

The Colony of Unrequited Dreams

Wayne Johnston's
Newfoundland Conversion Narrative

No great man lives in vain. The history of the world is but the biography of great men.

—Thomas Carlyle, "Lecture on the Hero as Divinity"

T*he Colony of Unrequited Dreams*, Wayne Johnston's novel about Joey Smallwood's ascent to power and Newfoundland's union with Canada in 1949, is a slippery book. Like its embattled protagonist, the book strenuously resists easy classification. Is it a love story? A *Bildungsroman*? A mock epic? Perhaps it is a work of historical fiction, or historiographic metafiction (Hutcheon). This novel is probably all of these things, and perhaps more. Certainly it is also—at least in the portions narrated by Smallwood himself—a fictional memoir, situating its first-person narrative of Smallwood's life in the historical context of Newfoundland's union with Canada in 1949. But it is a fictional memoir of a very particular kind, because its structure and its central theme bear resemblance to another mode: the conversion narrative. Traditionally, the conversion narrative is concerned with a single event in one's personal history: the moment at which one changes his or her religion because of a sudden conviction, as A.D. Nock says, "that the old was wrong and the new is right" (7); or, as William James frames it, the self, "hitherto divided, and consciously wrong, inferior and unhappy, becomes consciously right, superior and happy" (Peters 2-3). Smallwood's transformation from socialist reporter to Liberal politician, and Newfoundland's transformation from island outpost to Canadian province, are themselves suggestive of the theme of conversion that dominates the novel. That a fictive autobiography should concern itself with conversion is not surprising, given that "conversions are prevalent in secular

autobiographies” (Peters 4) and that the conversion narrative is part of the “depiction of the self as a psychological phenomenon” that is generally agreed to have begun with St. Augustine’s *Confessions* in the fourth century A.D. (Peters 33). Many of the themes and structural devices of *Colony* can be found in Johnston’s other works: the troubled coming-of-age of a child with an absentee father; the use of journals, correspondence, and other shared texts to construct characters and their relationships; the presence of a central text or texts upon which the novel’s action depends—all of these are familiar to readers of earlier books such as *The Divine Ryans* and *Human Amusements* and of his subsequent books, *The Navigator of New York* and *The Custodian of Paradise*. And, of course, *Colony* shares with each of these—and indeed with all of his books, *Human Amusements* excepted—a spirited representation of Newfoundland geography and culture. One way in which *Colony* stands apart from these other works is its use of the conversion theme to structure its plot and meaning. In Johnston’s hands, the conversion narrative becomes an apt means of portraying Smallwood not just as the huckster that Sheilagh Fielding would have us believe he is, but as a man whose ambitions and political transformations were bred of his desire to be part of something greater than himself. Johnston’s Smallwood is a secularized version of the Christian convert, a man who seeks political rather than spiritual grace and who wishes to gain admission into the textualized afterlife of History itself.

Conversion is a pervasive theme in the novel, but Johnston’s Smallwood is wholly resistant to religious conversion. When his mother reports that she has converted to Pentecostalism, he responds with horror:

I wanted to keep my distance from this religious fervour for fear of coming down with it myself, losing myself to it. I was terrified that something more powerful than my own will might be moving me along, or would if I gave in to it. (78)

Later in the novel, while in New York, Smallwood meets Tom Hines, an expatriate Newfoundlander who leads “the Pentecostal Church of Newfoundland in Brooklyn” (187). Hines tries to convert Smallwood, telling him that his conversion “‘is inevitable. . . . I see it as clearly as if it had already happened. You shall be immersed in the waters of the Hudson seven months from now and thus shall your eternal soul be saved.’” Smallwood insists that he has “no intention of converting” (196). Later, he attends a service at which Hines reveals an eerily intimate knowledge of arcane details of Smallwood’s life in an attempt to flush him out and convert him. Smallwood bolts from the church, feeling “as though [he] were being pursued and [his] very life depended on not being caught” (201). Indeed, he flees to Newfoundland for

fear of having his life controlled by another: “I was afraid of being pulled further into that weird world of [Hines’] in which there was no telling what was and was not true. And I had no doubt . . . that he would go on trying to convert me” (203-204). Unlike traditional religionists, whose conversion is grounded in a model of “self-fashioning [that] always involve[s] submission to something outside the self” (Todd 71), Smallwood is steadfast in his self-reliance, vowing that “if God himself appeared to me, I would assure Him that I would rather save myself than have Him do it” (82). He rejects a model of conversion based on “human helplessness” and “an abject reliance on . . . the grace of God” (80). Johnston’s Smallwood is not above self-fashioning; he simply wants to be in control of the process.

