

TWO VOICES FROM NEWFOUNDLAND:  
HISTORY AND MYTH ADDRESSED BY  
MAURA HANRAHAN AND PAUL BUTLER

Two interviews by  
María Jesús Hernández Lerena  
Universidad de La Rioja

MAURA HANRAHAN is a Newfoundlander of English, Irish, French and Mi'kmaq descent. She has a Ph.D. in Sea-Use Law, Economics and Policy from the London School of Economics (1989) and earned social science degrees at Memorial University, St. John's, and Carleton University, Ottawa (1984 and 1986). She is an independent consultant working across Canada mainly on Aboriginal issues through HB Creativity, the research and writing company she owns with her husband, the novelist Paul Butler. She has been a member of two Aboriginal land claim teams, working as an advisor and providing anthropological analysis on behalf of Aboriginal nations.

Maura's work is interdisciplinary, drawing mainly from anthropology and history and, apart from her academic publications on Newfoundland society and culture (*Uncertain Refuge* and *Through a Mirror Dimly*, both published by Breakwater in 1993), she is the author and editor of books in other genres, including biography (*A Faith that Challenges: The Life of Brother Jim McSheffrey*, Novalis, 2002; *Rogues and Heroes* with Paul Butler, Flanker, 2006) and creative non-fiction (*The Doryman*, Flanker, 2003; *Tsunami: The Newfoundland Tidal Wave Disaster*, Flanker, 2004; and *Domino: The Eskimo Coast Disaster*, Flanker 2006). *Tsunami* was a national best-seller and was short-listed for a Newfoundland and Labrador Book Award. With these books, Maura tries to preserve stories that are in danger of being forgotten as Newfoundland's culture shifts from oral to written. Maura's web sites are [www.maurahanrahan.com](http://www.maurahanrahan.com) and [www.writingworkshops.ca](http://www.writingworkshops.ca).

PAUL BUTLER is the author of *St. John's: City of Fire* (Flanker Press, 2007) as well as the novels, *NaGeira* (Pennywell Books, 2006), which appeared on the judges' shortlists for CBC's Canada Reads, *Easton's Gold* (Brazen Books, 2005), *Easton* (Flanker Press, 2004), *Stoker's Shadow* (Flanker Press, 2003), short-listed for the 2004 Newfoundland and Labrador Book Awards, and *The Surrogate Spirit*, Jespersion Publishing (2000). Butler has written for many publications in Canada including *The Globe and Mail*, *The Beaver*, *Books in Canada*, *Atlantic Books Today* and *Canadian Geographic*. He has a regular film column with *The Social Edge* e-zine and has contributed to CBC Radio regional and national. A graduate of Norman Jewison's *Canadian Film Centre* and screenwriter of the Archelon Films and Ontario Arts



Council short film production, *Solstice*, Butler is a three-times winner (2003, 2004, 2006) in the Government of Newfoundland and Labrador Arts and Letters Awards. He lives in St. John's since 1994 and his website is [www.paulbutlernovelist.com](http://www.paulbutlernovelist.com).

The following interviews originated in a long conversation held with both authors in St. John's, Newfoundland, on October 12, 2007, which later crystallized in written form. Maura had just published her book *The Alphabet Fleet: The Pride of Newfoundland Coastal Service* (Flanker, Sept. 2007) on the Newfoundland boats which served to connect the province's coastal communities. This book weaves together historical documents and personal stories of the ships' crew and passengers. Paul was then about to launch his *St. John's: City of Fire* (Flanker, Oct. 2007), a study of the three major fires which destroyed the city in the nineteenth century. In this book Paul includes archival records and eye-witness accounts and he reflects on the ways the catastrophes affected the people who normally did not make it into history. Maura is an anthropologist who has explored, among others, the paths of creative non-fiction, and Paul is a novelist who has refashioned foundational myths of Newfoundland and tapped into the power of its historical figures. Through their different approaches to the realities, the literature, and the culture of Newfoundland, we will be able to discover various aspects of a society that has over five hundred years of independent history.

The interviews roughly follow a pattern in which Maura and Paul talk about: A) the relationship between their cultural context and their sense of creativity, then, B) about their work (the authors give a bit of background about their books, especially for readers to whom they might be new or fairly new), and C) about the issue of Newfoundland identity. Although there are common questions for both authors (they are marked with an asterisk), each author has answered them independently and each interview is given a separate and autonomous format. Maura's interview is presented in the first place.

## INTERVIEW WITH MAURA HANRAHAN

### A) CONTEXT AND CREATIVITY

MJH: Does a novel/a book start in your head or in the archives?

MH: It starts in my head, definitely. It grows out of things that have been inhabiting my head for a long time, things that won't go away, that nag at me and want to be expressed somehow. Usually these are stories I heard as a child. *Tsunami*, for instance, began in my childhood when my grandmother told me how the floor shook beneath her feet one evening. She was holding the baby, my father, and said in her deadpan way, "There'll be weather tonight." Then she went on doing what she was doing. But the waves came and people's lives were changed forever. How could I forget this story? It was a story she told many times, as did other elders in my life. And I realized it was a story that had never been told the way I wanted to



tell it—in book form, as it was. There were a couple of novels that might have been inspired by it (Ken Harvey's *The Town that Forgot How to Breathe* and Margaret Duley's *Highway to Valour*) but then departed from it.

MJH: How does your memory absorb the history of your island? Is it always personified (legends, historical figures, ancestors, relatives) or does it come to you in a more vague shape (generations of people that succeeded each other in time)? Have you found a way to combine the two?

MH: I think it is about the place where people and nature merge, the confluence, if you like, of the two. When I was growing up this was still an oral culture, very rooted in our rural history, especially my own South Coast family but this is even true of St. John's, I think. The fishery still shaped and defined people's lives. We still lived and died by the sea. Nature teaches you who's boss and I think that people who live and work in this particular geography and ecology cannot get too "uppity". Nature, the teacher, is always present. This idea might be heightened in my case because my father's side is part-Mi'kmaq, and Mi'kmaq values persisted to a remarkable degree in the lives of some of my paternal relatives.

MJH: Are you intensely aware of history because you are a Newfoundlander? (in the sense that the past has "lasted longer" here?) Do you need to recover the past because Canada's attitude toward Newfoundland has been one of neglect?

