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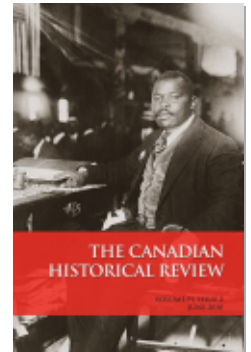
Revisiting Fence Building: Keith Matthews and Newfoundland Historiography

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Revisiting Fence Building: Keith Matthews and Newfoundland Historiography

JEFF A. WEBB

Abstract: *In 1965 Memorial University recruited the young historian Keith Matthews, hoping he would both conduct research on the West of England–Newfoundland fishery and collect archival material for the university. He fulfilled this dual mandate, and his work was an important part of an important historiographic shift. Matthews’s break with a 175-year-old interpretation was marked by a highly original essay, ‘Historical Fence Building,’ which subsequent historians have read back into his 1968 thesis. This essay examines his training and the context at Memorial that shaped his career, arguing that because of the persuasiveness of Matthews’s later historiographic critique the continuity between his thesis and earlier works is greater than is often recognized.*

Keywords: Newfoundland, historiography, Matthews, Memorial

Résumé : *En 1965, l’Université Memorial de Terre-Neuve a recruté le jeune historien Keith Matthews dans l’espoir qu’il effectue de la recherche sur la pêche à Terre-Neuve et l’Ouest de l’Angleterre (West of England – Newfoundland Fishery) et qu’il collige du matériel pour les archives de l’université. Il a bien rempli ce double mandat, et son travail a formé une grande partie d’un déplacement historiographique important. Rompant avec une tradition vieille de 175 ans, Keith Matthews a rédigé un essai hautement original, « Historical Fence Building », que les historiens subséquents ont lié directement à sa thèse de 1968. Le présent essai examine sa formation et le contexte à Memorial qui ont été à la base de sa carrière, et fait valoir que, en raison du pouvoir de persuasion de la critique historiographique ultérieure de l’oeuvre, la continuité entre la thèse et les travaux antérieurs de l’auteur est beaucoup plus marquée qu’on ne le reconnaît souvent.*

Mots clés : Terre-Neuve, historiographie, Matthews, Memorial

Keith Matthews (1938–84) was a pivotal figure in Newfoundland historiography and an important contributor to the development of a research infrastructure at Memorial University. In the two decades after Newfoundland joined the Canadian federation, the university established an agenda of research and archival collection intended

to foster, preserve, and explore the culture and history of the new province. One of the key people in this movement was George Story, who recognized Matthews's potential both as a scholar and as someone who could identify archival collections in Britain that were relevant to Newfoundland's history. Memorial funded Matthews's graduate work and his archival collecting, and these investments paid dividends in his role in fostering maritime and Newfoundland history. Matthews's inductive approach, and the career path Story set him on, contributed to his recognition and rejection of a fundamental interpretation in the earlier historical writing on Newfoundland. His DPhil thesis helped shift the explanation of the island's pattern of development away from one based upon political struggles between competing economic interests in England (which he dubbed the 'conflict thesis') toward the nature of the economy and environment.¹ Matthews's subsequent essay 'Historical Fence Building: A Critique of the Historiography of Newfoundland' became an almost obligatory reference for those engaging with the historiography of the island, and scholars have described it as 'seminal,' a 'watershed,' and a 'starting point' for inquiry.² Fleshing out the analysis of an idea that had germinated in his thesis, the essay provided the scale to measure his break with the established interpretation; he argued that there had been a continuity in historical explanation that ran from John Reeves in 1793 to twentieth-century works such as that of Harold Innis.³ Matthews claimed a privileged place for his own thesis by implying that his conclusions were based upon careful archival research, while arguing that earlier historians had erred by uncritically relying on their predecessors' interpretations. More than four decades after Matthews defended his

- 1 On Matthews's place in the study of Newfoundland history, see Jerry Bannister, "'A Species of Vassalage": The Issue of Class in the Writing of Newfoundland History,' *Acadiensis* 24, no. 1 (Autumn 1994): 134–44; Peter Neary, 'The Writing of Newfoundland History: An introductory Survey,' in *Newfoundland in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries: Essays in Interpretation*, ed. James Hiller and Peter Neary (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1980), 9.
- 2 For a characterization of the essay as 'seminal,' see Peter E. Pope, *Fish into Wine: The Newfoundland Plantation in the Seventeenth Century* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), vi; Bannister judged it a 'watershed critique of the traditional historiography,' in Jerry Bannister, *Rule of the Admirals: Law, Custom, and Naval Government in Newfoundland, 1699–1832* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003), 27. O'Flaherty described it as a 'highly original paper' and gave it credit as 'the starting point for my own investigations in this area.' See Patrick O'Flaherty, *The Rock Observed: Studies in the Literature of Newfoundland* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1979), 196n10.
- 3 John Reeves, *History of the Government of the Island of Newfoundland ...* (London, 1793); Harold Innis, *The Cod Fisheries: The History of an International Economy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1940).

dissertation at Oxford and presented 'Fence Building' to a meeting of the Canadian Historical Association, it is worth examining both the context and the nature of his disruption of the 175-year-old narrative. Revisiting that essay reveals that scholars have erroneously read his rejection of the conflict thesis in the 'Fence Building' essay back into his earlier thesis; his doctoral work shared more with that of his predecessors than Matthews later implied. In the thesis he concluded that there had been no effective prohibition on settlement, but it was not until the later essay that he set out an explanation for the error he saw in the dominant tradition of writing about Newfoundland's history. The essay reveals the extent to which by 1971 he had rejected the 'constitutional' tradition of imperial history within which he had actually written his thesis.

In 1965 Keith Matthews, a twenty-seven-year-old man from Plympton, Devon, took his bachelor's degree at Oxford. Random chance plays a large role in people's lives, and he was about to be recruited to teach Newfoundland history at Memorial University of Newfoundland. During the 1940s Alan M. Fraser had taught constitutional and diplomatic history of Newfoundland at Memorial University College, an approach that reflected the dominant historical traditions of the day. Not long after Newfoundland joined Canada, the Newfoundland-born political scientist M.O. Morgan, a former Rhodes scholar, proposed that the newly degree-granting university establish research on Newfoundland's society, culture, and history. Memorial hired faculty and created the Institute of Social and Economic Research (ISER) to fund research. Among the scholars recruited was Gordon Rothney, a Canadian-born and University of London-trained historian who had written on the diplomatic history of fisheries. He was a formative figure in the writing of Newfoundland history at the university. He helped establish what became the provincial archives and set individual graduate students the task of writing on short periods of nineteenth-century political history, which he hoped would one day culminate in a synthesis.⁴ When Rothney left to take up an appointment at another university, one of his students, Leslie Harris, a New-

