

Living the Authentic Life at “The Far East of the Western World”: Edward Riche’s *Rare Birds*

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BEFORE ONE READS A NOVEL by Wayne Johnston, Bernice Morgan, or Michael Winter, one likely has certain preconceptions of “Newfoundland literature” and of the island and people that it is meant to represent. Such literature will undoubtedly contain suffering tempered by irrepressible humour; loss balanced by a mystical oneness with the land; icy waves crashing on harsh shores; a salty yet melodious language; and the lingering mystique of a unique, unspoiled people. This is how Newfoundland art, literature, and identity are most often packaged by a pervasive and persistent culture industry. Since the “Newfoundland Renaissance” of the 1970s and throughout the current resurgence of Newfoundland literature, those who live on this island are portrayed as inextricably bonded with the land, possessed of a “Newfoundland mystique” threatened “by Progress” (Gwyn 40). This romanticism not only preserves an “authentic” Newfoundland identity but actually saves the island through a tourism industry that invites non-Newfoundlanders to experience this place’s “significant history, distinct culture, and genuine people” (Government of Newfoundland and Labrador). As this culture industry continues to consume Newfoundland literature, it is vital to consider a novel such as Edward Riche’s *Rare Birds* (2001), which resists this absorption by criticizing a culture that peddles an “authenticity” based on unfounded romanticism and perpetuated through “historical” re-enactments.

“Authentic Movie Fish”

Sandra Gwyn’s 1976 article “The Newfoundland Renaissance” did much to establish the trope of the mythical and nature-loving Newfoundlander whose Edenesque existence was being threatened by modernization. Gwyn fawns over Newfoundland artist Gerry Squires: “I put a bottle

of rum in the car and go to visit Gerry Squires at Ferryland. He's the kind of character who, even if he didn't live on the top of a cliff in an abandoned lighthouse with casements that really *do* look out on perilous seas and faery lands forlorn, is proof that there are still artists around who look and act as artists should. Shaggy, intense, an authentic rowdyman" (38). According to Gwyn, artists such as Squires are "bursting out of [the] sheer granite cliffs of Newfoundland," their work "the Newfoundland ethic of endurance made visible" (40). Yet their "natural" blossoming is imperilled by modern innovations such as "the Resettlement Programme of the late 1960s" (40), which arguably saved thousands of Newfoundlanders from an abject poverty fuelled by isolation. Gwyn converts this attempted move from poverty to prosperity into a highly romanticized loss to be lamented: "these settlements — clusters of flat-roofed, white clapboard houses and churches on the brink of the Atlantic, . . . and the people who left them for mobile homes and prefab bungalows, contained the essence of the Newfoundland mystique" (40).

Gwyn's notion of the pastoral primitive is reinforced by Newfoundland writer Patrick Kavanagh in *Gaff Topsails*. Kavanagh's modern Newfoundland outporters still lead lives that "echo . . . the touch of the sea upon the land" and frequently mistake the sounds of trains, airplanes, and steamers "passing through the fog . . . as the lament of the Boo Darby, suffering in beastly solitude somewhere in the wilderness" (139). For Kavanagh and Gwyn, Newfoundland modernism and Newfoundland mystique cannot meet. The essence of Newfoundland authenticity is in its juxtaposition to the modern, mechanical world.

Gwyn and Kavanagh possibly take their cues from R.J. Needham's "The Happiest Canadians," which sociologist James Overton critiques in his seminal article "A Newfoundland Culture?": "According to R.J. Needham in *Maclean's*, there is no factory time in Newfoundland, there are only nature's rhythms. The pace of life is slow, people work when they want to and 'break into poesy when they feel like it.' They have a colourful language and are kind and friendly. They are a simple folk who are contented with what they have" (9-10). Such descriptions went far to create a quaint (and marketable) Newfoundlander who shuns technology in favour of a life in harmony with nature. Overton scolds Newfoundlanders for accepting this trope of a "single, distinct

Newfoundland ethos, character or culture” and claims that the failure to “acknowledge and explore the contradictions and variations in people’s actual behaviour [has resulted in] a simple, idealized character” (11, 12) that is often praised but also used as an “explanation for underdevelopment” (14). This Newfoundlander, though charming, is essentially primitive and unable to find a place in the modern world.

