Chapter 5

Stranger Figuration and Outsider Depiction in Newfoundland Drama, 1945 –

It should be restated that, while every attempt has been made to represent a wide range of Newfoundland plays, no critical analysis of a body of literature can speak in categorical terms or describe itself as perfectly comprehensive. There are many plays omitted here, particularly those of recent vintage, which offer rich veins of material for examination. This study, which emphasizes figures of alienation within Newfoundland society, and especially outport society, must necessarily include those plays which feature such figures and contexts in prominent ways. Aspects which suggest a play's significance as a work were central factors in establishing the determinative criteria for selection: these aspects include the relative renown of the playwright or play, its publication or recurrent production, perceptions of its influence within a particular period, and narrative structure. There is, as yet, far less critical material on the playwrights and plays included here than befits a theatre culture as vital as that of Newfoundland. This dissertation will add, it is hoped, a building block to the foundation of Newfoundland dramatic literary criticism established by such writers as Helen Peters, Denyse Lynde, Brian Parker, Michael Fralic, and Craig Walker.

A restatement of terms is also called for. The key terms applied in this analysis are those of the Stranger, the Necessary Outsider, and the Insider. These three levels of status are said to represent points on a line of alienation which extends from within a community's normative boundaries to Outside them; the Stranger and Insider represent

the extreme ends (Outside and Inside, respectively) of the line, while Necessary Outsiders occupy a median, border position.[1]

Within the realm of the Stranger, distinctions are made between Strange behaviour (Strangeness) and the figuring of the Stranger (Strangerhood). Strange behaviour represents acts or expressions at variance with conventional Insider behaviour which may, or may not, lead to the conferral of Stranger status. Such transgressions against community norms can result in an outward shift in the status of the individual who commits them, depending on the context in which they are committed, the significance accorded to the transgressions, the status level of the individual, and the esteem in which s/he is held.

Strangers may be foreign- or native-born, resident or non-resident, corporeal or non-corporeal. In the case of native birth, an Insider may be accorded the status of a Stranger as a result of transgressive acts which are considered of sufficient gravity as to be irremediable. In the case of foreign-birth, an individual automatically acquires Stranger status. This status may be altered through affiliative interconnection with a community or through remediative interchange of sufficient quantity and quality.

Necessary Outsiders are made up of Transgressive Insiders and Demystified Strangers, with Exiles forming a sub-set of the Transgressive Insider. Demystified Strangers are foreign-born individuals who, through a continuing presence in the community and the demonstration of certain remediating qualities, have lost the element of threat which they presented as unqualified Strangers. These qualities involve the execution of needed and/or valued skills (such as teaching or medicine), adherence to Insider norms, acknowledgement of Insider values, or the possession of membership in

micro-communities within the polity, such as a marriage. The accumulation of these qualities must be adjudged of sufficient perceived value in order to shift their status inward from that of an unqualified Stranger.

Transgressive Insiders are those who have qualified their Insider status through action, expression or self-presentation that is perceived as anti-social. Their transgressions, while adjudged Strange by other Insiders, are not deemed of such gravity as to shift their status to the extreme Outside position on the line of alienation, that of Strangerhood.[2] Exiles are those who have left the community for a period of time, either voluntarily or involuntarily. The fact of their departure, and the nature of it, plays a role in determining the status they are accorded as members of the community. Voluntary Exiles who return may find it difficult to progress from qualified Insider (i.e. Transgressive Insider) status to unqualified Insider status, as departure is regarded as an implicit repudiation of the community organism.[3] Such individuals also face the obstacle of relearning the codes and received knowledge of the community, which have altered in their absence—an obstacle also faced by returning involuntary Exiles. Involuntary Exiles, however, may possess a greater chance to remediate their status within the community, as they are not assigned responsibility for their departure.

Actions, expressions, and presentation may simultaneously be regarded as positive or negative in community terms, depending on the gaze of the adjudicator and the status and esteem levels of the individuals involved. Such demarcators of difference take place within particular logo-centres of the community, those of membership and space. Membership is quantified along the line of alienation and its extreme and median points. It also involves the notion of circles of affiliation, micro-cells within communities

which themselves involve membership. Within these parameters of membership, determinations of communicative competence levels, remedial interchange, and dyadically accumulated social currency act as factors in the alteration, inwards or outwards, of membership status.

Space may be regarded as geographic territory, but also as psychic terrain. Physical space takes on different qualities determined by the expectations of those who claim it. Members of a community generally regard such spaces in similar ways: what is appropriate in a public space at a particular time, for instance, or what is regarded as acceptable etiquette within the realm of personal interaction. Aspects of temporality and proxemics come into play in the determination, by Insiders, of what constitutes appropriate behaviour within different areas of the community. Norms of spatial, social, and cultural proximity (see page 8) are used as markers of difference in the determination of Strange behaviour. The *umwelt* of a Stranger, his or her mobile "Inside" (derived from a different home community), comes into conflict with these established norms. Types of personal and public space are the primary arenas in which these determinations of difference are made.

Finally, members of a community take on responsibilities for the surveillance, regulation, and punishment, in both formal (juridical) and informal (normative) terms, of all transgressive behaviour within the boundaries of their polity. Within the frame of a macro-community's imposition of regulation and punishment, this can be perceived as self-disenfranchisement, as when a nation requires nothing more than an iconic presence within a town to ensure that its precepts for obedient citizenship are adhered to. Within the frame of the micro-community such as a village or outport, however, this self-

regulation can be seen as an essential mechanism for survival. Such activities as gossip, news reportage, and casual observation take on significance as the means whereby a community is able to maintain its identity through active regulation. Strangers are fetishized or neutralized within this regulatory framework. Fetishization is the depersonalization of a Stranger, the augmenting of a represented threat to mythic status. Neutralization is a personalization of the Stranger, a process of demystification which leads to a diminishment of a represented threat.

Communities, within the rubric of this analysis, are continually contested arenas where the status level of every agent is ceaselessly in play. Interests must be fought for and defended, and the borders, physical and psychic, of a community are under siege. These contests are essential in the determination and evolution of community identity.

5.1 Grace Butt: Towards a Playwriting Culture

The work of Grace Butt presents a conundrum for the theatre researcher. There is no contesting that Butt is a seminal figure in the development of Newfoundland theatre, through the founding of the amateur St. John's Players in 1937. The company's production of her works *The Road Through Melton* (1945) and *New Lands* (1947), as well as the influential *Newfoundland Pageant* toured by the Newfoundland Travelling Theatre Company in 1974, would seem to assure her status as the mother of Newfoundland drama. Yet, just as it is a matter of debate as to whether the legacy of the St. John's Players is that of an obstructive, lingering colonialism or a cautious step towards a modern, locally-generated theatre culture, the texts of Butt are similarly open

to question as to their lasting significance. Butt's published *oeuvre* has exercised little evident influence on later playwrights. Nevertheless Denyse Lynde, in describing the wave of Newfoundland-centred writing which occurred after the Dominion Drama Festival's call for Canadian scripts in 1967, avers that Butt's plays "are not the least notable of the group" of playwrights which emerged at that time, including, presumably, those by Michael Cook, Tom Cahill, and Al Pittman (Newfoundland 84).

In stylistic terms, Butt's work is structurally conventional. Themes typically involve "issues of personal and private integrity and the personal cost involved in maintaining such standards" (Lynde, "Newfoundland" 84), a point of reference not unlike that of Michael Cook, whose plays are "not just about survival ... but … about the price of survival" (qtd. in Wallace 163). The distinction is that, while Cook's dramaturgy has been described as "romantic-existentialist" (Walker, "Versions" 368) and "poetic" ("Elegy" 194), and demonstrates a willingness to mix different theatrical forms ("Versions" 280), Butt's work seldom strays from the "well-made" model. Issues are examined in a straightforward, dramatically rudimentary way, evoking a Newfoundland and Newfoundlanders who struggle against forces which seek to undermine them.

There is a palpable sense of mistrust of Outside political forces evident in Butt's work, be they Canadian, British, or from outlying local areas. What saves her best work, *The Road Through Melton* (1945), from accusations of promoting a purely nativist perspective is that the destructive forces in the play do not all come from "away". Insiders within micro-communities like Melton contribute to the crisis of identity faced by the community, although they function under the direction and impetus of foreign-born Strangers.

Butt's work asserts traditional values of loyalty, constancy, and familiarity. Michael Cook decried the work of those who, like Ted Russell, worked from an "idealized perception" where "darker elements of the Newfoundland reality were not permitted to disturb the idyll" ("Culture" 75), playing to an audience "who came to see Newfoundland and Newfoundlanders (good) triumph over the forces of Evil (anyone from away, politicians, *et al*)" (76). It is unclear if Cook placed Grace Butt's work in this category, though it seems likely that he was aware of its existence. It is impossible to paint Grace Butt as a rebel or iconoclast in the mold of Michael Cook; the quieter progress she and her work represents have been obscured by the louder voices predominant in the cultural ferment of 1970s St. John's. In many ways she can be considered the quintessential Insider, a well-regarded native-born member of her home community. Her refusal to portray all her Newfoundland-born characters in stereotypical fashion—Cook describes these as "the strong-willed, often angry or grieving, Newfoundland woman … the boys in the bar, witty, sardonic, knocking everything and everybody … the exploited fisherman, the wicked merchant" (Cook "Culture" 76)—fails to excuse her use of other, more global stereotypes. These include depictions of foreigners cited by Cook in his scathing indictment of the timidity of Newfoundland playwriting: "the ignorant and snobbish mainlander" and the "indifferent and corrupt politician" (76).

Butt does not pander to the sensibilities of her audiences, but her work cannot be said to challenge them, either. Such does not appear to have been her intent. A creature of the urban middle-class herself, the only political conviction evidenced in her plays is a heartfelt desire for Newfoundland to be allowed to pull its own weight.[4] The amateur

theatre of which she was the principal member for over thirty years had little to do with the reform movement led by community theatres in Great Britain. The crowd-pleasing priorities and techniques of the outport concert tradition would also have been foreign to her.

The structural conservatism of Butt's writing is striking, especially when compared to contemporaneous work in Europe. It adheres closely to the well-made narrative model which held pride of place in England, the spiritual home of the St. John's bourgeoisie, throughout the mid-19th century to the middle of the next. That this should be so is not surprising. Quite apart from factors such as Butt's background, there is scant evidence that progressive plays from the continent made their way into Newfoundland's literary circles in the 1940s, while British and American influence in the region continued to be present on every level.

These observations should not obscure the groundbreaking nature of Grace Butt's plays. All of her plays take Newfoundland as their setting. A broad range of native-born and foreign characters are featured (with a clear distinction made between the two), and the narratives involve themes and subjects quintessentially local in orientation. None of these aspects had previously been a part of the theatrical life of Newfoundland society.

Having established this initial context for the work, this section will examine two of Grace Butt's plays. As with the other examples cited in this dissertation, these plays are notable not only for their significance as dramatic landmarks but as examples of the thematic use of the Stranger.

5.1.1 *The Road Through Melton* (1945)

The setting of *The Road Through Melton* is rural Newfoundland in the recent past.[5] The play's title refers to a road connecting the small town of Melton with the coming "trans-Island" highway. The road is a bit of political pork-barreling proposed by Charles "Kelly" Kelburn, the Leader of the Opposition in the Newfoundland House of Assembly. Armed with the road proposal, he has come looking for a sure-fire candidate to represent his party in the next election. Within the frame of the micro-community of Melton, Kelburn is a Necessary Outsider. Not only is Kelburn not a native son, but he lacks the daily dyadic ties which would accord him Insider status at this level. This does not prevent him from claiming, at various points, membership in a series of local circles of affiliation. His manner is consistently jovial, peppered with references to his actions on behalf of the community. This behaviour can be seen as consistent with that of a regional politician, whose position depends upon the maintenance of a Necessary Outsider status in many communities. He requires local affiliations to be effective. The road proposal can be seen either as the demonstration of a valued skill—the ability to procure improvements for the town—or remediative interaction, an act designed to ingratiate him with members of the community.

That Kelburn's status is tenuous is indicated at the beginning of the play through the comments of the Mardens' housekeeper, Annie. She loudly declaims upon the venal qualities of all politicians. Unlike the Mardens, Annie speaks with a strong local dialect. In *The Road Through Melton* Annie represents the older families of Melton, the working people who have lived in the town for generations and who, unlike Steve, know and care

little about the Outside. Such characters, with their clearly defined borders of Inside-Outside, often function as ardent protectors and spokespersons of local mores, constantly wary of Outside forces.[6] In this case she heralds Kelburn's arrival and guides the audience's response to his presence.

The play takes place entirely within the house of Steve and Marion Marden. In spatial terms, this represents not only a micro-cell of a larger community, but the personal space of the Mardens. Therefore Strangers and Outsiders must tread carefully. Steve, the play's central character, is a voluntary Exile who has returned to Melton after a hiatus in the United States. The micro-community of the Marden household (which includes Annie) acts in the play as a locus for Steve's status as an unqualified Insider, whereas in the greater community of Melton he is well-regarded but bears, to some extent, the stigma of having once departed the community. The increased level of status Steve enjoys within his own home helps to cast the presence of the play's true Stranger, Helen, in a starker light. Helen is an American whose past relationship with Steve becomes an issue in the Marden household. Her presence is explained through her recent affiliation with Charles Kelburn, as his assistant, but it is clear from the outset that she carries an agenda related to re-encountering Steve Marden. Her suppressed desire to reunite with Steve (and, by extension, remove him from the community) represents a threat to the community, both in terms of its values—he is a married man—and its membership. Butt augments this threat in her characterization of Helen, who is fashionable, vivacious, and urbane, qualities Marion Marden, for all her homely virtues, does not possess.

Marion does not initially recognize the threat posed by Helen. Her first actions are to welcome Kelburn and his assistant into her home, where they will stay while

conducting their business in Melton. The process of welcoming is also a process of de-mystification; it is only much later that Helen, who appears so familiar through her past association with Steve, is revealed to be *not known*, not a Necessary Outsider but a Stranger. Her interest in Marion's husband represents a danger that is not immediately evident to any of the characters but Annie, the unqualified Insider. At the end of the first scene, the stage directions and dialogue clearly indicate that Annie is ready to act on the danger posed by Helen:

ANNIE, about to go, remains to size up and show disapproval of HELEN's cigarette, short skirt, slim figure, and air of superiority.

HELEN: Who's Dulcey?

ANNIE: Dulcey's pretty important around here, I can tell you.

HELEN: So I gathered. (*She lights cigarette*.) Is she one of the family?

ANNIE: You could say that.

HELEN: Well, who then?

ANNIE: She's not a who, she's a her.

HELEN (*Exhaling smoke in exasperation*)*:* And who's her?

ANNIE: A cow – she's a cow.

HELEN (*Incredulous*): A cow…? Good lord. Just a cow.

ANNIE: She's not just a cow – she's *our* cow.

HELEN (*A short, deprecating laugh):* Well.

ANNIE *(defensively):* Dulcey's a sweet creature, let me tell ya.

HELEN: Oh. *(Sitting, her skirt rides up and is noted by ANNIE.)*

ANNIE: She's like a person - *(Pointedly)* a nice person.

HELEN: Oh really.

ANNIE: Yes, oh really. She's gentle, with soft kind eyes and great warm tits *(she looks straight at HELEN's flat bosom)* – which is more than I can say of some people!

Giving a sharp nod, ANNIE marches out, leaving HELEN to dismiss the episode with an amused, superior shrug (Melton 12).[7]

From the cigarette-holder employed by Helen to the quick cadence of her speech, Helen represents a foreign presence in the household. Annie demonstrates Helen's lack of Insider knowledge, suggests, by her disapproving glance, that she is not a "real" woman (lacking the "great warm tits" required), and states, in the indirect manner considered polite in rural speech, that she is not "nice". The repetition of Helen's "Oh really" is a marker of latent hostility. The indictment has been made. Butt, through Annie, has identified the play's Stranger. Where Steve and Marion may mistake Kelburn as the larger threat to the community, Annie, in her primal wisdom, is having none of it. Her disapproval can also be seen as the opening salvo in an intended operation to regulate and punish Helen's behaviour.