As averse as he is to religious conversion, Smallwood embraces political conversion with religious zeal, doing so for the first time shortly after his harrowing (and anachronistic) experience aboard the S.S. *Newfoundland*, when George Grimes, a politician, presses a book into Smallwood’s hand and urges him to read it. Smallwood narrates this initial stage of his conversion breathlessly: “After I read the closing paragraph of *What’s So and What Isn’t*, I believed I had found my calling, a way to ensure that the deaths of the men of the S.S. *Newfoundland* might be redeemed” (116). He joins Grimes to spread this new gospel, going “from door to door, pitching socialism to the citizens of St. John’s” (117-18). But Smallwood’s zeal gives way to a kind of pragmatism shortly after his failure to recruit Fielding to join his union of sectionmen (239). He converts to Liberalism because it seems to him “the closest thing to socialism that Newfoundlanders would accept” (263). When he is no more successful at recruiting union members under the banner of the Liberal Party than as a card-carrying Socialist, he undergoes his final political conversion, deciding to champion Newfoundland’s confederation within Canada.

As a newly minted confederationist, Smallwood’s conversion is intended to affirm his claim to membership in something greater than himself—but that something is not a church, nor even Newfoundland nor Canada. It is History itself. Engineering Newfoundland’s membership in a federal structure is simply the means to a self-interested end, and Smallwood admits his opportunism: “. . . I was certain that none of the established ‘names’ would come out in favour of Confederation with Canada, which I intended to do. I decided that I would be its champion in part because it was the one cause that, far-fetched and unlikely to succeed, had no champion” (432-33). In doing so, he enacts the role-switching that Lewis Rambo identifies in his

research on the psychology of religious conversion: “When people become a member of a new religious movement . . . they have a new perception of themselves that often empowers them to do things, to believe things, and to feel things they have not been able to prior to that time.” Consistent with Rambo’s account of the psychology of empowerment that accompanies religious conversion, Johnston’s Smallwood describes the aftermath of his political conversion in spiritual terms: “[I]t was not long after I announced my support for Confederation with Canada that what I can only describe as the ‘interventions’ began. Without lifting a finger, the obstacles that had always stood between me and doing something great began to fall” (433-34). It is almost as though Smallwood’s eventual achievements are predestined.

However, Smallwood’s political transformations are not signs of a genuine conversion experience, because in the midst of these changes one thing remains emphatically unchanged: Smallwood himself. *He* does not undergo a genuine transformation. His ambition, summed up in his desire to do “something commensurate with the greatness of the land itself” (433), is his defining characteristic in the novel, and his political changes are thus superficial rather than fundamental. This is not to suggest that Johnston’s Smallwood is any more or less deficient than a traditional religious convert. Psychologists seem to agree that fundamental change rarely accompanies religious conversion. Rambo contends that “most people do not convert,” and Peter J. Kahn and A.L. Greene, who make use of Rambo’s typology of conversions, might describe Smallwood’s conversion as an “institutional transition”: “a person’s movement from one faith community to another within a major religious tradition (e.g., from Methodist to Orthodox within Christianity)” (238). In Smallwood’s case, he transitions from Socialism to Liberalism to Confederationism within politics, never altering the ambitious creature at his core. As is true of many religious converts, Smallwood’s conversions express “a tendency to adopt an ideology which addresses our prevailing needs” rather than an authentic transformation (Peters 121). The impossibility of his change is articulated in *Colony* by the loathsome Headmaster Reeves, who assigns Smallwood a grade of forty-five for “character.” Although Smallwood’s grades in his academic subjects eventually rise, his grade for character never does:

Its being so low, but fixed, never-changing, was the point. It could not change, Reeves seemed to be saying; my other marks could go up or down, as the case might be, but my character, my fundamental self, would stay the same. I might as well have had forty-five stamped on my forehead. I was what I was, my character was my fate and my fate was forty-five. (52)

Peter G. Stromberg's study of Christian conversion narratives affirms the logic of Reeves's judgment: "[O]ne's character is what one *is*. If one's choices reflect one's character, how can one begin to make choices that represent another character?" (23). "The conversion, then," Stromberg writes, "is not a one-time transformation of self or character but rather a process that somehow enables a person to act differently. . . . [P]sychological change may occur in certain experiences, but such change is not a one-time alteration of an essence such as character or true self" (31). And so it is with Johnston's Smallwood.