The notion of a sheltered, simple race of Newfoundlanders is promoted by a tourism industry that invites visitors to experience something “unique and different” in “a place that stays the same but changes you forever.” Newfoundland is unabashedly peddled as “The Far East of the Western World” (Government of Newfoundland and Labrador), and the people are coupled with the land so that they become unchanging and exotic. Despite a history of struggling to wrestle a living out of the land and ocean, Newfoundlanders are promoted as authentic, natural fisher-poets through festivals and pageants in which Newfoundland “culture” is paraded before paying customers. According to Dean MacCannell, tourists currently feeding Newfoundland’s economy “make brave sorties out from their hotels, hoping, perhaps, for an authentic experience . . . [and are] greeted everywhere by their obliging hosts” (106). Tourists wishing to witness the “authentic” outpost experience are pointed toward the reassembled movie set of the *Random Passage* miniseries or the “Trinity Pageant,” where, despite Overton’s assertions to the contrary, Newfoundlanders of old are depicted as a gregarious people in tune with nature who regularly break into song. This is the “staged authenticity” discussed by MacCannell, in which the tourists’ desire to experience “real life” forces the host “to *act out* reality and truth” (91, 92). Overton notes that the folksy heritage being performed has always been linked with a supposed love of the land as he discusses a promotional pamphlet written during the height of the “Newfoundland Renaissance.” The pamphlet “devotes a large section to ‘A Way of Life,’ complete with a picture of an accordion player and excerpts from various folk songs,” Overton writes, and this “hardy, fun-loving race” of Newfoundlanders share “a rare culture that is not contrived or artificial” (7). Most importantly, Newfoundland “is ‘an oasis of humanity’ in a ‘world of serious ecological and philosophical problems’” (7).

Newfoundlanders themselves are encouraged to visit the *Random Passage* film set to “Rediscover Your Past” (“*Random Passage*”) even though the set is an absolute reproduction (built on the ruins of an

actual abandoned community) complete with tree stumps forced back into the ground and simulated salt cod that the tour guide smilingly refers to as “authentic movie fish.”¹ In Newfoundland, as in Jean Baudrillard’s *Simulacra and Simulation*, “the double [is] being confused with the real” (1). According to Baudrillard, sites such as the *Random Passage* set constitute the “hyperreal”: “the generation by models of a real without origin or reality” (1). Newfoundland, with its pageants and reproductions, is eerily similar to the Disneyfied world described by Baudrillard: “Everywhere we live in a universe strangely similar to the original — things are doubled by their own scenario. But this doubling does not signify, as it did traditionally, the imminence of their death — they are already purged of their death, and better than when they were alive; more cheerful, more authentic, in the light of their model, like the faces in funeral homes” (11). Just as “the Pirates, the Frontier, the Future World” are all “embalmed and pacified” through Disney rides, exhibits, and films (12), so too is the “Newfoundlander” — insofar as he or she is a whimsical, musical, irrepressible fisherperson — preserved and packaged for consumption at various “cultural” sites.

What motivates the preservation and valorization of this “culture” is perhaps the “panicked nostalgia” described by Baudrillard when discussing the loss of power: “When [power] has totally disappeared, we will logically be under the total hallucination of power — a haunting memory that is already in evidence everywhere, expressing at once the compulsion to get rid of it (no one wants it anymore, everyone unloads it on everyone else) and the panicked nostalgia over its loss . . . in a society that cannot terminate its mourning” (23). Baudrillard’s sentiments are echoed by Overton, who critiques a widespread sentiment that Newfoundland’s power or mystique — “an authentic culture and a rural way of life . . . with real quality and humanity” — had been “sacrificed” by modernization: “This is a culturalist critique of modernization. It laments the loss of a traditional way of life. . . . It takes culture and tradition as the point from which to criticize mass civilization and urban-industrial society. It is a pessimistic expression of disenchantment with many of the changes that occurred in Newfoundland during and after the Second World War by people who were in a very real sense the product of those changes” (9). This “pessimistic expression of disenchantment” discussed by Overton is very much the “panicked nostalgia” of *Simulacra and Simulation*. The necessary move into modernism cannot

be entirely welcomed by Newfoundland culturalists, for it means the loss of a rural, “simple” existence on which they have hinged so much of their identity. While it is doubtful that anyone would wish to leave the age of refrigeration, running water, and paved roadways and return to preserving food by salt, using outhouses, and living in isolation, the connection to “authentic culture and a rural way of life” must be maintained to ensure the continuation of a particular Newfoundland identity. As Gwyn believes, the “life force” of Newfoundlanders is inextricably intertwined with the island — these people are “Celtic and passionate, funny and tragic, salty and earthy” (40). Cultural performances, as Overton puts it, “defend this way of life and to build on it in an effort to maintain or recreate a distinct Newfoundland identity” (9).

These notions of authenticity were recently tied to Newfoundland literature in the 8 November 2004 edition of CBC Newsworld’s literary program *Hot Type*. In this show, subtitled “The Rocks Here Tell Stories,” Newfoundland is referred to romantically as “uncharted territory” and Newfoundlanders as “bred to this place” (“Newfoundland Special”). Discussing his attachment to the island, Newfoundland writer and performer Des Walsh claims, without reservation, “every piece of granite, every spruce tree, I *feel* it, it’s all part of me.” Although it threatens to fall into the same quixotic quagmire that consumes Gwyn and Kavanagh, *Hot Type* inserts a critical voice through another Newfoundland writer, Edward Riche. Riche says, “I’ve had it up to here with authenticity,” and he claims that Newfoundlanders’ tendency to “indulge in our past” has resulted in a Newfoundland “trapped in amber.” Moving from dark sarcasm to slapstick satire, *Rare Birds* is the first serious look at the psychological ramifications of maintaining this island’s authenticity.