Father Durley drops by. His trajectory on the line of alienation is clearly inward—although he is new to the community, he enters without knocking, indicating that a degree of familiarity and acceptance has been achieved. His pastoral responsibilities also locate him as a Necessary Outsider. The level of esteem he enjoys, as demonstrated by the markers of his entrance without knocking and his warm welcome by the Mardens, represents a competition for status to Kelburn, a Necessary Outsider who enjoys far less esteem. Kelburn acts immediately to establish his position:

KELBURN: This your parish, Father?

FATHER DURLEY *(Nodding)**:*** Yes.

KELBURN: You haven't been here long, have you? Your name is not as familiar to me as I'd like it to be. Father Walter used to be head of this parish. I knew him well.

FATHER DURLEY: I've only been at Melton for several weeks. Spent most of my life as a missionary up north.

KELBURN: Oh? (8)

The politician, an experienced social manipulator, immediately attempts to establish his Insider status at the priest's expense. Kelburn's modus is coöptation. He quickly arranges a meeting with the Priest in order to create new dyadic webbing and a sense of reciprocal support for each other's status: "We must have a talk about your parish – the needs of the people here: my Party has a lot to offer"(9).

Kelburn has come to the Mardens to persuade Steve to run for office under the banner of his political party. Given that he is aware of Steve's local popularity, the offer is carefully calibrated, playing as it does on the very ambition which caused Marden to leave Melton, an act of voluntary Exile which he appears to have successfully remediated. Steve has returned to life in the community, but is unable to completely submerge himself. Regarded as a leader, he has been nominated by a committee of citizens to run for office. The question is which party he will choose. At the heart of Kelburn's proposal is the offer to connect the town with the greater world through a link to the highway. Modern life, in the form of tourists, services, and communications, will transform Melton. To a Necessary Outsider and non-resident such as Kelburn, this is manifestly an attractive prospect. Marden, while acknowledging the need to nurture a

tourism industry to ensure the community's survival, demurs on the need to widen and straighten the existing road. Having experienced modern urban life during his sojourn in the United States and retreated from it, Steve Marden represents the tension between modernity and tradition, depicted here in Inside and Outside terms. He is aware that the community must adapt, and that tourism will eventually represent a needed element in Melton's future, but he is unwilling to corrupt the community's identity to ensure that future. Steve declines to run for Kelburn's party.

Helen's characterization as the romantic complication in the play can be initially interpreted as unconvincing. Marion never takes her seriously as a threat, and Steve never inclines in her direction, save for an affectionate kiss. Her presence, however, is more important than simply that of a romantic foil. Following the logic of Melton's community mores, the staunch Marden, having been drawn back within his Insider community, cannot incline in the direction of the Stranger who represents the Outside world he has so recently repudiated with his return. This aspect of Helen's characterization is demonstrated in that the basis of her appeal to Steve deals as much with his unfulfilled potential as with the romantic sparks they may have kindled:

> **HELEN** *(Switch in tone):* What I can't believe is you.
>
> **STEVE:** Me?
>
> **HELEN:** Look at you – a working farmer, settled down in a place like – like Melton.
>
> **STEVE:** What's wrong with that?
>
> **HELEN:** For Steve Marden? – the man who used to believe that small town life was death to the soul – or should I say intellect since you don't believe in

> a soul – or you didn't two years ago when I knew you…I remember you were an out-and-out unbeliever, a committed free thinker. (10-1)

The Outside is represented by "free thinking" in Helen's words, and small town Insider life by " … petty jealousies, small-town knife-sharpening … "(11). Steve is undeterred, although he is attracted by the charms of freedom Helen represents.

Thwarted by Marden, Kelburn begins to negotiate with a local handyman, Tom Gahn, who is also a returning voluntary Exile, like Marden. Gahn, however, lacks Steve's charm and humility (and, one may presume, his level of education), and possesses a festering resentment that he has never achieved what he believes to be his rightful status in the community. This resentment is exacerbated by the fact that he does odd-jobs for the Mardens. A context is created that is self-fulfilling. In the absence of any remorse for having left the community, or a demonstration of remediative interchanges within it, Tom has failed to reintegrate. Sensing an opportunity in Gahn's sullen demeanour, Kelburn the politician demonstrates a sure hand at the politics of ingratiation:

> **STEVE:** This is Mr. Kelburn, Tom. Tom Gahn, Mr. Kelburn. Tom's helping us right now with the farm.
>
> **KELBURN:** *(Rising and offering a hand to a voter)* How are you? …Gahn…you say the name's Gahn?
>
> **TOM:** Yes, Tom Gahn.
>
> **KELBURN:** I knew a Patrick Gahn quite well – he lived in the Salmon River District.
>
> **TOM:** That's my uncle.

KELBURN: Well! Your uncle, eh? Y'know, Patrick helped me get elected in my first campaign.

……..

KELBURN: You interested in politics yourself?

TOM: I'm interested in getting on. I got plans – and I'd be interested in working to get elected anyone who'd listen to 'em.

……..

KELBURN: Um. You know many people here in Melton?

TOM: Sure. Was born and brought up around here.

KELBURN: I'd like to have a talk with you – tomorrow. Can you manage that?

TOM: Sure. (17)

Gahn feels no compunction about undercutting Steve Marden and his local backers if it will help him to shift his status inward, or at least increase the level of esteem in which he is held. His ambition is to build and run a tourist lodge: once Marden has turned down Kelburn's offer of candidacy, the politician dangles the prospect of facilitating such a project in order to recruit Tom to help elect the new candidate. Steve has initiated projects, such as a canning factory and a tourist lodge, to be run co-operatively by the town's residents. This spirit of communal endeavour represents a form of heresy to Kelburn. It effectively cuts Outside politicians out of the community loop. He argues with Helen over the efficacy of such an approach:

HELEN: You've got to admit that's pretty smart.

KELBURN: Smart! It won't work, can't. Oh, it'll go along for a while, but then it'll just fold up.

HELEN: But why? I –

KELBURN: But at the first sign where someone in the group sees where he can make a bigger profit on his own – and he's out! It's human nature. (28)

Kelburn reveals his anti-communitarianism. The community, to this regional politician, is not an entity whose integrity must be retained intact, but rather one whose outer walls must be breached, in order to facilitate control from the Outside and to profit from it. To do so he will manipulate Transgressive Insiders such as Tom Gahn. Their conversation takes place out of earshot of the others; Kelburn acknowledges the need for this by saying "Close the door" (29), creating a two-person variation of what Goffman refers to as a *stall*, a bounded personal space with restricted access (*Relations* 34). The implication made by the playwright is that their association represents something untoward, or at least something that should not be subjected to public scrutiny. They negotiate a strategy to achieve their mutual aims:

KELBURN: I'll be frank with you. Our man won't be Steve Marden. We need someone whose head is not in the clouds, a practical man – you understand me? Our candidate has to have some regard for the responsibilities of government – you understand? And he's got to be a good Christian man who has respect for the church – you follow me?

TOM: I get it. And what's more, I can add to it.

KELBURN: Good. Go to work, as of now.

TOM: Of course I'll need spending money and liquor.

KELBURN: You'll get both. (29-30)

Kelburn's insistent tone underlines the sense of the stakes for the two men. He employs a coded vocabulary riven with checks ("you understand me?") to ensure Gahn has access to the true meaning of what he says. By "responsibilities of government" Kelburn clearly means allowing government to run, and take credit for, community endeavours such as the canning factory and the proposed tourist lodge.

Kelburn moves on to Helen, indicating the second part of his strategy to her. He admits that he has had no luck persuading Father Durley to influence his parishioners. Other attempts to discredit Marden have run into a brick wall. He has decided to work actively to diminish Steve's status and esteem levels in the community, while seeming to remain friendly with the Mardens. A casual remark by Helen fuels Kelburn's determination to label Marden an "atheist":

> **HELEN** *(Incredulous):* You're not planning on staying here for supper – after all that's happened?
>
> **KELBURN:** Certainly. Just because Marden and I are politically opposed doesn't make him my enemy.
>
> **HELEN:** Doesn't make him your enemy? But just a while ago you said you were going to annihilate him in the eyes of the community because he was a free thinker.
>
> **KELBURN:** Atheist, not free thinker.
>
> **HELEN** *(Stamping her foot):* I didn't say he was an atheist.
>
> **KELBURN:** Call it what you like. From now on he's going to be called an atheist. And that's a dirty word in this community. (30)

The strategy is two-pronged: to push Steve Marden's status outward, from a highly esteemed Necessary Outsider to that of a Stranger, and at the same time to augment the status of a new man through the influence of money and alcohol.

Tom Gahn, it turns out, has brought his own piece of social currency to the negotiation with Kelburn. He has witnessed an intimate scene between Helen and Steve. Fuelled by a little alcohol, Helen has made her play for Steve. An aspect of the background story becomes relevant here. Steve reveals that his return to Melton occurred by chance, as a result of the death of his parents, not as an act of repudiation of the Outside, or of Helen. His Exile status is therefore more contentious than most in the community may know. They spar over the value of the contribution he can make in a small rural community, and if, in marrying Marion, he has settled for something less than was offered by Helen. Steve indicates that the ambiguous nature of his return to Melton has been replaced by a firm belief that the frenetic urban activity that Helen claims "makes the world go round" is "unreal" (22). Helen admits the real reason she accompanied Charles Kelburn was "to find out if it was possible for you and me to take up where we left off" (24). Steve gently rejects her. In so doing, he "*kisses her face and holds her against him*" (24), an act witnessed by Tom. Within the micro-community of the Marden household, he will attempt to sow discord, and so diminish Steve where he is strongest. Outside the family, in the context of the town of Melton, he will spread the rumours of atheism. Tom Gahn represents a character so alienated from his home community that the only manner in which he believes he can improve his status is through acts of physical or emotional violence. That such an approach may be ultimately

self-defeating is not the point. Gahn's inability to act like an Insider, in approving and adhering to local codes of acceptable conduct, allows him few options.

At the beginning of Act Two Butt signals that the community will not take kindly to such tactics through the redoubtable Annie, once again functioning as the voice of the community's unqualified Inside. She finds Tom snooping in the Marden's living room, and confronts him in the presence of Marion:

> **ANNIE** *(wild gesture towards Tom):* I'm givin' this one a piece of me mind, that's what's goin' on. Do you know what he's been doin' – it didn't come to me ears till last night – he's been goin' round handin' out liquor and money for Mr. Kelburn's man – and not only that but tellin' downright lies about Mr. Marden - and all the time workin' here for him…*(aggressively to Tom)* Tell Mrs. Marden what you were tellin' the men outside the post office last night – how you called Mr. Marden the anti-Christ…Tell her, tell her! (33)

Tom reveals that he has seen Steve "carrying on" with "this one from the States" (33)—the depersonalizing "one" and geographical reference are repeated a second time. Tom knows as well as anyone that Helen, as a Stranger, is a weak link in Steve's armour. Steve, in coming upon the scene, resists the urge to assault Tom – another indication that he is bound by the codes of the community, however difficult they may be to follow in different situations. With a boast about his increasing importance Tom departs. Steve is left to explain to his shaken wife the true nature of the "carrying on". Marion urges him insistently to defend their reputation. For the first time Steve clearly invokes the community's values as superseding individual needs:

> **STEVE:** …Oh, it's so hard to explain…and so fundamental…You see, if I use the same tactics as my opponents I may get elected, but I've lost everything else.

> Don't you see?...I'm trying to prove something in Melton. I'm trying to prove that if everybody will work for the good of the whole, everybody will benefit – not only economically, but as a community of neighbours. (36)

The reference to "neighbours" is notable. Hallman's definition of a neighbourhood as an entity that exists as a set of social contracts for the benefit of all is in play here.

Marion remains shaken by the revelation of the kiss. Steve's attempt to frame the discussion in the context of a greater social good is unsatisfactory. From her perspective there is no greater community good than the micro-community of the family:

> **MARION:** I don't understand anything […] Tom and his talk. It's all terrible. I didn't know there were people like him – people so bad, so evil […].You go on doing what you think is right, living in a way you think is – decent – and then suddenly everything you do is questioned – you're made to appear as – ah – as monsters. (35)

Steve, having experienced the ways of the Strange world, is better equipped to respond to the threat posed by Tom Gahn. He responds to Marion's plea that "you've got to do something about it" (35) by explicitly instructing her not to participate in this "ugly kind of game" (37) designed to put individuals in a community at odds with each other.

The results of the election are awaited. The Stranger Helen has left, and two malignant entities represented by Tom and Kelburn are also absent. Butt writes from an Inside perspective, defending the norms and conventions of traditional outport life. Marion confesses to Father Durley that she has sinned in her heart, by feeling hatred for Tom Gahn. As an unqualified Insider, Marion must remain without stain. This confession functions as a required act of remediation. Durley reveals to Steve that Kelburn has had

him replaced. His loss, while regretted by the Mardens, is a fair trade for the departure of Kelburn himself. As a Necessary Outsider of short duration in the community, Durley is dispensable. Before he leaves, Steve shares with him his despair of overcoming the forces marshalled against him:

> **STEVE** *(Moving about) :* Y'know, I should really be over at Court House. The counts are coming in and I really should make an appearance. I don't want to turn my back on defeat.
>
> **FATHER DURLEY:** Defeat? You expect to be defeated?
>
> **STEVE** *(Short laugh):* Oh yes.
>
> **FATHER DURLEY:** Why is that?
>
> **STEVE:** Too many things against me. Things I hadn't counted on when I began – things that have absolutely no bearing on my ability, or lack of ability, to serve the community…I expect you've heard the rumours.
>
> **FATHER DURLEY:** It's a small district.
>
> **STEVE** *(Shaking his head):* It's impossible … people are impossible … how can you deal with stupidity, treachery, bigotry? (41)

After Annie delivers a stirring description of her confrontations at the polls with the impressionable voters, the surprising (to the family) result is heard: Steve has been elected. The rural outport community will not be riven. The citizens of Melton have seen through the machinations of the Transgressive Insiders and Demystified Strangers (Tom and Kelburn) who have been working against their best interests as a communal polity. They are not about to turn on one of their own. Butt presents their decision as intuitively correct, because the communal organism remains healthy, stronger for the discord which has temporarily surfaced and which has been resolved. By play's end, Kelburn and Tom

have shifted outward on the line of alienation, to Stranger status. Tom will have difficulty remaining within the community after the scale of his treachery becomes known (as it will, through Annie). Kelburn's man has been defeated. They join the more sympathetic Helen as characters necessary to, but ultimately rejected by, the community.

Denyse Lynde considers *The Road Through Melton* to be "perhaps [Butt's] strongest play" ("Newfoundland" 83), one which deals with "the individual coming to terms with a changing world" (83). Again, the parallel with the more sophisticated, and perhaps less accessible, Michael Cook is drawn. Cook's plays have often been described, by Cook himself, in these thematic terms (qtd. in Wallace 167). *The Road Through Melton* is a far more significant play when one regards the potential shift in status of its protagonist at the hands of alienated figures, despite some of the trite aspects of the dialogue and characterization. The arc of the play involves clear definitions of the Inside as represented by the Marden household and the town of Melton, and vivid depictions of the types of divisive forces such Insides face from within and without. The play functions as a document promoting the primacy of community norms and values. Steve and Marion are tempted, each in their own way, to mistrust the social organism from which they derive their identity. The interlopers are repelled and the community is better for their intrusion. This is a positive confirmation of Ahmed's assertion that communities require Strangers in order to achieve ongoing self-definition, and that communities adjust, growing or contracting, to the presence and agency of Strangers.