In his essay on *Colony*, Alexander MacLeod applies the notion of inalterable character to Newfoundland itself, writing that "it remains, resolutely, a Rock, a 'hard' Canadian place where the forces of environmental determinism continue to shape the subjectivities of inhabitants" (80). MacLeod's appeal to environmental determinism might seem a reductive approach to understanding Newfoundland's diverse cultures and inhabitants, but it does suggest a useful way of thinking about Johnston's Smallwood, whose subjectivity is shaped by an unyielding belief that he is destined to achieve that greatness commensurate with the land itself. By using Newfoundland as the instrument of his ambitions, Smallwood becomes an apt metaphor for, and inextricably linked to, the island's modern history. MacLeod's idea echoes comments made by Fielding in her final "Field Day" column:

It doesn't matter to the mountains that we joined Confederation, nor to the bogs, the barrens, the rivers or the rocks. Or the Brow or Mundy Pond, or the land on which St. John's and all the cities, towns, and settlements of Newfoundland are built. It wouldn't have mattered to them if we hadn't joined. (560)

In the aftermath of confederation, Newfoundland remains fundamentally the same, and so both the man and the Rock undergo incomplete conversions—political transformations that do not change what they *are*. Not surprisingly, it is Fielding who points this out—Fielding, who tells Smallwood of her decision to use her columns to "become an atom of dissent beneath your mattress" (549), and who does so by mocking his hijinks and those of his corrupt Director-General of Economic Development, Alfred Valdmanis. She also mocks an important aspect of Smallwood's character and ambition, his belief that he and Newfoundland need to be written about to be given meaning. She addresses herself to Smallwood's radio persona in her customary ironic voice:

"Dear Mr. Barrelman: It has come to my attention that there are in the world a number of books . . . in which no mention whatsoever is made of Newfoundland. . . . I am myself in possession of several such books, including *A Guide Book to*

Chilean Songbirds, the absence in which of the world *Newfoundland* is so inexplicable that I have written its publisher demanding an explanation. (386-87)

Fielding, who resists change again and again in this novel and in *The Custodian of Paradise*, who remains the reclusive, drunken ironist throughout both books, simply does not believe that fundamental conversion is possible—or even desirable. Because of this, she sees what Smallwood cannot: that the alteration of Newfoundland's status and its sudden inclusion in Canadian history will not change what it *is*. Newfoundland remains politically divided and economically dependent, and Smallwood's post-confederation political actions amount more to a series of capers than a serious career. But as much as Fielding is able to run Smallwood down with her irony, in the context of the novel's adaptation of the conversion theme he is a successful convert, because he does achieve that for which he believes he is predestined: a place in History.

We are told on the first page of the narrative proper that Smallwood's mother believed that his "birthdate, Christmas Eve, 1900, predestined [him] for greatness" (8). The idea of predestination has strong religious overtones, of course, because it suggests that God has already determined, for all eternity, who will be saved and who will be damned. In its most rigid expression, the Reformed theology of Calvinism, all people are depraved but some are "wrenched from sin to grace by the predestined, inscrutable will of God. In salvation there could be no cooperation; otherwise God would cease to be supreme" (Pettit 2). Smallwood's zealous pronouncements of his own future greatness are born of his confidence in that future greatness, and again demonstrate Johnston's interest in articulating Smallwood's political conversion in recognizable spiritual language in order to argue for the strength and depth of his conviction. As he crosses Newfoundland by train he imagines the island to be "a landlocked country in the middle of an otherwise empty continent," and decides that "this core that we are passing [through] now [is] the unfoundland that will make us great someday" (141). This ambition for his homeland naturally turns, given Smallwood's robust egoism, into ambition for himself, and he imagines that "the train [is] moving for [no other] purpose but to take me, and only me, where I was going" (142). Later, in the offices of the *Call*, he announces that Newfoundland "'will be one of the great small nations of the earth, a self-governing, self-supporting, self-defending, self-reliant nation, and I will be prime minister of Newfoundland'" (165).