Rich(e) Traditions

The artifice of the culture industry and the dubiousness of island intimacy are most artfully and comically displayed in Edward Riche’s *Rare Birds*. Protagonist Dave Purcell has committed the fatal mistake of many who take a moment to ponder this island: he has asked the question, “do you know what this place needs?” For Dave, the answer is a fine restaurant, the “essence of elegance” that “could just as easily be in a tony bistro on the Left Bank of the Seine — but for the fifteen-foot-high snowdrift outside” (8). After a year of trying to peddle “calves’ sweetbreads and wine at \$150 a bottle” to “the fish and chip philistines

of St. John's" (6, 2), Dave has shut himself within his "domain of failure" (8), consuming the contents of his wine cellar and cooking only to repay his neighbour, Alphonse (Phonse) Murphy, "the crazy bayman" (187), who uses his homemade snow-blowing monstrosity to clear the lane leading to Dave's restaurant. The defeated Dave — waist expanding, marriage failing — is indicative of the Newfoundlander decidedly *not* of the land. Weather and geography conspire against him to make his restaurant a failure and send him into drink-driven despair. Divided from the land and disillusioned by the faux-culture he perceives around him, Dave joins Phonse in a scheme to save his restaurant. The result is an investigation of the "pseudo-event" and the chaos, dependence, and self-loathing that it fosters. A microcosm of Newfoundland's culture and tourism industry, the events of *Rare Birds* more than hint at the fakery behind the performable heritage and history that keep this island on life support.

Unlike the romanticized Newfoundland naturalist, Dave does not readily interact with his environment. In truth, on a day like the typically dismal 31 March that opens the book, Dave prefers to avoid the land outside his restaurant: "now in Newfoundland's dreariest month of March, the Auk was, for all intents and purposes, shut down. Shut down and Dave shut in. This last storm, a maelstrom of wild white curtains raging southeast from Labrador, had gone on for the better part of a week" (9). During the times that he does venture into the landscape, Dave is pathetically a townie, possessed of "a city boy's instinct" (167) that enables him to get lost on the short trail between his restaurant and Phonse's home. Dave wants to take part in outdoor adventures such as moose hunting, "feeling somehow that he should, that it was his heritage, something every good Newfoundlander did" (45), but his encounters with the outdoors are struggles that either leave him "bruised through" (189) or (at the best of times) exhausted:

It was difficult going. The snow was thigh-deep in places and softened to a slushy consistency by the rare sun. Dave bobbed and weaved through the crooked congregation of spruce, grabbing at branches to steady himself. Twice one of his legs sank to his crotch and he had to struggle, to the point of working up a sweat, to free himself. Phonse navigated with considerably more ease. (37)

Lest his readers think that Phonse's more nimble movement through the landscape is evidence of the Newfoundlander at one with his island,

Riche gives multiple examples of Phonse's disregard for the rugged beauty that surrounds him. In *Rare Birds*, the machine is in the garden, and Alphonse Murphy is in the machine.

At several times throughout the novel, Phonse appears as the hunter, the Newfoundlander-as-killing-machine whose instinct is to kill and then eat, wear, and display the animals around him. When he first appears in the back porch of Dave's restaurant, Phonse is wearing a "bushy fur hat of his own manufacture and most certainly made of some creature he had killed" (12). He seriously considers "raising ducks" (12) so that he can have a steady supply of the *confit de canard* that Dave prepares for him. Upon hearing Dave describe the elusive prey of local birdwatchers, Phonse wonders, "Roe's crested waxwing? . . . Are they fit to eat?" (34). Phonse is not the mythical man merged with the island of Kavanagh, but neither is he the pastoral primitive. He is possessed of a common sense that Dave first sees when Phonse walks past a "cluster of bodies on the community wharf" (22) to conduct the neat and necessary mercy killing of a humpback whale hopelessly caught beneath the ice. Phonse is the brilliant concocter of the scheme that will save Dave's restaurant and the ingenious creator of the Recreational Submarine Vehicle (R.S.V.).

It is his propensity for all things mechanical that sets Phonse up as a sort of new Newfoundland stereotype. As immortalized in the songs and stories of musical groups such as Buddy Wasiname and the Other Fellers, this new Newfoundlander is not so much interested in nature as he is in the vehicle that propels him through it.² Phonse is often found in his shed among wires and metal or "up to his elbows in engine" (205). His neighbours, the "car wreckers" (84) that dot the Upper Road connecting Dave's community of Push Through with St. John's, "were always congregated in one garage or another, usually around an automobile fast on its way to becoming a ruin" (23). That the modern Newfoundlander's attachment to the machine overwhelms his supposed attachment to nature is demonstrated during the trial run of the R.S.V. when Riche sets up a rather ironic instance of man using machine to "appreciate" nature. Peering through the periscope at his quiet community, Dave admires his environment at the very moment that he is polluting it:

There, plain as day, was the community wharf at Push Through. He could see the long-liners, tied up since the fish had been exterminated, bobbing somnolently at their moorings. . . .

“It’s amazing, Phonse.”

