

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Response to Garfield Fizzard's essay, "Newfoundland's First Known School." *Newfoundland Studies*, XI:1.

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HAVING JUST RECEIVED and browsed through my copy of Vol. XI, no. 2 of *Newfoundland Studies*, I felt compelled to comment on the lead article by Garfield Fizzard, "Newfoundland's First Known School." Though Mr. Fizzard sheds useful new light on education in early eighteenth-century Newfoundland, employing materials that are frequently overlooked by historians (such as the Fulham Papers), nevertheless I could not help but feel disappointed in the historical context he provides for his discussion. From its opening pages, where several statements are made that historians today no longer accept as valid, to the closing pages, where a number of significant studies are conspicuously missing from the list of references, the article manages to undermine its own credibility to the point where one no longer can have full confidence in the quality of its discussion or interpretation. This is a shame, for I suspect that Mr. Fizzard has some worthwhile things to say about eighteenth-century Newfoundland society. Allow me to provide some specific examples of my concerns.

In his second paragraph on p. 179, Mr. Fizzard makes the first of several references (three on the first page alone!) to the seasonal fishery carried on "for two hundred years...from England and Ireland." The Irish connection DID become very important to the British migratory fishery, as a source of provisions, labour

and capital. But it is quite misleading to imply (as the wording does here) that Ireland played a role of equal significance to that of England since the inception of the fishery at Newfoundland in the sixteenth century. One need look only at the several published articles by John Mannion (none of which are cited in the references), Gordon Handcock (none cited), Keith Matthews (none cited), or C. Grant Head to appreciate that Ireland's involvement in the British fisheries at Newfoundland became significant only in the late seventeenth century.

Nor is it strictly accurate to say, as Mr. Fizzard does in that same paragraph, that "by and large the entrepreneurs of the industry, based themselves in England and Ireland" (again, the presence of Irish entrepreneurs does not become significant until after the middle of the eighteenth century) or that they "opposed the development of a permanent local population..." Keith Matthews challenged that "myth" more than twenty years ago, and both Head and Handcock have since demonstrated that the West Country entrepreneurs played a formative role in the establishment of permanent settlement in Newfoundland (and Patricia Thornton demonstrates that the same thing happened in Labrador at the turn of the nineteenth century). This is not to say that the merchants promoted or encouraged vigorous population growth; they did not. However, they recognized (as Mr. Fizzard himself concedes in the next paragraph) the advantages to their investment of permanent inhabitancy in Newfoundland, and were directly responsible for its support and persistence.

Mr. Fizzard also claims in that paragraph that the entrepreneurs who dominated the British fishery at Newfoundland wielded "considerable influence on official British policies concerning Newfoundland." This has never been demonstrated by anyone. Indeed, if anything, the evidence points in a different direction. Keith Matthews insisted that the alleged influence of the West Country merchants was much over-rated, and more apparent than real; it seemed to exist only so long as what they wanted coincided with the wishes of the British authorities. When those wishes diverged from their own, the needs of the fishery were ignored. David Starkey certainly confirms this with respect to the fishery's alleged role as a "nursery" for seamen for the Royal Navy, and Starkey's conclusions were foreshadowed nearly fifty years earlier by Gerald Graham.

Mr. Fizzard states in the third paragraph (pp. 179-80) that the emergence of small centres of settlement such as St. John's and Ferryland led "to support a number of local merchants." If by "local merchants" he means permanent merchants who were Newfoundland born, bred, and who would die there, then again he is projecting a late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century development back by at least a hundred years. Tom Nemeč's work on Trepassey, Gordon Handcock's on Trinity, and John Mannion's on Placentia show that the merchants who mattered in those communities were all based and rooted in England (or, in the case of some Placentia merchants after 1750, Ireland).

In his fourth paragraph (the first complete paragraph on p. 180), Mr. Fizzard tries to describe the emerging "truck system," characterizing the control that

merchants and planters exercised over the servants as akin to slavery ("slaves to their employers"). This, too, is a serious oversimplification, even a distortion. Recent work by Sean Cadigan, Peter Pope, John Crowley and others (dare I say it? none are cited in the references!) indicates that "debt slavery," which did come to characterize the relationship between fisherman and merchant in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, was far from absolute in the eighteenth century, and that the emerging truck system was a mutually beneficial relationship, if not necessarily an equitable one. To employ words like "slaves" is to perpetuate an outmoded mythology.

In the next paragraph on p. 180, Mr. Fizzard begins, correctly, by indicating that merchants were submitting "reports" of lawlessness early in the eighteenth century. Unfortunately, those reports are accepted as factually accurate in the next sentence, though the petitions and complaints recorded in the CO 140 papers are surprisingly vague on details. Curiously, Mr. Fizzard does not make use of Jeff Webb's research note in *Acadiensis* (1991) on the attempt in 1723 by the "principle inhabitants" of St. John's to establish a Lockian-based political structure for themselves, ostensibly because of the criminal behaviour of the "lower orders." Nor does he cite any of the several essays by Christopher English on the early eighteenth-century legal history of Newfoundland.

Another mis-interpretation appears on p. 181, in the discussion of the naval chaplains. True, some of the Royal Navy's warships carried chaplains, and these occasionally attended to the spiritual needs of the inhabitants of eighteenth-century Newfoundland. It is not correct, however, to suggest (as Mr. Fizzard does) that the decision to place chaplains on board some warships was a "response" to petitions that clergy be stationed in Newfoundland. I suggest that Mr. Fizzard take a look at essays on naval chaplains by Waldo Smith or Mark Harris.

Finally, I find it puzzling that Mr. Fizzard's paper makes no use of the *Dictionary of Canadian Biography* essay (II: 315-6) on Henry Jones, the main focus of his paper, no use of James Healey's 1994 MUN M. Ed. thesis on "An Educational History of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Newfoundland, 1703-1850," and (most surprising!) no use of Bonita Power and Hans Rollmann, "Bonavista's 'Hewers of Wood and Drawers of Water': The First School in Newfoundland," *Humanities Association of Canada Bulletin* xvii: 1 (April 1989): 27-33.

In short, I felt that the Newfoundland context of Mr. Fizzard's article was far too weak. This weakness seems to ensue from Mr. Fizzard's very traditional perception of early modern Newfoundland history, which in turn appears to be rooted in a superficial familiarity with the substantial and still growing scholarly literature that has dramatically revised our perceptions of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Newfoundland. He certainly seems to have overlooked some very important recent studies. My own concern (to which I alluded at the beginning of this letter) is that, if the Newfoundland context is weak, then how much faith can

be placed in the accuracy of Mr. Fizzard's discussion of eighteenth-century education, either in the parent society in England or in its transference to Newfoundland?