MH: It is not obvious to me that this is the case, although my husband (who is not from here) tells me that Newfoundlanders seem to be very aware of their history. I'm not writing with any overt political purpose. I'm not writing with Canada or Newfoundland's place in Canada in mind. After I wrote *Tsunami*, an Ottawa journalist asked me about Ottawa's and Canada's role in the disaster and I realized that it didn't have one. I just hadn't thought of Canada until then; it wasn't part of the story, it didn't turn up anywhere in the research. The relationship between Newfoundland and Canada was not a strong one until it was formalized in 1949; the island's important political links were to Britain, and our economic links to the Iberian peninsula, the Mediterranean, New England, the West Indies, etc.

As for our history being old, it isn't old really. When you think of the age of the earth and human habitation, Newfoundland is very young, as is Canada, and even "Old World" countries, like Spain. When you live in such close proximity to Mistaken Point and the Tablelands, when you live at the wild intersection of the Labrador Current and the Gulf Stream, alongside Iceberg Alley, you cannot help but be aware of how small we are and how old the earth is.

MJH: How does the sense of place (the idea of Newfoundland, its landscape, its past and present vicissitudes) filter into your sense of who you are as a writer?

MH: I think maybe my reply to your second question answers this to a degree. However, I've noticed that sense of place is important to me; growing up



somewhere with a strong sense of place has shaped the way I interact with the world. Wherever I go, I react strongly, one way or the other, to the place. I felt an instant connection to Greece when I got there (we lived there for a year) —it wasn't the usual tourist attractions like the sea (this was December up north) but something created by the people, the land, the air, and the sky altogether. I can't describe it. I feel that Coastal Labrador is almost a holy place and I always return from there refreshed, healthy and happy. Then there are places I just cannot stand and I react so badly to them I can't stay there any length of time, not even for a week; I once cut short a Florida vacation for this reason, renting a car and driving through the Georgia night to escape.

I have written about other places I loved —Greece, Mexico, Haiti, etc.— but only in short form because I don't have the knowledge to write more fully about them.

## B) YOUR WORKS

MJH: Your latest book, *The Alphabet Fleet: The Pride of Newfoundland's Coastal Service* (2007), has been classified in libraries as sea stories, and it is a mixture of documentary, letters, telegrams, interviews, photos. What were your goals when you started your research? What kind of book did you want to create? What kind of satisfactions has it given you? Do you think that you, and writers like you, who dig up the past and give it a more personal shape, are managing to generate a different notion of history, one in which a more abstract/depersonalized idea of omniscience is ruled out as irrelevant? It seems to me you are managing a middle way between history and story, and so modifying conventional definitions of both these terms within a non-fictional context. Could you comment on the advantages or disadvantages of writing creative non-fiction?

MH: Well, I wanted to tell a story that had not been told and that was in danger of being lost. As we move from being an oral culture to a multi-media culture, almost skipping a literature-based phase, we are rapidly losing memories and our understanding of our history; we are becoming ahistorical, like many people in the world, and this has political and cultural dangers. This is something I am realizing just by writing this to you. Very little of one's motivation is conscious. However, I did know that if I did not speak to the crew members and passengers of the Alphabet Fleet soon, there would be none left and their perspectives would be gone.

The lives of ordinary people are very important but often neglected in history and that is something I want to correct in a small way. When I wrote *Tsunami* and *Domino*, I wanted to say to the long-dead people I was writing about "what happened to you mattered, your lives mattered." With *Domino*, I wanted to honour the shipped girl whose name was never recorded, like the women of the Bible. It was the same with *The Doryman*. The Newfoundland Grand Banks schooner fishermen (& those from Portugal and the Basque country, too) received no or few

honours or accolades. Yet what they did was remarkable. The strength of their wives and widows was astonishing as well. But these things are hardly remembered. As far as I know, there is just one schooner left in Newfoundland and it is privately owned. Robert Parsons, one of our 19<sup>th</sup> century parliamentarians once bellowed in the House of Assembly, “Newfoundland isolated? How can that be? Our argosies whiten every sea!” As far as I know, *The Doryman* was the first book about the schooner families; it was certainly the first book-length narrative. And it was written when there were virtually no schooner fishermen left.

When I was researching *The Alphabet Fleet* and certainly *Domino*, I rediscovered some of the international links, I saw again how Newfoundland was something of a player on the world stage, how we were part of the Gilded Age, etc. It is difficult to argue that Newfoundland was isolated when the seas were the highways, perhaps for women but not for men (this is something I deal with in *Sheila’s Brush*, my unpublished novel). The isolation notion is relatively new but persistent and I am drawn to deconstructing myths. That’s quite fun to do, very exciting.

When I was writing *The Alphabet Fleet*, I wanted to create a book that reflected the stories of these people and also that tackled some of the myths in an evidence-based way. I love the research process, to me it is an exciting thing to read William Reid’s diary entries about grouse shooting expeditions with the Governor and to feel in my hands the order for green velvet draperies for the Ladies’ Room of the *Lintrose*. This kind of material was filed away in boxes rarely taken off the shelves. I wanted to bring it to everyone or whoever wanted to know about it.

Of course, I also wanted to produce an engaging book that readers could enjoy. I am very pleased that my books are used in the schools; meeting children who have read them and are interested in the things I write about is one of the most satisfying parts of being a writer. Also, meeting older people who say, our lives were just like that, is very rewarding. I was thrilled when so many Labrador Métis Elders loved *Domino*. I am not part of their culture and was afraid I would get it wrong but they seemed not to think so, or else they were very kind.

Creative non-fiction is not very usual in Newfoundland or Canada either. The genre is not well-understood. *Domino* was turned down for an arts council grant with the comments: “Is it a novel? Is it history? What is it?” I get novelists asking me why I didn’t call it a novel and historians telling me I’m not a historian, mostly in that passive-aggressive way of academic communication but one academic reviewer came right out and said that academics are not fond of the genre. But, you know, I’m not thinking about constructions or categories or genres when I’m writing these books. The abstract expressionists knew the rules but then they broke them. Jackson Pollack got a lot of grief for this but he was just doing what came naturally to him. I feel that I understand him because I am writing something that comes from the spirit. I just hope it takes a shape that does the story justice.

MJH: \* Your work, in general, focuses on periods of intense crises in the history of Newfoundland and Labrador. In which sense do catastrophes, climatic in these cases, bring to the surface the values and weaknesses of a community? What is it that can be discovered about human lives that face massive tragedy? What is it



that you have both discovered about Newfoundland and Labrador when it was swept away by water, fire, or hurricanes?

