

# SAINT JOHN'S, NEWFOUNDLAND

DAVID EARLE LEWIS

THE stranger arriving in St. John's by plane, or train, or boat, gets a very vivid first impression—that here is anything but a modern city. This ancient, atmospheric seaport, where Sir Humphrey Gilbert arrived in 1583 with three ships to take possession for the Crown, has a leisurely pace of living which is alien to the swift, modern whirl of the average North American city. Life tones down, and the stranger must, from necessity, adapt himself. He will find the business section badly out of date; stolid, antiquated, substantial stores will seem to him at first a sad comparison with the modern, light-blazed, efficient stores of any Canadian city. The street-car system, one-tracked and jerky, will irk him considerably, until he realizes that there is nothing for it but that the car he is in must wait on its little track-detour until the approaching car passes, leaving the track free until the next detour is reached. This tightly-packed, historically-rich city, unmindful of the thousands of foreigners in its midst, seems to be taking a snooze between the centuries.

Far to the east of the city, with its front to lovely Lake Quidi Vidi, and as anachronistic as it looks, bustles the active American Army Base, Fort Pepperell, leased for 99 years by the American Government. These white, modernly-designed functional buildings are segregated from the city itself by sentries. Likewise the Canadian Naval and Army Barracks—both tremendous establishments, which were erected in the very heart of the city, on the residential Lemarchant Road. From any part of the city the stranger's view is dominated by the harbour—where foreign merchant ships, grey, bulky, ugly, lie unperurbed beside neat, trim, camouflaged corvettes, three or four a line. This is a harbor reminiscent of Halifax, and like its sister seaport, it is a convoy stop.

To the ripened historical atmosphere of this city is added a cosmopolitan flavour. One sees Russian, Norwegian and English sailors, New Zealand Air Force men, Canadian Wrens and Free-French sailors—but this is not the first time the French have visited St. John's. In 1696 the French decided to drive the English from Newfoundland, and while the Chevalier Nesmond led a strong fleet to attack the city, a French-Canadian, one *Sieur d'Ibberville*, who was born in Montreal, landed at Placentia and marched on the city, conquering it. The French evacuated

the city after destroying it. Again, in 1705, one de Subercasse set out in mid-winter with 450 men, bent on the recapture of the city. Although an actual capture did not take place, de Subercasse caused inestimable damage before retiring.

Again, in 1708, the French returned, and after capturing the town destroyed the forts. And, history records, in a dense fog, four men-of-war sailed out of Brest harbour in 1762 under the command of Admiral de Ternay. Landing at Bay Bulls, 700 men and 32 officers marched on the city, which offered little resistance. Admiral Lord Colville and Colonel Amherst, the naval and military commanders of Halifax, fitted out an expedition to wrest once and for all St. John's from the insistent grasp of the French. These soldiers landed at Torbay, where the mighty R.C.A.F. establishment is now, and where the stranger to Newfoundland will land also, if he comes by plane. The combat was brief, and the final struggle for French supremacy in Newfoundland had ended. But all this was in the past, and the stranger might wonder if the local people, with such a besieged heritage, do not look at these young modern Frenchmen, fresh off a Free French corvette, with their sailor berets and Newfoundland girl friends, and think of that clear moonlit January 1, 1708, when an English sentry saw soldiers approaching, and despite his alarm saw his garrison fall without much of a fight.

What will catch our stranger's eye on strolling around the St. John's of 1945 is the uniformly drab, wooden, connected buildings—these four-storey ungainly houses in need of painting and seemingly exhausted after the two years of steady, unrelentless blackout that St. John's endured early in the war. Where the city has started to grow, to the north, along the highway leading to the Torbay Airport, the newer houses are more individual and separately constructed. St. John's is a tired city. The complete blackout it endured seemed to have stifled civic pride. Since the war began, thousands upon thousands of Canadian and American service men have exhausted any attempt at public-utility efficiency. The housing and boarding situation is impossible, and St. John's if it had been a Canadian city would have been the first to have been classed a restricted area. The Newfoundland people have taken many of these strangers into their homes, and the legendary hospitality of these people, although slightly exaggerated, is nevertheless no myth—as proved by the numerous marriages of Canadian service men and local girls.

Sailing into the harbour through the bottleneck of water called The Narrows, one sees St. John's rising tier upon tier up the hill which slopes from the harbour. Standing there, head and shoulders above any other building, is the Roman Catholic Cathedral. It seems the nucleus of the city. Our stranger might wonder to himself if this cathedral just happened to be built in the most strategic, accessible spot in the city. But many a Newfoundlander could tell him a strange and fascinating tale—the account of one Bishop Fleming, who in 1834 and the next five years crossed the Atlantic five times—a small matter of 20,000 miles; and how he experienced the hardships and the privations that ocean travel in that early day meant—until he succeeded in getting the grant to build the Cathedral. Not such substantiated history will whisper that the grant amounted to the land that could be staked or fenced in during one day. And this Bishop Fleming himself left a vivid description of its start—"It would be impossible to describe the enthusiastic fervour that has been evinced by the people of St. John's . . . the whole population turned out, some bearing longures, some conveying posts, and even children bearing nails and implements, and in the incredible space of ten minutes the whole space was enclosed with a substantial fence eight feet high." St. John's is, in a way, the city of churches. The beautiful Gothic Church of England Cathedral was built in 1885, and the Presbyterian Kirk, with its central site, was built in 1843.

