## DIRT AND DANGER, DEVELOPMENT AND DECENCY IN NEWFOUNDLAND

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Symbolic acts of cleansing a province suggest that litter is not all that glitters in Newfoundland's mass-mediated obsession with civic cleanliness.

Poser des gestes symboliques pour la purification d'une province, tels que l'obsession des média pour la propreté communautaire à Terre-Neuve, rappelle que tout ce qui brille n'est pas or(dure).

There is a saying that an animal is judged by the state in which it keeps its nest. This may explain why most humans look upon the pig with some contempt. Judging from the amount of litter evident in all areas of our fair city, there is no doubt that we, the people of St. John's will not be judged very favourably and deserve perhaps to be treated with some contempt.

With these words Edgar Williams launched the St. John's Litter-Busters Campaign in the summer of 1985, a major offensive in what has become in recent years a war against what is seen as Newfoundland's serious litter problem.

Concern with litter and with dirtiness in the province has found widespread expression since the mid-1970s. A constant stream of letters to the editor of the St. John's Evening Telegram, (the newspaper which has spearheaded the anti-litter crusade), have taken up the issue. For example, a "born and bred Newfoundlander" writes:

Yes, I am ashamed of our province, and our people in this regard; we are dirty, there is no doubt about it.

The same person calls for exceptional measures to stamp out the spectre of dirtiness which is haunting the province:

Yes, legislate us to the maximum limits, we deserve heavy fines for we do not have civic pride and we do not know what clean means. Try and educate us too, but show us no mercy—who knows someday clean and no litter may be the rule rather than the exception.

Another writer gave St. John's "the prize for the most dirty city I have ever seen." And the St. John's City Council continually debates the "shocking and filthy state" of the city, arguing that this is at root a "people problem." To the problem of litter also has been added that of "packs of roving dogs" by the Evening Telegram:

Dogs are man's best friend, except when they roam in packs and leave their messes on public sidewalks and open areas.

These packs are a potential danger. The family pet, an adorable creature at home, can become a terrifying savage in a pack.

It is too great a danger to be ignored, as is the public health danger of dogs leaving their messes all over the city.

Nor is the problem confined to St. John's. One letter writer was "saddened" by the "lack of respect for the beauty of the land" and the "atrocious amount of garbage that is strewn everywhere" in Newfoundland. This self-described "Ontario-Newfoundlander" was moved to write:

At first I tried to overlook the rubbish and tried to see all the beautiful things; but it does provoke me to be gazing at a beautiful hill-cliff with a roaring sea below and trip over a pop can or other trash; and the beaches are something else--glass and pop cans all over the place.

Lack of respect for the landscape has been noted by Cyril Poole, principal of the Sir Wilfred Grenfell College in Corner Brook, who suggests that Newfoundlanders are "indifferent to their cultural landscape and...geographical surroundings," and that this reveals something very profound about the Newfoundland character. 7

These kinds of impressions of the litter problem in Newfoundland have been supported by 'hard data'. In 1984 Dave Snow of the Newfoundland Wilderness Society set out to test "the truth of the

oft-quoted statement" that "Newfoundlanders are the dirtiest people in the world."8 Using a "line transect survey" of the Trans-Canada Highway, he counted visible pieces of litter from a car. He had friends undertake surveys in British Columbia, Alberta, Ontario and Nova Scotia. Snow concluded that Newfoundlanders "are unquestionably the national leaders in dirtying our personal environment."

But, like others, Snow thinks that "we don't have to sit and wallow in our excrement." Things can be cleaned up, if community leaders set a good example, and if litter laws are tightened up. Those "not intelligent enough to stop littering" will be "zapped," and we are assured that a big fine will shock "even the worst people into Mr. and Mrs. Cleans,"

A subtle connection between dirt and dirty people is being made here. In 1979 the Evening Telegram in an editorial announced that:

"Anybody who is familiar with St. John's and walks its filthy streets and lanes knows how filthy it is and why it would probably  $_{9}\!$  win the title as the dirtiest city in North America.  $^{\rm 19}\!$ 

And a couple of paragraphs later links this situation with the problem of drunks:

"There is another problem facing this city, especially the downtown parts of it. It is the drunk who makes life uncomfortable for the shoppers and visitors. The downtown drunks look upon every passerby as a friend or enemy and they regard the streets and lanes as one great public toilet."