MH: Disasters put everything in sharp relief. I don't know about the strengths and weaknesses of a community because that is not my focus; I want to tell the story rather than engage in any kind of self-conscious analysis. And, as I said, things are happening at another level through the process anyway. For me as a writer, tsunamis or hurricane are vehicles to explore other things, like our relationship with nature or the relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. They give me a dramatic structure to work with. They give me some emotions to go with, helping me help the reader relate to these people.

When the 1885 hurricane practically destroyed the Newfoundland and Labrador fishery, people just went on because they had to. Somehow they geared up for the next year and so on. Human beings have to keep going after a tragedy and they do. This is not unique to Newfoundland in any way—it is universal; just look at the Bangladesh earthquake, Hurricane Mitch, the concentration camps, and I could fill 50 pages with such a list. Disasters have effects (the 1885 hurricane was a contributor to Newfoundland's 1894 Bank Crash; Hannah in *Domino* names her child after a lost friend) but people go on. There is nothing romantic about this, it just is. Life longs for itself, if I can paraphrase Kahlil Gibran.

MJH: Maura, you seem to be especially proud of *Domino: The Eskimo Coast Disaster*. Why do you think that the natives are still invisible in Newfoundland? Is your main motivation as a writer to save people from obscurity?

MH: The Mi'kmaq, the Innu (both formerly "Indians"), Inuit (formerly "Eskimo"), and Métis are invisible but the extinct Beothuck are not. The Beothuck are romanticized and glorified in art, music, and literature because they are not here to challenge Newfoundlanders to recognize Indigenous land and resource rights.

Last week I listened to a radio discussion about the spirituality of the Beothuck, their bravery, their close relationship to the land, every cliché you could imagine and these clichés are replicated in art, music, and literature. We have not moved beyond that. Meanwhile the media focuses on Indigenous people's social problems, brought about multiple, multi-generational losses (language, land, the right to parenting and family life [residential schools], etc.) but without explaining this context.

But, in *Rogues and Heroes*, I explained that if the Beothuck were alive today, they would be submitting land claims, blocking woods roads, suing the government—doing all the things the surviving Indigenous people are doing. If they were alive, people wouldn't talk about the Beothuck in reverent tones; they would be fed up with them while quite ignorant of their history and culture. The government would be arguing that Europeans got here first, as they do with the Mi'kmaq. We know this because this is the reception given to the Mi'kmaq, the Innu, Inuit, and Métis. One example involving a publication of record: The *Newfoundland Quarterly* recently ran a two page article on the demise of Okak, Labrador, due to the



Spanish flu epidemic; all the way through the *NQ* referred to Okak as an Innu community but it is, in fact, Inuit.

This is not unique to Newfoundland, of course. The Indigenous people of the past are romanticized all over North America and Australasia while, as the UN says, the rights of the living ones are neglected. I've worked with the Mi'kmaq of Quebec, and the Quebec government argues that the Europeans got to Quebec first as well. It's the old European doctrine of *terra nullus* at work.

Again, any motivations related to these political issues were not in my conscious mind as I wrote *Domino*—or *The Doryman*, which is also relevant. With *The Doryman*, I wanted to be true to the story of my own mixed-ancestry family, as it was told to me (warts and all). With *Domino*, I spent so much time in Coastal Labrador, which is among my favourite places on earth, and I wanted simply to tell the world about the people I met and the stories they told, the lives they lived and still live. It's part of the course that this would have political ramifications because they are Indigenous people, internally colonized and part of the Fourth World.

Again, I am very pleased that *Domino* is in the schools, as is *The Doryman* and *Rogues and Heroes*.

I should note that *Domino* was not reviewed anywhere except in Labrador and in a NL fisheries magazine called *The Navigator* (both favourably). It is the least known of all my books, it seems. (It has since been reviewed in an academic journal).

I'm not sure where this fits in but I went to Catholic schools (all NL schools were denominational when I was growing up). I did not come from a family that practiced the religion to any significant degree but the social justice aspect of Catholicism that I got in school stuck with me. It made sense and had appeal. We spent every Saturday morning in high school taking developmentally delayed children on outings like bowling. We collected and distributed Christmas food hampers, etc. It was more charity than social justice but it was a start. When I think about it now, I see that my whole career, writing and consulting, has been about advancing the place of marginalized people.

MJH: Maura: could you talk a little about your facet as a travel writer?

MH: Well, I haven't done as much travel writing as I would like. If you know how to break into this in a big way, please let me know! I have fantasized about asking Jan Morris if she needs an assistant (her book on Spain is fabulous). I like the way she gets to the feel of the place; it's much more than travel writing and it's something to aspire to.

I've done a few things like an article about Haiti in *The Diverse Traveller*, a prize-winning article about an NL outpost in the UK *Independent*, etc. I guess this comes from growing up in a place with a strong sense of place and then relating to other places through that lens, as I've talked about already. Also, islanders always know that they are not the centre of the world—the sea is there, ever reminding them. It makes them curious about other places, I think.

You know, I have to get off the island every few months. I can't read about NL while I'm here (except when I have to for work reasons) as I get claustrophobic.



Also I have to live away when I can; I've lived in Greece, as I said, England, Ontario, BC, and Nova Scotia. I don't expect or want to spend every year of my life here on the island. I am the kind of writer who needs different experiences, new visual stimulation, change, etc.

I certainly have a love-hate relationship with Newfoundland. This may mean I'm engaged; neutrality would be disengagement. James Joyce felt the same way about Ireland and such feelings are probably not uncommon among writers.

MJH: It seems that St. John's is a city whose history is one of making and unmaking, being constructed once and again and being burnt down to ashes. Even now, the streets near the harbor are all "stored up" again. Would it be all right to say about St. John's that it is a city that, however old, has a transient physicality?, that it could never stand as it is permanently?

MH: Although I grew up here, St. John's is somewhere I have not connected with very much on an emotional level. This is one reason I am in and out of it all the time. I live here, now anyway, for professional reasons but there is not much of an attachment. I find this is unusual among the current crop of NL writers, many of whom want to celebrate the city in their writing. I recently made the point on Angela Antle's show that it's fine to be urban and edgy and cool but, since 1992, we are moving on from our rural roots in a hurry without understanding them. So all we're left with is cliché and mythology which is not useful. You can listen to this interview at CBC ([www.cb.ca/wam](http://www.cb.ca/wam), WAM Interviews and Documentaries, September 30, 2007).

The Soviet-style buildings started in the 1970s, very controversially but you can't beat City Hall, as they say. Welcome to Moscow!

My lack of connection to the city is some sort of reaction to that intangible mix I tried to describe earlier.