“It’s Push Through, I hope.”

“Large as life.” “Anything stirring? Don’t want anyone to notice the smoke.”

Of course, the exhaust would come to the surface. (187)

The Newfoundlander that is Alphonse Murphy is not marketable. For islanders like Phonse, heaven is not to be in nature but to be “inside his own machine, part of it” (183). This is the less romantic Newfoundlander that, once discovered, leads to the disillusionment of those who so wanted to believe in the existence of Newfoundlanders as a “heroic nature-people” (Jackson 7).

This desire for an island of Druid-like naturalists seems only momentarily to defer an easily awakened disgust for and derision of the backward “Newfs.” The morning following the secret submarine tests, one of the academics duped by Dave’s scheme notices a small oil slick “no doubt from the R.S.V. launch” (Riche 196). The man is at once vindictive and demeaning: “Will these Newfs never learn? . . . I know I shouldn’t say it, but they truly are barbarians. They’ve killed off the fish but they won’t stop there, will they?” (196). When Dave wearily asks “What have we killed off now?” and then dismisses the oil stains as “not the Exxon *Valdez*” (196), the young scholar becomes patronizing, addressing Dave as “My good man” with a glare that indicates Dave’s response “was just the thing he expected to hear from someone whose progenitors had murdered an entire race of people” (196). In this instance, Riche seems to point out that those who come to this island in the hope of finding the rustic remnants of an enchanted and authentic culture have a vague suspicion, just waiting for confirmation, that the “simple life” of these islanders is the result not of an inherent quaintness but of a barely latent barbarism. These savages are not noble. As the derision in the voice of Dave’s detractor seems to indicate, Newfoundlanders’ intimate claim to this island is directly connected to the European eradication of the Beothuk Indians, the first people to occupy the island.

In *Surviving Confederation*, F.L. Jackson notes that, when it became apparent that Newfoundlanders would “not be satisfied to contemplate a future role as enchanted cultural islands, preserved forever untouched by

the storms of modernity, solely for the benefit of others” (6), their novelty began to wane. The “Newfcult” hysteria of the 1970s “ended rather abruptly when the world found out [that Newfoundlanders] killed seals and whales and were serious about wanting to do something to improve [their] circumstances” (8). A Newfoundlander like Alphonse Murphy, who not only ravages the land but also experiments with near-futuristic technology that results in a personal submarine and a revolutionary lighting system that enables one to “light the biggest kind of room with a double-A battery” (Riche 51), does not fit into the desired trope of the “poor, cute and simple-minded fisherfolk” (Jackson 7).

Both Phonse and Dave have reason to hate the culture industry that fosters this notion of the Newfoundlander. Phonse, whose proclivities fall well outside fishing and becoming one with nature, has had to carry the label of “lunatic bayman” (Riche 170) as he continues to broaden his supposedly “simple mind.” Phonse is hampered by what Mike Robinson terms the “simplistic and traditionalistic imagery of ‘otherness’ used in product promotions and travel advertisements” (13). Robinson goes on to write that such an image “hinders the inhabitants of the countries concerned in asserting an identity as modern, industrially developed or developing peoples with complex lifestyles” (13). It is worth noting that, in concocting a scheme to save the restaurant, Phonse obliges Dave to help him in his own modern, industrial pursuits. Dave has tried to play a role in the culture industry, creating chic caribou cuisine that the raving critics lauded as “rustic” (Riche 9) before abandoning the restaurant forever. Dave’s aptly named the Auk Dining Room and Inn is about to slide into extinction, just as Dave’s estranged wife prophesied: “Christ, Dave! . . . Why not call it the Beothuk Bar and Grill or the Dodo Arms?” (6). In the dying days of the Auk, Dave realizes that the land on which he built his restaurant prohibits prosperity:

what nature of demented traveler would visit Newfoundland during the six months it was under a cloak of bitter ice? . . . Smart people were in the Caribbean somewhere. They would have to eat. They would go to a restaurant, order spicy prawns and juicy local fruit right off the tree. Why had Dave imagined the Auk had even a prayer of succeeding? “Come experience the Ice Age as Cro-Magnon Man experienced it, eat at the Auk! Nuclear Winter? No problem! The soup’s on at the Auk. (6, 28)