5.1.2 *Good-Bye, Your Excellency* (1970)

Good-Bye, Your Excellency is a one-act play which forms the middle part of a trilogy of plays by Butt, grouped under the title *To Toslow We'll Go*. As Butt relates in her foreword to the published text, the title of the trilogy quotes a line from a famous Newfoundland song called "The Ryans and the Pittmans", better known as "We'll Rant and We'll Roar". Her stated aim is to depict the "ongoingness we as voyagers experience in anticipation of reaching a destination, fulfilling a destiny" (Toslow 2), but at the heart of all three plays is a fierce conviction that Newfoundland, as a young organism, should have been given the chance to grow on its own, without Outside interference or, at least, the interference of successive colonial governments. *Good-Bye, Your Excellency*, treats the issue of national affiliation in historical terms with great severity, making the claim that Confederation has robbed Newfoundlanders of the opportunity to correct past blunders and injustices.

The play reads as an entertaining rant, with the departing Governor of Newfoundland acting as a convenient foil for his visiting antagonists. The action takes place within the comfortable context of Newfoundland's recent past, the 1950s. There is little attempt made at dimensional characterization. None of the characters exhibit a moment's doubt about their purpose and after a perfunctory introduction of the circumstances the protagonists have at it. The play is notable for its lack of dramatic artifice and its conscious association with the issue of Newfoundland's vanished independence.

Denyse Lynde has commented on Butt's "many talents as a dramatist", describing her work as "provocative" and "dramatic and at times moving" ("Toslow" 93-4). While

there is clear evidence for these assertions, the structure of such plays as *The Road to Melton* and *Good-Bye, Your Excellency* demonstrates that Butt is a socially reifying playwright who works with established narrative tools. The departure of the Governor is a return to the status quo rather than a revolutionary act. Butt favours a rigidly realistic mode of presentation. Her advice that *Good-Bye Your Excellency* can be staged with "several formal columns, chairs, and a desk flanked by two flags—the British Union Jack and the Newfoundland Red Ensign with its badge in the fly" (Toslow 24) indicates the playwright's reliance on a proscenium perspective which is not allowed to stray far beyond the boundaries of pictorial realism. The characters are presented with little nuance, representing unshaded points of view. Furthermore, in this play the Strangers are stereotypical foreigners. The play's dramatic interest must therefore be found in the fervour of its Insider characters.

In *Good-Bye Your Excellency* the line of alienation is clear from the start. Butt signals the Stranger status of the outgoing Governor of the colony by depersonalizing his name – he is referred to only as "H.E." (His Excellency). H.E.'s term has run its course, and he is preparing to leave the colony to return to England, accompanied by his faithful aide-de-camp, Alderbee. The setting of the play is the Governor's study in Government House. Unlike *The Road Through Melton*, there is no sense here that this house is a "home", in the sense of being a nucleic membership entity, although it underlines the status identity of its inhabitants.[8] Both Strangers are looking forward to returning to their true home, England, and English society. Alderbee makes reference to the "furnishings" of Government house (25), while H.E. refers to the house as a distanciated entity, describing it as a "white elephant" that future "little lieutenant governor"(s) will be

unable to maintain. Neither man mentions a family. Later it is revealed that the Governor has lost a son during his term in Newfoundland. Given the formality of the relationship between Governor and aide, the organism of Government House comprises nothing more than a collection of individuals whose affiliation is purely based on a business relationship. Furthermore, residences such as Government House are considered as extra-territorial, belonging to the Government of the nation which is resident there, rather than to the nation in which they are located. Thus the setting of the play is a kind of Outside entity placed within the polity of Newfoundland society. The Insiders of the play are the Newfoundlanders who visit this Outside entity, not its inhabitants.

The nature of Government House, even its name, is about to change. This will be the last residency of a colonial Governor. The time is 1949, and Newfoundland is preparing to join the Canadian Confederation. Colonial Strangers such as H.E. and his aide are being genteelly expelled from within the macro-community of Newfoundland.[9] There will no attempts made to integrate with Newfoundland society. The Governor and his staff have performed their duties and will depart without regret, manifesting nothing more than a generalized affection for the colony and people they have moved among for several years. This absence of remedial interchange in both attitude and action contributes to the underscore of resentment which permeates the play, and which is forcefully expressed through its Newfoundland-born characters.

A case can be made that H.E. and Alderbee have functioned as Necessary Outsiders during their time in Newfoundland. After all, the Governor has performed his charge of administering the public affairs of the colony. H.E. views Newfoundlanders with affection; he does not regret that “the great common people have taken over” (27).

The fact that H.E.'s loyalty has always been pledged to a colonial master, rather than the inhabitants of the colony, problematizes his status within the community and is constantly reiterated by Butt as a social irritant. Perhaps it is most accurate to position these characters on a temporal plane which affects their location on a line of alienation. Their *charge d'affaires* has been completed, and their status has thus transformed from that of Necessary Outsiders to that of Strangers.

A Mr. Holke arrives at Government House and requests an audience. Holke is introduced by Alderbee, an act which Holke follows with a gesture whose ambiguity Butt chooses to emphasize for the reader: "He bends his head in a gesture of sincere or mock deference, it is not clear which" (28). Clearly something is afoot, and Butt is determined to let the reader know that all is not as it seems. She will not allow the reader for a single moment to interpret the actions of the first Newfoundland character to appear in the play as those of an obsequious, obedient colonial.[10]

Holke is a local community leader, the President of an unnamed fraternity which is "one of the oldest in Newfoundland if not in the whole of North America, with an enviable reputation for its achievements" (28). Butt intervenes to underscore this statement with a stage direction: "He pauses to allow for the full effect of his words" (28). The organization Holke represents is a *fraternity*, a brotherhood, and as such a collective entity where, it may be assumed, there is a much more homogeneous and socially integrated membership than that of Government House, a point Holke underscores through his references to the organization's pedigree and its "achievements". It is clear that in Holke's eyes, his meeting with the Governor is one of equals. His conscious formality indicates that Government House is foreign territory, which allows

him to assume the role and demeanour of a visiting dignitary, rather than the diminished status of a supplicant. Holke is an Insider, native-born and possessed of valuable circles of affiliation. From the outset of the conversation it is clear that he feels in no way inferior to H.E.: in fact, some element of superior status is manifested in the manner in which he drives the conversation and pursues his agenda, to H.E.'s mounting discomfort.

Holke presents H.E. with a parting gift, a table model of a Newfoundland dog. Once more Butt emphasizes the ambiguous nature of Holke's agency in the scene in his careful choice of phrasing: "… and that is to ask your Excellency if he would be pleased to accept a little gift as a reminder of your stay in Newfoundland and – ah – an indication of our feelings toward you" (29). H.E.'s perfunctory thank-you carries no hint that he views the gift as an ironic act, but the reader is left to wonder at the unusual vigour of Holke's presentation of the gift: "A special committee had it ready for presentation … after many meetings and discussion (*he glances at Alderbee*) as to the choice (*he smiles at H.E.*) of gift which would most appropriately express our sentiments" (29). Holke extols the qualities for which the breed is notable: courage, loyalty, "devotion to those entrusted with his care" and above all "magnanimity of spirit" (29), a phrase engraved on a plaque accompanying the model dog. Lest the reader miss the point, despite the explicit nature of the stage directions, after Holke's departure H.E. is left to point out to a disbelieving Alderbee just what the Newfoundlander really meant:

> **H.E.:** You noticed his choice of words? […] their full knowledge – not appreciation – their full knowledge of the contribution I'd made: I had a feeling they were telling me that they didn't think much of it. And the way Holke wished me a swift return sounded like he meant a swift kick […].
>
> **ALDERBEE:** I think perhaps your Excellency is imagining –

> **H.E.:** And this choice of gift […] this replica of a dog noted for guarding those left in his care. Was he implying that as a governor I had not looked after the best interests of those I came to administer? (31)

The audience is left in little doubt as to how Butt would answer the question. A second Insider arrives—Martin, the young friend of the Governor's late son. Like Holke, Martin appears to be an unqualified Insider, although he manifests no sign that he is a member of the kind of influential affiliative circles to which Holke belongs. His is a lone Insider voice, yet his statements nonetheless carry the weight of the community he represents. The character is presented as volatile, seething with resentment and barely suppressed rage at the perceived inequities perpetrated by H.E. and his government. The Governor, mindful of Martin's friendship with his deceased son, receives him cordially. Indeed, he has repeatedly tried to contact Martin prior to his departure, and it soon becomes clear that Martin has responded only under duress. He soon dispels any notion of an *entente cordiale*. Rather than indulge in a nostalgic remembrance of H.E.'s son, Martin has come to accuse, and condemn, the colonial administration. Their shared past is interpreted in starkly different terms by the two men: a contestation of temporally-viewed space. The locals have been betrayed, in Martin's eyes, by the Governor's failure to protect Newfoundland against the conspiracy forged between Canada and Britain to push the island into Confederation.

Here Butt, through Martin, is persuasive in communicating the resentment felt by Newfoundlanders who recognize that Confederation has been, in general economic and social terms, a positive development for the province. By depriving the nation of its sovereignty, however, the colonial government has robbed it of an identity:

> **MARTIN:** There is something more important than 'social progress' as you call it, (*intensely*) and that is the true destiny of a people. There is something more important than any human act or decision, and that is the motives that inspire it…the methods that bring it about. I *hate* the way Confederation was brought about. I hate the methods that were used – the methods you condoned. But even more than that I despise the meanness of spirit that could not let you recognize just what it was you were doing. Have you, in your calculating little soul, any notion of what you and your kind did? *You took away from us the opportunity to prove ourselves*: that's what you did! And you didn't even know it! (35)

The play thus provides one of the earliest dramatic statements of Newfoundland nationalism,[11] and few subsequent plays have distilled the essence of Newfoundland's cultural discontent so precisely. Martin's rantings about a rigged referendum seem difficult for the reader to seriously consider, but the historical basis for his paranoia is firmly established. Martin conflates the emotional element of identity with its physical basis. A community comprises not a space alone, but a sense of ownership of that space. Good deeds rendered by a Stranger may be welcomed, but if the Stranger presumes to ownership – in essence, to reverse the accepted direction of the line of alienation by taking on the status of an unqualified Insider of the highest esteem—then that action will be resented, even resisted. The British government and their representatives, in Martin's eyes, have committed a crime against the structure of his home polity. His presence takes on an aspect of punishment and deterrence, through the expression of his anger. The colonial government may be in the process of being neutralized, through its disappearance, but Martin cannot seem to resist fetishizing it, turning H.E. into a depersonalized, threatening entity who must be actively engaged.

With Martin's angry departure there is a palpable sense of siege to Government House, the sense that it is an island, isolated within an unfriendly territory. No assistance

is forthcoming; there will be no cavalry to the rescue. Each visitor represents a Trojan Horse, initially welcomed and proving toxic to the entity it has entered.[12] The viability of such an entity is thus undermined by Butt. The Government, as represented by H.E., Alderbee, and Government House, *must* go.

H.E. is left, he thinks, with the final ceremony marking his departure. Alderbee performs the symbolic task of bringing in the Governor's hat and coat. However, he has yet one more visitor to endure. Mr. Bone, the editor of the local newspaper, rushes in excitedly with a copy of the day's edition, wherein is found the text of a commemorative poem written especially for the occasion of the Governor's departure. In contrast to Holke and Martin, the publisher is full of sincere enthusiasm. He proudly reads the poem to the Governor:

> **BONE:** It is called 'To Our Departing Governor' (*He reads, clearly and understandingly*)
>
> You came –
> Only the other day, it seems -
> Unknown, a stranger to us.
>
> Bequeathing wisdom, now you take your leave,
> A personage familiar to us all,
> Secure in dedication to a will
> That shaped, out of quiescent freedom,
> A rock-bound province, hewn from
> Reluctant pride – a memorial
> Destined to outlive this humble tribute. (37)

Certainly there is no expectation given, by Butt or the characters, that the poem is destined for literary immortality. Nonetheless the capitalization at the beginning of each line is odd—one notes how the continuances between lines 5 and 6, lines 7 and 8, and

lines 8 and 9 are broken by it—though not so odd as to utterly contravene conventional poetic style of the time. That the capitalization serves another purpose is revealed by H.E. Having already endured two forms of assault, he is clearly vigilant for a third. His fondness for acrostic puzzles leads him to discover that the first letters of each line spell out YOU BASTARD. Sputtering with rage, the most (putatively) powerful man on the island has been reduced to impotence. The newspaper has been published. Within the informal modes of communication of the community, word has certainly spread as to the poem's real meaning. H.E. has been given a humiliating farewell. The Stranger is being jeered out of town, his values ridiculed, his contributions dismissed.

Good-Bye, Your Excellency is remarkable in its condemnation of the British presence in Newfoundland. In 1970 Michael Cook was just beginning his work with the Open Theatre, and his play *Colour the Flesh the Colour of Dust*, which raises similar questions about the British presence in Newfoundland, had yet to be produced. Such partisan hostility might seem inconsistent to a reader cognizant of Grace Butt's background in amateur theatre, which in Newfoundland was dominated by conventional British plays and working methods up to this time. There is nothing contradictory, however, in the nativism that is so sharply present in the play's Newfoundland-born characters. One need only look to Butt's earlier play, *The Road Through Melton*, to glimpse an earlier example of this distinction between an Inside made up of Newfoundlanders and Strangers from away, although *Melton* deals more specifically with micro-communities.

As in *The Road Through Melton*, Butt creates here a straightforward, colonially-inspired narrative structure. Both plays are text-driven, single-set examples of pictorial

and psychological realism. There is no statement the playwright makes in the choice of this mode of presentation, no use of structure as a tool of resistance. This is not surprising. Butt's background as an untrained amateur playwright and producer, who perhaps possessed neither the means nor the opportunity to experience other theatre styles first-hand, allowed her few options in her approach to plays. Even had she enjoyed such opportunities, Butt could plausibly have assumed that the audience for whom she was writing—the spectators who faithfully attended regional competitions of the Dominion Drama Festival and the productions of the St. John's Players—would be more amenable to "provocative" ideas if they were encased in a form they could recognize and which they would find accessible. It must be said that in both plays Grace Butt cannot be accused of pandering to the received sentiments of her constituency; there is at least an attempt made at a dialectical presentation of the issues in play. In the characters of Steve Marden and H.E., however, we are treated to an Insider and a Stranger whose trajectories only appear to be in play, and are in fact fixed.

5.2 Tom Cahill: Two Confederation Plays

The late Tom Cahill occupies a respected position in Newfoundland theatre. An award-winning veteran of the community theatre scene going back as least as far as 1959, as one of the forces behind the Corner Brook Playmakers and then in St. John's, and then as an award-winning writer and producer with CBC Newfoundland, Cahill's plays are marked by a neo-Aristotelian narrative structure which derives from the colonialist background in which he developed his theatrical skills.

Although Cahill wrote written steadily throughout his career, he is primarily known for three plays. The first, his adaptation of Harold Horwood's *Tomorrow Will Be Sunday*, was the winner of the Newfoundland regional Dominion Drama Festival in 1967, the first year a general call went out from the organizers for "Canadian" scripts. The play subsequently toured to Expo 67 in Montréal. Cahill stayed with outport themes but moved outward in his orientation for *As Loved Our Fathers*, a play which describes the divisions caused in a small rural community by the debate around Confederation with Canada. The third, *The Only Living Father*, tells the story of Joseph Smallwood, "Joey", and his rise and fall in the arena of Newfoundland politics.

Cahill's work represents an advance in Newfoundland writing from that which came before his time. His dialogue is more fluid than that of Grace Butt, his situations less contrived and more active. His depictions of Newfoundlanders are also more balanced. A Newfoundland nationalist, Cahill was clearly passionate about matters of Newfoundland politics. He takes care, however, to represent in his writing the opposing sides of the Confederation debate in *As Loved Our Fathers* and the pro- and anti-Smallwood forces in *The Only Living Father* in vivid terms which enable an audience to view the issues dialectically.

Little critical writing can be found on Cahill or his work. This is unfortunate. His work was considered unfashionable in the collective-minded years of the 1970s, when *As Loved Our Fathers* was written, and he was associated with the long tradition of amateur theatre which the Mummers Troupe and CODCO implicitly rejected with their anti-establishment, anti-Aristotelian approach. He then switched to a focus on television work with the CBC in the 1970s and 1980s. Nevertheless, his theatre work is not only valid but

important, as a documentation of the transition made by a particular generation of Newfoundlanders who grew up in the amateur theatre and continued to practice its precepts long after that scene had been eclipsed by the burgeoning "alternative" professional scene in St. John's. In a sense the amateur theatre provided the established entity that these theatres could style themselves as "alternative" to, a problem they faced when making applications for funding or dealing with Actors' Equity (Filewod, "Alternative" 204).