MJH: \* Do you feel any connections between your work (fiction/non-fiction) and other Canadian or Newfoundland novels which also dive into the past, especially into historical crises or myths of origins?

MH: Maybe I feel a connection to Cassie Brown, whose writing was not unlike mine. We studied her *Death on the Ice* in school and I remember being blown away by the idea that a Newfoundlander could be a writer. It had never been role-modelled to me (no one in my family had much formal education) and Newfoundland had already forgotten about Margaret Duley, Erle Spencer, and even Harold Horwood and Percy Janes who were more recent. (I always wanted to write). I later read everything Cassie Brown wrote. *Death on the Ice* was about the 1914 sealing disaster. I loved Percy Janes' *House of Hate*, which told the truth of one dysfunctional family in Corner Brook, the offspring of poverty and her twin sister, ignorance, I think he wrote. Janes was a courageous writer who had a big impact on me.

I'll tell you some of my favourite writers –actually it's their books or some of them I like: *The Good Terrorist* by Doris Lessing; Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Chil-*





*dren*; *The Lovely Bones* by Alice Sebold; *The Stories We Could Tell* by Tony Parsons, which really captures England on the cusp of Thatcher and losing itself; Anita Diamont's *The Red Tent*; Emily Brontë; Thomas Hardy; Jane Austen; Truman Capote's short stories; Haiti's Edwidge Danticat; Chinua Achebe from Nigeria; Marguerite Yourcenar; Graham Greene's *The End of the Affair*; and Ian McEwan's *Chesil Beach*.

All these writers tell a great story and offer us memorable characters. So far, I haven't found many Canadian writers who do; I've noticed this just recently when a reporter and then you asked me about it. The problem with Canadian writing is the current fashion for occasionally beautiful but self-conscious word-smithing at the expense of plot and character (Anne Michaels, Michael Ondaatje, etc.) I know this sounds harsh and you have to be brave to say it in this country. Exceptions are Bernice Morgan in *Random Passage* (Newfoundland writer? Canadian writer? Does it matter? Are all writers citizens of the world?) Jane Urquhart's *Away*, Ann Marie McDonald in *Fall on Your Knees*, and Jane Rule who, as a lesbian, might not be mainstream. I do think, but may be biased, that *NaGeira* is an incredible achievement and an original exploration of scape-goating.

You know, I am a bit mystified when people talk about British writers or Canadian writers or whatever because that is not how I approach books. This may be due to some gap in my education so please elucidate me if you can!

Isn't it funny when people say "writing", they really mean fiction. This is not a criticism; I do this, too, obviously but don't really understand why.

I read a lot of non-fiction. I like and have been influenced by Edward Said, Andrea Dworkin, Reynolds Price, Thomas Merton, James Behrens, James Bartleman, Ward Churchill, Winona LaDuke, Gore Vidal, and the earlier, slightly less cynical work of Christopher Hitchens. Ok, enough name-dropping!

MJH: Do you think you are somehow outside the tendency of many mainstream Canadian novelists that use the past for historiographical metafiction purposes (both to create the past anew and to insist that it is all made up)? By mainstream I mean successful novels, both commercially and academically, which are included in university syllabuses partly because their variety of self-reflective techniques calls for a lot of scholarly commentary.

MH: I don't think I am familiar enough with Canadian writing to answer this. You would be in a much better position to answer it than me. But based on the wording of the question it sounds like the answer might be yes.

MJH: There is no uneasiness in your books about bringing us closer to the past or serving us the past straight away (that is why I asked the last question). I think other writers (for example, Ondaatje, Atwood, Findley, Shields, etc.) would feel obliged to use parody to bring attention to their "narrative tricks" and their imaginative manipulations. Do you think you belong to a different tradition of storytelling, one devoted to the art itself and not to theorizations on it? Do you think that the contemporary Newfoundland novel, because it is immersed in a different cultural environment, can do without postmodernism?



MH: I think so, yes, at least speaking for my work. But it is a generalization I don't feel equipped to make for other people.

### C) THE ISSUE OF NEWFOUNDLAND IDENTITY

MJH: Can you tell us a little about your book *Through a Mirror Dimly: Essays on Newfoundland Society and Culture*? What do you think characterizes NL society? You said that the idea of NL community, or at least NL artistic community, was a bit overblown: why do you think that is so?

MH: This book was just a series of lectures for a distance education course @ MUN [Memorial University]. I have actually forgotten most of it and I was young at the time, 29, so I am almost afraid to go back & look at it. Though I think we have to forgive our younger selves if there is anything to forgive.

I think we have a culture which values artistic expression, sometimes taking it for granted and not doing what it takes to support artists, e.g. buying their paintings, for example. But I'm not sure we have an arts community the way it is often portrayed —everyone supporting each other, hanging out together, etc. It may be so with musicians or visual artists, I don't know, but there isn't a single community of writers. There are communities of writers, or groups of friends who are writers or networks, but not one cohesive community. Paul and I have something of a community with our writing workshops. You know that a homogenous society will always divide somehow and maybe this applies to NL writers!

The national media has paid a fair bit of attention to NL writers and the writing community here but some of this is fashion and has been quite patronizing and reflective of the Canadian need to caricature someone, i.e. NL. (The US has the South; England has Ireland and so on.) There is in some of the coverage a failure to see Newfoundlanders as multi-dimensional. CBC often portrays us as all happy, sticking together on a rock in the sea, our face to the gale. Unfortunately, some artists play into this, especially our actors. Hopefully it is changing as people become more politicized. Many young people are way past it so it is generational to a degree.

What characterizes NL society? That is a huge question. It is more multi-cultural than people think, with diverse roots and regions. Official tourism has turned us all into leprechauns, playing fiddles in the meadows, but this doesn't reflect fact or reality. There is the beginning of a backlash against this now. One-third of Newfoundlanders are of Irish ancestry, that's all! Most have English ancestry. Many, if not most, of us have many stories in our ancestry; our people are Lebanese, Chinese, Jewish, Indigenous, French, Portuguese, German, Norwegian, Welsh, and Scottish. These histories date way back. Lately, new Newfoundlanders are Sudanese and Russian, among other ethnicities.

What characterizes NL society? NL is largely misunderstood, cloaked in ideas banged into our heads by Joey Smallwood and other politicians serving their own ambitions more than their people: we are backward, poor, isolated, burn your



boats and all that. These ideas are simplifications at best and have been damaging to our individual and collective self-esteem, ergo every aspect of our lives.

NLs is an introvert society; people will help you but think about how long it takes to get to know people.