Smallwood's words are an expression of more than just confidence or ambition, because they effectively wrench the notion of predestination from

the spiritual plane to the secular one, putting the power to shape his destiny in his own hands. His unerring confidence in himself and the political destiny he will shape is evident from an early age. Like Joyce's Stephen Dedalus, Smallwood sits at his desk and writes down his name, from there projecting his identity far beyond his immediate circumstances:

Convinced . . . that I would myself write a history of Newfoundland . . . , I compiled this list of Newfoundland historians: Judge John Reeves, the Reverend Lewis Amadeus Anspach, the Reverend Charles Pedley, the Reverend Philip Tocque, the Reverend Moses Harvey, Judge Daniel Woodley Prowse, Joseph Robert Smallwood. I compiled a list of Newfoundland's prime ministers, a line of success that ended with me: The Right Honourable Sir Joseph Robert Smallwood, K.C.G.M., P.D., M.H.A. (40)

It is telling that whereas Dedalus imagines his place in the universe in terms of outwardly expanding circles, Smallwood imagines his place in terms of linear succession, as part of a historical narrative of development that culminates in himself. There is not much in the way of Christian modesty in such pronouncements, but if we recall Smallwood's aforementioned rejections of the conversions offered by Garrigus and Hines, his rhetoric is understandable. Johnston's Smallwood believes from a very young age that his future greatness is predestined, but he rejects the idea that he is being moved along by anything other than his own will and efforts. If, as Charles Cohen writes, "[u]nregenerates trust their own energies" (238), then Smallwood is wholly unregenerate—in spiritual terms, at least—because he believes he will fulfill his political destiny through his own hard work. But Smallwood's rejection of religious conversion makes clear that the destiny he seeks is secular, not spiritual. As we shall see, it is the kingdom of earthly history—Newfoundland's history—and not the kingdom of Heaven that Smallwood has his eye on, and it is in the books of History, rather than the Book of Life, that he will be regenerated. In the world of history, faith remains subordinate to works, and Smallwood knows this.

Smallwood's secular ambitions and his rejection of spiritual goals undergird his belief that the fruits of his efforts must be recognized in the here and now, that there must be fulfillment *in* history, not beyond it. This is why, after working tirelessly on behalf of Grimes by handing out copies of *What's So and What Isn't*—a book that describes the socialist, tellingly, as "a man of destiny" (qtd. in Johnston 116)—Smallwood leaves Grimes's camp and preaches the socialist gospel on the docks rather than going door to door: ". . . I was not content, as [Grimes] was, to lay the groundwork for a revolution that I would never live to see. 'Our day will come,' Grimes said,

sounding like some preacher consoling his congregation with the promise that in some nebulous next life, things would be better” (119). In New York, he quits his job at the socialist daily *The Call* for the same reason: “They seemed too Grimes-like to me right from the start, their interest in socialism too theoretical. . . . They saw themselves as advancing the cause of some world-wide movement to whose real-life effects they had not given much thought, while I was mainly interested in how socialism could be of benefit to Newfoundland . . .” (165). Smallwood’s desire to actualize his social and political “salvation” in the real world is rooted in the same instinct that compels him to resist religious conversion. It is only in the temporal world that he can exercise control over fulfilling his destiny.