Cahill's work is neither as technically naïve as that of Grace Butt, nor as sophisticated, in relative terms, as Michael Cook's. Cahill lacks the animus with which Cook appeared to approach his work: the gnawing desire to depict problems, to expose decay, to cry out before it is too late. Cahill's authorial voice is less obviously present. There is a sense in Cahill's plays that an order exists in life and society which is changed only at great risk to all. In this respect Cahill's work reads as fundamentally conservative in nature. Within the terms used in this examination, one is tempted to consider Cahill as a kind of guardian, a protector of values and practices he feels are in danger of being overlooked or swept aside. This description might be applied to much of the work produced by the playwrights included in this study. What makes Cahill's work unique is its sense of decorum, a belief in tradition that is reflected in the careful structure of his plays.

The Inside in Cahill's work begins with the family and the family home, and then spins out, in affiliated circles, to networks of friends and colleagues and to the civic body, town or outport, in which the family is found. Lynde notes that in *As Loved Our Fathers* "Cahill uses the private sphere of the family to explore the various tensions and issues

that divided and, in some cases, broke long standing relationships [in the community] during this tumultuous time in history" ("Newfoundland" 85). His Strangers are not spectral, but neither are they always tangible. Like Butt's work, Cahill features the visiting Stranger, but the major emphasis of the figuration is embodied in a larger concept of the Outside, as represented in the following two plays, by Canada.

5.2.1 *As Loved Our Fathers* (1974)[13]

As Loved Our Fathers takes place in a typical outport, centred on the home of anti-confederate Cornelius Hartrey. It is the evening following the first referendum vote, June 3, 1948. Con's wife Trese sits in the kitchen as her brother Gord attempts to fix a battery powered radio. Her infirm mother and sister Imelda ("Mel") hover nearby. Mel in particular is anxious to hear the news of the referendum vote, having worked together with Con on the anti-Confederate, pro-Responsible Government campaign. After Con's hurried entrance and the news, gleaned from the sputtering radio, that the riding of St. George's in western Newfoundland has surprisingly turned out for the Smallwood forces, we soon discover that together these individuals represent the divided opinions of Newfoundlanders with respect to the question of their sovereignty. Members of the same extended family, the group stands as a metaphor for the extended family of the macro-community of Newfoundland. Mel and Con have voted for Responsible Government. Gord, who boards with the Hartreys, has voted for the median option of continued Commission of Government. Con's mother-in-law, a feisty and cantankerous creature silenced by a stroke and in a wheelchair, sits happily beneath a newspaper photograph of

Joe Smallwood taped to the wall, a convert to the Confederate campaign's promise of old-age pensions. Despite her infirmity, she has been the first to vote that morning. Finally, in near terror, Trese reveals that she, too, has voted for Confederation.

Although the dramatic convenience of having all three options on the referendum ballot represented in the same family may seem like a cause for skepticism, there is enough anecdotal evidence provided by families who lived through the Confederation debates to indicate that the situation is plausible. Such a charged environment encourages subjectivity and perhaps even polemicism. In contrast, Lynde notes, "Cahill manages to present each of these issues with feeling" (85).

Con possesses a keen sense of grievance, and views the world as essentially Manichean, dividing his acquaintances into friends and "quislings" and "Iscariots" (8, 1979). Trese accepts his ranting with relative equanimity, keeping a close eye on how he treats her mother, with whom Con has no love lost. There is a feeling that within the micro-community of the Hartrey household, all existence depends on the sufferance of its patriarch. His power to expel those who transgress against the codes of the house is, however, limited. Trese has brought elements of her family, in her mother and brother, into the household. Con's explosions of animosity towards them suggest that he feels outnumbered. The theme of contested democracy at home acts as a microcosm of the democratic movement taking place in the town. The mood of the opening scene, and of the play, is serious, with flashes of rough humour.

Cahill compresses the Confederation, Responsible and Commission of Government arguments and puts them, variously, in the mouths of Trese, Con and Gord, making them comprehensible to an non-native reader. The effect is reductive, a sound

bite reiteration of positions that have ossified as the vote approaches. When compared to the treatment of the Confederation issue in David French's *1949*, for instance, a reader cannot fail to notice the lack of characterization. The advantage French employs is that of a longstanding familiarity with his characters, a history he was in the process of drawing out and with which he had been engaged for over 17 years. The history of the Mercers is also a personal family history, as French notes, "a lifetime of conflicts compressed into ninety minutes" (qtd. in Zimmerman 305). This does not explain or justify all the deficiencies of characterization in *As Loved Our Fathers*, however. There is an inversion of narrative priorities. For French, the people in his plays are the paramount concern. Cahill, the nationalist, utilizes characterization in a more Shavian manner, as archetypal mouthpieces representing differing sides of a prismatic argument.

The west coast[14] results come in, favouring Smallwood and Confederation. Hartrey is dismayed by what he views as the willful ignorance of the consequences of Confederation, on the part of voters in general and, to his particular regret, within the house:

> **CON:** Yeah, go on, make fun of it! But 'tis your country, lad, poor as it is. And it's the only one you got. Everywhere else you're a foreigner, and don't you ever forget that! Oh, if my father were alive now, by God, Joey Smallwood wouldn't be going around either, roaring and bawling about joining Canada, because the first time he'd see him he'd shoot the little …. (19, 1974)

For Con, the issue is not merely an emotional one, but a matter of belonging. Canadians don't belong in his cultural house, and Newfoundlanders don't belong in theirs. His vision of Newfoundland appears to be concerned with keeping foreign influences out,

including ostracization of "the dirty tribe" (27, 1979) within. This is nationalism as thinly-disguised xenophobia.

When Trese reveals she has voted Confederate, Con rips the photo of Smallwood from the wall and tears it into small pieces. To Hartrey the poster is an affront to his domination of the possessive space he shares with the others, and a symbol of his inability to control it. Metaphorically the poster also represents a political rebuke, as if Canada has come and invaded his territory. His invocation of Newfoundland's past is part history lesson, part astute summary of a victim narrative which acts as a call to arms:

> **CON:** Sure I'm getting wound up. Somebody's got to get wound up around here. Don't you see what's happened to Newfoundland all along? We're either too soft or too stunned, it's hard to figure out which. You weren't allowed to settle here for the first hundred years because the overseas merchants wanted to keep all the goodies for themselves. They figure settlers were nothing but trouble, wanting land grants and concessions and finally to run the show themselves. So we had to hide away in the coves, and look what that did to us. Turned us into half-starved criminals, scrabbling to make a living. Kept us from getting together and making something of the place. And when we finally did get our own government, our own crowd turned it into a circus, and they took it away from us, and turned us back into a colony again. And now we have the chance! Now we have money in the bank, educated young people, and enough importance to go to any country in the world and say we've got something to offer. And this is the very time people like you want to make us a colony again. Because, by God, it was bad enough being a colony of England, but if we joins Canada tonight, in twenty years we'll be a colony again, a colony of Ottawa and Toronto. Who wouldn't get wound up when half the people in Newfoundland is willing to sell us up the St. Lawrence river for thirty dollars a month for that old woman, and your cursed baby bonus? (22)

He underlines the price he thinks they will pay for these pensions and bonuses:

> **CON:** I'll knock it off when I can beat it into your heads what you're giving up for a pension. You'll let them turn you into zombies in your own country, that's

> what. And boys, won't you miss the water when the well's gone dry, and you got to kiss somebody's behind to get what you want, and somebody who don't give a damn about you or who you are. When you're getting taxed at every turn, and you're treated like dirt, and you're not allowed to go where you like and fish where you like and hunt where you like, and yes, live how you like. When that day comes, don't come bawling back to me and say why did we vote for Confederation! (23)

Con's ranting is interrupted by his fellow anti-Confederates Sooley and Jack (in the later version of the play this is where Mel makes her entrance, as well). The Responsibles are winning. In a fit of manic glee Con wheels his mother-in-law in a furious circle, spilling her out of her chair. This act carries great significance within the play. As one of a very small number of actions which are not merely typical, its occurrence creates a vivid and galvanizing effect. Con is a tightly coiled bundle of frustration. What such frustration produces when it is momentarily released is, here, a level of manic, narcissistic glee.

When Con seizes the wheelchair he is committing a transgression of personal space breathtaking in its severity. The wheelchair is quite literally a part of the old lady's *umwelt*; as a "vehicular unit" in Goffman's terms (*Relations* 5) she relies upon it and is at the mercy of whomever controls it.[15] His violence has transferred from a projected object, the poster, to the real target of his anger. It is not too extreme to label this a *sheath* violation, the equivalent of punching someone or grabbing a person and shaking them. In such circumstances the individual whose sheath is breached becomes a puppet or rag-doll, a dehumanized object of the aggressor's anger. The fact that Con needs so little encouragement to enact this ritualistic bit of revenge suggests sociopathy.

This hypothesis is supported by the grudging reconciliation which follows. Hartrey cannot conjure up an effective facade in order to carry out even the lowest level of remediation. Instead, alcohol takes the place of an apology, as celebratory drinks are poured. The victory has been secured, but the battle is not over. A question hangs in the air—will the majority be big enough? For any contemporary Newfoundlander the history is too fresh for the moment to contain an iota of suspense. For Canadians, the historical fact of an initial referendum victory for Responsible Government is not considered relevant. French makes no mention of it in *1949*, although Jacob's mother Rachel mentions the narrow margin of victory for Confederate forces in the second referendum. In the narrative of Canadian history, Newfoundland's eventual decision to join Confederation is all that matters. The difference between the two plays is stark and reveals much about the two playwrights who wrote them. For Cahill, the result of the first vote is presented as the point at which the future of Newfoundland was at its zenith. Seen from this perspective—and there can be no doubting that our gaze is directed through the playwright in *As Loved Our Fathers*—the referendum which followed weeks later represents the nadir of Newfoundland's long history, a national cataclysm. Newfoundlanders watching the play know that Con's euphoria will be short-lived. The news arrives: there will be a run-off, because no side has acquired fifty percent of the available votes. Con rallies the troops, and Act One ends with the Responsibles singing a rousing anti-Confederate song.

Act Two opens on the evening of the second referendum, July 22. The macro-community of Newfoundland has taken centre stage after sharing it with the micro-community of the Hartrey family in Act One. Mel is helping Trese bring her mother

home from voting. After a few gins, and a charming fortune-telling scene—a metaphorical interlude Cahill handles adroitly—Mel admits that she has changed her vote and is afraid of how Con will react to her defection. Con is still down at Bennett's tavern, having heard news of an "Orange letter" in circulation, directing Protestants to vote for Confederation.[16] For Con, the issue of Confederation is about exclusion, an opportunity to identify "traitors"; for Mel, and most of the women on the island, the issue is *inclusion*:

> **MEL:** I got no argument to make about it, Trese girl. It just struck me about the old people and that poor woman, and me rowin' with the folks and leaving 'em like that, alone. Anyone who can help those forgotten ones, Trese, I got to give him a chance, at least, to do it. I got no other choice. (45)

Con is a deeply narcissistic personality who fears being sucked inside a greater whole, whether within his family or in terms of his status as a Newfoundlander. As the surveillance and enforcement officer for his family and the outport, he evokes a sacred collective duty, but gives no evidence of a willingness to work in a collegial manner. Mel, in contrast, speaks of people who are already being deprived of their identity within the various micro-cell communities of Newfoundland society, who have been alienated through poverty and illness, consigned to the margins because there exist so few resources to assist them. Mel suspects that many such people, including the women in the Hartrey household, are in this vulnerable position, existing without individual sovereignty and subject to ostracization for perceived misdemeanours. Mel has decided to help bring a form of enfranchisement to these citizens, to shift them further inward along the line of alienation. She herself feels this vulnerability—she mentions her longing for a man in her life. As a single woman, and a teacher, she is a Necessary Outsider, a Transgressive

Insider (by virtue of not having married) whose education and individuality may work against her in a society based on rigid orthodoxies of male and female behaviour. It is notable that the scenes taking place between women in the play are more intimate, involving tighter configurations of personal and possessive space. Con dominates every space he is in, and even when others are present he does not share it so much as tolerate their presence.

The two characters, Mel and Con, thus assume opposite positions of the play's fundamental Insider-Stranger issue of Confederation. Con returns to the house, where, unbeknownst to him, his adversary awaits. He insists that Mel stay to hear the results. Trapped, she will have to admit her betrayal.

Outraged by the rumour of the Orange letter, Con plots with his mates to counter it and to appeal the referendum result if the vote does not go their way. Con's binary view of society and social relations is again in evidence. There is only one form of enforcement to be considered; an enemy has shown its colours and must be battled. It matters little that supporters of the "enemy" have as long an established residence in the community as Con and his supporters. Their dissent is enough to disenfranchise them. The Stranger is within, and the conspiracies are everywhere, starting with the rumour of the Protestant letter. Mel happens to be Protestant. This uncomfortable fact and that of her transferred allegiance lends an air of credibility to the wild theories spouted by Con and his followers. Listening, Mel can only agree that the sectarian divide in the voting is destructive.

Con's mood begins to darken as the results become clear. By the time the results have moved out of St. John's, he has picked up the radio and thrown it across the room.

This next act of physical violence is quite distinct in significance from the first, but is no less symbolic. The voice of Confederate victory must be silenced. In the instant of rage when Con anthropomorphizes the radio and smashes it against the wall, silencing (killing) it, he is admitting defeat. The words have been spoken, and cannot be erased by attacking the source. His violence, while still frightening, has become redundant, and has shifted back from a human object to one he must reconstruct as human. Con has been revealed as impotent, unable to bully his family and incapable of rallying the town to his cause.

Mel at last admits she has voted Confederate. They spar angrily over Newfoundland's economic prospects within Confederation. It is a credit to Cahill's skill as a writer that he can make this dialogue relatively natural, and even interesting. Con at last accuses Mel of having buckled under the pressure of sectarian tribalism, in the form of the Orange letter. She leaves on a final, defiant, note of inclusion: "If only half the people who vote tonight will do it because they want someone else besides themselves to have something, then maybe we've learned a lesson. And if that means confederation, then by God let's have Confederation!" (61)

Mel's collectivist sympathies create no resonance in Hartrey. It is becoming increasingly clear that he has isolated himself. Like Skipper Pete in Cook's *The Head, Guts, and Soundbone Dance*, he has no consideration for anyone individually. Con's Inside is a construct made up of a mishmash of tradition, custom, and personal experience, in which he enjoys the most privileged position. This may explain why he has failed to understand the concerns of female voters such as Mel, and why he has proven ineffective at persuading sufficient numbers of his larger micro-community, the outport,

to go along; in the Kingdom of Con the followers will always eat second. His remaining partners, Sooley and Jack, lack the enthusiasm to plan a new campaign. They prefer to accept the defeat and make their peace with it. The battle is over. Newfoundland will be lost, and the Con Hartreys of the outports, the rugged individualists who think of territory and freedom rather than people and comfort, cannot see this as a gain.

It is significant that the play is structured to present Con Hartrey as its most powerful voice, a charismatic, if violent, character. It is tempting to conclude that he represents the playwright's point of view, but Cahill is too canny and disciplined a playwright to allow such a bully to run amok, unimpeded, through the dialectic of the play's major themes of inclusion and exclusion, sovereignty and collectivity. As Denyse Lynde notes, "For Con, the final referendum outcome is the death of a way of life but typical of Cahill's play, this same result gives all the women new-found hope for the future" (Newfoundland 85). Cahill's presentation of the fiery, egocentric Con Hartrey achieves more for the Confederate cause than for the forces of Newfoundland nationalism.