Our stranger friend, having accustomed himself to the town, must necessarily adapt himself to the people. He will find them super-sensitive, so conscious of every minute fault, because of the incessant criticism on the part of strangers, that they will admit none of them. There is, among many of the elements, a smouldering, deep resentment and dislike of Canadians and Americans. This feeling causes friction at the slightest provocation. Perhaps the most amazing thing to a visitor will be the ever-present, vitally real topic of confederation with Canada. Letters-to-the-editor, editorials, and articles on this are daily occurrences in the daily papers. This is a serious problem of argument to the average Newfoundlander. Probably the fundamental reason is the unstable, deeply unpopular government system now in power. Newfoundland, since 1934, has been governed by a Commission of Government, appointed by, and responsible to, Whitehall. This oldest British Colony, as they proudly refer to themselves, which had enjoyed respon-

sible government since 1855, found itself in such a desperate financial condition that a Royal Commission presided over by Lord Amurlee recommended, as the only cure, such a form of government. These Commissioners, three Englishmen and three Newfoundlanders, are presided over by the Governor, at present, Sir Humphrey Walwyn. This arrangement is, now, universally unpopular. The only alternative that the local press and local people can see is either a return to the old form of responsible government, which has had little constructive preparation, or confederation with Canada. This issue is constantly suggested, rejected, and argued among them.

Thus, without any advocacy on the part of Canada, this question has become a prime factor in the political future of the island. The stranger, finding himself embroiled in a heated argument over Canada's insidious desires concerning Newfoundland, without quite knowing how it happened, will be told how Newfoundland rejected similar overtures in 1867. Although this stranger friend of ours would like to suggest that Canada's obsession of Newfoundland joining the union seems to be more in the minds of the Newfoundlanders than in the minds of any Canadian statesmen, he remembers his manners. True, in 1867 Sir Frederic Carter (then the Prime Minister), and one Sir Ambrose Shea went to the first confederation conference in Canada, but local opposition was too strong, even though these two estimable representatives were immortalized by an artist as two of "The Fathers of Confederation." This feeling was obvious a short time ago when a group of experts, at the Newfoundland government's suggestion, published their findings from an extensive survey of malnutrition conditions on the Island. Their findings, which were far from flattering, were published in a current issue of the *Canadian Medical Association Journal*. Sir John Puddester, the present Commissioner of Health for Newfoundland, and a native, was in Toronto when this article became public, and in a furious interview with Toronto newspapermen made the enlightening statement—"Canadians are always maligning Newfoundland, and you cannot have it in confederation if you go on like that." He found the experts' report unfair, and then epitomized his interview with the impassioned observation that he didn't see any difference between the people of Newfoundland and those in Toronto. The reaction to this, amongst Canadians in Newfoundland, was

wry, and one rather inspired soul was found in print the next day:—

Sir John has announced to the press  
His mind in most obvious distress;  
That we're in the same class  
As Torontonians en masse.  
God! but we must be a mess!

Although the delight of the Newfoundlanders was exuberant, the limerick was really written by a Nova Scotian, under a pseudonym, who saw an opportunity to tease his "Upper Canadian" cousins a little. But the original point of this digression was to accentuate the fact that one of the six men in complete control of Newfoundland's political life had but one reaction to Canadian criticism on a widely divergent matter—that Canada need not hope to shanghai Newfoundland into confederation. Back in 1867, when the issue was violently alive, a ballad was written to direct the people in their thinking:—

Ye brave Newfoundlanders that plow the salt sea,  
With hearts like the eagle so bold and so free,  
The time is at hand when he'll have to say  
If confederation will carry the day.

Men, hurrah, for our own native isle, Newfoundland,  
Not a stranger shall hold one inch of her strand;  
Her face turns to Britain, her back to the Gulf.  
Come near at your peril, Canadian wolf!

. . . Would you barter the rights that your fathers have won?  
No! Let them descend from father and son.  
For a few thousand dollars Canadian gold  
Don't let it be said that our birthright was sold.