Dirt and drunks. Matter out of place and disorder. But drunks are not the only wrecks on Main Street. In 1980 Michael Harrington of the Evening Telegram found others. He contrasted the neat potato patches of the Great Northern Peninsula with the populated Avalon Peninsula where dirt and disorder were to be found. 10 In particular, he focused on junk cars:

I don't know what it is with us, but this deplorable habit, in spite of all the urgings and warnings about it, seems to be getting worse instead of better. In the past few weeks, driving round the Bay, and along...suburban roads, it's disgusting to see the number of these ugly junk heaps that still lie along the route, almost on the shoulders in some places.

Dirt and disorder. At a more subtle level, these are also as a threat to public safety, as those responsible for the litter show "disdain" for, and "defiance" of "rules which have been made to maintain a good society." One newspaper letter writer made quite explicit a connection he saw between dirt, protest and violence. Noting that the major news of the day, (August, 1985), was of "mob rampage" in South Africa, the writer drew a comparison with a minor incident at Foxtrap, in Conception Bay South. A public meeting there had got slightly out of hand, and the writer was not surprised by the outbreak of "rabblerousing" in a community which he described as "one of the shore's dirtiest in the amount of litter and car wrecks." 11

Those associated with dirt are thus seen also as a potential danger. And even dirt itself, once removed to places and set apart for its disposal, can continue to threaten the world of order. We can be contaminated by direct or indirect contact with it. The refuse from the City of St. John's is removed to a sanitary landfill site at Robin Hood Bay. Access to the dump is carefully controlled, and no scavengers are allowed. (Garbage, it would seem, is not to be taken from the rich and given to the poor, even at Robin Hood Bay.) But recently it has been observed that valuable resources are being destroyed at the dump, and therefore wasted. When it was suggested that scavengers, (or "conservation engineers"), might be licensed, the Evening Telegram was guick to point out the dangers:

"Council had better step lightly on this matter. Sanitary fill areas are nothing but breeding grounds for disease and if Council should issue such permits it could quite possibly be held liable if the so-called scavangers should contract disease..."

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The editorial went on to say that if scavengers were permitted, then they should be required to sign release forms. Dirt, it would

seem, is inextricably tied to images of danger--how else can one explain the strange case of the Robin Hood Bay hermit?

In November, 1981, a man was discovered living in an old tent in the woods about a mile from the Robin Hood Bay dump. He was taken into custody by the RCMP, and sent away for psychiatric examination. Police suggested that he had been found previously in similar circumstances at Halifax and Corner Brook, living a lifestyle which featured "a deliberate attempt to avoid social contact." 13

A later newspaper report revealed that the hermit, (whose life had been described as "shrouded in mystery"), was, in fact, regularly visited by at least one local resident. This individual was quoted as describing the hermit as "an intelligent, articulate human being whose main desire seems to be to live apart from the standard social system." The hermit's home by the dump was described as "meagre," but spotlessly clean. Seems he had tried living in town in a boarding house, but left for the woods near the dump because he was "mistreated" and "made an object of ridicule."

A "gentle and kind" person living in the woods near the dump, and scavenging. Matter out of place which must be removed, (for his own good, of course). Dirt and mental disorder. The connections are made so easily between a moral and spiritual condition and a physical one.

Now clearly one of the main concerns of the St. John's City Council, the <u>Evening Telegram</u>, and local business, is that dirt and all that is associated with it should not drive away tourists. This accounts in part for the great amount of publicity. Similar concerns in connection with tourism were expressed in the 1930s, but then it was the spectre of poverty which loomed over the land. And it was the "dirty, ragged children," the "deformed and ill-clad people" and "those likely to beg" who had to be cleaned up, or at least avoided, so as not to distress visitors. 15

Newfoundland's latter-day drunks and hermits are of the same genre, one presumes, but in recent years the most sustained and vigorous campaign to cleanse the province and make it aesthetically attractive to visitors, has been on the anti-litter front. Since a massive cleanup associated with the Canada Summer Games in 1977, continued efforts have been made by people such as Ken Meeker of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation who began his personal campaign in 1978. The movement he and others started by getting "respected people...to show cleanliness is a worthwhile goal," has since swept the province. <sup>16</sup>

By the fall of 1981, some 200 communities had been cleaned up, and the anti-dirt campaign has continued to gather momentum, particularly in St. John's. In 1982, the City Council, searching for a solution to the problem of dirt, brought in an expert from the Keep America Beautiful organization to assess the situation in the provincial capital. It was reported that it would cost \$50,000 to "put in place" the KAB system to change public attitudes toward litter in St. John's. 17

Council decided that this was far too expensive, but pressure to deal with the litter problem continued, and by the spring of 1983 had reached a fever pitch. The Evening Telegram launched its campaign by exhorting Council to reconsider its priorities, and allocate funds to clean up the city. It also urged better enforcement of existing litter laws, and even suggested that if public housing tenants refused to clean up their grounds, then they should be evicted. <sup>18</sup>

A response came quickly. May was declared clean-up month, and Council allocated \$32,000 for a "clean-up blitz" of downtown, the money to come from the following winter's snow-clearing budget. The city also proceeded to force homeowners to repair, paint and tidy their properties, a move supported by the Evening Telegram:

"The great majority of residents do not need reminders because they take pride in their property and keep it clean and tidy. It's those who, it would appear, couldn't care less that need the prodding and it is to the benefit of their neighbors. Nothing devalues a property more than having an eyesore next to it.