5.2.2 *The Only Living Father* (1991)

If the history behind *As Loved Our Fathers* is obscure to non-Newfoundlanders, the subject of *The Only Living Father* is less so. Joseph R. Smallwood was Premier of the Province of Newfoundland for twenty-three years after leading the Confederate forces to victory in the second referendum of 1948 and assuming office as its first Premier in 1949. Smallwood always characterized himself as an Insider in outport

communities and an Outsider in the corridors of power. It is difficult in a paragraph or two to convey the charisma, street smarts, and sheer energy of the "little guy from Gambo", a former union organizer, pig farmer and radio host who almost single-handedly changed the course of Newfoundland history. In so doing he gained as many enemies as allies, especially amongst the newly fashionable Newfoundland nationalism of the 1970s. Smallwood's singular achievement was to rouse the outports to overthrow the dominance of the St. John's merchants. As CODCO co-founder Mary Walsh noted in an interview with Michael Fralic in 1996:

> The good old days. There were no goddamn good old days. There was only days. It's a falsehood, and a way to make oneself unhappy […] to imagine that […] some way of life has been snatched from you […] Other than in St. John's, everyone in this country [Newfoundland] voted to join Confederation. (148)

What Smallwood achieved following the victory of the Confederation forces is the subject of endless debate. The significance of the seismic shift in Newfoundland's political landscape which was a result of his tenure, is, however, inarguable. Under Smallwood Newfoundland was introduced to the concepts of old age pensions and universal health care. A highway was created to cross the island – and, more controversially, residents of smaller outport communities were resettled in the 1960s to facilitate Smallwood's economic model of compact urban communities and a wage-based employment system.

Two of the most notable plays of the early 1990s in Newfoundland theatre were Cahill's *The Only Living Father* and Des Walsh's new adaptation of Harold Horwood's

novel *Tomorrow Will Be Sunday*. Cahill's one-man tour-de-force toured across Canada starring Newfoundlander Lorne Pardy, while Walsh, already a celebrated poet and musician, enjoyed a high-profile success at the Trinity Festival in 1992 with Canadian director Guy Sprung directing *Sunday*. Denyse Lynde compares the two plays:

> The two plays, while markedly different in style, approach and tone, share an unsentimental but not cynical viewpoint. It is as if both playwrights shared a concern for giving an unedited perspective on the major but substantially different topics they found as their subject matter. (*Landwash* xv)

Cahill's prominence as a playwright has also been obscured by bizarre luck. Walsh's play is a more recent re-working of a novel Cahill adapted in the 1960s, effectively consigning the earlier adaptation to obscurity.

Cahill's approach to staging what is in essence a biographical picture of Joseph R. Smallwood is simple but effective. A single actor, alone on stage with nothing more than "a coat rack, desk, microphone, telephone, and simple costume changes" (Lynde *Landwash* xv) takes the spectator through the eventful life and times of Joe Smallwood – and in so doing, a pocket history of Newfoundland politics in the twentieth century.

Cahill makes effective use of the fact that Smallwood, in effect, introduced the Newfoundland century. Born Christmas Eve, 1900, the character Joe Smallwood in the play makes much of this link to the Divine (though always with a mix of Smallwood's trademark hyperbole and raucous humour). Smallwood, as noted by friends and critics alike from Harold Horwood to Richard Gwyn, always identified himself with the polity of Newfoundland. This identification may not have quite reached the level of "*l'état,*

c'est moi", but the man who managed to produce both *The Book of Newfoundland* and *The Encyclopædia of Newfoundland*, and whose *Barrelman* radio show was amongst the most popular in Newfoundland broadcast history, could hardly be faulted for thinking of himself as the quintessential Newfoundlander, a "little guy" succeeding against the odds—and Strangers—through pluck, persistence, and guile. Cahill intuitively acknowledges this mentality in creating *The Only Living Father* as a one-man show.

The lack of props and the fluidity with which scenes and subjects flow from one to another emphasizes the ephemerality of material things. The lack of interlocutors presents a contradiction to Smallwood's self-avowed reputation as a "people person". In *The Only Living Father* Smallwood is the only living character. No one else matters, at least not as much as Smallwood said they did. If they did matter, they are gone, like Smallwood's great friend and ally Greg Power, frustrated by Smallwood's penchant for autocratic decision-making. If, as is commonly held, people believe deeds rather than words, Smallwood's constant protestations of affection are of little value.

The historical Smallwood represents in many ways the ambiguity of the Newfoundland experience. A man of great vision and limited education, he was throughout his career easily impressed by men with foreign accents, numerous degrees, fancy cars, and access to old money and gentry. The roads along which he led his province as a result of this naïveté led to mixed success in economic terms, and the exuberance he demonstrated in investing in unproven schemes made poor use of the growing confidence of the people he represented. Yet the Newfoundland government, and by extension its people, made enormous errors in judgment under Smallwood's

tenure. The enduring humiliation of the Churchill Falls energy deal with Québec continues to be a festering source of indignation.[17]

Smallwood remains revered as well as vilified. The story of his rise from humble beginnings to do battle with the wealthy and privileged, however embellished by a personal penchant for hyperbole, enabled Smallwood to cast himself throughout his long career as a classic underdog. There is also the fact that his passion for Newfoundland was not simply fabricated for political consumption: he produced the *Book of Newfoundland*, a kind of compendium of interesting facts and biographies from the province as an initial labour of love. Later, he was the driving force behind a projected five-volume *Encyclopædia of Newfoundland*, depleting his personal savings to keep the project going. Well after the salad days of his premiership, when his money and contacts had disappeared, he took to selling the Encyclopedias from community to community, driving alone down the Trans-Canada highway he had helped bring to the province.

The Only Living Father opens with a Christmas hymn and J.R. Smallwood's triumphant : "I was born!" (Lynde Landwash 260). Smallwood describes his birthplace as "Gambo, Newfoundland… (*He pauses to smile broadly, announcing with triumph*) Canada!" Cahill from the first moments of the play paints Smallwood as a traitor to his origins, more want-to-be Canadian than Newfoundlander. The self-confident tone remains throughout and serves as an indication that the true dialectic will exist between Cahill and his subject.

Smallwood describes some of the distinctive superstitions of outport life:

> Our Irish neighbours explained their sudden family additions by announcing, "he wasn't born, he was come across". That meant someone else's infant had been

> stolen by the fairies and abandoned in the woods, and they did the proper thing, and took it home. I had another playmate who, they said, "wasn't born. He was left on the grass and the sun brought him out." (260)

The passage is more complex than it appears. Smallwood's affection for his "roots" and the people amongst whom he grew up appears. Cahill introduces Smallwood's well-known, if not notorious, talent for storytelling in a positive light, with a reminiscence that is not only truthful but evocative. Smallwood continues:

> Some enemies later suggested that being born on the same day as another distinguished personage 1900 years earlier made me even think I was Him. Anyway, I ended up in the same business He did, trying to save the world. Or at least my part of it, Newfoundland. It was only later that I decided to throw in Canada for good measure. (261)

The acknowledgement that Smallwood had Newfoundland's best interests in mind is a major concession for any Newfoundland nationalist. Cahill demonstrates his mature playwriting skills in capturing the cadence and hyperbolic quality of Smallwood, as well as his sincere conviction that he was acting in the greater interest of Newfoundlanders.

Smallwood continues to describe his childhood as the progeny of a mixed religious liaison (Catholic and Methodist). This is useful only in as much as it describes a common fissure in the outports of the time. The denominational school system persisted in Newfoundland until the 1990s. He is building his case as an Outsider, not a Stranger; his Insider status is critical to his future success. The family moves to St. John's. Smallwood relates his father's alcoholism in orthodox Insider terms: "He was a solitary drinker, the worst kind" (262).

Smallwood's account of his life, as rendered by Cahill, is fascinating for what it reveals about the estranged Outsider. His family moves from place to place, partly as a result of his father's drinking problem. Shorn of a home-bred male role model, the young Smallwood glimpses Sir Robert Bond at the age of nine. Bond was a unique form of politician, as related by Smallwood in the play:

> As the son of a wealthy merchant, he'd made himself everybody's hero years before, saving the country by pledging his personal fortune as collateral for a loan when financial collapse threatened the local savings bank. Now when was the last time you heard of a politician doing that? Today they're using the country as collateral to fill their own accounts. (262)

Here Smallwood sets up a dichotomy between a nostalgic past and corrupt present—with his own career set in-between, as a kind of golden age. The point Cahill makes is that, regardless of his many deficiencies, Smallwood identified himself as a *public servant*, someone who contributes to the benefit of the polity. Smallwood goes on to describe Bond's failure to establish policies that would benefit Newfoundland in the face of resistance from the Outside forces of Britain and Canada. The roots of the paradoxical appeal of Joseph Smallwood are clearly drawn by Cahill. A Newfoundland nationalist who affixed Newfoundland, possibly forever, to Canada, Smallwood describes the chicanery which marked Canadian and British duplicity with regard to the "Newfoundland question" and concludes "No matter how prosperous or well-governed, our little country could never survive on its own" (264).

Smallwood resolves to become a socialist. "I had no idea what a socialist was, but it sounded rebellious and besides, I had a new hero. His name was Sir William Coaker.

He called himself a socialist, but the Churches were denouncing him as an anarchist, atheist and Communist, and that was just my cup of tea!" (265). Coaker was the charismatic leader of the Fisherman's Protective Union, a man who made his own deal with the devil by serving in government, to the detriment of both his personal ands social goals. His signal achievement, however, was to give voice to disaffected outport fishermen and their families. Cahill demonstrates his unique rhetorical skills:

> Coaker was a brilliant debater, and in one famous confrontation over money being wasted building a bridge across the Waterford River in St. John's, he jeered "For God's sake, I could piss half way across it." "You're out of order," rapped the speaker. "I must be," roared Coaker, "or I could piss ALL the way across it." (266)

Coaker, in short order, proved unequal to the responsibilities of government. Smallwood's next hero was Richard Squires. Squires was a "consummate politician, believing every handshake, every name remembered and every note of sympathy to a grieving widow would be returned a hundred fold come polling day. And he was right." (266) Cahill could as well be describing the political animal that was Joseph R. Smallwood. In linking Smallwood's behaviour to indigenous antecedents Cahill is in one respect stating that Smallwood is a product of a culture tied firmly to the dyadic web of village life. Squires, as was subsequently proved, was susceptible to corrupting and predatory influences. Smallwood's naïveté and ambition would expose him to the same influences throughout his career.

Scene Two opens in New York circa 1920, as the young Smallwood learns about socialism and political promotion. Smallwood has become a voluntary Exile from

Newfoundland, with express purpose of returning. This does not necessarily mitigate his transgression; neo-colonialist impositions are no more welcome from returning Insiders than they are from Strangers. Smallwood learns to speak in public, speaking at "thousands of meetings" (268), learning how to handle hecklers and engage with dissenting opinion. Suddenly, Smallwood is seized with a bout of homesickness. He describes the phenomenon, couching it in terms which include him within a greater polity:

> I don't know if you've ever been, or ever known a Newfoundlander away from home, but we're a *strange* lot [emphasis added]. We have this terrible ambivalence about the place, hating the isolation and confinement, yet yearning to get back and inhale it. Besides, I was tired of eating at automats, and pinning the huge map of my homeland on the walls of countless apartments and rooming houses. (268)

Notable elements of this passage include not only the use of the word *strange*, in relation to Newfoundlanders away from home, but the "huge" map of Newfoundland one pins up in transient spaces. Newfoundland, then, is *significant*, a place that affects its Exiles and Insiders alike in significant ways, a "huge" presence. Smallwood goes on to demonstrate his growing communicative competence, touring the island as a union organizer:

> He was one of the original settlers from Port au Port, the French area of Newfoundland, who spoke in that fascinating back-to-front English they still use today. (*He does the accent.*) "The worst t'ing a feller can 'ave on his house in the winter is no porch!" [...] Looking at me stumbling over the railroad ties, he said "it makes hard walking dere, Mr. Smallwood, because them things are too goddam close apart". "You be de feller who make union dere in Corner Brook" he continued, "Why you not make union for us crowd?" (269)

Cahill demonstrates, to humorous effect, Smallwood's growing capacity to engage with the micro-communities with which he comes in contact. Smallwood's ability to shift from one outport to another in chameleonesque fashion proves to be a tremendous political advantage. He can remember names and birthdays, aspects of dyadic affiliations, that are distinct from one community to another. What he does not possess is any sense of having his *own* micro-community. Smallwood is a macro-politician: concerned with the big picture, he has never identified the details of any one community in a way that would make him a member, having long ago departed Gambo. In Cahill's view, Smallwood perceives this as unimportant. A man of the people must belong to all of the people, and not to one particular tribe.

Smallwood walks across Newfoundland, using the narrow-gauge railroad as his highway. Along the way he meets scores of people, drops to 112 pounds ("a quintal" he proudly notes to those unfamiliar with fishing weight measures) and marries. Even at 30, Smallwood, through Cahill and his meticulous research, identifies himself as "a restless soul".

Scene Three finds Smallwood back in Newfoundland, on the west coast, in the pulp and paper town of Corner Brook. He has started a newspaper, *The Herald*, and makes discreet inquiries about running for office, now that his hero Richard Squires has resurrected himself from the scandals which marked his government's tenure. The Necessary Outsider is looking for more esteem, more social currency to be accrued, and more influence. Smallwood becomes a campaign manager for Squires, who is running on the west coast out of a sense of political self-preservation. Squires wins the election and his own seat, and takes Smallwood to St. John's.

Cahill's account of the riots which marked Squires' second term in office makes a thrilling story. Riots erupt in St. John's as the stock market crashes. Squires attempts to sell Labrador: "First for the 100 million debt. Then 50, then 10. There were no takers." (272). Smallwood makes his first attack, at a public meeting, on the "Water Street merchants bringing political advice. They will stop at nothing to regain control of government to re-line their own pockets" (272).

Parts of the Legislature are set on fire by the mob. According to Cahill, "hired hooligans began smashing the windows, beating down the doors and ransacking the offices, dragging the furniture outside to set on fire" (272). One notes the use of the Irish term "hooligan" in this account, a longstanding practice in Newfoundland (and elsewhere) linking the Irish by association with criminal practices. In a memorable passage, Smallwood describes the Speaker of the House sitting in his chair, using a metal wastepaper basket to protect his head as rocks come flying in from the windows.

Smallwood helps Squires to a hair-raising escape marked by backdoors and disguises, and learns about political self-preservation in the process. From this point forward the game will be played in a manner more calculating. Cahill's account betrays an affection for the rogue which lies barely concealed within both Smallwood and Squires:

> "Down to the harbour with him," they yelled. "Drown the son of a bitch." As we were carried along Colonial Street towards the waterfront, a man suddenly opened his door to see what was going on. I pushed my way toward it. "In here, Sir Richard. Quick," and we shot through the door, and slammed it shut behind us…we raced through the house, out the back door, through a hole in the fence, across a garden and into the back door of another house on Bannerman Street. There, they let us call a taxi, while the mob boiled on towards the harbour, still thinking they had their victim." (273)

Cahill's use of real-life accounts of the tumultuous Squires regime are redolent with the flavour and tenor of the times. Smallwood acts merely as a guide. Having taken note of the "ruthless class, sectarian, and political warfare that was paralyzing our country" (274), Joseph Smallwood resolves to unite the macro-community. His means, and the end to which they are brought, will forever divide Newfoundlanders.

Scene four takes place in the "dirty thirties", a period when every region of the North American mainland suffered. Newfoundland, already notably poorer than most of North America, endured great deprivation. As Cahill, through the voice of Smallwood, notes:

> The isolation that once allowed the outports to defy British anti-settlement laws now turned out to be their greatest enemy. Unable to sell their fish, whole families starved without money for the basics of flour, sugar, tea, or medical attention, the new commission government unable to offer little more than token assistance. (276)

Smallwood embarks on a career as a promoter of Newfoundland and a purveyor of hope to the disenfranchised masses, starting his *Book of Newfoundland* and performing as the host of "The Barrelman" on Newfoundland public radio. This can be seen as either preparatory activity, with regard to Smallwood's future political career, or, more generally (and likely more accurately), as remediative interchange. Having been away as a voluntary Exile, Smallwood, through his trek across the island, his appropriation of various dialects, and his reading of simple fishermen's letters on regional radio, was assiduously remediating his position within the Newfoundland macro-community.