4 Melvin Baker, 'Memorial University's Role in the Establishment of a Provincial Archive in 1960,' *Newfoundland Studies* 9, no. 1 (Spring 1993), 86-7; Melvin Baker, 'Newfoundland Studies,' *Encyclopedia of Newfoundland and Labrador* (St John's: Cuff, 1993), 4:67-8. Rothney pointed out that Field had written on the period 1638-1713, and Paterson covered 1713-1763, so 'the purpose of the present work is to add one more chapter to the comprehensive "History of Newfoundland" which, it is to be hoped, will some day be compiled.' G.O. Rothney, 'The History of Newfoundland and Labrador 1754-1783' (MA thesis, University of London, 1934), 2-3.

foundlander trained in London, taught both Newfoundland and Asian history. In the fall of 1964 Morgan, then Dean of Arts and Science, wrote the eminent lexicographer George M. Story, who was then in Oxford taking a sabbatical from Memorial's English Department. Morgan sent a list of positions that needed to be filled, and asked Story to 'keep his ear to the ground' for possible faculty members.⁵

The intellectual interests of Story – a native of St John's who trained at McGill and Oxford – included literature, history, bibliography, and oral culture, and he had a passion for collecting that culminated in the *Dictionary of Newfoundland English*.⁶ He had an agenda for research on Newfoundland, and a strategy for faculty recruitment, similar to Morgan's. Story wanted to hire young people who would collect Newfoundland-related archival and oral cultural material for the university, and he favoured recruiting in Britain, since much archival material on Newfoundland remained in British repositories. He believed that using personal connections to select promising scholars would result in hiring better faculty members than would general job advertisements. If young bright scholars became part of an exciting research community at Memorial, he believed, they would also be less likely to leave for higher salaries elsewhere, as some faculty members at the university had already done. Story used his personal connections (he knew historians such as Hugh Trevor-Roper) to find promising young scholars whom he then tried to entice to work on Newfoundland research. 'There's enough material over here to keep a dozen hard-working scholars going full time simply collecting material,' Story reported, but he expressed disappointment that most 'English academics are petrified in conventional studies' and there were few 'students of the kind I would like to see coming to Newfoundland.' There was an exception:

His name is Keith Matthews. Born in Devonshire of very humble family; aged about 26; discovered by Ruskin College here, where he read for the University diploma in Political Science and Economics; did so well that Jesus College gave him an Exhibition, and he is now about to take Modern History Schools. He is a sure bet for a brilliant first, and will be going on to do a D.Phil., probably on some kind of grant from St. Anthony's. I've had several chats with him, and the result is that he is going to do his dissertation on the

5 M.O. Morgan to George Story, 5 Nov. 1964, 'Report on Prospective Faculty Members – G.M. Story (at Oxford 1965),' box F-3, President's Office, Memorial University of Newfoundland (MUN).

6 G.M. Story, W.J. Kirwin, and J.D.A. Widdowson, *Dictionary of Newfoundland English* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1982).

West Country–Newfoundland fishery, probably a socio-economic history ... It occurred to me that Matthews with this subject is the very kind of man the Institute should be interested in ... This chap is like a young Harold Wilson – a razor sharp mind, immense capacity for work, plenty of self-assurance together with an attractive West Country bluntness and honesty. He is going to do some important work in history.⁷

Story and Matthews had been introduced by Arthur Pedley, an acquaintance of Story's and a member of the same college as Matthews. After a conversation in a coffee shop, Matthews returned home to tell his wife that they were moving to Newfoundland. Matthews noted that the two-year fellowship that Story was offering him would be insufficient to complete his thesis. That prompted Story to recommend to Morgan that the offer include a third year of funding to teach in St John's. Story had not at that point told Matthews that he hoped the young man would identify records that could be microfilmed for the provincial archives while researching his thesis.⁸ Matthews may not have known it, but he was being hired as an archival collector as much as a teacher. Morgan offered Matthews the fellowship and ISER provided research funds to aid him in copying documents for Newfoundland.⁹ There would also be a 'lightened teaching load to enable him to complete this rather important project' when his two-year residency requirement was fulfilled.¹⁰ Within three months of meeting him, Story reported that even before his admission to Jesus College, which took effect 1 July, Matthews was 'fresh and vigorous from Schools, is already hard at work ... he is a bit of a wonder and already has compiled a massive bibliography to start work on.'¹¹ For Story, compiling a bibliography was not preliminary to research and writing; it was, itself, an important intellectual act. Story recommended several appointments that year that shaped the university over the next thirty years, but none fulfilled Story's dual mandate of scholarship and archival collection more than the working-class man from Devon.

7 Story to Morgan, 14 Mar. 1965, 'Report on Prospective Faculty Members – G.M. Story (at Oxford 1965),' box F-3, President's Office, MUN.

8 Story to Morgan, 9 April 1965, 'Dean of Arts – History Dept. 1971,' box 3, ISER files, Office of the President, MUN.

9 Morgan to Matthews, 25 June 1965, file 'Dean of Arts – History Department 1971,' box 3, ISER files, Office of the President, MUN.

10 Morgan to Story, 23 Mar. 1965, 'Report on Prospective Faculty Members – G.M. Story (at Oxford 1965),' box F-3, President's Office, MUN.

11 Story to Morgan, 16 June 1965, 'Report on Prospective Faculty Members – G.M. Story (at Oxford 1965),' box F-3, President's Office, MUN.

Matthews had indeed come from a humble family; several generations of his ancestors had been agricultural labourers, and his father had a modest salary as an artificer in the Royal Navy. As a physically small boy from a poor family in a predominantly middle-class neighbourhood during the war and postwar harsh economic times, he developed a driving ambition and work ethic. Aspiring to be a professional musician, he quit school at the age of fifteen for a career as a jazz pianist in London. That was interrupted when he was drafted into the British Army. He spent most of three years stationed in Cyprus, where he was assigned as a company clerk after doing well in the army's standard IQ test. An officer saw promise in him and encouraged the young man to finish his schooling. After being discharged from the Army and working at a couple of jobs, Matthews attended Ruskin College, which was not a degree-granting institution but catered to working-class students who lacked the qualifications to get into a university. Success at Ruskin enabled him to take a BA at Jesus College, which was part of Oxford University, and to feel secure enough to marry. He had planned to study the National Health Service for a graduate degree but abandoned that and committed to moving to St John's after meeting Story. It is little wonder that he accepted the £1200 ISER fellowship (when Nuffield and St Anthony's colleges were offering between £850 and £900).¹² The offer from Memorial gave him economic security and allowed him to study the heritage of Devon, about which he cared deeply. In what must have appealed to the boy from Plympton, it allowed him to earn a living studying ships. The conversations with Story, an elegant and erudite man, were also enough for Matthews to realize that moving to Newfoundland would give him a chance to distinguish himself.¹³