Smallwood labours in the novel to gather believers into his political “church” of the moment. Indeed, he tries desperately, on occasion, to win political converts of his own. His sense of having been chosen to perform an evangelical mission begins when he parts ways with Grimes and he preaches about socialism with religious zeal, exhorting fishermen to consider “why your children never have enough to eat; why the men you work for pay you nothing; why some of you are risking your lives to keep rich men like the owners of the S.S. *Newfoundland* in smoking jackets” (122). The religious fervour with which he delivers his secular gospel is unmistakable, as it is when he recruits voters for Sir Richard Squires, when he walks clear across Newfoundland in a failed attempt to drum up support for a union of section men, and when he steps up to the microphone as the Barrelman, announcing before each broadcast that his purpose is “to make Newfoundland better known to Newfoundlanders” (388). Of course, he saves his most powerful evangelism for the cause with which he would be eternally identified: confederation. And so he swoops into outport communities in a Grumman Widgin seaplane and calls out to their inhabitants over the plane’s megaphone: “Citizens of Lamaline, this is the Barrelman, this is Joey Smallwood; I have come to speak to you about Confederation. I repeat, Confederation” (453). If we recall for a moment that Johnston’s Smallwood is recounting these evangelical moments as part of his own narrative of conversion, and that this narrative itself is an instrument of that evangelism, it becomes apparent that he is re-enacting his own conversion experience—or, given his changeable nature, his conversion experiences—and imagining as his ideal reader an audience of other potential converts for whom it may have a meaning. If evangelism is a “principal means ordained by God for instructing people in the great truths revealed by the Scriptures” (Morgan 7), then

for Smallwood, it is the means of revealing to his listeners the great truth that he envisions in Newfoundland's future.

Scripture—the text itself—has an important place in most models of Christian conversion. New England Puritans, for instance, possessed what Patricia Caldwell describes as “a pervasive biblical *sensibility*, a scriptural . . . way of rendering reality in general” (177) that “[grew] out of the idea that men are saved by the gospel” (31). Text and textuality are fundamental to the conversion narrative for two reasons. First, by grounding his or her narrative in authoritative prior texts—and it is important to remember that for Protestants, to give an example, “[t]he word of God in print was . . . a higher authority than any man or institution” (Todd 71-72)—the convert is able to demonstrate his or her full understanding of scripture and thus his or her spiritual *bona fides* for receiving God's grace. Second, references to texts that are familiar to members of the spiritual community that one wishes to join allow the individual to affirm his or her fitness to join that community. In this regard, sacred texts function very much as do the secular texts—newspapers and novels—that Benedict Anderson argues provide “the technical means for representing the *kind* of imagined community that is the nation” (25). The reading and transmission of shared texts facilitate the convert's common identity with the religious—or, in Smallwood's case, political—community.

This emphasis on texts and textuality is manifested in *The Colony of Unrequited Dreams* in a few significant ways. First, Johnston's Smallwood has an unshakeable faith in the power of books. *What's So and What Isn't* compels him to become a socialist, and *Ten Days That Shook the World* inspires him to move to New York City. As a schoolboy, he has a run-in with Headmaster Reeves, who has seen him walking around with “with a load of books beneath his arm. What's he up to, I wonder, what's he thinking? . . . He must be confused, he must be searching for something in those books” (40). Reeves sneers when he finds that Smallwood has been reading Tolstoy: “‘Leo Tolstoy,’ he read, ‘1828-1910. So where is Leo perhaps-the-greatest-novelist-of-all-time now, Mr. Smallwood? Can you tell me that, where is poor old Leo now?’ ‘Right here,’ [Smallwood says], pointing to the book” (41). Smallwood's response is a powerful statement of his belief that books can preserve people, that what the gospel offers its believers is what any text offers its author and subject: a path to eternal life. Smallwood is more interested in being preserved in secular history than being saved at the end of time. On his long walk from Port-aux-Basques to St. John's, he slings his suitcase around

his neck as a makeshift desk so that he can read D.W. Prowse's *A History of Newfoundland* as he walks. He has a Bible with him, but it "remain[s] unopened in [his] suitcase" (214). Prowse's *History*—not the Bible—is Smallwood's sacred text, containing "not a record of the past, but the past itself, distilled, compacted to such density that I could barely lift it" (46). If we think back to the young Smallwood, Dedalus-like, including his name in the pantheon of Newfoundland's historians alongside Prowse's, the point becomes clear: as Christian converts cling to the Bible, so the Newfoundland Smallwood clings to the *History*, which is for him a powerful totem of the history that he will be written into.