Smallwood starts a pig farm, which is floundering until the outbreak of World War II. A cataclysmic event across the globe, WW II proved a boon in most respects for Newfoundland, with the establishment of American bases on the island and in Labrador and a new prominence in continental diplomacy. Smallwood begins to sell pigs to the military, a fact unremarkable except within the context of belonging. The picture of an individual who will take advantage of any opportunity, no matter how tenuous its prospects, or curry favour within any polity, emerges. For all his love of Newfoundland, Smallwood's most essential micro-community is portrayed as being simply himself.

The war ends and with it Smallwood's porcine windfall. Newfoundland, too, is about to see the rolling good times grind to a halt. Britain establishes a commission to determine what to do with the colony they have never wanted. A National Convention is convened to debate the alternatives on offer. An alliance with the United States, a previously popular (if delusional) alternative, had been ruled out by the Crown. What remained were three confusing options: continued Commission of Government, Responsible (or Independent) government, or Confederation with Canada.

Scene Five opens in the midst of the National Convention. Smallwood came into his own during this Convention; the proceedings were broadcast live on radio, and no one manipulated the new medium better than "The Barrelman". Far more effectively than in *As Loved Our Fathers*, Cahill here sets forth the various arguments for and against Confederation, seen through the subjective gaze of Joseph Smallwood. Smallwood elects to take the part of outporters in the debate. Historically disenfranchised within Newfoundland, the residents of the outport are particularly susceptible to Smallwood's promotions of the Canadian social security system. Marshalled against him are all the

mercantile interests represented by the "Water Street millionaires", the epithet Smallwood uses to brilliant effect in describing the influence of his adversaries. Cahill's detailed recounting of the Machiavellian tactics employed at the Convention makes for compelling theatre, even as recounted by a single actor. The Convention ends with Smallwood's success at having Confederation with Canada included on the coming referendum ballot.

Act Two opens with a rousing version of the "Anti-Confederate Song" playing on radio. The song plays on Newfoundlanders' well documented distrust of Outsiders controlling their destiny. Michael Fralic comments on Ray Guy's *Young Triffie's Been Made Away With*, a play set in an outport just before the Confederation debates:

> Guy's protagonists tend to be torn between adaptation "to conditions of imposed pressure" and resistance, the "struggle against domination and appropriation." […] [This leaves] a difficult choice: invite […] (the outsider's) help and risk more unwelcome outside influence, or refuse to assist [the outside forces] and risk never improving their defenses. (Fralic 149)

The referendum approaches, and Smallwood and his tight-knit cabal, led by close friend Greg Power, plan for every contingency. Smallwood begins to publish a Confederate newsletter; when he realizes that many of his potential electorate cannot read, he hires a cartoonist. Smallwood the Necessary Outsider is nothing if not adaptable. His Outsider position affords him a perspective that the merchants of Water Street do not possess. Cahill provides snippets of Smallwood on the stump. A legendary public speaker, Smallwood criss-crosses the island until his voice is hoarse, promoting the virtues of an alliance with a larger micro-community. When the result of the first

referendum comes in, he is shattered. Confederation has lost by 5000 votes. Smallwood/Cahill notes: “They couldn’t surrender their bloody independence!” (284)

One suspects that for Cahill, this represents the high point of Newfoundland’s resistance, while for his character, Smallwood, it represents a nadir. Smallwood, ever the tactician, quickly analyses that civil servants who voted for Commission of Government will be more likely to switch to the Confederate side in the run-off ballot once they understand that they will make more money. The Catholics publish a newsletter arguing against Confederation . Smallwood, an inspired partisan more than he was ever a unifying force, copies the article and sends it to every Protestant parish in the region. The result is the “Orange letter” mentioned in *As Loved Our Fathers*, a Protestant “encyclical” directing the faithful to smite the Papists by voting for Confederation. Through what is essentially a political debate Cahill reminds the reader of Smallwood’s remarkable common touch. In fact, Smallwood has a Confederate selling point for each person he encounters:

> How many children do you have there, madam, eh? Yes, you – How many children? Eight, you say? You have eight children all under sixteen? And do you have trouble keeping them in boots and shoes and clothes for school? Yes indeed, don’t we all? Then let me tell you something, madam. Three weeks after the twenty-second of July coming, if you vote for Confederation, three weeks after that date, you’ll receive a cheque in the mail from the government of Canada, for five dollars for each of those eight children. And five times eight is forty, so you’ll receive a cheque for forty dollars. And you’ll get that money every month of every year for every child until the child passes sixteen. And it doesn’t matter if you work, or your husband works, or you both work, or if you have a bad year at the fishery or a good year, you’ll get that money for your children, and that’s what we call the great Canadian baby bonus! (286)

One notes in the above passage the conscious use of repetition by the playwright; a hallmark of the man he depicts, as well as the hypnotic effect of clauses of approximately the same length following one after the other. The easy conviviality of his manner combines with Smallwood's talent for hyperbole to create a portrait of a man who affected to know everyone well, and yet who remains, even now, an enigma. Few were close to him. In Goffman's terms, Smallwood's *umwelt* dominated every micro-community he entered, until there was nothing but a series of affiliative circles whose members worked for their own ends. Cahill depicts Smallwood's ambition and insecurity as flaws that will leave him effectively with no core micro-community to call home.

Smallwood soldiers on. He talks brilliantly and listens with the practiced edge of the ready debater, ever vigilant of an opportunity to promote the Confederate point of view. The second referendum vote produces a wafer thin majority in favour of Confederation. Smallwood has won his victory. The campaign represents the high point of Smallwood's career. A true contrarian, he is most effective when functioning from an underdog position. Once in power things begin to go horribly wrong. The Necessary Outsider, having assumed the mantle of Premier, or Pre-eminent Insider, finds it ill-fitting.

The diminutive Smallwood quickly metamorphoses into a political schoolyard bully, provoking resignations from his cabinet and recruiting loyalists from non-traditional sectors of the populace in order to control the "Water Street Merchants", who are unused to relinquishing the levers of power. Embarking on a programme of economic renewal tied to an industrial/resource model, Smallwood adopts the slogan, "develop or

perish" (289). One can imagine the reaction to such a slogan in the fishing outports which overwhelmingly supported Smallwood's push for Confederation.

A key aspect—and in social terms, deficiency—of Smallwood's tenure as Premier is his propensity for affiliating with Strangers. Strangers are placed in influential government posts or gleefully accept provincial money proffered by the Premier to undertake wild business ventures. The unspoken assumption by Cahill is that Smallwood does not believe that Newfoundlanders possess the capabilities to fulfill such posts. He travels throughout Europe with his economic czar, Alfred Valdmanis, who is later convicted of various corruption-related crimes and disgraced. Each of their economic undertakings turns to ash. Smallwood's dealings with shady American businessmen fare no better. Cahill is careful to underscore the irony that Smallwood's aim throughout is Newfoundland's independence from Outside forces: "my plan to take up where Richard Squires left off and free Newfoundland from the curse of dependency on one resource was a shambles." (290)

Smallwood's response to each entrepreneurial disaster is to pursue even more ambitious projects: "as far as our industrialization campaign is concerned, gentlemen, we go down one road, and if it doesn't lead us anywhere, we abandon it and try another. Newfoundland cannot stand still. We must go ahead, or go astern" (291). Cahill uses here, as he does throughout, a careful sense of Smallwood's rhetorical cadence to achieve a recreation of the impact he produced on those with whom he negotiated. Here too are examples, through Cahill,[18] of Smallwood's talent for communicative competence. "Go ahead or go astern" is a specific nautical reference which communicates not only metaphorical meaning but sub-textual meaning. Those who live by and work on the sea

are familiar with such a metaphor; those who do not are excluded. Smallwood is, in effect, saying "I am one of you."

His ambition, however, involves few Newfoundlanders, if any. This creates a disconnect with the people he is ostensibly serving. A scene in *Father* depicts Smallwood selling Sir Winston Churchill on the idea of lending his name, for fund-raising purposes, to a mega-project in Labrador. In his impatience with the pace of the project—it took seventeen years to complete the initial "agreement to proceed"—the historical Smallwood overlooked the fundamental interests of his constituency. Newfoundland was the victim of sophisticated bargaining on the part of a Québec government still angry over the 1927 Privy Council decision to award Labrador to Newfoundland.

Cahill portrays Smallwood as utterly abandoned at this point. He seeks to cast blame elsewhere, and occupies himself with new projects. The number and scope of ventures, and their record of failure, eventually undermines the credibility of the Smallwood government. The Premier has alienated all of his inner circle in order to maintain a ruthless grip on power. Smallwood faces the existential barrenness of his life:

> And then I had a revelation. A revelation that for twenty years I'd been working virtually alone, eighteen hours a day at a pace that would have killed most men. A revelation that, although I would never surrender my belief that Newfoundland could be rescued from economic isolation, suddenly I was tired…a revelation that many of my old friends were gone; some alienated, many dead, the rest tired of my impossible posturing. (295)

Here Cahill underscores Smallwood's solitude in suggesting that he cannot break out of the *umwelt* role of the stump speaker: even when discussing his personal loneliness he uses repetition techniques. The *pol* is, at the end of the day, and after all reductions

have been made, a pol, his own self-creation. There is nothing behind the mask. A protracted, awkward and ultimately humiliating exit from politics ensues, marked by low chicanery which emphasizes once more the notion that Smallwood has a destructively malleable idea of how ends and means combine within a social context.

Smallwood, forced into retirement, takes to flogging his *Encyclopædia* door to door by car and picking up honorary doctorates from universities. He suffers a stroke and, with mortality beckoning, wonders how he will be remembered, what his legacy will be. His secret fantasy is to be remembered as a writer: "'This writer fellow, Smallwood. He was in politics for a while, too, wasn't he?'" (301) With this fond wish Smallwood strolls off into the darkness, never to be seen on the public stage again.

The Only Living Father appears to be told from the subjective view of Joe Smallwood, but he reveals so much about himself unconsciously that a far more dimensional picture emerges. The play's depth and its layers of meaning are not immediately obvious, especially to a mainland audience. There is a disconnect between Smallwood the role and Smallwood the person, and it is the second who is seldom on view. In Cahill's rendering of the character, a question is raised as to whether there *is* a personal Joe Smallwood. The portrait of Smallwood remains, however, generally sympathetic. Joe Smallwood is presented in all his feisty, self-absorbed glory, unapologetic and ever hopeful of a big score up the road that will finally put Newfoundland on the map. A character made for drama, Joseph Smallwood was seldom off-stage in his public life. Tom Cahill's achievement is to present the flawed nature of this Outsider, in all his insecurity and boastfulness, and to let the character's traits speak for themselves. On one level the play is a simple biography. On another it is an

examination of how Outsiders work to remediate their status. The macro-community of Newfoundland serves as the site for this examination.

Joseph Smallwood's tireless promotion of his home province established Newfoundland in the Canadian political landscape. That this may be a mixed blessing would not, perhaps, have bothered the man who schemed and debated to bring Newfoundland into the Canadian federation. Cahill creates a structurally simple, dramatically effective way of presenting a complex man—to place the man on stage, alone, and let him tell the story, in his inimitable syntax and cadence, of how he and Newfoundland conquered the world, or at least caused a fuss. The staging highlights Smallwood's, and Newfoundland's, isolation in the world and the North American sphere. Both were required to knock on the door, and keep knocking repeatedly, even after they had been let in.

5.3 Michael Cook's Newfoundland Trilogy

The figure of Michael Cook looms large over Newfoundland drama. Although his plays are imperfect exercises in different styles, they are charged with a beauty of language, a vividness of action, and a searingly acute sense of observation that is as loving as it is critical. No Newfoundland playwright has yet equaled the combined impact of his œuvre within and beyond the province's borders. Brian Parker asserts that "Cook remains an important dramatist, because beneath the technical crudities, at the poetic heart of his work, lies an intensely imagined experience of Newfoundland life, presented with such integrity that at its best it rises to comment on the human condition" (22).

Reference to Cook's technique as crude is arguable. While his dramaturgy may be "diffuse" (Walker, "Versions" 279), and exhibits the "obvious difficulty he has in organizing his work" (Parker 22), Craig Walker argues that the inter-mixing of stylistic forms which so confounds and frustrates critics is in fact part of a greater unity, a poetic sensibility combining elements of elegy, mythology and the sublime where "an imaginative, rather than a rationalized social vision" is depicted ("Elegy" 194).

Cook appears to have regarded his work in the same way: "in many ways I do hear the plays as musical scores" (qtd. in Wallace 162). He further described how plays occurred in his imagination as a "series of images, dramatic scenes, and circumstances" (qtd. in Parker 22). His Irish heritage is repeatedly referred to, by himself and others, in interviews and articles, and Cook referred to Newfoundland as "the recreation of a Celtic culture in North America" (qtd. in Wallace 164). Cook was at pains, however, to distance himself from the "romanticizing and mythologizing the glories of the past" which he identified as the "Irish trend" (qtd. in Wallace 162) occurring in Newfoundland drama. One must therefore be careful in assigning any category, even one as general as "poetic" to the work of Michael Cook. Cook's primary concern was to chronicle the struggle for survival of a culture he felt had reached a critical turning point. The twin double-edged swords of Confederation with Canada and the Smallwood-era resettlement programme,[19] he stated, had resulted in a lost culture, one which had "left behind their sense of identification and place and community. They left behind the bones of their ancestors. They left behind their history" ("Culture" 73). This description fits the storyline of both of Al Pittman's plays, *West Moon* (1980) and *A Rope Against the Sun* (1974), but, tellingly, not the mood of these plays, which is elegiac and passive. Although Cook

exonerated Pittman (as well as Tom Cahill and CODCO) from his charge that Newfoundland playwrights and collectives were unwilling to challenge Newfoundlanders' idealized version of themselves, his criticism rings true, not only of Pittman's work but of much work that has been produced subsequently. Cook found a virtue in the circumstances of his "resident alien" status:

> **Wallace:** Do you benefit from being an outsider in Newfoundland?
>
> **Cook:** Very much so. Because I'm not connected to the people historically, I lack the self-defensive mechanisms of the people born there. I see with a clearer vision, and can speak with an honesty which perhaps is too difficult or too painful for the many people who are the inheritors there. (qtd. in Wallace 162)

Cook's plays are anything but passive. Their elegiac quality has been noted by Craig Walker, but the elegies are angry ones, marked not by a sense of resignation but rather one where identity will be defended until the last breath. From Ted Russell's *The Holdin' Ground* to some of the recent work of Robert Chafe, there is at work in Newfoundland theatre a persistent rear-guard action, a creeping conservatism which threatens to undermine its ability to speak clearly and critically about life in the province. Partly this may be an understandable aspect of a culture founded by working people whose early struggle for survival, as Cook noted, left little time for the development of sophisticated art forms. He recounted vividly his experience in running *The Head, Guts and Soundbone Dance* up against this tide of resistance:

> The TV production would expose the work to a great mass of people who had never been to the theatre. The result was instantaneous, and devastating. The play (and author) were reviled, and it became evident, I think, to everyone working in

> theatre at that time that the potential audience's image of themselves could not be tampered with lightly. That anxiety still exists and to a large extent has proved detrimental to the creation of a theatre that could have been unique in the country. ("Culture" 75)

Few revivals of Cook's work have taken place in Newfoundland, although Rising Tide Theatre has presented *Quiller* and performs *Theresa's Creed* regularly. Rising Tide also re-mounted *The Head, Guts and Soundbone Dance* in 1996, featuring the characteristic realistic misreading that was typical of the initial critical response to Cook in mainland Canada. That things have perhaps taken a strong turn in the direction of riskier theatre in the St. John's theatre scene, with the advent of companies such as Artistic Fraud of Newfoundland, would be heartening to Cook. Throughout a short but frenetically productive career, he never ceased promoting the virtues of Newfoundlanders and Newfoundland life, or attempting to articulate to islanders what might be called Shakespeare's "cruel to be kind" approach to his depictions of life on the Rock. In the comments of mainland theatre critics such as the *Montréal Star's* Myron Galloway there is a hint that Cook should take it easy and leave "Newfies" to their bucolic, stereotypical bliss: "He hacks his characters out of stone without compassion". "Unable to illuminate their personalities with a single saving grace his characters remain cold, hard, unyielding and unsympathetic" (qtd. in Conolly 99-100).