Matthews's graduate supervision was taken on by A.F. 'Freddie' Madden, who maintained the older tradition of constitutional history in Oxford of the 1960s at a time when most other imperial historians wrote on the dependent empire rather than the commonwealth. He encouraged Matthews to select important 'constitutional' documents on Newfoundland history for inclusion in his own publications, even though, Matthews reported, most historians of empire were interested in Africa and Asia in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and among Oxford scholars at that time 'even the word "Empire" seems

12 Story to Morgan, 9 Apr. 1965, 'Dean of Arts – History Dept 1971,' box 3, ISER files, Office of the President, MUN.

13 I thank Keith Matthews Jr (interviewed in St John's 13 May 2009) and Kay Matthews (interviewed 21 Sept. 2009) for discussing Keith Matthews's life and work.

to have sinister undertones.’¹⁴ Madden, a colleague of his later noted, was also unusual in that he continued to write narratives of long periods of time rather than take a short period and write an analytical piece that avoided narrative, as one of the most influential British historians, Louis Namier, had done.¹⁵ For Madden the history of the commonwealth continued to be important since it both informed British history and united historians working in disparate countries.¹⁶ Constitutional historians had something to say that seemed particularly relevant to those interested in Newfoundland – a colony that had developed representative institutions later than most other parts of British North America and remarkably had abandoned responsible government in 1934. Newfoundland’s political history seemed, to its historians, exceptional. British constitutional historians and their Newfoundland counterparts continued to share with their Whig historian forebears an emphasis upon legal developments, such as the charters of colonies. (It is noteworthy that the other Newfoundland scholar supervised by Madden in this period was S.J.R. Noel, who wrote an influential narrative study of twentieth-century Newfoundland politics.)¹⁷ And while a few British historians in the 1960s worked within Marxian analysis, Madden was little influenced by theory. As late as 1980 he reflected on the postwar years as ones in which ‘the approach in Oxford became pre-eminently pragmatic at a time when oddly enough elsewhere (and not least in Cambridge) there was a new emphasis on theory: a new commitment to find a single conceptual framework to embrace explanations of the phenomena of empire. So, while others have tended to put back theory and even teleology into imperial history, Oxford has become liberated from dogma.’¹⁸

Matthews shared a similar view that adopting an overarching explanation trapped historians into reproducing the conclusions of others and believed that the key to being a great historian was to have conclu-

14 Keith Matthews to Les Harris, 1 June 1966, ‘Dean of Arts, History Dept,’ box 3, ISER files, Office of the President, MUN.

15 Michael Brock, ‘Freddie Madden,’ in *Perspectives on Imperialism and Decolonization: Essays in honour of A.F. Madden*, ed. R.F. Holland and G. Rizvi (London: Cass, 1984), 3; Wm Roger Louis, ‘Introduction,’ *The Oxford History of the British Empire*, vol. 5, *Historiography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 27.

16 Frederick Madden, ‘The Commonwealth, Commonwealth History, and Oxford, 1905–1971,’ in *Oxford and the Idea of Commonwealth*, ed. Frederick Madden and D.K. Feildhouse (London: Croom Helm, 1982), 22–3.

17 The dissertation was published as S.J.R. Noel, *Politics in Newfoundland* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1971).

18 Madden, ‘The Commonwealth,’ 27.

sions rise inductively from reading all the empirical evidence. As we will see, Matthews drew little from economic or Marxian theory but, rather, wrote a narrative thesis that covered more than three hundred years of the history of the West of England–Newfoundland fishery.

Despite the continuity of constitutional enquiry, history at Oxford during the 1960s also consisted of well-developed specialties, such as economic history and demography, which provided alternate bodies of evidence to the public records of the Crown and Parliament and new ways of constructing an argument that owed as much to the social sciences as the humanities. In the period after 1945, Britain was losing its empire, and many British historians were now examining local circumstances in the various parts of the empire and exploring economic factors rather than forms of government.¹⁹ Furthermore, Herbert Butterfield's criticism of the Whig tradition had been internalized as a matter of faith for those who saw themselves as professional.²⁰ For the many historians working on political history in the tradition of Namier, 'constitutionalism spelled innocence: a failure to see that politics did not work like that.'²¹ As John Burrow put it, 'It was an axiom with him [Namier] that the real considerations at work were to be found in the private correspondence of ministers and Members of Parliament ... Public utterances were *prima facie* discredited because they were public. Namier is an extreme case of the tendency for the devotion above all to manuscript sources to pre-determine what was to count as real history.'²²

These are the threads in English historical scholarship out of which Matthews wove his dissertation. From the constitutionalists, he gained a narrative framework of the commonwealth, but the new imperial historians made it possible to study the effect of the periphery of the empire on the centre, and that enabled Matthews to avoid the teleology of constitutionalism. Namier encouraged a critical outlook on the public face of politics, a sentiment that supported Matthews' skepticism. He shared a suspicion that the real historical story did not consist solely of stringing together royal proclamations and charters. The economic historians had provided an explanation of history that was an alternative to changes in legal regimes resulting from

19 Louis, 'Introduction,' 39–41.

20 Herbert Butterfield, *The Whig Interpretation of History* (London: Bell, 1931).

21 Michael Bentley, *Modernizing England's Past: English Historiography in the Age of Modernism, 1870–1970* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 22.

22 John Burrow, *A History of Histories: Epics, Chronicles, Romances and Inquiries from Herodotus and Thucydides to the Twentieth Century* (London: Penguin Books, 2007), 472.

the struggle of Whigs and Tories. The influence of Madden and other British historians on Matthews was tempered by the fact that the Oxford graduate experience was one of independent study. His wife, Kay Matthews, remembered him attending no lectures and immersing himself in the archival record day and night, weekdays and weekends. He was also copying documents for the Newfoundland archives and being reimbursed for the expenses, even as he was writing his thesis. His thesis cites few other historians and lacks the explicit engagement with interpretation that has become the hallmark of graduate theses of more recent generations of scholars, but it certainly showed a wide range of reading in the documentary record. As Eric Sager put it, 'For a long time the British training drew scholars toward political history and imperial relations, and away from American model building and social theorizing; but that same training, demanding inductive reasoning from new empirical foundations, enabled Keith Matthews to demolish the myths of illegal settlement, eighteenth century anarchy, and ruthless fishing admirals.'²³