It remains family-oriented; try to get a group of friends together on a Sunday when everyone is having dinner with their extended family.

The root or settler population had an interesting relationship to the land. They could not own land or access natural resources in the British Isles so this was something of a paradise for them. But they were Christians and had the notion of man having dominion over animals, etc. Contrast this to the world-views of Aboriginal people. This relationship between the settler population and the land has become rights-based, more so since 1992. Its expression is unpleasant in many ways now, e.g. the disregard for the bogs caused by an idea that driving an ATV (all-terrain vehicle) is some sort of right.

MJH: \* Every Newfoundlander, whether an artist, a CBC broadcaster, or a person in the street, will tell you about the closely-knit familial structure that has permeated the history of NL since the beginning. Is it because the communities were small?, is it because life in the outports did not have any of modern facilities? Is it because this is an island and you feel apart from Canada? Is it because you were poorer and have historically emigrated to Alberta? (Countries with a strong emigration tend to give a lot of stress to family values, Spain was an example).

MH: Well, let me start off by saying that there are hundreds of children in foster homes in this province so we have to take a good hard look at ourselves.

I think the question is premised on other myths, too. Any amount of research into NL history will reveal that Newfoundland was no poorer than any other agrarian or maritime society, e.g. Saskatchewan, Missouri, Portugal. These places may be poor through our current lens but you have to go back and really think about how they saw themselves and how they lived. They weren't poor if their needs were met. There is a notion that the pre-Confederation poverty here was singular. Instead, I've found that there was case, not mass, poverty and that the society was very stratified with the usual mix of rich, poor, and in between. In spite of the enduring notion of NL at this time as a cashless economy, many of the tsunami victims had hundreds of dollars in the bank (1929) or in their homes and these were rural fishermen. Outport people had beautiful household items imported from all over the world via our schooners: silks, china, jewelry, etc.. The mass transformation to a cash economy actually happened before Confederation, during WW2 with the establishment of military bases here. There was, however, only the most rudimentary social safety net, of course, as in most places at that time, making women and children and the ill or disabled vulnerable. The Great Depression hit us hard, as it did most places. The Depression colours most Newfoundlanders' understanding of our pre-Confederation history; the political forces at the time were sophisticated in shaping this but that is a long story. Many Newfoundlanders do not realize that the Depression was global and that our union with Canada was



really part of the general reshaping of the world map after the war.

The stress on family values comes from the land and sea-based economy in which the family was the economic unit, i.e. brothers fished together while their wives “made fish” onshore. Communities were small because people had to spread out to use the available natural resources effectively. NLers once had summer and winter houses in the fashion of many Indigenous people.

Emigration, as you say, has long been a factor: first to New England, then Ontario, and more recently Alberta. Men having to leave for work was a factor in the 1899 election (see *The Alphabet Fleet*) so it is not new and, as you allude, not unique to here. I wrote a column for *The Social Edge* called “Worlds without Men” about rural NL, Mexico, and Haiti.

MJH: \* On October 14, Kenneth J. Harvey and Ed Riche were interviewed at the LSPU Hall. Ed Riche read a fragment from his novel *Rare Birds* where he said that, unlike the predictability and the comfort Nova Scotia offered tourists (gentle landscape and geographical attachment to Canada), Newfoundland was in the middle of the ocean, all alone to cope with the ocean’s dangers, and it posed a constant threat to the tourists’ safety with all those moose constantly crossing the roads. Do you think that, while the issue of Canadian identity is the favorite Canadian pastime (that is what we, European students of Canadian literature, have been taught), the issue of Newfoundland identity is likewise also Newfoundlanders’ favorite pastime (either for romanticizing it, for joking, or for more profound critical purposes?)

MH: This is a good question. I once was annoyed by the Canadian obsession with identity —why do you have to keep asking who you are?!— but I came to see it differently. When they stop obsessing about it, they become just another 30 million North American consumers; they lose that cultural dimension they are trying to retain living next door to the elephant. So it is actually quite useful to obsess about it. They even created an institution to do just that: the CBC, but it is falling down on the job lately, importing too many American programs, being too centralized, etc.

I suppose once we started writing, questions of identity inevitably came up. You know, I noticed that similar questions have come up in Britain a lot lately, remarkably so in the past few years. I guess the British are trying to cope with their relatively new consciously multi-cultural society and what it means and some of them feel threatened.

I suppose in some ways Newfoundland feels under attack with the 1992 groundfish moratoria (which we failed to recognize as permanent and grieve for), the Alberta oil field sucking people from here (and every other Canadian province) like a vacuum, the disillusionment with Canada and what it promised (certainly more than resource extraction, conflict, and Newfie jokes), and the commercialization of our society so that we are like everyone else in North America. In the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century, change has happened at a faster pace than any other time in human history and by exploring identity we may be trying to buffer ourselves against this.



## INTERVIEW WITH PAUL BUTLER

### A) CONTEXT AND CREATIVITY

MJH: \* Does a novel/a book start in your head or in the archives?

PB: I'd say there are themes, characters, and emotions in my head that are awaiting expression and a piece of history somewhere provides the framework through which expression can come about. Here's an example: In 2002/3, my head was very full of issues regarding the use of military force and what makes the use of force seem legal or illegal. It's obvious, I suppose, why it was a preoccupation. The larger and more powerful the "state," it seemed, the less its power was questioned.

A few years before this I had come across this character in Newfoundland history, a pirate called Peter Easton who controlled a good deal of Newfoundland's coastline between about 1611 and 1613. He was a real person, not a myth. What was interesting was that he had been at different times both a pirate and a loyal privateer (loyal to the English crown). Which side of the dividing line —privateer or pirate— he was on depended on several factors (e.g. whether England was at war with the country whose ships Easton attacked, how powerful Easton was and whether the duly appointed powers loyal to the English crown could defeat him, and whether Easton might "buy" a pardon from the cash strapped English crown). None of these factors had anything much to do with how Easton was behaving in any moral sense. In other words, the dividing line between pirate and privateer was political and had nothing to do with ethics.

There were so many parallels with this story from Newfoundland's past and the kinds of frustrations that I was feeling as I watched the news every night that the story of Easton became an outlet, and this is where the novels *Easton* and *Easton's Gold* came from. Easton in the first book is a pirate who doesn't think he is a pirate. He sees himself as doing the "work," fulfilling the obligations —i.e. attacking foreign vessels— from which the English crown has abdicated responsibility. In his own mind, he is fighting for England, and the English king is a usurper.