This is not to say that Myron Galloway is entirely wrong in his assessment of the play. It can be argued that critics who hold Cook's work to a standard based on the tenets of realism are misguided, misled by Cook's confusing use of realistic, almost naturalistic details of setting and the truthful ring of his characters' dialects. Brian Parker, Craig Walker and Richard Perkyns have all commented on the religious symbolism that is rife

in Cook's plays, and, to a lesser extent, the link to Greek tragedy in his work. It can be argued that the religious iconography employed by Cook is simply that which was most useful to him, as a Catholic-raised dramatist working in a denominationally-fervid environment. Cook is explicit:

> What I am trying to do in *Head, Guts and Soundbone Dance* and in *Jacob's Wake*, to some extent, is to write a classic tragedy as much as one can in the Twentieth century. Skipper Pete and Elijah sacrifice an elemental, social part of themselves in order to maintain their stance in the world. The cost is enormous. I am more sorry for Pete in the play than for the boy because he loses everything. When he shuts the door at the end of that play, he shuts out the world, and he shuts himself in forever. That defiant song that rises from his mouth is meant to be tragic. He has failed to adapt and he is dead as a dodo. (qtd. in Wallace 163)

In considering Galloway's comment that "he hacks his characters out of stone without compassion" and that they remain "cold, hard, unyielding and unsympathetic", one wonders if this is how Aeschylus would have fared had he faced modern theatre critics armed with realism as their defining criteria. Aeschylus, too, loved his home; he fought for it. His characters, too, seem hacked from stone. They are nearly always unyielding and often they are unsympathetic. One suspects that both Aeschylus and Michael Cook would have responded that this need to sympathize is a symptom of the moral laxity both wished to excise from their communities, a feeling inextricably linked to the toxins of sentiment and nostalgia which denies a community the necessary astringent of self-examination and thus assists in denying a people their identity.

Cook's influence as a theatrical builder in his adopted culture is sometimes overshadowed by his considerable accomplishments as a writer. Cook helped to establish a small but important theatre company in 1970, the Open Group, produced plays, and

quarreled in the local press with cultural mandarins. He recognized the need to promote this cultural flowering in passionate, polemical pieces published in the earliest issues of the *Canadian Theatre Review*, such as "St. John's.", "Trapped in Space", and "Under Assault" (CTR 3,6,7). The fact that he possessed a gift for writing plays on top of these other achievements is remarkable.

Cook was a passionate convert to the Newfoundland way of life. The dramatist in him appeared unable to adopt the same subjectivity. His plays do not countenance the traditional view of Newfoundlanders as plucky victims, despite Cook's oft-stated agreement with the thesis that the island's people had suffered numerous privations and predations. Cook's Newfoundlanders are loud, passionate, uncivil, rudely funny and unnerving in their ability to make errors of dire consequence. In contrast to the wistful nostalgia of Al Pittman's *West Moon*, or the complacent timelessness of Russell's *The Holdin' Ground*, Cook's work evinces little keening for a simpler, gentler time. Michael Cook attached himself like a boil to the Newfoundland corpus from his arrival in 1966 until his death in 1994. While it is true that Cook spent some of his last years in Stratford, Ontario, he retained a home in Newfoundland, maintained a relationship with a local woman for some years, and returned on a regular basis.[20] Like boils, his plays have not always been a welcome sight, but they are, like boils, indications of a deeper condition that requires action.

5.3.1 *Colour the Flesh the Colour of Dust* (1971)

Colour the Flesh the Colour of Dust was the first of Cook's plays to gain national attention. Critics remain divided about its structural merits. Brian Parker observes that Cook's plays are "thematically confusing", marred by "unevenness", "verbosity" and "obvious stage effects" (22), and that *Colour* is "something of a mess" (24). Remarkably, these comments can be found in an article that is generally positive in its perception of Cook's work. Craig Walker describes *Colour* as "an excellent example of the way in which Cook's conflation of a bewildering array of social, political and intensely poetic perspectives arouses and confounds audience expectations" ("Elegy" 193).

From the perspective of the Insider-Outsider-Stranger relationships which form the basis of this analysis, *Colour the Flesh the Colour of Dust* is a notable play. Its circles of affiliation are numerous, perhaps more clearly defined than they would typically be in real life. Within each are identifiable sets of markers indicating how the characters are viewed, and view themselves, with regard to their membership status. Further, the stakes of the play are those of life and death, adding weight and significance to the struggles between individuals and groups.

The setting of the play is St. John's in 1762; more specifically—and this has some import in terms of Insider-Outsider-Stranger determination—most of the action takes place *above* St. John's, within and without the garrison manned (initially) by the British occupying forces. Many of the soldiers have been stationed there for more than twenty years after a series of repeated extensions to their term of service. Discipline within the

garrison has become lax, marked by a gnawing despair at the harshness of the climate and the barrenness of the soldier's lives. Alcohol is the preferred means of dealing with this despair, often accompanied by spontaneous acts of violence directed at the local citizenry. The citizens are a fractious, crude bunch, always presented as a mob, primal in their needs and methods of survival.

From the beginning the spectator is confronted with these depersonalized entities cohabiting a contested space. The crowd is made up of native-born residents, but their Insider status is qualified by their propensity for violence and their inability to define themselves as a civilized unit. The British soldiers offer the promise (if not the reality) of civilization; not only are they foreign-born, but they have no interest in disseminating the rules of conduct and social order which they have brought with them. Beyond this initial level of conflict lies the fact that each group subdivides into sections along the lines of class, education, or rank. There is a schism which exists between the officers of the regiment and the soldiers, which prevents the regiment from being seen as a unified social organism. The officers are high-status servants of the British Crown, which regards Newfoundland as its territory. In theory, then, the British can also claim to be Insiders. That such a claim would be ludicrous is evidenced by the inability of the officers or soldiers to integrate into Newfoundland society, to re-make it in the image of their true homeland, or to survive in an adequate manner during their period of residence there.

This schism is mirrored in the townsfolk as well. The Merchant and the Magistrate are depicted in scenes where their lack of concern for the people of the town is made manifest. The Merchant adds sawdust to his flour and turns down a plea for credit from a starving woman who dies soon after. The Magistrate takes the lead in working

behind the backs of the British to secure a business pact with the French forces that will enable those such as he to retain their privileged position. It is intriguing to consider whether such amoral characters constitute the true Insiders of the play. Cook makes no mention of the birthplace of the Merchant or the Magistrate, although each speaks with the clipped accent of the educated class, a marker which distinguishes them from the vernacular and argot-ridden language of the other townsfolk. Yet these characters clearly regard St. John's as their home, even though they regard the majority of its residents with contempt. If they are foreign-born, they have made themselves Necessary Outsiders; if they are native-born, they are high-status Insiders, despite their hypocrisy and self-centred actions.

As the play opens life in the garrison has become a grinding daily exercise in routine stripped of meaning, of enforcement and punishment that produces no social reification. The illusion of superiority has been shattered. Over time the soldiers, and increasingly the officers, have become neutralized Strangers: they act increasingly like the town's inhabitants – venal, coarse, dehumanized and dehumanizing. Walker observes that Cook's work centres on the struggle of "humanity caught between two mighty opposites: Nature and Civilization" ("Elegy" 193). While this is problematic for several reasons – Nature is not difficult to envisage as a personified entity, but Civilization remains an amorphous concept—Walker captures the essence of what is occasionally missed in Cook's work, as demonstrated in vivid detail in *Colour the Flesh the Colour of Dust*. Neither the regiment nor the citizens exist in harmony with the Nature that is the true Insider in Cook's Newfoundland.[21] Both groups unconsciously become more "natural"—that is, less civilized—in order to affiliate themselves with this brutal Inside.

The contest is not so much between competing organized social units comprised of rules of order as it is a race amongst equally alienated groups to de-civilize themselves in order to survive. Neither the regiment nor the citizens manifest any desire to "better" themselves or each other. Such betterment would be pointless within the environment they inhabit.

The play's opening image demonstrates the brutality and dehumanizing elements of this Natural society in a vivid manner. In the moonlight two soldiers huddle at the foot of a gibbet, from which hangs the dead body of a man. One of the soldiers—Cook gives them no names—drunkenly pushes the corpse so that it begins to swing. A woman appears. That she is the dead man's lover is scant identification, as noted by the soldiers:

> **Soldier 2:** Who's that?
>
> **Soldier 1:** Rest easy. It's his whore.
>
> **Soldier 2:** Which one?
>
> **Soldier 1:** How should I know – one whore's the same as another. All look the same to me after twenty years.
>
> **Soldier 2:** All feel the same, you mean – (D5)

This is not merely exposition. Four characters have been introduced within seconds. None of them is identified by name, only by function. The theme of dehumanization within a savage environment has been established, not only as a result but as a strategy for survival. The question is to what purpose Michael Cook puts it. The depiction of the St. John's crowd in the play is amongst many instances cited where Cook is accused of holding Newfoundlanders in contempt. A simplistic rendering of the forces of social

entropy explains the lack, in relative terms, of dimensional characterization. This interpretation overlooks some crucial elements, already present in the early stages of the play. The soldiers have a home, which they long for: England. The Officer of the Watch, whose ability to enforce discipline has diminished as his own discipline has waned, muses about the twenty-two year-old wife he left behind eight years ago, and whether she has been faithful. Remnants remain of the civilizing context in which they were raised, as they do in Marie, the whore who soon acquires a name, and a lover – Lieutenant Mannon, first introduced as the Officer of the Watch.

These two characters are *named*, identified as distinct humans. Their struggle to find some kind of meaningful relationship within the boiling cesspool of the town and the garrison forms a critical element of the play. The theatre critic for the *Toronto Star*, Urjo Kareda, dismissed this sub-plot as a misleading cliché (qtd. in Parker 28). Brian Parker defends the centrality of the "affair" between the Lieutenant and Marie by linking it to Mannon's further "corruption" (28). Indeed, as Parker points out, the Lieutenant is being unfaithful to his English wife. While true, this assertion misses a crucial aspect of Mannon's relationship with Marie, through its misplaced emphasis on English society as the focal point of civilization. In terms of English mores, Mannon is becoming more corrupt, but within the context of the society where he has been resident for eight years, he is in fact embarking on a process of re-civilizing himself. He is forming an intimate affiliation with an Insider and thus is attempting to remediate his unqualified Stranger status. His unfaithfulness has no currency in St. John's; it exists only within his own mind, in which he appears to begin to compartmentalize the two notions of home competing for his allegiance.

The dead man is soon cut down. Marie asks for the body. She cradles the body in her arms. Both Parker (29) and Walker ("Versions" 280) note the religious symbolism of the *pieta*-like position of woman and "child", and the name of the character, Marie. The scene also takes place on "Gibbet Hill", which recalls Calvary. After Marie asks "May I have him, please?" Soldier 2 retorts, "fer Christ's sake. Can you hear her? Look at us, Sir. Look at us. Is he Jesus Christ? Are we the Romans? Is she Mary?" (D7) She *is* Mary, at least in terms of her name. The invocation of the Crucifixion triggers her response: it feels appropriate to cradle the dead man in her arms, to act like Mary did. She has acted on a suggestion. The gesture, however, has everything to do with a small attempt to recapture humanity. Cook uses this overt religious symbolism in a sarcastic manner, undermining its sanctity even as his characters search for the peace religion seems to promise. The play's setting, after all, is a paganistic arena of emotions and desires. Nature is god here, and God has been left far behind (presumably in England). None of the characters attempt to recreate a Christian environment, nor do they invoke it as anything more than a past, now irrelevant, set of social criteria. Christianity is nowhere present as a civilizing force. Perhaps if Cook had named his Lieutenant "Mammon" rather than "Mannon", the claim of significance for religious symbolism in the play might carry more merit. Like Brecht's use of religion in *St. Joan of the Stockyards*, Cook regards religion, particularly of the Christian, civilizing kind, as a luxury for those who can afford guilt.

Marie's action can also be seen as a personal *gestus* in Brechtian terms.[22] Evidence for this lies in the fact that soon after she launches into the first Brechtian song of the play, "Song of the Woman". The song takes place within the context of the scene,

however, so there is little effective distanciation. The song reinforces the themes of life and death and how people must give themselves up to living in spite of the essential meaninglessness of the act. Walker identifies "an elegiac cast to Cook's vision of Newfoundland" ("Elegy" 192) which is apparent here. It is not the wistful nostalgia of Pittman or Russell, or the dissatisfaction with the present found in the works of Grace Butt and Tom Cahill. The search for a meaningful existence, for Cook, is sidetracked by nostalgia and weariness. We must deal with life, not stoically, but by fighting at every moment against numbness, to feel.

The play's narrative involves, on one level, the contest between the British and French forces for control of St. John's, and the manner in which the merchant class and citizenry of the town deal with what Walker calls the "national flip-flop" ("Versions" 279) in the town's national affiliation. On another level it involves the relationship between Lieutenant Mannon and Marie, and the existential despair of the aptly named Captain Gross,[23] under the duress imposed by the town's increasingly strained social dynamic. Mannon is eventually killed in an incident of "friendly fire" and Marie remains, at the end of the play, in the same position she held at its beginning: alone, in a state of unsentimental mourning. The Merchant prepares for the presumptive victory of the French forces by plotting with the Magistrate to create a "citizens' petition" demanding safe treatment of all commercial properties. The townsfolk threaten rebellion against the British but instead prefer to wait for the French to do the job for them.

With the arrival of the French at the end of Act One, one group of Strangers is exchanged for another. The people of the town celebrate by getting drunk and impaling a British soldier in his groin, an incident viewed by Walker in mythic terms ("Elegy" 197).

The primal nature of the action is more central to the play's contested space and its participants, however. The crowd is dispersed "as if after a communal orgasm" (D27). Their bloodlust has been quenched for the moment. A Stranger has been killed. He has been replaced by new Strangers, who will become Necessary Outsiders for a time, and then will likely suffer the same fate. This apparent contradiction matters little to the people of the town. In a truly communal sense, all Strangers are the same.

Act Two takes place six months later. The Merchant and The Magistrate are prospering; as Cook notes, "the poor are as poor. The rich are as rich" (D32). The Merchant attempts to instruct his young helper in bad commercial French. The scenes between the Merchant and the Boy might be considered peripheral entertainment devices except that they highlight an element of the line of alienation. The Merchant and the Magistrate form, with the Officers of the occupying regiment (French or British), a separate social unit. As Walker notes, "the representation of the crowd as, alternately, the victims of economic oppression and the perpetrators of senseless violence is simply inconsistent with any ideological intent" ("Elegy" 194). Cook is not setting up a binary good-evil relationship based on political criteria. He is suggesting, rather, that some individuals in a polity may adjust to new realities better than others. This belief is echoed in *The Head, Guts and Soundbone Dance* in the distinction made between Skipper Pete, who dooms himself through his failure to adapt to the new, and Uncle John, who adapts.[24] In such a paradigm the true Insider is the one who is left standing on the highest ground after the dust has settled.

The Captain reflects on his coming departure from the island to the Lieutenant: "Yes, well. You might thank God, Lieutenant – But I will go soon. And leave nothing

here. Twenty-five years. You would think a man should leave something in a place, a place he …a place in which he has lived. But this rock, now. Something in it defeats the spirit." (D35) The captain soon admits that his spirit "was defeated before I got here" - a revelation his isolation in a foreign environment has assisted him in discovering. He has, perhaps, no home to return to. All the British soldiers who return will be Exiles. Some will adapt quickly, and remediate their transgressions. Some, like the Captain, will exist in a purgatorial space, neither home nor fully away.