After fulfilling his two-year residency requirement at Nuffield College, in July 1967 Matthews and his family moved to St John's so that he could take up a position as lecturer in the Department of History and finish writing his thesis.²⁴ The young Englishman soon developed an affection for his adopted homeland and a desire to show that a study of the history of the West Country–Newfoundland fishery was important 'as a study in English national history.'²⁵ 'Every historian talks of the West Country's role in Newfoundland History; no one has seriously attempted to reverse this and examine the fishery as a part of the history of Devon and Dorset ... Over the centuries Newfoundland became to the West of England more than a fishery; it was transformed into an integral part of English economic and social life, becoming in the process one of the "accepted institutions" of British political life.'²⁶

- 23 Eric W. Sager, 'Newfoundland's Historical Revival and the Legacy of David Alexander,' *Acadiensis* II, no. 1 (Autumn 1981), 104–15.
- 24 Morgan to Matthews, 17 Apr. 1967, 'Matthews, Keith,' Department of History files, MUN. Matthews's acceptance of the appointment read, 'It is with great pleasure that I accept the post as Lecturer in History and look forward to my arrival on July 20th. I can hardly wait to see an Island which I have been so closely studying for the last two years.' Matthews to Morgan, 26 Apr. 1967, 'Matthews, Keith,' Department of History files, MUN.
- 25 Keith Matthews, 'A History of the West of England–Newfoundland Fishery' (DPhil diss., Oxford University, 1968), preface, 6.
- 26 *Ibid.*, 2–3.

The thesis itself is more conventional than readers of the later 'Fence Building' essay might assume. As each of his predecessors had done, Matthews sketched British policy, the effects of war and peace, and changes provoked by events such as the American Revolution. 'A History of the West of England–Newfoundland Fishery' is primarily a political narrative history of the fish trade based on a reading of the same colonial office records that each of the other historians of Newfoundland had used.²⁷ Matthews divided his narrative into conventional periods of British history, such as 'Newfoundland under the Restoration,' or by pivotal international milestones, such as the chapter titled '1763–1775.' Perhaps, like graduate students everywhere, he had to justify his topic to a supervisor (who, in his case, was a constitutionalist historian of the empire), although Newfoundland was indeed profoundly affected by European wars and times when 'peace broke out.' He examined planters, shipowners, and merchants, and his narrative shares more with the histories written by his predecessors than he would have admitted.

Yet it was an impressive feat of empirical research. The 600-page thesis was written in three years by a man who started his work with no particular knowledge of Newfoundland. The examining committee, which included the eminent historian of the age of discovery D.B. Quinn, was not pleased by the lack of a table of contents, his underlining for emphasis, or the thin nature of the economic data that underlay the work. Matthews was a man of great passions, but that also meant that he was often in a rush. The copy he submitted had typographic errors corrected by pencil and unreliable footnotes. Not long after the oral examination of his thesis, Madden wrote to Matthews, encouraging him to revise the dissertation and to prepare an article based on it for the *Economic History Review*.

I would hardly have recognized your viva from the rumbustious, exaggerated account of the blazing rows which appeared in your correspondence from the cool, calm and collected statement that I received from David Fieldhouse and read at the History Board. But this apart, I think that the only *very wicked* thing that you did was to produce so long a thesis. I would therefore support your view that I would not rewrite it wholly on economic lines, and that there is a very good case which you might justify in leaving in as much of the political and constitutional material.²⁸

27 I thank Jerry Bannister for bringing my attention to this point.

28 A.F. Madden to Matthews, 21 Oct. 1968, 5.01.085, Keith Matthews fonds, Maritime History Archive (MHA), Memorial University.

In a second letter, Madden set out the criticisms of the thesis more explicitly, reporting that the committee thought that Matthews had come to 'identify' with the merchants he was writing about. The committee agreed that the thesis was a 'substantial contribution to knowledge, and that the material itself, and the zeal you have shown in collecting it, warrant the award of the degree.' But they were less impressed with the thesis as a study in economics and were disappointed that there was not greater quantitative data. 'They say,' Madden wrote, 'that you obscure your contribution in your particular field by trying to tell the whole history of Newfoundland and that your economic history is technically weak.'²⁹ Matthews's response was that many of the statistics on the trade were unreliable and perhaps 'fictitious.' Madden accepted that, and agreed with Matthews's view that the work needed 'to have a clear political and constitutional thread, and that in considering the Western Adventurers as a group of individuals exercising pressure upon the government it is sensible to consider the economic aspects in relation to their influence on the political theme.'³⁰ Indeed, as Lewis R. Fischer later suggested, it was a testament to Matthews's intellect that, in the course of his archival research, he realized the logical fallacy in the idea that government policies had been effective in discouraging settlement.³¹ The evidence presented did not directly speak to that question, but he induced from his reading that despite anti-settlement rhetoric there had been no conflict between economic groups and ultimately realized that anti-settlement government policies had been ineffective. In the fall of 1968, with the degree and promotion to assistant professor in hand, Matthews wrote several British and Canadian publishers to offer them a manuscript, which he confessed was 'totally unfit for publication, being some 150,000 words in length and not too well written.'³² Cassel, a British publisher, seems to have declined, and presumably others did as well. Much later, Kay Matthews reported that he saw the thesis as a necessary step to an academic career rather than an end in itself so he lacked the impetus to revise it. Despite his initial impulse to publish his thesis, writing was not easy for him, and there were other projects to put his energy into. He soon met with colleagues Harris and Gerald Panting to plan a 'Newfoundland Documentary Study' that would 'use political documents to pose questions and the

29 A.F. Madden to Matthews, 30 Oct. 1968, 5.01.085, Matthews fonds, MHA.

30 A.F. Madden to Matthews, 5 Dec. 1968, 5.01.085, Matthews fonds, MHA.

31 Lewis Fischer, personal communication.

32 Letter from Matthews, 10 Nov. 1968, 5.01.085, Matthews fonds, MHA.

ancillary documents to suggest the answer or answers to the questions.³³ The Canada Council funded the project, and they contacted the University of Toronto Press about publishing it. Nothing came of the book; Harris moved into university administration, and both Panting and Matthews undertook a project of archival salvage.

That same autumn Matthews learned that the Public Record Office in London was to dispose of the vast majority of the 'Agreement and Account of Crew and Official Logbooks for British Empire Vessels, 1863-1938 and 1951-1976.' With the aid of a Canada Council grant, Matthews and Panting spent from May to September of 1969 in London, selecting records to be shipped to Memorial.³⁴ The economic historian David Alexander had joined the Department of History the same year that Matthews had, and the three men now sought to use the records to establish Memorial's History Department as an important centre of economic history.³⁵ Story had once praised his tireless collecting of archival records, and Matthews took primary responsibility for the acquisition of documents for the group, returning to Britain many times to survey archives and arrange for the copying of records. Matthews also assumed much of the responsibility for grant applications and management of the projects. During this period he also embarked on a quixotic project, the 'name files,' that consumed much of his time during the rest of his life. This too was, in part, a product of his contacts with others at Memorial. While still a student in England he had become aware of the work on Newfoundland surnames underway in Memorial's English Department. He had met W.J. Kirwin of that department as well as Story, and Matthews expressed an interest in identifying the surnames of people from the West of England in Newfoundland.³⁶ Matthews combed through archival collections, noting documentary references to names of specific people on thin strips of paper. Over his lifetime he created a data set of 7300 surnames that occupied twenty file cabinets.