"If a homeowner refuses to comply with the order then Council should move in and make the necessary repairs and bill the owner 10 lf he refuses to pay then by all means take him to court."

The provincial Department of the Environment also gave some attention to cleanliness in 1983. Free garbage bags were distributed to school children who were recruited to collect litter. And the Environment Minister, after being questioned by a member of the House of Assembly about what was being done to clean up "one of the filthiest provinces in Canada," contrived to have his photograph taken the following day holding open one of his garbage bags so that it could be filled with litter by children. <sup>21</sup>

Continuing through early June a massive clean-up effort was undertaken. The reason? The impending Royal Visit by the Prince and Princess of Wales. A royal visit to celebrate Newfoundland's 400th Anniversary had stimulated a feverish house cleaning for "company from the old country." And the pressure was on:

The Prince and Princess of Wales are coming to visit us. Quické Clean the streets, jail the derelicts, repaint your houses, return your Holiday Inn bathtowels, put a brassiere on Lady Madonna. For God sakes hurryé<sup>23</sup>

Dirt and litter seem to hold particular dangers for royalty. Everywhere to be visited by Charles and Diana was touched by cleansing fervor. For a three-hour visit to Harbour Grace, the mayor had initiated actions which would ensure that his town would be "one of the cleanest in the province on that day." The royal couple also was scheduled to travel to Cape Spear to open the National Historic Park. Accordingly, every eyesore along the way had to be removed. The disposal of car wrecks proved difficult, however, because the community of Shea Heights had no funds for a clean up, and the St. John's city dump refused to accept refuse from outside the city. In addition, the company which had previously crushed and stored wrecks in Paradise had stopped doing so, thus cutting off another source of

disposal for abandoned cars. In the end a large hole was found for temporary storage.  $^{25}$ 

The anti-litter campaign in Newfoundland continued through 1984, and the St. John's City Council passed a new bylaw dealing with litter. 26 But 1985 saw an even more concerted attempt to clean up the city. In April, Council announced the "St. John's Litter Buster" campaign. 27 Some \$30,000 had been allocated to clean the city, the money being earmarked for consultant's fees, research assistants, travel expenses for consultants, posters, pins, litter cans supervision and administration. 28 At the same time the City announced that it was cutting back on the already inadequate street cleaning program in St. John's. The downtown area would be cleaned once a week instead of twice, and suburban areas would only be cleaned once every two weeks instead of once a week.

In late June the Litter Buster Campaign was launched. This 10-week program mobilized large numbers of young people to collect garbage in the city and raise money through sponsor pledges. The "Garbathon" ultimately involved 2,000 young people, and netted 15,000 bags of refuse. The Downtown Development Corporation also had initiated a clean-up campaign in the core of the city with hired hands managing to remove 2,000 bags of litter from one small street alone. 30

Not to be outdone, the provincial government announced in June of 1985 a \$1,250,000 "community enhancement project." This was in response to a proposal by organized groups interested in tourist promotion on the province's west coast. Administered by the provincial Social Services Department, this project employed 350 people who otherwise would have been on welfare. 31

Newfoundland's dirt problem has not been without theorists who have offered explanations for the widely-perceived sorry state of affairs in the province. Cyril Poole, inveterate searcher for Newfoundland's soul, (a mysterious and intangible essence supposedly at the core of the Newfoundland being), in such unlikely places as the

psychology of used clothing and highway gravel pits thinks Newfoundlanders are simply indifferent to the cultural landscape and the natural beauty of their province. He believes, (with Auden), that "trees encountered in a country stroll/Reveal a lot about a country's soul," and that this idea can be applied generally to the landscape. His conclusion is that there is something very untidy about the souls of Newfoundlanders. But explaining the situation is difficult. 32

Poole opts for a comparative approach, wondering why England and Ireland could be such tidy lands, while those descendents of the tidy English and Irish who settled Newfoundland could show so little concern for landscape aesthetics. It may be as well that this is as far as he goes, because following the line of argument developed in this essay, "The Soul of Newfoundlander," he might have looked for environmental or occupational influences on attitudes. And he might have argued that, given the poverty of the country and the attention that had to be directed towards scraping a living, people did not feel inclined to turn their attention to higher things. 33