Later, in *Easton's Gold*, it is 1640, the age of Galileo etc., and Easton is caught up in an era when universal morality was being questioned by science. He is alternately wracked by a kind of maudlin guilt, then defiantly believing he had as much right as any to create his own morality as any deity. This is how Easton looks back on his life.

MJH: \* Do you feel any connections between your novels and other English, Canadian, or Newfoundland novels which also dive into the past, especially into the myths of origins?

PB: Although it may not seem obvious because of the era, I was very affected by Andrea Levy's *Small Island*. Although it is set just after the Second World War it is an exploration of the beginnings of a society —namely British multicultural society. As a story of cultures which think they understand each other, and don't,



coming to co-habit it's also about the birth of modern British racial tensions. I was struck by the way Levy crafted a story in the late 1940s in which the embryo of the 1980s—possibly the time of greatest racial strife—was clearly present. Even though I'm using the seventeenth century as a backdrop I like to think my novels *Easton*, *Easton's Gold*, and *NaGeria* have something in common with that.

## B) YOUR WORKS

MJH: \* Paul, I asked Maura about the issues that surface in a community after big catastrophes, could you give us your view on this too? You have recently published *St. John's: City of Fire*, a book about the fires that destroyed St. John's at least three times in the nineteenth century. What is it like, for a fiction writer, to get engaged in the mechanics of writing a documentary book?

PB: Frankly, it's hard. I get kind of impatient with facts and fact checking. I find that usually a story screams to be told and that I have to keep this aspect caged during the process of putting a piece of work like *St. John's: City of Fire* together. It is interesting, of course, because, as you say, a disaster does tell us about the strengths and weaknesses of community, about inequalities, about the way people view authority, which changed a good deal through the 1800s from the first fire 1817 to the more recent in 1892. After *St. John's: City of Fire* I began to write a purely fictional story about the fire of 1892 (called, for now at least "1892"). This was absolutely necessary for me, kind of like my reward to myself for writing the non-fiction book.

MJH: \* What is it that can be discovered about human lives who face massive tragedy? What is it that you have discovered about Newfoundland and Labrador when it was swept away by water, fire, hurricanes?

PB: I'm not sure Newfoundland is really any different in any fundamental way from anywhere else, except that island people are often forced back upon their own resources. You can see this in the fire stories. Some people left Newfoundland after the St. John's catastrophes but had, say, Birmingham, England, burned down in the same year, many more people would have had the option to leave than was the case in St. John's.

MJH: Is *City of Fire* a study of class differences in nineteenth-century Newfoundland?

PB: It ended up being so, at least to some extent, principally because what had been written in the past few decades seemed to swallow the late Victorian line about who suffered the most, which to the late Victorians was the middle classes and above. To an extent the people doing the writing and reporting (who were middle-class and above themselves) were just more shocked by their own suffering



than by the suffering of people who already lived in conditions which would have been unacceptable to them.

MJH: Your second novel imagines the life of Bram Stoker's family after his death. How were you drawn to that topic? The book is somewhere described as a mixture of biography and dreamscape. Could you explain the sources, or the effects, of this hybridity?

PB: I never realized until I read this question that this story had something important in common with the "Newfoundland" novels but of course it does because it's about a real historical character, a historical situation, and has folds of mythology too. This story is really about fearing the act of creation, fearing what we find out about ourselves and others once pen is put to paper. Bram Stoker created a memorable character and many believe the well he drew from, at least in an emotional sense, was his all-consuming adoration of Henry Irving. Irving was an actor and Stoker's employer and many believe Stoker's adoration of Irving had a spirit-draining effect ultimately upon Stoker. *Dracula* is still a troubling novel because the love the heroes have for their women can turn very violent suddenly, e.g. Arthur impaling the eroticized Lucy, his fiancée, in a manner which is quite horrific. Stoker's own prose seems to be at the mercy of powerful psychological undercurrent which had not at that same (1897, *Dracula's* publication) been much understood or discussed. By 1922, the year in which Florence Stoker (Bram's widow) tried to get the film *Nosferatu* banned (in real life), psychoanalysis was, of course, in vogue. The questions that got me started on the Stoker's Shadow story were these: what might have been going on in Florence's head that she became so single mindedly intent on punishing the film-makers? What might her worst fears have been about *Dracula* regarding what that work might potentially reveal about her husband and her family? And what might the effect of the same fears have been on the Stokers' son? The question is full of dramatic potential. While the historical facts help frame this drama, they would also limit that dramatic potential if I didn't find a way to cut the cord and go into the realm of fiction. One way I did this was to change the names of Bram's son and his wife from Noel and Nellie (historical) to William and Maud (fictional) and to introduce an entirely fictional element, Florence's maid, Mary, who would carry one of the three narrative points of view. She would also represent the new world of 1922 entering the world of Victorian sensibility that Florence still inhabited.

Once done, I felt creatively freer. The late Victorian era seems to represent the very pinnacle of sexual repression, the time when the gap between private and public sexuality seemed in societies like the U.K. to be at its greatest. Bram Stoker himself was an odd combination of the stuffy and the wildly perverse. The most important single fact that drew me to this story was that when Florence Stoker failed to get payment for F.W. Murnau's pirated film *Nosferatu*, she continued a legal battle until the courts ordered all existing prints of the film to be destroyed. Although she didn't ultimately succeed, this seemed like a very clear statement of something, and the one essential image was of Florence actually burning the work



of art created by her husband. This is turned around in the novel and she forces Mary to burn the book *Dracula* which she is reading without permission.

MJH: Why were you interested in the myth of Sheila NaGeira? What does it mean in Newfoundland culture? Can you tell us why you decided to turn over Sheila NaGeira's attributes and how did you do it?

PB: NaGeira, according to oral history and folklore, is the first woman of European descent to have had a family here which stayed here. To many people she symbolizes the birth of Newfoundland's Irish-English dominated mainstream society. According to this legend (and, some believe, history), she is supposed to have been rescued in the English Channel from Dutch pirates by Peter Easton in 1602, who at that time was a loyal English privateer. Sheila had been on her way to France where her aunt was in charge of a convent. But she met an officer, Gilbert Pike, on board of Easton's ship and had a change of plan. They married and stayed on board traveling to Newfoundland with Easton. Easton was going there to protect the fishing fleet. She settled in a community called Mosquito, now Bristol's Hope.