Finding no succour in the land around him, having no spiritual affinity with the ocean or rocks, Dave is disenchanted and despondent. He sees through the charm “that had suckered so many souls” (24), including his own, and realizes that what is paraded before tourist and host as quirky and quaint is actually “old-world weariness. . . . A four-hundred-year legacy of misery and deprivation, a desperate colonial outpost of missed opportunities” (24). The ennui that all but paralyzes Dave is driven not by his floundering marriage but by his Baudrillardian discovery of the emptiness behind the artifice, a discovery that he shares with the iconoclasts, who realized that there was no God behind the symbols and statues, but that “the visible machinery of icons substituted for the pure and intelligible Idea of God” (Baudrillard 4): “One can live with the idea of distorted truth. But their metaphysical despair came from the idea that the image didn’t conceal anything at all, and that these images were in essence not images, such as an original model would have made them, but perfect simulacra, forever radiant with their own fascination” (5). For Phonse and Dave, who winter in this province, the supposed inherent kinship with nature possessed by every Newfoundlander is a laughable hoax. The “real” Newfoundlanders are not mystical, musical islanders but “enterprising brigands of the bay” (Riche 53) who sustain their existence not through a love of the land but by concocting schemes and ripping from the land what little refuge they can find. To keep the Auk alive, Dave and Phonse must use one tradition to exploit the other. Just as the postcards that promote this province add to the supposedly natural beauty of this place, so too must Dave and Phonse create the sort of natural occurrence that Newfoundland is supposed to provide.³ For these men, the “nature” that many people come to Newfoundland to experience is already a pretense — it is but one small, almost logical step to create more of this “nature” to ensure the Auk’s survival. In doing so, Dave and Phonse commit the central deception of the tourist industry: “assembl[ing] their own images in advance of the arrival of the tourists” (MacCannell 142), thereby creating their own exploitable “reality.”

When Dave questions the viability of a recreational submarine, Phonse quickly replies, “Nature, old man, people are gone mental on the nature. Geezers hiding behind a blind all day to get a picture of a bird! This [submarine] is only a prototype. Once I build one with windows, so they can see the little fishies” (Riche 60). As his explanation

of the consumer craving for the R.S.V. turns into his scheme to save the Auk, Phonse displays an intimate knowledge of “the tourist gaze.” As John Urry notes, in the centuries following the Romantic movement, “nature of all sorts came to be widely regarded as scenery, views, and perceptual sensation. . . . And the building of piers, promenades and domesticated beaches enabled the visual consumption of [an] otherwise wild, untamed and ‘natural’ [world]” (*Tourist* 148). Tourists whose connection with nature is hampered by their otherwise urban existences need to see this nature, for, as Jackson writes, “People want to feel that somewhere out there beyond the confines of their overpopulated, thoroughly industrialized cities, an original life in nature still goes on undisturbed” (Jackson 4). The isolation of Newfoundland, and the Auk, is “part of the appeal,” according to Phonse: “you’ve got geezers flying up here from all over the world to get a good gawk at a whale or take a snap of a gannet” (Riche 62). People come to Newfoundland hoping to see — to visually consume — something that they would not see in less isolated parts of the world. It is the task of restaurateur Dave Purcell to give these insatiable masses something to “eat up.”

It is fitting that the proprietor of a restaurant named after an extinct bird would fabricate the sighting of another felled fowl to keep his business afloat. With Phonse’s help, Dave creates mass hysteria through several anonymous sightings of “Tasker’s Sulphureous Duck,” a possibly extinct bird last seen off the coast of Newfoundland in 1985. True to Phonse’s predictions, Push Through is soon “maggoty with bird-watchers” (80) who take respite from the drizzle and the damp at Dave’s quickly revived and thriving restaurant. The wild duck chase concocted by Dave and Phonse conforms to many of the characteristics of the “pseudo-event” as detailed by Daniel J. Boorstin in *The Image*. Moreover, whereas Boorstin differentiates between “natural” or “spontaneous reality” (254) and the entirely fabricated pseudo-event, Riche demonstrates how “nature” can not only become artifice but also be modified, replicated, and repeated as desired.

The first characteristic of the pseudo-event is that “it is not spontaneous, but comes about because someone has planned, planted, or incited it. Typically, it is not a train wreck or an earthquake, but an interview” (Boorstin 11). The “appearance” of the Tasker’s Sulphureous is blue-printed in Phonse’s shed, playfully (or perhaps not so playfully) termed “central ops.” The “event” itself does come in the form of an interview,

as Dave and then Phonse phone a local call-in show for birders to report “seeing the strangest bird” (Riche 88). The second characteristic of the pseudo-event is that it is planted “for the immediate purpose of being reported or reproduced. . . . The question, ‘Is it real?’ is less important than, ‘Is it newsworthy?’” (Boorstin 11). The bird exists solely in the report, and its actuality is less important than its possibility. While actual evidence of the duck’s existence would certainly be interesting, its unconfirmed possibility results in hundreds of “bird brains” and “dupes daring the cliffs around the restaurant” (Riche 95, 85).

This unfulfilled search that eventually becomes the search for unfulfillment is discussed by Graham Huggan in *The Post-Colonial Exotic*: “Tourism shares with exoticism the impossible search for ‘uncontaminated’ experience. The exoticist/tourist gaze looks beyond the world toward an ungraspable ideal entity” (180). Citing John Frow, Huggan notes that disappointment plays a “structural role” in the tourist experience, for it is not so much what the tourists see as “how they ought to see” (180) that defines the “tourist gaze.” “The appeal of the exotic ‘elsewhere’ is,” Huggan believes, “precisely, that it will always be out of reach” (194). In this light, tourism is a brand of hope, a type of wishful thinking that must always remain as such. These birders do not need to see the duck so much as they need to be in the presence of its mystique, to believe that, in this part of the world, outside the urban and suburban sprawl, there is the possibility that an authentic piece of nature, thought vanished, still exists. It is their willingness to be deceived, their need to be deceived, that makes these “gawkers,” “bird brains,” and “dupes” the perfect marks for Phonse’s scheme.