If he had followed this line of investigation, it probably would have taken him to the kind of explanation for litter offered by the CBC's Ken Meeker: "I am convinced that you can apply a theory—that the amount of litter varies inversely with the level of economic security achieved." 34

Meeker's connection between level of economic development and cleanliness is not uncommon. Consider this quotation:

"Cleanliness is another instinct which has grown up since savage time. Primitive peoples have no dislike of dirt. They are naturally filthy. In higher peoples the instinct of cleanliness affects not only their persons, but extends to their homes, streets, fields, places of business, etc."

This statement, (outrageous, but central to the line of reasoning being considered), is from J. Howard Moore's <u>Savage Survivals</u>: The <u>Story of the Race Told in Simple Language</u>. In it, Moore outlines a theory of human development through stages, from savagery to

civilization. In his discussion of the "moral ideas of savages," he suggests that the earliest human virtues to develop were those useful to the preservation of the individual and the tribe---courage, loyalty, endurance, social feeling, desire for praise, and dread of blame. After that the "personal virtues" of temperance, prudence, modesty, industry, self-control, and cleanliness developed. Somewhat later still, the virtues of humanity, such as justice and charity evolved. According to this theory, some savage instincts may survive in higher peoples due to the fact that "our natures are not modernized," remaining adapted to "a world that has passed away." But such instincts are to be regarded as "vestigal" features which we should "definitely turn our backs on...in our efforts to advance towards a Better World."

Moore thus establishes, (to his satisfaction, at least), a connection between a low level of development and "no dislike of dirt." For savages the "personal virtues" are absent. They are not only dirty, however, but impulsive, passionate, childlike, weak-willed and very much subject to the "loafing instinct." "The savage lives from hand to mouth." "The savage is not an energetic animal." "The savage has no concern for cleanliness." The connections are all made, low intelligence, poverty, dirtiness and laziness. The savage is judged by the standards of self-defined higher people, and found wanting on all counts.

Moore's theory about cleanliness remains quite widespread, with roots in the common wisdom of the 19th century. Dr. Paley and Samuel Smiles both subscribed to this theory. The former, according to Smiles, was accustomed to direct the attention of travellers in foreign countries to the condition of the people "as respects cleanliness and the local provisions for the prevention of pollution." This, he claimed, would provide great insights into the people's "habits of decency, self-respect, and industry, and into their moral and social condition generally." The argument is that "people are cleanly in proportion as they are decent, industrious, and self-respecting." Here cleanliness becomes the prime indicator of the moral, spiritual and

economic condition of people. Samuel Smiles' essay on cleanliness in which Dr. Paley's remarks are summarized provides a further elaboration of this theme. Smiles (1812-1904) is best known for his book, Self-Help, published in 1859. This work is generally concerned with the themes of self-betterment, thrift, and self-help, being part of what Eric Hobsbawm calls "a moral and didactic literature of middle class radicalism." His concern with cleanliness is central to his thinking:

Cleanliness is more than wholesomeness. It furnishes an atmosphere of self-respect, and influences the moral condition of the entire household. It is the best exponent of the spirit of Thrift. It is to the economy of the household what hygiene is to the human body. It should preside at every detail of domestic service. It indicates comfort and well-being. It is among the distinctive attributes of civilization, and marks the progress of nations.

Thus "unclean people are uncivilized." And in characteristic nineteenth century fashion, he extends this idea to connect dirt with a social, moral and political threat:

The dirty classes of the great towns are invariably the "dangerous classes" of those towns. And if we would civilize the classes yet uncivilized, we must banish dirt from among them.

It was in this vein that many of the social explorers and missionaries in the nineteenth century worked, seeing their task as one of pouring Bible truths into the hearts of the slums in order to cleanse both body and spirit. 41

Smiles gives dirt a strange power over us. It "feeds upon human life...destroying it." It makes children "fretful, impatient, and bad-tempered." It degrades men and makes them "reckless." It, therefore, pollutes the mind as well as the body. "There can be little purity of mind where the person is impure." We are also informed that dirt "has an affinity with indulgence and drunkenness." The dirty classes are the drunken classes, those prone to seek a refuge from life in the "stupefaction of beer, gin, and opium." Thus dirt becomes a metaphor for moral and political threat of the dangerous

classes. And achieving a state of cleanliness is equated with the creation of order, and with moral reform. According to Smiles, "purity of thought and feeling results from habitual purity of body." In order to achieve "purity of mind," the body as the "temple of the soul" must be "cleansed and purified." Accordingly, Smiles argues that one of the "most moral things a man, in common senses, has in his power to do" is to strip and bathe emerging from the water as a "purer and better man." The skin, cleaned of every "foreign speck of imperfection" would then "radiate in thee with cunning symbolic influences to thy very soul." Cleanliness is equated with civilization, perfection, self-respect, industry, fine virtues, decency, delicacy, temperance, purity and order. Dirt means danger, drunkenness, indulgence, stupefaction, depression, impurity, lack of civilization and disorder.

