

Introduction

A book of this nature needs some explanation. On a general level, there is the question of whether there is value in the genre of political biography in and of itself. More specifically, why should there be a political biography of Robert Bond? He was and remains an admired figure in the political history of Newfoundland*—but is another such volume needed?

During the nineteenth century, biographies were generally devoted to “the great and the good”: prominent individuals, usually male, who had exercised considerable influence in the public sphere and beyond. The overall tone was serious and uncritical, and these volumes often contained information that remains of value. A reaction gathered force in the late nineteenth century, continuing into the twentieth, that insisted that public figures—and indeed the subject of any biography—had to be placed in context and examined as truthfully as possible, without moralizing or cover-ups. Nevertheless, there remained a persistent debate, especially in literary circles, about the potential intrusiveness of biography: were not people, alive or not, entitled to some degree of privacy? And there has been discussion, as well, about the value of “psycho-biography,” in which subjects were subjected to Freudian analysis, an approach that was popular in the mid-twentieth century.¹

For all that, biography has remained an immensely popular genre. Over the past century its scope has markedly widened, with far greater attention being given to women and to people (often obscure) who formerly would have been ignored. Biographers have also become more critical of their subjects, seeking to evaluate what their contributions may have been. Over the past twenty years or so, certainly, historical biography has

* Throughout this book, I use “Newfoundland” rather than “Newfoundland and Labrador,” which did not become the province’s official name until 2001.

undergone “a renewal” and the phrase “the biographical turn in history” has been used.²

Yet biography has been, and still is, seen by some historians to be a problematic genre—in John Tosh’s words, one that “has no serious place in historical study”³—and it has generated an extensive bibliography. Ben Pimlott (a practitioner) argues that biography is “the least confident form of political writing” and though “avidly consumed . . . the least analysed.”⁴ The case against historical biography is that it can easily cause the historian to overestimate the contribution of a given individual, and to see the subject as in some sense representative of the milieu in which that person functioned. Further, by concentrating on an individual, the biographer may discount group dynamics and the overall social and economic forces that conditioned society in a given period.⁵ Biography can also, it is argued, oversimplify the complexities of political events. Pimlott adds that a biographer may well try to do as well for the subject as the facts allow.⁶ As a result, by and large academic historians tend to shy away from biographies (or are ambivalent about them)—though they are quite prepared to contribute to such works as the *Dictionary of Canadian Biography* (DCB) or the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. Much of the reason for this can be placed on the dominance of the “new social history,” here in Canada and elsewhere, from the 1970s, with its emphasis on the group and on social class rather than on the individual.

These are scholarly debates—and biography is not limited to scholars. The field continues to attract writers of ability and distinction who are outside the world of academe. There is a widespread understanding that, as the Victorian sage Thomas Carlyle wrote in 1830, “History is the essence of innumerable biographies”—a well-known and frequently repeated statement. But the individual life has to be interpreted for the present, since only in this way can biography explain both the person and the setting—how the subject was part of the history of the time. There must also be an analysis of motive and intention, and of the interaction between the individual and those who surrounded him or her. How did people in the past perceive the future? Surely that, too, is an important factor. Historians cannot ignore personalities and individual life histories, but they must see them in context.

This study assesses the political career of Robert Bond, who became a central figure in the public life of Newfoundland soon after his first election in 1882 at the age of 25. He was prime minister from 1900 to 1908, and retired from public life in 1914 at the relatively young age of 56. He is remembered, by those who care about such things, as the best and the brightest of his comparison group—other first ministers of his period—and as the man who might (just might) have saved Newfoundland from the humiliation of surrendering responsible government in 1934. This book tries to evaluate his contribution and asks whether his posthumous reputation is warranted. Was he, in actual fact, as I was once told, “Newfoundland’s only statesman”?

My interest in Robert Bond derives from my being an historian of Newfoundland politics. Hence, this book focuses on political analysis. It also attempts to explain both what happened in the colony’s public life during Bond’s adult lifetime and his important role.⁷ I do not address in any detail Bond’s private life, the establishment of the town of Whitbourne, or his building of an increasingly elaborate house, The Grange, in that community. These matters could not be ignored, obviously, but in this study they are secondary.