I first became aware of Sheila, the legend, while I was researching Peter Easton, and I was somewhat astonished to find that, despite this story being recorded in the Newfoundland Encyclopedia (a reasonably well-respected publication) as history, there is really nothing to say that she really existed at all. This in itself fascinated me, as did the very real attachment people in the area of Carbonear (where she is supposed to have ultimately settled) to every detail of the above story. I wrote an article about the legend for *The Beaver* (the magazine of Canada's Historical Society) and it became an article about how people create legends and personas based upon their own psychological, community needs. One vital aspect of many societies is, of course, the goddess figure, and many accounts of Sheila stress her role as a midwife and a herbal healer. Both Protestant (QEI) and Catholic (The "Virgin" Mary) had powerful goddess figures in the land from which they came; it was fascinating to me that Newfoundland had created its own.

Another aspect of the Sheila stories is that they tend to have her both as a young woman, and as an old woman, and I became aware of a figure in Irish mythology called Sheila Na Nig, a rather fearsome, very old but vital, sexually active figure. I believed that there was some kind of folkloric connection, whether faint or strong. Sheila Na Gig opened the story up for me dramatically. Finding out about her provided a very important impetus for wanting to write about Sheila. Sheila NaGeira, the undisputed heroine of some of the Newfoundland myths, had already been told. (An author called P.J. Wakeham wrote a story in the 1950s called "Sheila Na Geira: The Irish Princess".) The great thing about Sheila Na Gig—or what that image said to me—was that she was about fear, not heroism. There is nothing cozy about her. I thought, well what if our Sheila was not a heroine who turned into a sweet and much loved old woman after all? What if she dispensed the herbal remedies and knew the secrets of the village, and was, as historically old widows were, an object of suspicion? In a folkloric way this seemed to ring more true to me anyway. We are much more likely to end up venerating in death those who we





persecute during their lifetime. If I could find a way for Sheila to be at once the repository of her society's anxieties, their fears, their guilt, and posthumously, their need to redeem themselves, then I thought I'd be creating both an interesting story and one that would ultimately work nicely with the enduring strength of the Sheila legend now. It's also more dramatic to have a character who is on the outs with her community—as my Sheila is—than someone who is accepted and liked, especially as I could tell the story of a young Sheila and how she came to be dispossessed in the first place; that could provide a nice contrast to the despised old woman living in misery.

MJH: Did you feel you were committing some kind of violation when you turned Sheila NaGeira's romantic, foundational myth, upside down?, or perhaps should I say "inside out"?

PB: In a way I did. There is some investment in those who are enthusiastic about the traditional story, some attachment to the idea of Sheila as a straight-forward heroine. The wedding to Gilbert Pike is played out every year in a kind of pageant in Harbour Grace. I think a novelist passes a point of no return when writing a novel like *NaGeira*. Your inner voice tells you what you must do and you have little choice but to follow it. To do otherwise would render the whole exercise pointless. Finally, you reach a stage when you just have to finish it, and then you rewrite parts, edit, etc., and you just have no choice to try and get it published so that all that work is not wasted. I felt some growing trepidation through this process, especially as I was always coming across people who, with the best intentions say, "Oh, you're writing a novel about Sheila NaGeira. I'll introduce you to so-and-so who has a lot of information about the legend you can use." I felt mean because I had no intention of using any such information which, experience told me, would invariably be someone's family history hinting at a connection with the legend.

This feeling of trepidation is all the more heightened because there is a powerful feeling of a sense of ownership over Newfoundland history, even to the extent that fiction is often not judged by the same criteria with which it is judged elsewhere. I've heard repeated arguments that Wayne Johnston, for instance, can't be a good writer because he mentions Harbour Drive in St. John's in a historical novel set in a time before Harbour Drive existed. I think it's okay to want historical verity in historical fiction but I think it's often taken a step further here, as being a central virtue, or vice of historical fiction. I'm of the opposite school. There are instances when I will deliberately use an anachronism if it serves the story and the theme well enough.

I suspect that, to some, *NaGeira* still is a bit of a violation. I have not been directly criticized but I sometimes think I can sense disapproval in people's silence on the subject. Incidentally, I was challenged at the book launch, not aggressively but with some spirit, about why some of the more charming motifs, particularly the wedding, that go along with Sheila were not in my novel. My only answer is that all that material already exists in play form, in a novel written by P.J. Wakeham in the 1950s, and as various non-fiction accounts and that there's no artistic merit



in repeating it. One concession, which may have been unconscious, was to not call the novel “Sheila NaGeira” which would have led people to believe this was the one definitive myth of the “Irish Princess”. As it is, few people even recognize the name “NaGeira” on its own.

MJH: About your novels *Easton* and *Easton’s Gold*. How did Easton come to your imagination? Or did you create him little by little?

PB: Peter Easton is a real historical character (see earlier answer) and I envisioned him—I did the research but nothing is written *by* him, although there are contemporary accounts *of* him. I envisioned him, and this is somewhat borne out by history, as a sociopath, the kind of figure who might be a brokerage politician in our present era, well spoken, slick, probably capable of great sentimentality, and deep down desperate for love.

MJH: Are those two novels meant to be read from a number of levels or dimensions? I mean, they have a historical dimension, also adventure, perhaps they can also be read as tales of suspense, perhaps they are meant to be philosophical reflections. I know all good novels contain these layers and many more, but could you give us your view on this?

PB: When I wrote Easton I had it in mind to write something fast-moving, and not as interested in the interior as Stoker’s *Shadow*, the novel that immediately preceded it. Because it was such a political story, there naturally was something about the nature of politics waiting to be discovered in it. It ended up being a partial allegory of today’s political world in which morality is the ostensible purpose of foreign policy, while the real reason is financial.

MJH: Both novels seem to be radically different in tone and perspective. Why was that so?

PB: This goes back to the point about protagonists not being heroes. Easton is one of the three main characters, and the protagonist for a third of *Easton’s Gold*. Going inside his mind meant the novel had to be heavier. It had to deal with cruelty, the extent and limits of self-forgiveness, about narcissism, and self-delusion. This couldn’t be fast moving the way that Easton was, although given its themes it is pretty fast moving really. All the characters carry secrets and a great deal of moral anxiety.

MJH: Could you tell us a little about your first novel, *The Surrogate Spirit*?

PB: *The Surrogate Spirit* is about a spirit who initially remembers nothing of his former life, but who gradually picks up strands of memory as he hovers around his former town. He is initially certain that he is, and was, a sensitive, kind soul, but it is with a kind of horror that he watches memories return which show



him to be a corrosive influence upon those who were closest to him. It is a somewhat hellish vision of the afterlife, but one that does hold some redemption.