In his book on contemporary Canadian historical fiction, Herb Wylie writes that Prowse's *History* "hangs over the novel as a whole" (*Speculative* 155), and Stan Dragland observes that the novel is "saturated" with Prowse's book (193). The *History* influences the life of Johnston's Smallwood because, in the novel's entirely fictional subplot, a handful of letters cut from its pages are used to create an anonymous letter that changes the course of his life and because it is "a narrative that Smallwood hopes to see himself enter as a historical agent and an accomplishment he hopes to repeat as a chronicler of the story of Newfoundland" (Wylie, *Speculative* 155). The *History* influences the novel itself because, in addition to being a source of some of its historical information, it continually resurfaces in epigraphs to each of the novel's six sections. The first of these epigraphs, constituting the very first words of the novel, seems to perform the obligatory postmodernist gesture toward the irrecoverability of authentic historical experience: "The history of the Colony is only very partially contained in printed books; it lies buried under great rubbish heaps of unpublished records, English, Municipal, Colonial and Foreign, in rare pamphlets, old Blue Books, forgotten memberships . . ." (n. pag.). The reliability of historical narrative would seem to be further undermined by the very structure of the book, in which Smallwood's narration is regularly interrupted by Sheilagh Fielding's newspaper columns, her epistolary journal entries, and, most conspicuously, the chapters of her own, overwhelmingly ironic, condensed *History of Newfoundland*. Yet somehow, despite these disruptions and Johnston's occasional teeterings into pure fiction (Smallwood never lived on a place called the Brow in St. John's; he never set foot on the S.S. *Newfoundland*, although the story of that ship's doomed sealers is true; and he never met Sheilagh Fielding, who is herself entirely a work of fiction), *The Colony of Unrequited Dreams* distances itself from the tactics of historiographic metafiction because it is not overly concerned with

“thematiz[ing] its own interaction both with the historical past and with the historically conditioned expectations of its readers” (Hutcheon 65). It would be an exaggeration to say Johnston displays the same faith in historical texts as converts do in the Bible, but he demonstrates a cautious (and necessary) faith in them nonetheless, and the novel is “less profoundly skeptical about historiography, less concerned with fracturing and interrogating retrospection, and [more] rooted in historical verisimilitude and an engagement with the historical record” than is much Canadian fiction of the past twenty-five years (Wyile, *Speculative* 262). This cautious faith in the historical record is vital to Johnston’s construction of a fully integrated conversion narrative because, as Peter Stromberg points out, the conversion narrative is rooted in an “historical, observable event” that is patterned after the example of Jesus Christ (14), a figure who embodies the relationship between corporeal existence and spiritual afterlife that was fundamental to the Christian convert.

The novel’s general fidelity to the historical record also prevents it from quite becoming the “con-game between duplicitous and blatantly falsifying documentalists” that Hans Bak claims (231). Were Johnston’s narrative to be overly suspicious about the reliability of history, it would undermine Smallwood’s passionate demands to be made author, subject, and agent of that history. We have already seen that Smallwood believes Prowse’s *History* to be “the past itself, distilled” (46), and that he seeks the preservation of his identity in the historical text rather than the eternal salvation of a spiritual afterlife. Johnston raises the stakes by suggesting that Smallwood has a Carlylean view of history *as* biography, and believes that only the historical text can testify to the greatness of his life. This impulse stems, in part, from Smallwood’s sense of his own insignificance in relation to Newfoundland’s massive seascape, which he feels when he “look[s] out across the trackless, forever-changing surface of the sea, which, though it registered the passage of time, was suggestive of no beginning and no end, as purposeless, as pointless as eternity” (131). Danielle Fuller suggests that his awareness of “a lack of physical limits and boundary markers produces anxiety because it evokes the threat of continuity with other spaces and a concomitant loss of place-bound identity” (26). But Smallwood’s anxiety is at least as much about historical identity as geographical (and even cultural) identity. The remedy for the disturbing sense of dislocation wrought by the apparent lack of beginnings and ends is, of course, history itself, which demarcates time so very usefully; to locate himself in history, then, will be to confirm his significance. But Smallwood’s urge to view history as biography is also inherited from his

father, who feels irrelevant when he thinks upon Prowse's *History*, a book he could neither have appeared in nor authored (69-70), and who, upon seeing his name mentioned in the dedication to Smallwood's *Book of Newfoundland* but not in its contents, lashes out with sarcasm and indignation: "A dedication is the only way I could ever get my name into a book like this. He seeks to appease me for deeming me unworthy of inclusion in his book by working my name into the dedication. I am honoured, deeply honoured, and not at all offended as some men might be" (481).