Bond as a public figure needs to be fairly assessed. He was honest and principled, but could be insufferable, autocratic, and hot-tempered. He had a genuine devotion to, and belief in, Newfoundland as a viable country with considerable economic potential—hence, for all his fiscal conservatism, his support for building an expensive railway. He insisted that the imperial government in London should treat Newfoundland as an equal to the other colonies of settlement, in all respects. He worked hard and his abilities were recognized. What he lacked was flexibility and an understanding—though the realization may have arrived later in life—of the limitations necessarily imposed by the imperial and international contexts within which the colony had to operate. In addition, he certainly overestimated the colony’s overall economic potential and its strategic value to the British Empire. In short, Bond’s contribution was important, but it should not be exaggerated.

Bond’s reputation has been enhanced by several factors. J.R. Smallwood (Newfoundland’s first provincial premier, 1949 to 1971) was, as a

young man, very conscious of Bond's existence. He claimed to have listened to Bond in the House of Assembly before the Great War, when Bond was Leader of the Opposition—Smallwood must have been quite young—and he certainly met him in 1919 and 1925.⁸ He frequently referred to “the great Sir Robert Bond” and saw to it that a bridge was named after him.* A railcar ferry followed. More important has been the generally negative impression of his successors in office, principally Edward Morris and Richard Squires (his predecessors, perhaps unfairly, have received relatively little attention). The evidence given to the Newfoundland Royal Commission in 1933 provides a relevant snapshot: many of the witnesses expressed the view that Bond's resignation as prime minister in 1908 had been an important turning point for the worse; the overall assumption seems to have been—in retrospect—that once Bond left office, the colony was on the road to disaster.⁹ William J. Browne, who sat both in the House of Assembly and the Canadian House of Commons, thought that Bond was “the greatest political figure in the past one hundred years” and that his exit “meant a radical departure from the careful and conservative manner in which . . . [he] had conducted our national affairs.”†

This is a defensible if oversimplified position. Newfoundland's collapse during the Great Depression was primarily due to a large public debt, mostly representing problematic attempts at economic diversification and the cost of the Great War. Bond refused to try to become his country's saviour in spite of repeated calls to return to public life. Instead, he prevaricated and remained on the sidelines, removed from the political fray that he had come to loathe, reclusive as he always had been. Indeed, seclusion at Whitbourne may well have enhanced his later reputation.

The person from this period who has received the most attention in

* Bond was also the only person to be awarded a full-page photograph in Smallwood's *Encyclopedia of Newfoundland and Labrador* (volume 1). The bridge is in central Newfoundland.

† Browne, *Eighty-Four Years*, 189. Even Governor Sir Charles Harris thought, in 1918, that Bond appears “to stand head and shoulders above any Newfoundland politician whom I have seen of late years” (Harris to Long, secret, March 23, 1918, CO 537/1167).

recent years, in fact, is William Ford Coaker (1871–1938), who founded the Fishermen’s Protective Union (FPU) in 1908, entered politics in 1913, and became Minister of Fisheries in 1919. Academic historians and others have been fascinated by his rise from relatively humble origins to positions of considerable influence as a union leader, politician, and merchant. Several works related to Coaker are mentioned in the bibliography, though the basic source remains Ian McDonald’s 1987 account, as well as Melvin Baker’s entry in the *DCB*.¹⁰

Over the past fifty years, the history of pre-nineteenth-century Newfoundland has been subjected to a severe and long-overdue revisionism that has debunked many of the once-prevalent theories about the country’s European origins and its treatment by the British government,¹¹ which were espoused by late nineteenth-century historians such as the highly influential Daniel W. Prowse and by the prolific Moses Harvey.¹² Their accounts, which mixed pride (“Britain’s oldest colony”) with accusations of imperial neglect and abuse, were the orthodoxy in Robert Bond’s day. For their generation—and for later ones, as well—Newfoundland’s history was seen as one of struggle: against prohibitions on settlement, against imperial hostility and marginalization, and against the constraints imposed by ancient fisheries treaties with France and the United States. But they felt that these disadvantages would be overcome. The valuable resources that were assumed to exist in Newfoundland’s interior and elsewhere would be developed, and the colony would become respected and important. The island’s strategic significance would be recognized and the colony would conquer its past.¹³ Bond certainly accepted this version into the 1920s, and the idea that Newfoundland’s history has been one of constant struggle still persists.

