 December 1948.

¹⁷NG, William R. Watson to H.O. McCurry, 23 December 1948.

¹⁸NG, H.O. McCurry to Sadie L. Organ, 2 February 1948. See also minutes of 21 December 1948 meeting of the trustees of the National Gallery as follows: “The Director submitted an offer from the Watson Art Galleries, Montreal, received through the Rt. Hon. The Prime Minister, of a picture ‘St. John’s Harbour and Town, Newfoundland’ by Maurice

G. Cullen, R.C.A., price [\$]2,500.00. The suggestion was made that this picture might be purchased and presented to the Newfoundland government. The Director suggested that a small group of suitable paintings from the National Gallery permanent collection and the war collection might be brought together and presented to the new Province of Newfoundland as a nucleus of a permanent art gallery, provided the Dominion Government approved of this action. This proposal was approved in principle and the question is to be considered at a future meeting when further details are available." The minutes of the trustees are available in the Library and Archives, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.

¹⁹NG, C.J. Burchell to Secretary of State for External Affairs, 5 January 1949.

²⁰Sarah L. Organ, later Sarah (Sadie) L. Organ-Dixon.

²¹NG, Sadie L. Organ to H.O. McCurry, 22 January 1949.

²²NG, H.O. McCurry to Sadie L. Organ, 2 February 1949.

²³NG, excerpt, William R. Watson letter, 17 March 1949.

²⁴NG, William R. Watson to H.O. McCurry, 3 February 1949.

²⁵NG, excerpt, letter to William R. Watson, 18 March 1949.

²⁶Minutes of the trustees, 17 March 1949.

²⁷NG, excerpt, letter to William R. Watson, 18 March 1949.

²⁸NG, William R. Watson to H.O. McCurry, 21 March 1949.

²⁹Invoice no. 663, order no. 2301. There is a file copy in NG.

³⁰NG, excerpt, Sadie L. Organ to H.O. McCurry, 25 July 1949.

³¹Governor General of Canada, 1974-1979.

³²National Archives of Canada, Louis St. Laurent Papers, MG26 L, vol. 125, N20.

Leger wrote as follows: "Pour rappeler Terre-Neuve, monsieur McCurry m'a dit qu'il serait heureux de mettre à votre disposition un grand tableau que Maurice Cullen a peint sur le port de Saint John's. Ce tableau a été offert par Musée National au gouvernement de Terre-Neuve, mais il ne semble pas être question qu'ils le réclament immédiatement. De toute façon, le geste serait encore plus apprécié si, lorsqu'il s'agira de leur donner ce tableau, ils le recevaient directement de votre bureau. Ce Cullen pourrait être placé sur le pan de mur qui fait face à votre bureau." I found no evidence of a letter to the "gouvernement de Terre-Neuve." Leger was probably referring to the informal approach made to Sadie Organ.

³³NG, "Receiving and Shipping Picture Record."

³⁴For Newton's report see <http://www.mun.ca/celebrate/50s/Newton_Graphic.html>.

³⁵NG, excerpt, Robert Newton to H.O. McCurry, 4, 13 May 1951.

³⁶NG, Robert Newton to H.O. McCurry, 13 May 1951.

³⁷NG, excerpt, H.O. McCurry to Robert Newton, 7 May 1951. Italics and accents added.

³⁸Sir Leonard Outerbridge (1888-1986).

³⁹NG, Robert Newton to H.O. McCurry, 13 May 1951. Frederic (sometimes Frederick) Steiger was born in Solwutz, Romania, 21 October 1899, and became a Canadian resident in 1922. He was commissioned by the government of Newfoundland to complete portraits of House of Assembly speakers since 1832 and of premiers since 1855. He died in Toronto on 4 August 1990. For his career see *Who's Who in Art*, twentieth edition (Havant, Hants: The Art Trade Press Ltd., 1982), p.405. There is also an information file about him in the Library and Archives of the National Gallery of Canada.

⁴⁰The relevant section of the minutes of the 1 June 1951 meeting of the trustees is as follows: "As a result of his recent trip to Newfoundland in connection with educational

projects there, Dr. Newton reported a great need for art in that province. He suggested that the most suitable place to hang the Maurice Cullen picture, 'St. John's Harbour, Newfoundland', would be in the Legislative Building. It was agreed that the Prime Minister should be requested to write to the Premier of Newfoundland offering them the picture on condition that it be hung in the Legislative Chambers. Dr. Newton also suggested that the University might take the lead in displaying loan exhibitions from the National Gallery. A collection of some twelve pictures was recommended. These suggestions were approved."

⁴¹A preliminary search of the Louis St. Laurent Papers, National Archives of Canada, Ottawa, and the J.R. Smallwood Papers, Centre for Newfoundland Studies Archives, Queen Elizabeth II Library, Memorial University of Newfoundland, St. John's, was unproductive.

⁴²He had published an article on Cullen in vol. 20, no. 12 (December, 1927) of *La Revue Populaire*.

⁴³NG, H.O. McCurry to Jean Chauvin, 2 September 1952. The picture had been returned from the Prime Minister's office in February 1950. It was in the Railway Committee Room, Parliament of Canada, September 1951-May 1952. In May 1952 it was sent to Bomac Ltd., Montreal, to be reproduced. It was returned to the Railway Committee Room in August 1952 and was there until September 1959. After a period in storage, it was again sent to the Railway Committee Room in 1963 (see NG, "Receiving and Shipping Picture Record").

⁴⁴NG, Jean Chauvin to H.S. Southam, 21 August 1952.

⁴⁵NG, R.H. Hubbard note, 17 June 1953.

⁴⁶For details of the work see <<http://cybermuse.gallery.ca/ng/>>. In "Art in Newfoundland," *Canadian Art*, vol. 7, no. 1 (Autumn, 1949), Robert Ayre noted the acquisition of the picture by the National Gallery as follows: "The notable painting, St. John's Harbour, by Maurice Cullen, has this year been acquired for the nation by the National Gallery of Canada. Concerning this particular painting, the late James Wilson Morrice ... [wrote] in 1910 'Cullen ... has painted a good picture of St. John's, Newfoundland. He is the man in Canada who gets at the guts of things.'"

⁴⁷For information on the Art Gallery of Newfoundland and Labrador (AGNL) see <http://www.heritage.nf.ca/arts/agnl/per_col.html>. For the history of the gallery see Patricia Grattan and Caroline Stone, *Twenty-five Years of Art in Newfoundland: Some Significant Artists* (St. John's: Art Gallery, Memorial University of Newfoundland, 1987).

⁴⁸The Rooms will house a museum, archives, and art gallery.