I react badly to fiction in which the author takes pains to make the protagonist too sympathetic. It seems a bit of a cop-out. If a novel is to expose cruelty or dishonesty then the most effective way of doing this is surely through exploring the interior of the main character. I realize now that this is something that recurs in my fiction, that if I have something to say about oppression, violence, or abuse, I want to do it, at least in part, from the point of view of the abuser. In a curious way I think it's unethical and dishonest not to.

### C) THE ISSUE OF NEWFOUNDLAND IDENTITY

MJH: \* Paul, could you comment on the question, already answered by Maura, about the traditional way of life in Newfoundland revolving around a closely-knit family structure which has characterized the history of Newfoundland since the beginning? It is not uncommon to hear that Newfoundland has lived the same kind of existence from the sixteenth to the twentieth century only to wake up recently to the swirling global world of technology and commodities.

PB: I think it's at least partly the fact that in the fishery people depended upon each other for safety and to get the job done. I suspect that creates a certain set of values, e.g. a high value placed upon familiarity, on knowing a face and being able to trust who you know. But, speaking as someone who came here as an outsider, I don't think this translates into anything exclusive or insular. It's very easy to become part of this familiarity; the only qualification you need is to simply turn up. I think generations of shared risk with the fish harvest, shared work, etc. have created an egalitarian ethic, a sense that we are all in it together, and a sense that the whole is more important than individual triumph. This is quite rare, I think, in "western" societies. There is a cynicism too about power and wealth that I find very attractive.

MJH: \* Could you comment on the permanent interest in questions of Newfoundland identity? Why do Newfoundland writers keep approaching this question in a variety of moods? (See Ed Riche's half-humorous, half-proud distinction between Newfoundland and the Maritimes which I mentioned in my last question to Maura)

PB: I think there is a very profound interest in "our" history which is even more the case because Newfoundlanders have so often felt forcibly moved away from it, e.g. the Commission of Government from 1933 when Britain took over Newfoundland's government after many decades of Responsible Government; and later Confederation. There is a very real and understandable resentment that Newfoundland history was not for many years taught in the schools here. So when there is a resurgence of cultural pride, it comes with a great deal of energy, like something



released after being kept down. It is often led by the arts (or so it seems from my perspective) —many commentators will look to the '60s and '70s as a cultural renaissance here.

There is a lot of anger that Canada Day is celebrated on the same day that commemoration for Beaumont Hamel (Newfoundlanders' position on the push of the first day of the Somme in 1916). So here, I think, there's an edge to it and a sense that if we don't express what's important to us, no one else will.

I think that, referring to the Ed Riche point, a central theme of pride for Newfoundlanders —a central virtue perhaps— is resilience. The fishery and the seal hunt were always extremely hard and dangerous occupations requiring a stoical outlook. I arrived here in 1994, two years after the cod moratorium was announced, and there was a sense that Newfoundland was an open wound... that very hard working, quietly proud people had lost the cornerstone of their identity. It's not like that now and the mood is generally much brighter in the more urban centres anyway, and perhaps it is because this resilience, this stoicism really is a core value that these qualities remain intact despite the circumstances of the last 15 years. There are a great many families who have a member, often a husband, off most of the year in Alberta, or on an oil rig somewhere living a dormitory existence while the family lives in an outpost. The remarkable thing about it is the lack of grumbling for a lifestyle that is really no one's dream. There is still this sense of quiet "getting on with things". I suppose this is the legacy of centuries of making the best out of what there is.

MJH: What has the experience of living in NL has brought you artistically? (You seem to have been mostly inspired by your cultural environment of adoption)

PB: It has certainly given me a sense of the possible. It's a smallish population with a proportionately large university. So the atmosphere —if you remove the baggage about class and "town and gown" that goes along with it— is not unlike being at Oxford or Cambridge. Everyone is publishing something, or studying something. Everyone has an urgent opinion about literature or history. And if you add to that a preoccupation with "nationhood," and Newfoundland's destiny, this is a very rich and vibrant culture, one that draws outsiders in and tends to keep them, particularly if they are involved in the arts. What I've written here in terms of novels is a bit of a surprise, as for the first few years I never thought I'd be able to set a novel in Newfoundland. In the end the fact that it's new to me ended up being one of the advantages. It set me free, I think, from certain constraints in a way that I'm not sure I understand myself. Perhaps trying to evoke a setting you grew up in, is in itself inhibiting to the writer. The onus is to be true to a memory. Newfoundland, for me, exists outside memory, and that could be a good thing.

MJH: What is it like for an Englishman to live in Newfoundland?

PB: It's generally wonderful. Newfoundlanders are very egalitarian people who allow you into their culture easily. Of course, I'd be lying if I claimed I never



feel like an outsider. The intense preoccupation about Newfoundland history, admirable and fascinating as it is, can also be overwhelming when you are not part of the same group, you don't have the same formative experiences. You have to work very hard to play catch-up. The curious thing is that everyone I speak to has such an investment, such a thorough knowledge of their history, and yet people will tell you that they did not receive any education specifically about Newfoundland in high school. I think this is being rectified now.

MJH: In the forum of your website, you regularly call attention to great books, especially to “Newfoundland and Labrador most overlooked publications”. Could you please name a couple of NL books that have met this fate either in Newfoundland or in Canada in recent years?

PB: I sensed that books are terribly disadvantaged in the media, no interesting visuals, few sound-bites compared to music, theatre, and film. They tend to scoop off the most recognizable, visually appealing “stars,” and once that happens they have their ‘go to’ people. Most writers, and therefore most books, end up sinking into the mire of obscurity within months of publication. This seems especially the case in Canada. Books are judged here by what they say about their region; they compete with each other as worthy champions of that region. If your book misses its slot as “a new Nova Scotian classic,” or a fine example of Newfoundland’s “distinct voice and dialect” then it could simply be lost. The media—which is on the look-out for an easy sell to the public—won’t recognize its relevance. The books that have had this fate are too numerous to mention. One that comes to mind is *Filling the Belly* by Tara Manuel (Turnstone Press, I think). Also a few years ago Annamarie Beckel published a fine novel through a Newfoundland publisher called *Dancing in the Palm of His Hand*, a fiction set around the witch craze in Europe. I’ve no idea how well it did outside Newfoundland, and Canada, but one local reviewer here gave it a few cursory lines after much more in-depth reviews of books on local subjects.

I find this frustrating as it feels as though we, in Newfoundland, don’t understand that we can be as much the centre of the universe as anywhere else. The London press doesn’t disregard the release of a London publisher because it’s not about London. Why should we be any different?