The problem for Smallwood's father is that he is not one of the historical elect. He is not predestined for historical greatness as his son is. The younger Smallwood will fulfill his destiny and write himself into the pages of *History* by taking up the cause of confederation: "It seemed to me that unless I did something historians thought was worth recording, it would be as though I had never lived, that all the histories in the world together formed one book, not to warrant inclusion in which was to have wasted one's life. It terrified me that if it were possible to extrapolate Prowse's *History* past 1895 to the present, I would not be in it" (454). This is a critical moment in the novel, the moment at which history and biography are fused. Smallwood's realization that history may serve as his biography is the final piece of his conversion experience. We have seen that Smallwood resembles the Christian convert in his belief in predestination, his evangelicalism, and his faith in the power of texts. Now, at this moment in the novel and at this moment in history, he professes his faith (in confederation), he acknowledges his own debasement (in his feelings of insignificance), and he submits to a higher power—*History* itself—in order to assure his salvation. His salvation is secular rather than spiritual, but it grants him the everlasting life that he so desperately craves in the form of permanent renown. So important is this idea to Johnston's construction of Smallwood that it is repeated by Fielding in *The Custodian of Paradise*, the sequel to *Colony*: "To be overlooked by history, rightly or wrongly, [is] his greatest fear. To be demoted to a kind of non-existence. His life erased, as if it never happened" (203-04). From the fictional Smallwood's perspective, confederation is vital less because it allows Newfoundland to join Canada than because it allows him to etch his name in the secular grand text of the elect: *History*.

The influence of Prowse's book on Johnston's Smallwood is clear. However, its influence on Johnston's novel is more complex than it might seem at first blush. Its usefulness as a plot device is inarguable, since discovering who cut and pasted the mysterious note from its contents drives the novel's mystery.

Its aptness as an artifact around which to structure the novel's thematic interests in history and textuality is similarly unassailable. Less certain, though, is something else that Prowse's *History* seems to contribute to Johnston's *Colony of Unrequited Dreams*: a basis for peppering its conversion theme with various recognizable aspects of the Puritan model of the narrative of conversion. The novel does make one oblique reference to Puritanism in its description of Prowse's history as a book that "justified the ways of Newfoundland to the world" (46), a line that echoes one written by John Milton, a devout Puritan who stated in Book One of *Paradise Lost* his desire to "justif[y] the ways of God to men" (1.26). And aspects of Smallwood's transformation from insubstantial man to historical figure are reminiscent of aspects of a specifically Puritan model of conversion, in which the convert must (1) make a public profession of faith and confession of sins (performed here, symbolically, in Smallwood's first-person narration); (2) undergo public questioning (conducted by Sheilagh Fielding in her newspaper columns); and (3) submit to a vote to determine his or her admission into the Church (the referendum that determines Newfoundland's future as part of Canada and thus ensures that Smallwood's name will not be forgotten). Hans Rollman mounts a persuasive argument against the myth of established Puritanism on the island and the "persistent historiographical tradition from the beginning of the nineteenth century that the earliest settlers of Newfoundland were Puritans." He traces this tradition back to very brief stays by Congregationalist preachers, and comes to the conclusion that "a substantial and organized 'Puritan' or separatist presence in seventeenth-century Newfoundland is highly unlikely." How, then, did this "tradition" become "persistent," and perhaps persistent enough even to have influenced Johnston's novel? Enter D.W. Prowse's *History of Newfoundland*, the 1895 edition of which contained a supplement, "History of the Churches in Newfoundland," that Rollman argues "popularized from fact and fiction the most comprehensive picture of Puritanism on the island." Prowse's history of the churches, largely derived from a pamphlet by Mrs. G. Ward Siddall and John Wood's *Memoir of Henry Wilkes*, simply gets the facts wrong. It is possible, given its prominence in *Colony*, that Prowse's *History* is thus also the source of the novel's other thematic and structural underpinning: the narrative of conversion, a staple of the Puritan culture that Johnston would have learned from Prowse had thrived in settlement-era Newfoundland. If, as Fielding writes in her condensed *History of Newfoundland*, "Prowse was completely taken in by [William] Vaughan" (83), the Welsh writer whose *Golden Fleece* (1626) advocated the colonization

of Newfoundland, then it may be that Johnston was, however slightly, taken in by D.W. Prowse, although to much more fruitful ends.