Far on top of Signal Hill, which stands as a bastion guarding the Narrows, every day at noon a cannon is shot off, and everyone unconsciously checks his watch. From any point in the city, when fog does not obscure the view, the stranger can watch with fascination the puff of smoke. He might think "I am looking at an historic spot," and right he is . . . for there, on Signal Hill, Signor Marconi received the first wireless signals across the Atlantic Ocean from Poldhu, Cornwall. It was December 12, 1901. A fabulous story, this, full of human fascinating anecdotes—like the incredulous eager telegram sent by the

*New York Herald* to its St. John's correspondent, one Robert Watson—"Your bulletin about Marconi seems incredible. Please be extremely careful. Rush Marconi's own statement. If this report is confirmed by Marconi and we have the news exclusive, we will pay you a large fee, but it must be confirmed by Marconi." Mr. Watson got his fee. This same Signal Hill is where the stranger can see the tower erected in 1900 to commemorate the discovery of Newfoundland by John Cabot in 1497 . . .

The pronunciation of the name "Newfoundland" is a touchy subject with most natives. Americans, Canadians and Englishmen have introduced various pronunciations, with the accent on the first, second or third syllables, but they are politely but firmly corrected. The right pronunciation is with equal emphasis on each syllable. The Armed Forces, not to be bothered with a name as long as that, have originated a derivation—"Newfie"—which is ardently hated by the Newfoundlanders, but which, apparently, is here to stay.

St. John's offers as proof of the hospitality of its homes the wretched restaurants that dot the city. There is not one that could possibly be classed first-rate by the standard of any Canadian city. They close early, are overcrowded and pathetically understaffed. The theatres, which can boast queues nightly, are also second rate, but are practically the only entertainment offered to the average income. There is a new theatre, the *Paramount*, which was opened only in 1944. The others lack air-conditioning, and are veritable firetraps. To try to capture the atmosphere, the picturesque panorama presented by war-time St. John's to the stranger, is a difficult feat. This old and perplexing city of contrasts, where dirty little motor-boats and fishing schooners rub shoulders with sleek, uniform, giant battleships . . . where chic, modernly dressed people are the clientele of rusty, unchanged, unconcerned stores that have been in business over 200 years, and which ignore neon signs and other modern paraphernalia with a shrug of their weather-beaten, perennial shoulders! Our stranger might walk along Robinson's Hill, where, on a fateful morning in the spring of 1829, the last duel in Newfoundland was fought. A duel between one Captain Rutkin and a peppery Lieut. Philpot—a duel wherein Philpot was killed, and the cheering mob carried Rutkin around the town on their shoulders, after the jury, ignoring the insistent demand of the Chief Justice to bring in a verdict of "Murder", found him "Not Guilty". The ironic

sequence to the duel was that Rutkin, out of pity and perhaps a feeling of duty, took Philpot's aged and poor mother under his wing and cared for her the rest of her life. Her son, mad to the point of distraction, insisted that a duel be fought in the first place, and after the first shots had been fired and no one was hit, insisted fanatically that second shots be fired, despite the pleadings of more sane and less crazed seconds.

The stranger might gaze around this town, dusty, drab and monotonous, and wonder how much of a blaze it would take to level it in its entirety. In 1816, 1817, 1839 and 1846 there were just such fires—but the most flaming page in St. John's history was written the blazing night of July 8, 1892, with smoke and fire and tears. And, the stranger will reflect, incredulous, here they are for the sixth time, these endless wooden, connected houses, block after block of them, waiting for their next bout with nature's most cruel weapon. Perhaps, he might muse, St. John's has a Phoenix-complex, remembering Milton's ageless lines:

... like that self-begotten bird  
that no second knows or third,  
and lay erewhile a holocaust  
from out her ashy womb now teemed;  
revives, reflowerishes . . .

The stranger, musing on this, might wander along aimlessly. Suddenly, he'll see a sleek, black limousine slink past over the cobblestones of Water Street, obscuring from view for a moment a dirty old man dragging a codfish home by the gills. A big six-foot policeman (no smaller than the others), more like an English bobby than one of our Canadian constabulary with his fur helmet and long black overcoat, watches a crammed creeping street car ignore its stop and jangle past a group of disgruntled would-be passengers on the sidewalk.

Here, he might think, is St. John's clinging tenaciously to its old-fashioned, simple, leisurely way of life. There is a certain charm in this retardation—a kind of relief for the weary. This is a city where the Canadian and American way of life vies, and often interweaves, with the English and Newfoundland mode of living. This kaleidoscope of slightly strange pictures is a study—this quaintly charming and inefficiently irritating city, with its denominational schools, its dearly beloved Regatta Day, which has been the favorite holiday since 1828, its caribou

emblem, its Peter Pan monument, the most gracefully beautiful thing in the entire city—a monument erected by Sir Edgar Bowring in memory of a little girl, Betty Munn, who lost her life by drowning in the frightful Florizel disaster of 1918 . . .

St. John's, with its strategic position, and its fiery history, has a dauntless record of a people for whom, underlying everything they have ever accomplished, is the grim, determined and frightening battle with a hostile nature . . .