In this light it is worth thinking about "Newfie" jokes.

Gerald Thomas has identified some of the major characteristics attributed to Newfoundlanders in these jokes. 42 They are stupidity, poverty, laziness and dirtiness. Such jokes contain a set of judgements passed upon what is viewed as an economically and socially backward group of people by those who are more advanced.

How do you get a Newfoundlander out of the back garden? Put the garbage in the front.

How do you get a Newfoundlander out of the bathtub? Put some water in it.

They operate with the same set of assumptions as Dr. Paley, Samuel Smiles and most of Newfoundland's current anti-litter enthusiasts. Dirt, pollution and litter are not seen as the outcome of civilization or industrial development or consumer society, but as related to backwardness. And such views are powerful. They continue to be perpetuated in all manner of ways.

In the summer of 1980, Playboy Productions was in Newfoundland filming Farley Mowat's A Whale for the Killing. 43 They chose Petty

Harbour for much of the filming, and in the quest for authenticity they littered the community with car wrecks and assorted junk. Old tires, tin cans and broken bottles created the right atmosphere for the film, that is, one of abandon, decay, disintegration and disorder. And since the film is about the killing of a whale by 'village cowboys', and the indifference of the community to this, the setting is perfect. The people do not care about the landscape and nature. They live in a dump. The message is that you can not expect civilized behaviour from them, or concern for the aesthetics of nature. Again the connection between dirt, disorder and violence is maintained.

According to anthropologist Mary Douglas, dirt is matter out of place. 44 And to understand the problem of dirt we need to approach it through order. This notion can help us appreciate some of the recent concerns with litter and dirt in Newfoundland. For many, dirt clearly represents disorder. This is, however, not just physical disorder. It is also moral and political. Dirt represents a danger for those whose narrow world it threatens to defile and disrupt. And this world is generally one of hard lines and rigid boundaries, of strong assumptions about human behaviour and strict judgements about what is right and wrong according to a morality of the Samuel Smiles type. It is a world at one with itself, unpolluted by junk cars, drunks, hermits, or things that go bump in the night.

There is a kind of dirtiness which is frowned on, rather in the way that dirty underwear is frowned upon, by those who regard themselves as morally superior. And it is at this level that many of the statements about dirt cited in this essay operate.

Dirty people are, in the words of one nineteenth century observer, made the "scapegoats of a thousand pollutions." Meanwhile, at another level, the real problem of dirt and disorder increase. Pollution gets worse, causing a variety of health problems and environmental protection measures are removed to encourage investment. Cuts in government funding limit street cleaning and garbage collection. Increasing unemployment and poverty lower living

standards and cause destitution. And frustration and anger rise while moralists engage in what are essentially symbolic acts of cleansing.

## Notes

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- "It's a 'people problem'," Evening Telegram, May 6, 1983.
  "Follow Torbay example," Evening Telegram, June 1, 1983. 5.
- 6. "Saddened by lack of respect for scenery," Evening Telegram, August 10, 1978.
- 7. "Convocation told Newfoundlanders indifferent to cultural
- landscape," <u>Evening Telegram</u>, June 1, 1981. Dave Snow, "Newfoundlanders: The little 8. The litter kingsé," Evening Telegram, November 24, 1984.
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- "Our dirty city," Evening Telegram, July 7, 1979.

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- 16. "Economic status blamed for litter problem here," Evening Telegram, August 21, 1981.
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  "Department will provide bags for spring clean-up project," 21. Evening Telegram, May 18, 1983; "Okay, Let's fill this bag," Evening Telegram, May 19, 1983.
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  "Clean up of wrecks planned before visit of royal couple," 25. Evening Telegram, June 4, 1983.
- 26. "Clean the streets," Evening Telegram, June 15, 1984; "The
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  "Keeping the city clean," Evening Telegram, April 10, 1985;
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"Community enhancement project to provide 350 jobs on west 31.

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Poole, ibid., Royal Commission, and op. cit., footnote 16. 33.

34. Meeker, op. cit., footnote 16.

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