Contemporary academic historians have largely rejected this interpretation. They are not Whigs (like Prowse) and have taken a critical and comprehensive approach to the history of both Newfoundland and Labrador. Even so, some areas of post-1815 history have done better than others. The loss of responsible government in 1934 and the highly contentious “confederation period” between 1946 and 1949 have both received a great deal of attention, as has (more recently) the First World War.¹⁴ But historians

and others have also debated additional matters: pre-confederation economic diversification initiatives, the credit or “truck” system, the apparent failure to tackle the problems of the all-important fisheries, and the experience of Indigenous peoples.¹⁵

So this book does not cover untravelled ground—far from it. A fair number of historians, myself among them,¹⁶ have looked at Newfoundland during Robert Bond’s lifetime, and at Bond himself. In terms of general surveys, there have been valuable contributions by S.J.R. Noel, Patrick O’Flaherty, and Sean Cadigan.¹⁷ Noel’s seminal account of twentieth-century politics has been known for many years and retains considerable value. O’Flaherty’s narrative of this period was published in 2005, and Cadigan’s accounts followed in 2009 and 2013.

O’Flaherty was a professor of English who specialized in eighteenth-century literature, but he had a strong historical bent—like Ronald Rompkey, whose biography of Wilfred Grenfell (*Grenfell of Labrador*) is now the standard work—as well as a fascination with the history of his native province. His is the most passionate and detailed of the recent surveys of this period; it forms part of his dense but highly readable three-volume history of Newfoundland from the country’s beginnings. O’Flaherty was a Newfoundland patriot who abhorred—but sought to understand—the surrender of responsible government in 1934 and the flirtations with confederation that had preceded it. Robert Bond does not escape censure—he was “suspect,” O’Flaherty says, because he was willing to consider confederation.¹⁸

Sean Cadigan is a prolific environmental and social historian. His major theme in *Newfoundland and Labrador: A History* (as far as this period is concerned) is that efforts to develop landward resources were largely mistaken, and that the colonial government would have done better to concentrate on the fisheries and the sea. This is an entirely plausible argument but somewhat discounts the contemporary fascination with railways and the “hidden resources” of the interior, which Bond fully shared. In *Death on Two Fronts*, an innovative book, Cadigan concentrates on William Coaker and the FPU, and seeks to draw a line connecting the 1914 *Newfoundland* sealing disaster, the outbreak of the First World War, and the

collapse of responsible government. Robert Bond plays a brief walk-on role. The argument here is clearly important and accurate, Cadigan holding that Coaker, in time, became one of the “long-coated chaps” he had once despised, and that he failed to bring in the class-based politics he had originally advocated.

William Coaker’s career has long been a central preoccupation for Melvin Baker, who has made a significant contribution to our understanding of this period.¹⁹ He has also written on the history of St. John’s and on various aspects of Newfoundland history in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. He joined Peter Neary in writing two important biographical articles on Robert Bond and consulted with Ted Rowe about his recent biography of Bond, which is solid, accurate, and well-researched.²⁰

Other authors also deserve mention. There have, for instance, been recent investigations of Newfoundlanders of Irish descent in this period and beyond. Carolyn Lambert has made valuable contributions to this history, both in St. John’s and in Newfoundland more generally.²¹ She has provided detail about bishops John Mullock, Thomas Power, and Michael Howley, stressing the imperial loyalty of the Catholic population and its endorsement of Newfoundland nationalism. Patrick Mannion has taken a later but overlapping period, starting in 1880, and has also found that Catholics of Irish descent in Newfoundland generally valued their freedoms within the British Empire and were ambivalent about the prospect of Irish independence. These are valuable contributions. Kurt Korneski has taken a different perspective. Considering the colony as a whole, he has taken a fresh and original look at several of the crises and problems that characterized this period, for instance the south coast bait trade, the west coast lobster fishery, and railway building.²² He has successfully added a deeper social dimension and new interpretations to relatively familiar incidents. There have been additional significant contributions to the historiography, of course, too numerous to list here: many of them appear in the bibliography.

