
Jennifer Bowering Delisle. *The Newfoundland Diaspora: Mapping the Literature of Out-Migration*. Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 2013. Pp. vii, 211. \$42.99.

As Jennifer Bowering Delisle argues, out-migration from Newfoundland is both a preoccupation for many of its writers and a condition under which some of their literary output is produced. Because leaving the province is such a universal phenomenon—indeed, the author observes that it is “often expected or considered inevitable” (3)—out-migration serves as more than simply a thematic concern. It forms the signature trope that, when combined with an expressed desire to return “home,” defines the shared experience central to Newfoundland literature and provides Delisle with the foundation from which she seeks to theorize diaspora in an Atlantic Canadian context. To this point, by her reckoning, the concept has been applied too loosely to the Newfoundland experience, and so the author connects diaspora purposefully to five features of out-migration. In large measure, Newfoundlanders “abroad” experience a painful separation, an unbroken connection to the island, and a sense of marginalization in their new homes. In response, they form communities of the like-minded and together regard Newfoundland in neo-national terms (10). While these commonalities are essential to her understanding of diaspora, Delisle seems most troubled by the application of this last feature. Is Newfoundland in its literature depicted as a region, a province, or a nation? Ultimately, the author seems to understand this figurative Newfoundland as a nation, one that transcends its nebulous status before confederation to strengthen its place within Canada and sharpen the features of its creative heritage.

Delisle uses the novels of Donna Morrissey to illustrate the toll of out-migration in human terms, revealing how personal choices that for many are thought to be pragmatic can be pieced together in a mosaic of fictional experience that is both wider and deeper than any individual story. The verse of Carl Leggo, on the other hand, demonstrates the persistence of nostalgia in diasporic literature, as the poet’s very personal observations evoke a series of images that may be read as central to any evolving definition of Newfoundland identity. Though the idea of Newfoundlanders as perpetual outsiders on the mainland sits uneasily with the concept of Canadian multiculturalism, the work of Helen Buss/Margaret Clarke allows Delisle to explore the ways in which identity remains grounded in a sense of place. By embracing multiple identities, Buss/Clarke may acknowledge many attachments in different locations; a similar preoccupation defines the work of

David Macfarlane, who seeks literary spaces where his Newfoundland and Canadian heritages overlap. The poetry of E. J. Pratt is weighed on its authenticity as Delisle revisits the question of whether his verse is contrived romanticism or whether it ever reflects genuinely on outpost life. While she is mindful of his skeptics, the author chooses to emphasize how Pratt embraces Newfoundland cultural traits while also identifying as Canadian, thereby transcending narrow political allegiances and traditional conceptions of nationhood. A more common strategy of resistance is the construction of an “imagined community” of Newfoundlanders in the drama of David French, whose declared identity resists assimilation in Toronto (111).

Many of Delisle’s concerns are brought to bear on her discussion of Wayne Johnston, a Newfoundland novelist who may be counted among the best contemporary Canadian writers. Against the criticism that his *The Colony of Unrequited Dreams* is inauthentic, the author moves beyond the familiar explanation that he reinvents his Newfoundland for dramatic purposes and argues instead the value of Johnston’s prose for shifting the representation of geography away from windswept outposts to the island’s interior. By doing so, Johnston achieves a wholly different authenticity: one that embraces a complexity to belie the postcard images of the province’s tourism industry. Similarly, Delisle finds that *Baltimore’s Mansion*, Johnston’s somewhat beleaguered memoir, twists genre itself to consider both out-migration and confederation, questioning whether the perspective granted him by distance also introduces a contamination to his narrative.

It is clear that the author has chosen works to elucidate the various features that she views as defining diaspora. She has been by necessity tremendously selective, excluding entirely the literature of Labrador, for example. There has been no comprehensive history of Newfoundland literature since Patrick O’Flaherty’s *The Rock Observed* (1979), as Delisle notes, and while this brief survey concerned with out-migration underlines the need for a more wide-ranging work, she has had to spend a disproportionate amount of time in these pages fleshing out the historical background of the economic and political realities exclusive to Atlantic Canada. But my only substantial quibble with her work is actually one of execution. In some cases, as in her discussion of Morrissey, Delisle outlines relevant critical issues and the subsequent exegesis of the texts emphasizes a summary of plot. The work is much stronger in its discussion of Leggo and Pratt, poetry lending itself to a different kind of reading that is less distracted by story. In general, Delisle’s analysis is best when the literary works first tease out but are then illuminated by the critical issues she hopes to employ. She achieves this most clearly in shorter sections of the study, concerned with the work

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of Macfarlane and French, and notably in the longer appreciations of Buss/Clarke and Johnston.

A strength of *The Newfoundland Diaspora* is how it applies conclusions drawn by international scholars working across disparate fields to the province and its literature. The work of American social scientists, for example, helps Delisle actually extend the concept of diaspora, allowing her to move through conceptualizations of nation rooted in the Jewish experience or the development of Asian states in order to engage anew the research of Newfoundland folklorists, historians, and sociologists. Some of their voices, like those of Pat Byrne and Shane O'Dea, may still be heard; others, like those of David Alexander and Stuart Pierson, have fallen silent. That their ideas help shape the background to this innovative study demonstrates the healthy tradition of Newfoundland scholarship that has developed in parallel with its literature.

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