Among the earliest American spiritual autobiographies were those written by English dissenters—Quakers and Puritans—for whom the northeastern corner of what was to become the United States of America was their new found land. Puritan spiritual autobiographers laboured to validate their claims to membership in the church community, as Johnston's Smallwood does in the political and historical community, through a narrative of conversion. Descriptions of this process were recorded by Puritan writers who "wished to trace the natural history of conversion in order to help men discover their prospects of salvation" (Morgan 66), an activity that helped to establish the conventions of the conversion narrative itself. Daniel Shea argues, however, that the narrative of conversion usually forms only a small part of the Puritan spiritual autobiography (183), and that these interpolated narratives "hardly deserve to be considered as autobiography" because they are entirely overdetermined: "[T]heir authors' designated purpose was to convince the elders that the presence of grace was evident in their experience. . . . The autobiographical act is [thus] reduced to testifying that one's experience has conformed, with allowable variations, to a certain pattern of feeling and behavior" (91). Of course, all autobiographical acts issue from the desire to impose a pattern on one's experiences, to orient the narrative of a life toward a specific end. But in conversion narratives this pattern is, according to Shea, imposed from without rather than from within.

And so it is in *The Colony of Unrequited Dreams*, in which the pattern imposed on the life of Joey Smallwood is also imposed from without, albeit in a complicated way. If the autobiographical act necessarily distorts its subject, then the life of Smallwood in *Colony* is multiply distorted, and in ways both fruitful and provocative, by pressures exerted not simply by Johnston's selection and manipulation of historical and biographical data, but also by the generic demands of the *Bildungsroman* (Wyile, "Strip-Tease" 97), the memoir, and, not least, the conversion narrative. Ironically, perhaps the most distorting and most fruitful of these pressures is exerted by the book that Johnston's Smallwood would write himself into if he could: Prowse's *History of Newfoundland*.

In *The Mutilating God: Authorship and Authority in the Narrative of Conversion*, Gerald Peters argues that the reason the conversion narrative has continued to find expression in life writing is that our "knowledge that the 'unified self' is only an illusion produced by conventions in writing does

not, in itself, eliminate the psychological need or the social imperative to understand oneself as a totality” (11-12). And this is precisely what Johnston’s Smallwood strives to do in his narration—to understand himself, and indeed construct himself, as a totality in the context of Newfoundland history. *The Colony of Unrequited Dreams* is thus the fable of Smallwood’s reconstruction, one in which Johnston employs conventions of the conversion narrative to achieve this goal. Wyle notes that Smallwood’s “drive to make his mark on history [warps] his relationships with others and thwart[s] his political and romantic dreams” (“Strip-Tease” 88), and Smallwood seems to recognize this as he mourns “the unacknowledged sorrows and blunders of my life” in the novel’s final pages (550). By omitting, or treating superficially, many of Smallwood’s political debacles after Newfoundland joined Canada, Johnston lets his Smallwood off lightly and leaves himself vulnerable to charges of allowing “errors and distortions” to creep into the novel (Dragland 189). Missing are the “details which seriously qualify his rags-to-riches account” (Wyle, *Speculative* 130). But even this apparent fault may be grounded in the novel’s model of conversion. As Caldwell observes, Puritan conversion narratives resist “a literary standard of completeness, wholeness, and roundness” because the conversion experienced on Earth can only be fully realized in Heaven. The author of the conversion narrative is faced with the thorny problem of trying to write persuasively about “the essence of a spiritual event that manifests itself in the material world but starts and ends elsewhere; one that is felt in the temporal bodily existence but can be ‘assured’ only beyond its bounds” (16). And so it is that *The Colony of Unrequited Dreams* must omit the judgment of history. It is the story of Smallwood’s *aspiration* to be included in history, not of history’s judgment of him. Like religious converts, Smallwood aspires to live beyond his time on earth, and like their narratives, his is an expression of hope and faith that he will achieve this. Like them, he can never know how that story will end.

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