It is also this predilection for self-deception that fuels the final two characteristics of the pseudo-event. According to Boorstin, the pseudo-event must be ambiguous. To draw curiosity, a pseudo-event must inspire people to discover “whether it really happened” (11). The pseudo-event is also “intended to be a self-fulfilling prophecy” (12). Phonse demonstrates an understanding of how ambiguity and desire can confer “reality” on a pseudo-event while explaining to Dave how his plot will play out: “You know what will happen, too? . . . One will catch a gull or a kittiwake out the corner of his eye and say, ‘Did you see that?’ and another one will say ‘Yeah! I saw something!’ and they’ll go wild for it. Psychology of the mob, Dave, mass hysteria!” (Riche 80).

It is his disdain for these “dupes” that enables Dave to execute Phonse’s scheme, but it is his dependence on them that leads to the anxiety, guilt, and self-loathing that plagues his mind and liquefies his bowels. Boorstin never examines the psychological ramifications of perpetrating a pseudo-event in *The Image*, but Riche’s *Rare Birds* is arguably a case study of the repercussions to be expected by those who simulate the culture and nature of their environment.

Dave’s guilt upon carrying out Phonse’s caper is almost immediate. It was never Dave’s intention to cater to the tourist industry: “[the Auk] was to be an ‘Inn,’ a place of rest and wines for the weary traveler, and never a ‘Bed and Breakfast,’ a place of poached eggs and tepid tea for the tourist” (8). As the unprofitable months progress, Dave is forced to admit his dependence on these visitors, telling a friend that “I’m mostly going for large parties until the tourist trade picks up” (27). His disdain for his earliest customers following the duck sighting (locals who are not tourists per se but certainly cut from the same bourgeois cloth) is evident even as he lovingly prepares their meals:

Through one of the tiny diamond-shaped windows he studied the table nearest the bar. Two men and a woman. They were dressed in the mock fishing vests, cableknit sweaters and leather patches of the class that chose to go out of doors. You could tell they had never worked a day under the sky. They *took the air*. The woman . . . was smiling, at some bon mot, he guessed. . . .

No piece of salmon had ever been so delicately poached. . . . Dave wanted the table with the salmon to tell her deep-pocketed friends about her fah-bulous lunch at the Auk. (102)

His shame over pandering to the very elite whose indifference almost bankrupted him combines with his guilt over lying to them and manifests itself physically. Even as he is reporting his supposed sighting, “Dave had the urgent need to shit. His guts were boiling. . . . His hands were trembling and he was concerned he would shit in his pants. . . . His shirt was heavy with sweat and growing cold against his flesh” (89-93). He later develops a burgeoning and body-wrecking addiction to cocaine (salvaged by Phonse from “an operation being undertaken at sea,” 52) in order to keep up with his other dependency — fulfilling and profiting from the increasingly intricate orders of St. John’s aesthetes and classy come-from-aways.

Dave's guilt over his deception also threatens to destroy his as yet unconsummated relationship with Phonse's sister-in-law. Although Dave longs to become more intimate with the hypnotic Alice, he fears what may happen if she discovers that his recent success is the result of a ruse: "She seemed to know nothing of the duck hoax, and he would never tell her. He reasoned that if Alice was to discover the horrible fraud he was perpetrating on these innocent, well-meaning bird lovers to simply fill his pockets and rescue his pride, she would think him cruel and selfish" (111). His guilt and shame only further escalate following a visit from the minister of tourism.

Riche's implied criticism of the tourist industry through the shyness and self-loathing of Dave Purcell is replaced by outright condemnation of the culture industry prior to Dave's conversation with Minister of Tourism Heber Turpin: "Tourism. It was the last hope for Newfoundland, to become some kind of vast park, its people zoo pieces, playing either famished yokels or bit parts in a costume drama, a nation of amateur actors dressed up like murderous Elizabethan explorers, thrilling to the touch of their tights and tunics as they danced for spare change. It would never work" (148). That the culture marketed to tourists is more act than actual is made obvious through the scheming familiarity that the tourism minister assumes with Dave when Turpin visits the Auk "to get a piece of the phantom action" (149): "And these bird freaks. Amazing, hey?" There was something conspiratorial in Turpin's tone. 'Did you set up the restaurant out here because of that? I mean, Dave, who would think to open a restaurant in Push Cove? You are a shrewd one, hey? An operator. . . . If the birds weren't here I'd say you would be wise to say they were anyway. I could talk to some people in Wildlife.' Turpin winked" (154). Turpin's devious nature, his belief (correct but unfounded) that Dave is running a scam, and his willingness to aid Dave in the continuation of his confidence game are indicative of the pretense and deception at the core of the tourism industry.

