Vikings to U-Boats: The German Experience in Newfoundland and Labrador (review)

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Canadian Ethnic Studies, Volume 39, Number 1–2, 2007, pp. 233-235
(Review)

Published by Canadian Ethnic Studies Association

DOI: https://doi.org/10.1353/ces.0.0021

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individual into the hands of a secret security team that was known to torture political suspects. For at least one Board member, the claimant’s complicity is evident, but his moral culpability is not so certain: “It was one thing to reject the butchers, but what about the teenagers dragooned into military service, complicit yet frightened peasants like Manuel who had never had a sense of choice or alternative in their lives” (39). Now living the life of a model immigrant in Canada, Manuel might himself be tortured if he (and his family, including three Canadian-born children) is sent back.

Showler offers few easy answers for either his characters or readers, and thus in this and many other stories the final outcome is not revealed – it is left for us to determine. In this way, he takes his audience beyond the formal legal-administrative structure of the process and presents refugee determination as a deeply human (and, therefore, often flawed) exchange as he shifts focus onto different actors and circumstances across the chapters. While the determination process is portrayed at its best and worst, underneath seems to lie, in the words of one character, a fundamental belief (or at least hope) that “[d]espite all of the differences in language, perception, and all that, ... there is always the possibility of truth. A very relative truth, mind you, but truth all the same” (93). Perhaps it is with this in mind that Showler includes an afterword to provide readers with a formal overview of the process and four key recommendations to improve its quality. This is not, however, an academic analysis, and, therefore, anyone looking for an exegesis on refugee determination will be disappointed. However, they should not be, for Refugee Sandwich offers academics, students, those involved in the refugee determination process, and the general public alike the chance to appreciate the real constraints at play in refugee determination, and to think about how far they might be tempered if not overcome.

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Newfoundland and Labrador seems an unlikely locale for a book about Germans. As Gerhard Bassler acknowledges in his recent book, the non-British population in the province has always been minute. To even approach achieving his objective of uncovering the “footprints” (4) of Germans in Newfoundland and Labrador, Bassler is forced to examine a long period of time. Germans, he suggests, have been present here in some form from the arrival of the Vikings at L’Anse au Meadows, where fragmentary
evidence points to one of Leif Erikson’s entourage being a German, to the “embellished” stories of U-boat crews sneaking onto land during the Second World War (286). Bassler ends his account in 1945, suggesting that the period thereafter is a whole new story.

Bassler’s themes are those of contacts, connections, and perceptions, and his account is a collection of widely divergent vignettes about German nationals, contacts with Germans, stories about a variety of local people who are in some way German, and Newfoundlanders’ perceptions of Germans. Chapters in the book outline these vignettes, beginning with early European contacts, a comprehensive chapter chronicling the story of the Moravian mission in northern Labrador, commercial contacts in the nineteenth century, a chapter devoted to German impressions and views of Newfoundland and Labrador, and four chapters devoted to the German experience during the wars. The earlier chapters offer interesting reading and paint an exhaustive picture of everything that touches on the theme of “Germanness” as it relates to Newfoundland and Labrador. Bassler’s assertion that the book contains “whatever could be uncovered…” about the subject is probably correct (3). The book is the culmination of over forty years of living in Newfoundland and a twenty-year period of research.

An important part of the book analyzes the effect of the two world wars, where Bassler suggests that earlier sensibilities about being German were replaced “with the stereotype of local Germans as enemy aliens and spies” (7). His conclusion goes even further, suggesting that the “fiction and stigmatization of local Germans… all but wiped out” the German population after 1945 (304). The four chapters that analyze the perceived threats, myths, and scapegoating that accompanied the two world wars are some of the most insightful in the book. Bassler unravels stories of refusals to accept Jewish refugees, the internment of local Germans and sailors arriving on German ships, the media hype that gave rise to the idea of a Nazi fifth column, and, finally, the stories of U-boat sailors dropping off saboteurs in Newfoundland bays and dating Halifax girls. These chapters are particularly interesting in the way they shed light on how a small and relatively isolated population came to terms with the prospect that it would be on the frontier if an attack by Germany materialized. Bassler’s analysis is based on a rich combination of interviews, newspaper accounts, and archival sources, and has been the subject of some of his earlier work in scholarly and public venues.

Bassler’s main aim in the book, however, seems to be to correct the loss of the value of Germans in the Newfoundland and Labrador consciousness. The important analysis of how the world wars changed the perceptions of being German is overshadowed by the preoccupation with proving that the wars diminished important German contributions to the economic, social, and cultural life of Newfoundland and Labrador. The emphasis on contributions appears frequently in the author’s analysis: Moravians had “excellent rapport with the Inuit” and were “a significant
cultural force in northern Labrador” (61); Germans made important contributions to mapping the region and documenting its flora and fauna (54); German “brew-masters deserve credit for the high quality still attributed to Newfoundland beers” (170); “nothing but the best and most up-to-date technology” in the form of electric generators were supplied by Germans (76), but the world wars erased “the memory of the pre-World War I community’s existence and contributions” (304). Here Bassler reaches back to the model of earlier ethnic histories that felt the compelling need to justify their ethnic group’s place in the Canadian story.

*Vikings to U-Boats* adds an important chapter to the history of Newfoundland and Labrador. Its focus on a small colony of the British Empire that eventually became part of Canada also sheds new light on the German-Canadian story. Particularly important for Canadian history is its analysis of how media-generated fear jaded public memory as it related to a small minority in a specific local environment, and how that fear affected that minority as it came to influence the workplace and public policy.

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*Walking a Tightrope* constitutes a remarkably unified presentation for a book of readings. Primarily based on information derived from eastern Canada, thirteen of the seventeen contributors live in that region. Two contributors are located at institutions in the United States, one at the First Nations University of Canada, and one at the University of Turku in Finland. One of the contributors, Olive Dickason, represents both East and West with her academic writings.

*Walking a Tightrope* begins with a poem, “Goodbye, Wild Indian,” by Lenore Keeship-Tobias, in which she expresses the hope that negative stereotypes of Canada’s Indigenous people will soon vanish. The poem is followed by three major parts of the book: a) Reflections on Walking a Tightrope (five chapters); b) Historical Representations (five chapters); and c) Literary and Cinematic Representations (four chapters). The book is an attempt to update perceptions of Canada’s First Nations in a variety of literary sectors, many of the articles referring to or building on Daniel Francis’ *The Imaginary Indian* of 1992. In the preface the editors express the hope that the Canadian literary community has passed the previously held dualism of “Good