33 Meeting Oct. 7 1968 re 'Newfoundland Documentary Study,' 5.01.506, Matthews fonds, MHA.

34 Keith Matthews, 'Report concerning a visit to England in the summer of 1969 ...,' file 'Faculty of Arts - History,' box PO-35, President's Office, MUN.

35 Stuart O. Pierson 'David Alexander: A Reminiscence,' in *David Alexander: Atlantic Canada and Confederation; Essays in Canadian Political Economy*, ed. Eric Sager, Lewis Fischer, and Stuart Pierson, x-xviii (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1983); Sager, 'Newfoundland's Historical Revival,' 104-15.

36 Matthews to Harris, n.d., file 'Dean of Arts - History Dept 1971,' box 3, ISER files, Office of the President, MUN.

He did find time to write a historiographic essay – ‘Historical Fence Building: A Critique of the Historiography of Newfoundland.’ Matthews presented the first version of the essay to the Canadian Historical Association meeting in St John’s in the spring of 1971, and that fall *Acadiensis* accepted it for publication, pending some reorganization and clarification of the argument.³⁷ The editor of that journal, Phillip Buckner, also suggested to Matthews that any study of Newfoundland historiography should include a discussion of Gillian Cell’s then recently published book.³⁸ In his revised draft, Matthews complimented Cell as the only historian who did not fall into the error of assuming conflict, a judgment that the archaeologist and historian of early modern Newfoundland Peter Pope points out was overly generous to Cell. Like the others, she uncritically accepted the conflict thesis.³⁹ Perhaps Matthews’s respect for Cell’s archival diligence encouraged him to let her off the hook, but, whatever the reason, his discussion of Cell’s work was clearly an afterthought rather than an integral part of his critique. Despite committing to making the changes recommended by Buckner, Matthews did not complete the revisions and ultimately published a shorter version of the essay in 1978 in the *Newfoundland Quarterly*. Harris was then editing ‘Aspects,’ a subsection of the *Quarterly*, on behalf of the Newfoundland Historical Society, and published the piece without the careful editorial work it needed. The piece was widely cited, despite being in a magazine rather than a peer-reviewed journal, and in 2001 Pope edited the essay and republished it.⁴⁰

For those who have not read the essay, it is worth restating its principal arguments. The foundations of Newfoundland’s historical mythology, Matthews suggested, had been laid by Newfoundland’s first historian, John Reeves, who proposed that conflict between those who favoured settlement and those who opposed it had shaped the history of the island. Nineteenth-century historians accepted this theory of conflict, and it entered into the scholarly canon of twentieth-century

37 P.A. Buckner to Matthews, 20 July 1972, file 85 Matthews, Keith, series 1, Buckner Papers, Harriet Irving Library, University of New Brunswick (UNB). I thank Stephen Dutcher for providing me with a copy of the file and Phil Buckner for permission to use his records.

38 Buckner to Matthews, 27 Jan. 1972, file 85 Matthews, Keith, series 1, Buckner Papers, Harriet Irving Library, UNB.

39 Peter E. Pope ‘Introduction: The New Early Modern Newfoundland, the Eighteenth Century,’ *Newfoundland Studies* 17, no. 2 (Fall 2001): 140; Gillian T. Cell, *English Enterprise in Newfoundland, 1577–1660* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1969), 21, 52.

40 Keith Matthews, ‘Historical Fence Building: A Critique of the Historiography of Newfoundland,’ *Newfoundland Studies* 17, no. 2 (Fall 2001): 143–65.

academic historians in Britain, Canada, and the United States. Matthews argued that these historians had attributed Newfoundland's particular colonial path to an assumed conflict between groups within the fishery, such as planters vs shipowners, or sack-shipowners vs fishing-shipowners – a dichotomy traditionally perceived in terms of English interests that supported a resident fishery vs those that did not. The second element of his argument was that professional historians uncritically worked within the conflict thesis because they were not looking at Newfoundland on its own terms but only as an illustration of some other theme in imperial history (such as the wars between Britain and France). These errors reached a high point in the work of the New Zealand-born historian of empire A.H. McLintock, who implicitly compared Newfoundland to other colonies and decided that the relatively late arrival of representative political institutions showed that Newfoundland's constitutional development was 'retarded' by the conflict. To explain this, McLintock worked backwards from the inception of representative government in 1832 to examine the island's constitutional history. Like others, he accepted the view that conflict between groups that favoured settlement and those that opposed it had been responsible for the pattern of development. Matthews concluded that Newfoundland history had become, in the hands of several generations of historians, a set of political eruptions and constitutional acts. The statutes, charters, and judicial decisions that made up the political-legal interpretation had become fence posts, and historians had stretched a narrative between them like so much wire. This emphasis upon statutes and the political-legal narrative was not surprising. When Matthews turned his empirical method to the work of earlier historians, he found that it fell short:

The basic problem is that the whole interpretation of retarded development as being due to group conflict rested upon a set of assumptions which have never been tested. The theory gives primary attention to politics and legislation as factors in economic development, having assumed but not proved a material conflict of interest centered on the fishery. Newfoundland's development was, supposedly, retarded as a result of legislation passed either at the behest of an interest group or by a dogmatic government. To show that the government enacted legislation inimical to the growth of population, culture or government does not measure its effect upon that growth, for the legislation must be shown to be effective. The historians mentioned above did not prove the effectiveness of legislation and, in fact, the evidence indicates massive evasion of the law.⁴¹

41 Ibid., 156.

This passage in Matthews's essay exemplifies how much he was representative of his generation of English historians. His rejection of the teleological narrative (which aimed to explain why growth was 'retarded') rested on testing the theory against evidence. His analysis here also seems to owe a debt to Alexander, who had read a draft of the essay and observed to Matthews,

Your predecessors have all, in fact, been historical materialists and it is an assumption of economic interests which find expression in politics and legislation, that is of primary importance. Their error was to assume the substructure and write about the superstructure ... Now, in addition, it could (theoretically) be quite conceivable that there was such a conflict of interest that resulted in legislation and which the British government attempted to enforce, but that all of this had not one jot of importance in the matter of the slow build up of settlement in Newfoundland. That is, that everyone was tilting at windmills (which is not unusual) and that the real reason for slow build-up of settlement is the reasonable one you suggest. That is, what I am trying to say is that even if your predecessors 'proved' all their theories, that in itself would not disprove yours.⁴²