The other Atlantic provinces have tended to concentrate on their own histories and that of the Maritimes, though there were efforts some years ago to encourage a genuinely regional historiography.²³ This is a lost cause

and it has to be accepted that Newfoundland and Labrador and the Maritimes will develop (and have developed) separate accounts of their pasts, linked though their histories may be. Historiographically and politically, the term “Atlantic Region” is little more than a convenience.

Thus Newfoundland and Labrador remains distinct from the adjacent areas of Canada and it has developed its own history. And if academic interest in Newfoundland’s history is not what it once was, there is intense curiosity among the general public. Social media groups, discussion clubs, and websites prosper, as do established institutions like the Newfoundland and Labrador Historical Society and the Wessex Society. The province has an aging population, and it seems that many Newfoundlanders and Labradorians want to connect with a past that has either disappeared or is disappearing—numerous outport settlements have gone, and a far-flung diaspora continues to grow.

There also persists a curiosity about Robert Bond, who remains an important figure in historical memory. If this book can help place him in context and provide a fair assessment of his political career, it will have done its job. He should neither be idealized nor vilified, but seen for what he was.

NOTES

- 1 Lee, *Biography*, 57–63, 72–88.
- 2 Possing, “Biography,” 7. See also Snowman, “Historical Biography.”
- 3 Tosh, *Pursuit*, 75.
- 4 Pimlott, “Political Biography,” 214.
- 5 See, for example, Riall, “Shallow End,” 375–97; O’Brien, “Political Biography,” 50–57; and Whitaker, “Writing About Politics,” 7–8.
- 6 Berger, *Canadian History*, 222; Pimlott, “Political Biography,” 221.
- 7 Morgan, “Writing Political Biography,” 33–34.
- 8 Smallwood, *I Chose Canada*, 157.
- 9 Hiller, “Corruption and Collapse,” 84–85.
- 10 See McDonald, “*To Each His Own*.”
- 11 Two examples: Peter E. Pope, *Fish into Wine*, and Bannister, *Rule of the Admirals*.

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- 12 G.M. Story, "Prowse, Daniel Woodley," *DCB* 14:850–54; Aldrich, "Harvey, Moses," *DCB* 13:455–57; and Armour, "Castles in the Air'." Both Prowse and Harvey were prolific authors, but see particularly Hatton and Harvey, *Newfoundland*, and Prowse, *History of Newfoundland*.
- 13 Bannister, "Sport of Historic Misfortune'," 263–314.
- 14 Works covering these topics include Overton, "Economic Crisis"; Letto, *Newfoundland's Last Prime Minister*; Neary, *Newfoundland in the North Atlantic World*; Patricia R. O'Brien, "The Newfoundland Patriotic Association"; and Mike O'Brien, "Producers versus Profiteers."
- 15 For these matters, consider Alexander, "Development and Dependence" and "Newfoundland's Traditional Economy"; Ommer, *Merchant Credit*; and Kennedy, *Encounters*.
- 16 See particularly "The Political Career of Robert Bond," "Robert Bond and the Pink, White and Green," and "A History of Newfoundland."
- 17 Specifically, Noel, *Politics in Newfoundland*; O'Flaherty, *Lost Country*; and Cadigan *Newfoundland and Labrador and Death on Two Fronts*.
- 18 O'Flaherty, *Lost Country*, 163.
- 19 For a list of Baker's publications, visit his homepage:
www.ucs.mun.ca/~melbaker/.
- 20 Baker and Neary, "Bond, Sir Robert," *DCB* 15:122–30. See also Rowe, *Robert Bond: The Greatest Newfoundlander*.
- 21 See, for example, Lambert's thesis, "Far from the Homes of Their Fathers" and "This Sacred Feeling," 124–42.
- 22 In particular see Korneski, *Conflicted Colony*.
- 23 Hiller, "Is Atlantic Canadian History Possible?" 16–22.