Dave's restaurant and the area surrounding it possess no inherent value in Turpin's opinion until others begin to regard them as valuable. The minister admits that the first time he heard of Dave's restaurant was "in one of those airplane magazines" (153), reflecting a mentality first discussed by Jackson in *Surviving Confederation*: "[Newfoundlanders] had no idea we were a living cultural goldmine until the anthropologists came along and told us so. . . . We were so convinced . . . we started

to warm to the idea" (7). It is worth noting that Phonse counsels Dave before phoning "the bird show" to let "them decide what kind of bird it is. The less you know the better" (Riche 84). He then praises Dave's addled performance on the radio because "they would never suspect any scheme from such an arsehole" (94). Those whom Jackson refers to as "culture-cultists," who seek "to satisfy their spiritual hunger" (1) by witnessing a simpler, more natural culture, must be fed more of whatever it is they find appetizing, and those "simpler folk" who take up their gaze live and die on the cultural assessments of outside experts. Whatever catches the collective fancy of the tourist class is captured by the host, revamped, re-enacted, and imbued with cultural importance.

MacCannell believes that "the underlying structure of touristic imagery is absolutely plastic, so its eventual form is a perfect representation of the collective conscience" (143). Turpin arrives hoping to mould the duck sensation into a particular "Newfoundland" experience. The tourism minister pays his first visit to "the little restaurant that could" (Riche 149) with the promise that photographers will follow, no doubt to take pictures that will appear in brochures and pamphlets alongside other "Newfoundland" to-dos and must-sees. Turpin is relieved to hear that Dave is a Newfoundlander, for it "would never do to have another come-from-away-makes-good story" (151). A culture is quickly being erected around Dave's restaurant and the phantom fowl — a culture that is almost destroyed when one of those outsiders for whose enjoyment this culture is (re-)created questions its reality.

Dr. Hans Speidel, the world-renowned ornithologist who last spotted the Tasker's Sulphureous, comes to Newfoundland and quickly dismisses the "sightings." Although the duck has never been seen, it has already been infused with a particular "Newfoundlandness," and Speidel's rejection of the duck's existence is received as a condemnation of Newfoundland culture. Heber Turpin is enraged and calls Dave as the restaurateur begins once more to indulge in the wine cellar of his once again empty establishment. The psychological and economic depression caused by the "disappearance" of a duck that was never there is discussed by John Urry in "Death in Venice": "Where the place no longer affords those performances of play that visitors are seeking, then it may be in its death throes — a place of degraded consumption. More generally, the place of play where no-one much still plays seems more dead than ever" (209). The anxiety over the second, greater

death of Newfoundland is reflected in Turpin's "panicked nostalgia": "Turpin called Dave in a funk. 'It's an outrage, Mr. Purcell, an outrage! Goddamn foreign experts sticking their nose in it! They are a plague on Newfoundland, a plague! Christ sake, a fucking Kraut coming over and telling Newfoundlanders about our ducks. We'll get our own fucking experts on the case. I have friends down at Wildlife, Dave, I can send them around'" (Riche 202). Dave, a former employee of the Department of Fisheries, remembers too well the result of experts claiming that fish were in the ocean when they were not, and he declines the minister's offer to "verify" the existence of the duck.

Phonse again saves Dave's business by attaching a decoy of the disputed duck on the periscope of the R.S.V. and doing "a few sweeps of the bay" (205). Phonse correctly predicts upon hearing that his "duck" has been spotted that Dave will "have a full house tonight" (206). But Dave is becoming tired of the game, fearing that the future of his business may be in "hawking trinkets and novelties, duck key chains and T-shirts, candy duck eggs and whatnot" (204). As the climax of the novel approaches, Dave is outside his restaurant, armed with a rifle and ready to chase away the very birders who sustain his business: "The birders were beginning to piss him off. . . . He was too reliant on them and tired of sucking up. It was time to reclaim some dignity" (229). His customers, the tourists, become for him one all-consuming maw, devouring his food and his culture without understanding or appreciating it:

This aspect of the restaurant's life distressed Dave. After a certain point, he thought, if the prices were high enough and tables scarce enough, he could serve up steaming plates of shit. The rich would go in for it, they loved to be humiliated. Passionate physical appetites, the devotion to food, the full appreciation of its smell, its texture, its fire and certainly its primary function as sustenance did not motivate the fashionable crowd now frequenting the Auk. Their relationship with food was pained; eating, filling the mouth, chewing was always somehow vulgar. Eating made one belch and fart. It gave you bad breath, became, in the end, only unsightly fat and foul excreta. (134)

Dave's restaurant has become what Urry claims every tourist location strives to be: "*the* place to be, a place to die for, a place that cannot be missed, a place of life" ("Death" 207). Yet the tourists' superficial connection to the culture that they are appreciating can easily turn places

“to die for” into “*places of death*” (206). Once the novelty of the place wears off, once everything it can offer has been consumed, the place becomes “more dead than ever,” its culture consumed and reconsumed until it becomes “foul excreta.” Riche’s obvious parallel between the Auk and a tourist industry that smilingly serves up a reheated culture for consumption is reiterated near the novel’s end as Dave sets out to destroy the wooden decoy and end his connection with this deception: “The curse of the duck, of the lie that had propped up the charade of the Auk, needed to be purged. . . . The duck was trouble, an evil juju, looming forever over Dave. It was his contract with the devil. They had been playing games with God, resurrecting the dead, and if Dave did not soon repent God would continue this torment. Blasting the duck to smithereens would forever end the Faustian bargain” (226). The continued perpetration of cultural events to be consumed by insatiable “culture vultures” (Jackson 6) becomes a hellish sentence for Dave. Both he and his customers are so busy consuming and being consumed by the artifice that no one notices when an authentic and “spontaneous event” occurs (Boorstin 39).