As a metaphor, 'fence building' is a critique of historical practice. He had been trained in a 'constitutional' paradigm, but his professional practice in the archive had led him to test the hypothesis underlying the established historical narrative. As Matthews put it,

By training and inclination these historians relied heavily upon constitutional documents – those which concentrate mainly upon political issues and which are written, in the main, by politicians and civil servants. Interested mainly in examining the evolution of Newfoundland ... into a colony, they used as a basis for comparison the evolution of other parts of the Empire. In this light Newfoundland was viewed as a deviation from some norm. It was 'normal' for colonies to become self contained and independent, therefore Newfoundland was 'deviant.' Thus the historians began with two basic assumptions: that Newfoundland's colonial development is best measured by reference to colonial development elsewhere; and that Newfoundland's different development (its 'retardation!') was due to political and human factors. This alone can explain the lack of interest in the multitude of other factors – climactic, geographic, cultural and economic – which may also have shaped Newfoundland's 'retardation.'⁴³

42 David Alexander, undated comment on draft of 'Fence Building,' 5.01.003, Matthews fonds, MHA.

43 Matthews, 'Fence Building,' 161.

Rothney, one of those whom Matthews had criticized, read the version presented to the Canadian Historical Association and wrote a statement of 'defense against the charge of "fence building."' He conceded that historians had not distinguished between mercantile opposition to government and opposition to settlement, which he believed was an important and innovative point. But Rothney thought that Matthews's claim that historians had assumed an unchanging group conflict between 1610 and 1832 was an exaggeration. Rothney denied he had held a "'timeless" view of group conflict' and commented that 'Mr Matthews himself supplied ample evidence that all the writers to whom he refers, except [D.W.] Prowse and McLintock, were very much aware of the changing character of group conflicts between 1610 and 1832.'⁴⁴ Matthews had suggested that Rothney and Agnes Field were uninterested in Newfoundland itself and apologetic about their choice of subject. What Matthews had perceived as apology, Rothney argued, was just a survey of the field and a statement of the problem 'for the benefit of our examiners.' He continued,

Miss Field was the first person to challenge some of the historical myths created by Prowse, myths which go on being repeated in some Canadian school textbooks to this day. Professor A.P. Newton of the University of London, and editor of the *Cambridge History of the British Empire*, was the man [in] back of the attempt to re-write the history of Newfoundland on a more objective and rational basis. In volume VIII he incorporated Miss Field's discoveries into a chapter which he wrote himself. His comment on Prowse was that 'the references are very imperfect and the historical judgements unreliable.'⁴⁵

The essence of Matthews's argument, Rothney pointed out, was the claim that historians took legislative acts as their subject and assumed that nothing significant happened during periods that policy remained unchanged. Rothney dissented. Matthews had overlooked Janet Paterson's thesis, he pointed out, a thesis covering the years between 1713 and 1763, a period between the fence posts. Had Matthews consulted Paterson's thesis he would have found that she also made the error of assuming conflict was a main motor of history; she too accepted the notion that West of England shipowners had held

44 G.O. Rothney to Matthews, 30 June 1971, 5.01.092, Matthews fonds, MHA. The reference is to D.W. Prowse, *A History of Newfoundland from the English, Colonial and Foreign Records* (London: MacMillan, 1895) and subsequent editions.

45 Gordon Rothney's 'Comments of [sic] Keith Matthews' "Historical Fence Building"' can be found in 5.01.092, Matthews fonds, MHA.

back the settlement of the island and claimed to be filling in the historical narrative of a period that others had not examined because they judged it to be one in which no significant changes occurred.⁴⁶ Rothney maintained that the period he chose for his own study was not dictated by any of the fence posts Matthews had identified either, and that his own motives for studying Newfoundland history 'had nothing to do with the subject of retarded colonization and the struggle for self-government.' Rothney saw no examples of 'group conflicts as a "theory of causation"' in his own work and pointed out that he had attributed government anti-settlement policy in the late eighteenth century to the Navy, not to conflict among merchants involved in trade and fishing. In sum, Rothney insisted that Matthews's characterization of him and other authors (Prowse and McLintock excepted) as having 'an interpretation of Newfoundland development based upon unchanging group conflicts' was inaccurate. Rothney did indeed assign the blame for the slow pace of settlement to the Navy, and while he repeated the claim that West Country merchants had advocated the removal of settlers, that statement is incidental to the narratives developed in both his MA and his PhD theses.⁴⁷ Far more explicit than conflict in his work was his observation that Newfoundland was 'the only British dominion to surrender the right of responsible government' (which had happened the year he wrote the thesis) and his suggestion that his study of the eighteenth century might 'explain the present peculiar position of the ancient island Dominion.'⁴⁸ A copy of Rothney's commentary is extant in Matthews's papers, but Matthews did not revise his judgment.

While revising his historiographic essay and embarking on the Atlantic Canada Shipping Project with his colleagues, Matthews pursued a similar theme in what would be his first essay to appear in print, 'The Class of "32."' In that article he argued that historians had portrayed the political reform movement that resulted in the advent of representative government in 1832 as 'a struggle for liberty between Newfoundlanders, and an alliance between the Imperial Government and a reactionary band of West of England fishing merchants who opposed the growth of settlement and government

46 Janet Paterson, 'The History of Newfoundland 1713–1763' (MA thesis, University of London, 1931).

47 Rothney, 'History of Newfoundland,' 97–8; and Rothney, 'Britain's Policy in the North American Codfisheries, with Special Reference to Foreign Competition, 1775–1819' (PhD diss., University of London, 1939).

48 Rothney, 'History of Newfoundland,' 1, 25.

on the Island.⁴⁹ He suggested that the campaign for reform was a local manifestation of the desire for greater autonomy shared by colonial elites throughout the empire. The irony was that the reformers, who did so much to foster Newfoundland nationalism, were not natives. 'Since the St John's elite were in Newfoundland and not somewhere else, their demands were for colonial freedom,' he wrote. 'Had they been in Tasmania, Canada or any other part of the empire they would have been patriots of those regions.'⁵⁰ The reformers mobilized opinion to support their personal ambitions by popularizing the interpretation of history that saw Newfoundland as having been held back by West of England interests and the Crown. The myth 'that Newfoundland was impoverished and aggrieved solely because of an imperfect constitution and the indifference, even the hostility of the Imperial Government,' was at the root of the error he had exposed in 'Fence Building.'⁵¹

Revisiting the work of the scholars whom Matthews criticized reveals that while he accurately identified an underlying theme of conflict, their work ranged more widely than he implied. Field, whom Matthews blamed for bringing the conflict thesis of nineteenth-century historiography to twentieth-century scholars, indeed argued that the crucial factor in Newfoundland history was the duel to the death between (West of England) fishing captains and (London- and Bristol-based) sack ship men.⁵² On the other hand, although her thesis was titled the 'Government of Newfoundland,' it was a broader survey of the economic history of the fishery than the title indicates. The American historian Ralph Greenlee Lounsbury also accepted the fact that conflict between groups ran through the entire period of his study, 1634–1763. The Canadian historian W.L. Morton based his study on government records and, as Matthews identified, was interested in Newfoundland primarily as an example of imperial relations

49 Keith Matthews, 'The Class of '32: St John's Reformers at the Eve of Representative Government,' *Acadiensis* 6, no. 2 (Spring 1977): 80–94. An earlier version of this essay, titled 'The Reformers of 1832,' was presented to the Newfoundland Historical Society on 29 Jan. 1974. A copy of his lecture can be found in 5.01.52, Matthews fonds, MHA.

50 Matthews, 'Class of '32,' 92.

51 Ibid., 93. O'Flaherty has questioned Matthews's view, suggesting that the local grievances were genuine. Patrick O'Flaherty, 'The Seeds of Reform: Newfoundland, 1800–18,' *Journal of Canadian Studies* 23, no. 3 (1988): 39–59.

52 Agnes Field, 'The Development of Government in Newfoundland, 1638–1713' (MA thesis, University of London, 1924), 6, 21, 43, 322.

in the aftermath of the American Revolution.⁵³ It is also true that Morton proposed that the 'the historic conflict which for centuries disturbed British policy in Newfoundland' was indeed 'the ship fishermen and by-boat keepers of Devon and Dorset [who] fought a losing battle with the resident fishery of Newfoundland, [which was] supported by the traders of London and Bristol.'⁵⁴ But Matthews was too quick to dismiss Morton's work as derivative; the conflict thesis is only one theme in the work. Morton also wrote an interesting chapter on British policy toward the Beothuk and Inuit, for example – a discussion that is related only tangentially to questions of British policy toward settlement.⁵⁵ In a comment that prefigured later generations' interest in the nature of class relations as explanatory factors in Newfoundland's history, Morton argued that 'merchants became more exacting in collecting debts owing to them, and ... this social foundation of debt it was [sic] that dominated Newfoundland then as now, and more than any other factor it was to lead to the defeat of the policy of Great Britain in the fishery, and to the establishment of civil government.'⁵⁶ McIntock judged studies of Newfoundland history by the 'light they throw upon the general colonial policy of Britain.'⁵⁷ His study was also perhaps the most explicitly 'constitutional,' and it culminated in a discussion of the 'gift of representative government.' Yet while constitutionalism and the conflict thesis are at the core of his book, like Rothney, he saw the seeds of the failure of the 1930s in the policies of the late eighteenth century, not in the earlier period of extensive West of England influence in the fishery. The near bankruptcy of the Newfoundland government in 1933, the Newfoundland Royal Commission 1933 Report's condemnation of the country's fitness for democratic institutions and the suspension of responsible government that next year had a great influence of McIntock's view of the period between 1783 and 1832. Rather than a narrative of fishery to colony, he used a derogatory metaphor to signal constitutional backwardness: 'The peculiar maritime system of the island government and a unique judicature developed, like rank and poisonous weeds, to

53 W.L. Morton, 'Newfoundland in Colonial Policy, 1775–1793' (B Lit thesis, Oxford 1935), ii.

54 Ibid., 15–16, 28n3.

55 Ibid., 167–79.

56 Ibid., 180–1.

57 A.H. McIntock, *The Establishment of Constitutional Government in Newfoundland, 1783–1832* (London: Longmans, Green, 1941), xii.

choke and wellnigh overwhelm an unwanted colony which defied the legislation of Great Britain to crush it.'⁵⁸

Ironically, even after penning this critique of history as constitutional milestones, Matthews found that charters and statutes could still be useful. He compiled a *Collection and Commentary on the Constitutional Laws of Seventeenth Century Newfoundland* much like Madden had done for the empire. In introducing the set of bound photocopies, he wrote, 'It is not a study of how these laws came to be, nor whether they were good laws or even, given the confusion of contemporaries and some later historians, what these laws were thought to be.'⁵⁹ He went on to say that the selected documents showed what English policy was at various times, even if the principal argument of his life's work was, and the commentary accompanying the documents made clear, that these policies did not matter. Despite his work's influence in shifting historians' attention away from such legislation, an important part of a nascent reorientation of scholarship occurring in the 1970s, Matthews had not fully committed himself to other explanations.

That was not the case for Matthews's contemporary C. Grant Head, who independently arrived at conclusions similar to those of Matthews in his 1971 PhD thesis, but advanced an explanation based upon the availability of resources. As a graduate student in geography in the 1960s, Head had studied the contemporary distribution of people and resources along the northeast coast of the island at a time when the Newfoundland government was resettling the population of remote coves and islands to 'growth centres.' That experience encouraged Head's interest in the historical geography of early settlement. Starting from a disciplinary emphasis different from that of Matthews, Head compiled a significant body of data to support an environmental and economic explanation for settlement patterns. Head cited Matthews's point that the opposition to settlement was short-lived, but his analysis seems little influenced by Matthews.⁶⁰ That is not surprising, since Matthews had not articulated the full implications of his insight into the ineffectual nature of government policy in his thesis, and 'Fence Building' was not yet published. Head criticized the 'traditional Newfoundland Historiography' for asserting that the scattered nature of settlement was a reflection of the illegality of settlement, 'a questionable fact in itself,' and argued that ecological factors

58 Ibid., xi.

59 Keith Matthews, *Collection and Commentary on the Constitutional Laws of Seventeenth Century Newfoundland* (St John's: Maritime History Group, 1975), iii.