Boorstin notes that the greatest threat of the pseudo-events that feed the tourist industry is that they “overshadow spontaneous events” (39). Among the attributes of these pseudo-events that enable them to eclipse more natural occurrences is the fact that “Pseudo-events can be repeated at will, and thus their impression can be re-enforced” (39). When interest begins to decline, or authenticity is doubted, it takes only the proper placement of a wooden decoy to revive the duck-driven delirium. “Pseudo-events are more sociable,” according to Boorstin (40). The search for the duck is never a failure, for it involves taking part in the most topical of events, and it incorporates dining at the most exclusive of restaurants. “Finally, pseudo-events spawn other pseudo-events. . . . They dominate our consciousness simply because there are more of them, and ever more” (40). Even as the duck hoax begins to take wing, Phonse is preparing for the next great pseudo-event, even further removed from reality: the discovery of “dinosaur bones” in Push Through.

The conclusion of *Rare Birds* spirals further into this unreality with a standoff with CSIS, the explosion of the R.S.V., and the death(?) of Phonse Murphy. All these events so absorb those on either side of the hoax that Boorstin’s lament proves true in the novel’s final paragraph

as the actual, the authentic, the real swims by unnoticed: “Dave walked up the hill and back to his rented truck, failing to notice among the other ducks on the water that day a particular bird, a bird with its wing lifted, its head tucked underneath, preening itself purposefully, a little dandy, a peculiar bird, a wildly colored bird with a ridiculous white tuft on its head. A rare bird” (259). Concerned with creating and consuming empty signifiers whose *raison d’être* is that they can be easily and opportunely (re)produced, the tourists and hosts of Newfoundland culture are starving even as they gorge themselves. Riche’s warning that the real is being lost while the re-enacted is being fetishized points toward a future Newfoundland void of meaning and starving for the outside attention that confers significance upon its culture. *Rare Birds* shows how Newfoundland is approaching this future. Dave Purcell is caught in Fredric Jameson’s “feedback loop” (xv), in which culture and economy continually nourish and devour each other. Dave must continually provide evidence of the sought-after duck so that he can fill his restaurant. Newfoundlanders are also trapped in this terminal loop, offering bite-size morsels of their culture to tourists, essentially “fattening up” these visitors so that they can parasitically live off money spent in the “visual consumption” (Urry, *Tourist* 148) of this “culture.” A snake devouring its tail, Newfoundland then puts this money back into the culture and tourism industry, making more consumable culture, consuming more tourist dollars.

* * *

The culture and tourism industries “saved” Newfoundland by focusing on the demise of a people and a way of life. Yet the “rugged individualism” that was once “supposedly characteristic of Newfoundlanders” can “be used by people to become entrepreneurial pioneers in oil-related businesses” and other modern industries (Overton 14). Through the romancing of the outport existence, the pragmatism that is the Newfoundland tradition was lost. “The pitiless Newfoundland environment does not yield a living easily to the labour of men” (O’Flaherty 4), yet people have been living there for hundreds of years. It is the enterprising nature and ingenuity of people such as Alphonse Murphy that should be at the centre of Newfoundland identity, not the idealized image of Newfoundlanders harmonizing with their island paradise. As

Riche demonstrates, it is this division from the practical promoted by the culture and tourism industries that consumes Newfoundland reality and turns Newfoundland culture into an artifact that is not so much lived as it is performed.

NOTES

¹ On a guided tour of the *Random Passage* movie set, the guide will point out the split “cod” laid out to dry on flakes around the “community.” Unable to use real cod, the film’s producers created the fish from brin bags (canvas potato sacks) and cardboard. In a remarkable oversight, however, all the “cod” are *the same size*.

² In stories such as “Da Yammie,” “The Chopper,” and several others, performer Kevin Blackmore (a.k.a. Buddy Wasiname) talks of mechanical miracles such as placing the “454 four barrel, superglide transmission” engine of a Corvette Stingray into a Yamaha snowmobile — the result being a skidoo that outraced the speed of sound (Buddy Wasiname).

³ In one of the postcards advertised on the Newfoundland and Labrador tourism website, the tail of a humpback whale breaks through the ocean just in front of an enormous iceberg as a kayaker paddles by. Tail, iceberg, and kayaker have all been cut from separate pictures and pasted into this pastiche to create a “natural” moment (see Government of Newfoundland and Labrador).

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