60 C. Grant Head, 'The Changing Geography of Newfoundland in the Eighteenth Century' (PhD diss., University of Wisconsin 1971), 51–2.

explained the distribution of the population rather than government oppression.⁶¹ In his 1976 published version of his dissertation, Head observed,

It has been popular to assert that the present scattered distribution of population around the island can be attributed to illegality of permanent settlement, and the consequent scattering of people to small settlements strung along 6,000 miles of coastline in order to escape detection by British naval officers and migratory fishing vessels. This is a folk-myth and has not been dispelled by the scholars.⁶²

As Matthews had realized earlier, Head concluded that 'the supposed illegality of permanent settlement ... was an illusion ... [and that] even when law on paper, it had little impact upon the actual state of settlement.'⁶³

Matthews's conclusions resonated with a contemporary's view, and many other important scholars were revising the field of Newfoundland studies and Atlantic Canadian history. However, placing him in context does not diminish the importance of his work or the extent of his influence. His mastery of the sources and enthusiasm for argument influenced several generations of students. Neither Alexander nor Matthews lived to complete their work. Matthews suffered from a spinal condition that required several surgeries and left him in considerable pain during the last five years of his life. He died at the age of forty-six, just twenty years after Story suggested to him that he study the West of England fishery. After his death, affection for him and the persuasiveness of his conclusions encouraged academic historians to accept Matthews's dismissal of his predecessors. His most talented student, Shannon Ryan, took as his life's work the study of the cod fishery and seal fishery after 1815 (the end year of Matthews's periodization), because it seemed that there was little to add to Matthews's account of the earlier period.⁶⁴ Subsequent authors, such as Patrick O'Flaherty, made effective use of Matthews's historiographic argument.⁶⁵ O'Flaherty later had reservations about Matthews's dis-

61 Ibid. 293–4.

62 C. Grant Head, *Eighteenth Century Newfoundland: A Geographer's Perspective* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1976), xii.

63 Ibid., 244.

64 Shannon Ryan, *Fish Out of Water: The Newfoundland Saltfish Trade, 1814–1914* (St John's: Breakwater Books, 1986); Shannon Ryan, 'The Newfoundland Cod Fishery in the Nineteenth Century' (MA thesis, Memorial University, 1972).

65 O'Flaherty, *The Rock Observed*.

missal of the efficacy of the legal prohibitions on settlement, but that view is an outlier.⁶⁶ The preponderance of professional opinion continues to favour Matthews's view that any ban on settlement was short-lived and ineffectual. Several generations of Newfoundland historians have used his thesis, as read through the lens of 'Fence Building,' as a starting point.

Memorial University of the 1960s and 1970s shaped Matthews's life and career, and we should not judge his contributions by the disciplinary standards of our day. Story, Harris, and Morgan had recruited the young man, not only for what he might write, but because 'his spade-work on the British sources might be one way for us to get our hands on primary material for the Library and/or Provincial Archives.'⁶⁷ His legacy as a collector and founder of the Maritime History Archive had an important role in Newfoundland scholarship, and the Atlantic Canada Shipping Project, of which he was a principal investigator, received between 1976 and 1982 one of the largest Canada Council / SSHRC grants of the day. Matthews published little compared to his colleague Alexander, because he became distracted by new sources and new projects. Nevertheless, Memorial continued to promote him, funded his archival collecting, and encouraged him to compile guides to sources. The university bears much responsibility for who he became, and his work should be seen as part of a larger agenda of preservation at the university.⁶⁸ The publication of 'Fence Building' was tardy and it appeared in a magazine rather than a peer-reviewed journal, despite its having been accepted for publication, because he did not revise it. There are several instances in which he put his efforts into other things rather than bring his work into publishable shape. His most widely circulated writing was a 1973 series of thirty CBC school broadcasts, which was available for several years as a bound photocopy and published posthumously as *Lectures on the*

66 Patrick O'Flaherty, *Old Newfoundland: A History to 1843* (St John's: Long Beach, 1999), 40–6.

67 Story to Morgan, 9 Apr. 1965, 'Dean of Arts – History Dept 1971,' box 3, ISER files, Office of the President, MUN.

68 Some of the scholarship of his peers at Memorial reflected a similar agenda of preservation and inquiry. Consider among many other works: Herbert Halpert and J.D.A. Widdowson, *Folktales of Newfoundland: The Resilience of the Oral Tradition* (St John's: Breakwater, 1996); Agnes O'Dea, *Bibliography of Newfoundland* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1986); Ronald Seary, *Family Names of the Island of Newfoundland* (St John's: Memorial University, 1977); Story et al., *Dictionary of Newfoundland English*.

History of Newfoundland 1500–1830.⁶⁹ The financial demands of a young family and the fifty dollars that he was paid for each lecture may have stiffened his resolve to complete that project. The *Lectures* brought his view of the history of Newfoundland to people in an accessible form, but without scholarly apparatus or the discussion of the work of other historians. Professors often assigned the *Lectures* to students as a textbook for the course ‘Newfoundland to 1815.’ (Twenty-five years after his death, the end date of Matthews’s thesis remains institutionalized as the dividing line between the two introductory Newfoundland history courses in Memorial’s curriculum.) Subsequent academic historians also found frustrating the fact that his work, which had convinced specialists, had not put to rest popular myths such as the illegality of settlement.⁷⁰

‘Historical Fence Building’ is commonly read as a funeral oration for a historical mythology and the last word that need be spoken of several generations of historians. Matthews correctly identified these historians as repeating the conflict thesis without looking for supporting evidence and of being interested in Newfoundland primarily as a case to test ideas in other historiographic traditions. That was an insightful critique of his predecessors, but they all ranged more widely in their narratives than Matthews implied, and many of them may still be reread with profit. They should not be overlooked because Matthews showed one aspect of their argument to be without supporting evidence. Further, the persuasiveness of ‘Fence Building’ should not blind us to the similarities in structure and sources between Matthews’s 1968 thesis and the earlier historians. His thesis shares the same fence posts, sources, and political narrative as his predecessors. It fit within the constitutionalist frame of imperial history and the older narratives of the history of Newfoundland more than is commonly recognized because the later essay so persuasively set out where his predecessors had been wrong. Revisiting ‘Fence Building’ also shows that Matthews had moved past his own training to criticize the tradition within which he had been working. It is too easy to read back into his thesis the radical break with the historical literature that

69 Keith Matthews, *Lectures on the History of Newfoundland 1500–1830* (St John’s: Breakwater Books, 1988).

70 While Matthews’s work is little known outside professional circles, Prowse’s *History* remains widely available in a facsimile edition more than a century after its publication. For a perceptive commentary on its relevance to Newfoundland nationalism, see Jerry Bannister, ‘Whigs and Nationalists: The Legacy of Judge Prowse’s *History of Newfoundland*,’ *Acadiensis* 32, no. 1 (2002): 84–109.

actually gelled in his later essay. For the sake of clarity, we can consider his historiographic contribution as having two elements. In the thesis, in 1968, Matthews made the intuitive leap that there had been no 'division between "settlers" and "fishermen."' ⁷¹ By 1971 he argued that his predecessors' work within the constitutionalist framework caused them to believe in such a division. His work was important in shifting attention from political to economic factors in the writing of Newfoundland history, but any appraisal of a historian needs to examine more than his or her historiographic position. We must attend to the context of a life to have a basis for judgment.

71 Matthews, 'History,' 448, 521–2, 603.

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