The Captain encounters the Merchant. As Walker notes, the literality of the Merchant causes him to misapprehend the Captain's more metaphorical description of "being at sea". (D36) Here is created an issue of communicative competence. The Merchant simply does not need to understand the more sophisticated language of the Captain. It is not needed within his environment, which is not merely the store he runs but the emerging community itself. For the Merchant, the sea is a means to an end. Ships travel upon it, carrying goods which can then be sold. Fishermen fish upon it, and require materials and equipment to do so. Fish can be procured from its depths, and sold for consumption at a profit. The Captain speaks like a tourist who is regarding a sight for the first time. The Merchant, in this encounter, proves to be the Insider. It is his lexicon which will dominate discourse within his community.

In the play's final scene the French have been defeated and once more the British are the ascendant Strangers. Citizens remark on the circularity of regime-change in the context of life itself, viewed from the Inside:

Man: Today – yesterday – tomorrow –What's the difference – There's fish and they's got to be caught – whether them silly devils kill each other off or no is no worry of mine.

Boy: At least the French are fighting for what they've got.

Spokesman: Those that are left. What are they fighting for though.

Woman: It's us. (*Cackles*) Heard sometime about a whole army fighting over a woman. (D39)

Apart from the allusion to Greek mythology, the central feature of this dialogue is the equanimity with which these Insiders regard Outside forces, whether they be temporal or physical. They will come, but they will also go. This lesson is soon underlined by Marie and the Lieutenant. She is pregnant with his child. The dialogue indicates that Strangers are likely to find aspects of comforting familiarity in other Strangers:

Girl: You're transparent - I'm muddy – We're all muddy – Those of us who stay here – You want to begin and end things – we exist – the French know you're coming.

Lieutenant: Didn't even cross their minds that I'd cross the lines.

Girl: Do you know them all now?

Lieutenant: Many of them.

Girl: Do you like them?

Lieutenant: We're the same – it's just a question of balance, that's all. Who tips the scales – but we're all professionals – it gives us a point of communication. (D42)

The Lieutenant is considering whether he can set up as a resident, but admits the fact of his status: "I'd rot here". Marie replies, "I know. You don't belong here, that's all" (D42).

The Lieutenant, in a piece of bitter irony, is killed by friendly fire from his own besieging troops. Alienated from both polities within which he has been living, the garrison and the town, he is a Stranger to both. Though his death is accidental, it is doubtful that it will be mourned. A small part of him remains in Marie's womb. Her resilience, and the hope it represents, is represented by this presence and in the song she sings at the end of the play, a crooning reprise of the first song of the play:

> **Girl:** You were nothing to anyone, but me; and your sense of honour, your King and Country. Now you're dead. And the honour and the King and the Country lie dead with you. And there's only me left – me and him – me and her – what's it matter. (*Sings*)
>
> Swing by the neck,
>
> hang by the toes
>
> from birth to death the swinging goes
>
> But it's a fool who doesn't trust
>
> to give himself because he must…(D47)

The British have arrived, to an unctuous greeting from the Magistrate. Old is new is old again. In their poverty, the citizens remain citizens. The Merchants and Magistrates remain in true command of the community's daily interactions. The Strangers will come and go, huffing and puffing and occasionally blowing someone's house down. In the end, they will go, well before the people of the town, who will hang on until the sea, the wind and the rain reclaim their own.

Colour the Flesh the Colour of Dust raises the question of what constitutes an Insider. To answer this question in any satisfying manner requires delineating the various

micro-communities which are in conflict in the play. On a macro-cosmic level, that of Nature versus Civilization, all the characters must be Strangers, intruders who struggle against the remorseless resistance of natural elements. In such a battle, all humans will eventually lose, and Nature—bloodied and mutilated, to be sure, but inexorably Itself—will reign again.

In social terms, the play leaves the Aeschylean realm described above and enters the Euripidean. Emotions, alliances, and the plotting of humans count for a great deal when communities are arenas of contested ownership between humans, as opposed to supernatural elements.[25] The native-born townsfolk of St. John's have demonstrated two of three criteria for the establishment of a community as described by Bonjean.[26] delineation of territory; and an affiliation with the territory as demonstrated by their desire to stay, their long-term residence, and their animosity towards the British force. A set of codes may or may not have been established; certainly the presence of the British testifies to the Crown's belief that the rule of (British) law is not being scrupulously observed.

The British can make no such claim to St. John's as a home polity. The regiment is made up of unaffiliated foreigners who manifest tendencies to stay only after a protracted period of ostracization, marked by the disappearance of hope for a return to the true home community, Great Britain. Within the community of the garrison—in reality a series of affiliative circles rather than a unified micro-community, which is a key element of its weakness—they may be regarded as Insiders, but the placement by Cook of the garrison on a hill suggests that he wishes the garrison to be regarded as an anomalous

entity, an impermanent intruder or infection of the body politic, which will inevitably be neutralized or expelled. Such is what happens to the soldiers.

Lieutenant Mannon's attempt to become a Demystified Stranger in linking himself with Marie is doomed by the extremity of his foreignness and the near-total lack of remedial actions he can undertake in such a hostile environment. Their child will live on in the community (as an Insider), but it could have been sired by anybody. Its parentage, one suspects, will not be an issue in a community made up of new citizens.

The other soldiers are Strangers who are neutralized through the public display of their deficiencies of character and decorum, and who then depart, in one manner or another. Walker makes the point that the townsfolk, in crowding into the garrison, are party to a "garrison mentality", and that their attempts to create a community within its walls are doomed by the lack of social order which results from the mixing of soldiers and citizens and their conflicting notions of the rights to be accorded to each ("Elegy" 196). Although the garrison lies within the borders of their community, it has its own walls and constitutes what one might call a separate "block", an environment distinct from that of their former micro-community, one in which these Insiders cannot enjoy the typical rights and prerogatives of Insiders (such as freedom of movement). The garrison is a contested space.

There are no noble characters in the confusing welter of tensions in St. John's, circa 1762; there is no unqualified Insider. Notions of honour are bandied about in strategic terms by the Merchant and the Magistrate, two characters of consummate venality who pursue their own welfare with single-minded ruthlessness. Characters like Mannon, who profess to a grander sense of honour and decency, have abandoned this

moral high ground through actions which are inconsistent, in moral terms. The notion of honour carries little currency in a survival landscape:

> **Spokesman:** Well, Sir, honour's a fine word with gentlemen; but with us, y'see, it doesn't hold too much water. You need time and money to uphold honour. And you need to think of yourself as being someone with a place in life, as having a station, you see. But us now – we're scum. I think ye'd call us that now, wouldn't ye?
>
> **Lieutenant:** I think I might have done. I'm not too sure.
>
> **Spokesman:** Oh, don't just think it, Sir. That's what we are. It's your word for us and ye've made us that, ye see. And ye want me to act with honour in a hand-to-hand combat – because that's the way you gentlemen proceed with your quarrels. But, we, Sir – we –
>
> **Lieutenant:** Yes, I want to know about you.
>
> **Spokesman:** Well, Sir, we proceed with the pain and the knowledge and the denial of our responsibilities – kids starving, women whoring with your soldiers for a penny or two, merchants selling us gear not against this year's fish but the next and the next – we don't have no honour, Sir. And what we need every now and again is a circus – a good hanging, perhaps – one of yours instead of one of ours – or a good fight when the odds is with us. (D17-8)

The competing groups are like lobsters in a pot, clambering desperately over each other for survival. All are aware that there is a larger game afoot than that marked by the quotidian battles each is waging. The French will attack, take over the garrison and the city, and the call will go out to Britain for a response. Six months later the ships will arrive. The British will retake the city. The same officers will discuss terms. All will be dictated by global forces which are far away in geography and scope from daily life in Newfoundland.

While there is some question as to whether the play's mélange of styles is ultimately successful in dramatic terms, there is little doubt that the play was revolutionary in Newfoundland theatre. There is no record of Brechtian techniques of alienation and gestus knowingly employed previously in the province's theatre, amateur or professional. One example suffices. At the beginning of the third scene, following a song called "The Ballad of Making Ends Meet" the townsfolk are on the edge of rebellion. For perhaps the first time in Newfoundland playwriting, these calls are directed to come from the audience as well as the wings, rather than simply the proscenium stage itself. The symbolism of the staging is clear: these people are the same as those who have come to watch the play. The pointless, repetitive nature of the rebellion, however, soon dissipates any empathetic identification with the townsfolk. Yes, they are angry, Cook states, but to what purpose? To violence? Don't just be angry victims, Cook seems to be saying to his neighbours, be passionate advocates for your cause.

This Brechtian format, mixed in with a bewildering range of themes and styles, produces, in Brian Parker's view, an effect that is "incoherent because he has tried to cram too much into it without a clear sense of priorities". That the play is at times confusing, even "exasperating" (29), is difficult to dispute. It should be noted, however, that the confusion in form mirrors, in a vividly dramatic manner, the content of the play, and, in many respects, the inter-mixing of styles which marked the community concert tradition. This is not an argument for incoherent plays to portray incoherent subjects. Nevertheless, a world of confusion and turmoil is perhaps not best presented in a cool, logical manner. Such a clinical presentation is stripped of the primitive power to evoke the fear which exists in all people – of a fatal loss of control, of an elimination of identity.

Cook vividly brings a sense of this survival mentality to life in *Colour the Flesh the Colour of Dust*.

There is value and conscious purpose in the play's rough-and-ready nature. Cook indicates in many ways that the play is not meant to be a polished exercise in socio-political discourse. His stage directions include directions such as "the actors here must improvise around the following" (D38) and abrupt changes in scene. The character called "the Spokesman" notes that "historically, this has been a pretty inaccurate play; but there's something that could be said was real" (D42). Cook's perspective is perhaps closer to that of Piscator or the early Brecht than to the later Brecht or to the British political theatre school of Hare, Barker, and Brenton. This is not to say that *Colour* is a Brechtian exercise. This too has been a subject of much misinterpretation. Cook utilizes Brechtian elements—the surging crowd coming out of the audience, a spokesman/narrator, Epic-style songs, and gestus, as identified by Walker (*Versions* 289)—in the same manner as he makes use of religious imagery. There is no particular agenda in mind other than to shove the reader/spectator along a path towards the play's central theme, the battle between Nature and Civilization and the erosion of a people through the disappearance of its rituals and traditions.

In this, as has been stated, Cook was to some degree closer in aesthetic inclination to the organizers of community concerts than to the literary-minded traditions of western Europe. Although Cook declared that he was primarily a "literary writer" (qtd. in Wallace 159) his sensibility with regard to the Newfoundland scene was fundamentally practical.[27] In helping to found the influential Open Group with Clyde Rose and Richard Buehler, directing his own work, and producing a stream of plays in a short period—he

once noted that “my practical training has eliminated at least three drafts of every play I’ve written” (161)—there is an echo of the pragmatic artist who wrote *Colour*: one whose dramatic decisions are based less on procuring an enduring literary legacy than on producing an impact on his audience. Styles are combined, often in uneven proportion, in defiance of the critics’ dictum that plays should be thematically and structurally consistent. Cook found no such unity in the tumultuous existence of life on the Island. The result is undeniably riveting and the dialectic produced is satisfyingly complex. It is impossible to dismiss *Colour the Flesh the Colour of Dust*, and it is perhaps misconceived to suggest that the play could have been made “better”. Rough theatre is not synonymous with simplistic theatre, just as theatre practice remains at odds with the extreme formalism of some dramatic criticism.

5.3.2 *The Head, Guts and Soundbone Dance* (1973)

Myron Galloway saw little evolution in Cook’s work upon viewing the Montréal production of *The Head, Guts, and Soundbone Dance*:

> […] it is not even a full-length work. Its playing time is little more than an hour and even within such a short span it is shamelessly padded with stage business in a desperate attempt to give it a semblance of reality and substance. Cook has obviously absorbed a good deal of the atmosphere of Newfoundland (though it is still not nearly enough) and observed the external characteristics of some of the more rugged of its individualists. What he has failed to do however is get beneath the surface idiosyncrasies of these people and invest them with a degree of dimension […] The play is a folksy exercise which no experienced theatergoer is likely to confuse with legitimate drama.” (qtd. in Conolly 120-21)

The Aeschylean aspect of Cook's characterization apparently did not appeal to a critic immersed in the new wave of Canadian realism, which featured plays such as David French's *Leaving Home* and *Of the Fields, Lately* and David Freeman's *Creeps*. Marion Owen-Fekete in the Fredericton *Daily Gleaner* offered a more complex reaction:

> Michael Cook's *The Head, Guts and Soundbone Dance* is a queer play. It upsets one, knocks one off-keel. I don't like it because it's pessimistic and contains some unpleasant things, yet I like it because it doesn't prostitute itself to any tradition and just because it does unbalance me and make me think…Can't a play have a hero who's pretty lousy? And can't the play be good even if we do leave the theatre feeling as low as Hades? (qtd. in Conolly 121)

Even this more nuanced assessment fails to regard Cook's play as anything more than realism, although the "shameless" stage business is better accounted for:

> [T]he play contains enough to set pens of letters-to-the-editor writers wriggling. There are swearing, urinating (but not quite on stage), and the throwing of fish guts to the four corners. (Those six fish caught by Skipper Pete's son Absalom smell to low Hell) […] Walter Learning has directed it with dedication and forcefulness, trying hard to keep a realistic play interesting […] People will disagree about Michael Cook's abilities as a playwright (which I'll argue are of consequence) […] (qtd. in Conolly 123)

By far the most complex reaction, in terms of newspaper criticism, was produced by Patrick Treacher, writing in Cook's adopted hometown, St. John's.[28]

> "[…] like many of us who are new to the Newfoundland scene, and like many of us who are not native, [Cook] feels that he has something to say about Newfoundland that Newfoundlanders have not said for themselves. Some will say this is impertinence […] However, his play […] is one of the most perceptive things I have ever seen […] the function of the playwright is to observe, to understand and finally present his conclusions, with sympathy and tolerance. Mr.

> Cook does almost all of these things, but perhaps because his dedication gets in the way, his tolerance tends to slip sometimes […] Synge only recounted, he never consciously commented. Mr. Cook has not mastered this art, but he is near enough to the thing to becoming an important person in the theatre. In short, I have never sat on a stage-head and watched a people die, but I think I did last night. (qtd. in Conolly119)

The confusion of Cook's intents and his mixing of forms continued, then, through the productions of *The Head, Guts and Soundbone Dance* which featured in various parts of Canada. Robert Wallace, however, allowed Michael Cook to offer a response to critics of the play:

> **Wallace**: I'd like to talk about Skipper Pete in *The Head, Guts and Soundbone Dance* because the ambivalent response he evokes in me I find central to all your work. On one hand I admire Skipper Pete's adherence to the old ways, the so-called natural truths that he is able to affirm against change; yet I abhor the way this leads to his self-absorption which contributes to the boy's death. What is your opinion of the Skipper inasmuch as you've made him so complex?
>
> **Cook:** That ambivalence exists in the Newfoundland character and Newfoundlanders don't like me to say it. In fact, many Newfoundlanders were appalled by the play because they saw so much of themselves in it. But I am not dealing with docu-drama there; I'm dealing with an imaginative creation of parts of the Newfoundland psyche. Historically there are precedents for the boy's death in that way […]. (qtd. in Wallace 163)

Part of that "imaginative creation" constitutes a *revival*, an attempt to articulate the power and necessity of ritual and mythology in survival cultures such as that of Newfoundland. Cook believed that, while no idealized paradise, the Newfoundland of the 17th to early 20th century was a "place for the dispossessed" which had established a "commonality of place and tongue unique in North America":

> There were highly ritualistic rites of passage; the annual seal hunt followed by the summer journey to the cod fishery off the Labrador coast…for four hundred years this people moved in ways unknown to the rest of the world, a mixture of Celt and Anglo-Saxon that survived because the nature of the environment determined that it was more important to depend upon your neighbours than it was to keep old animosities alive. Obviously, in survival cultures, art does not flourish, but with the advent of Union with Canada, roads, radio, television, the inevitable happened…within two decades, the ritual and mythology, as practiced in reality, died. And in the death throes the sleeping, visionary spirit of the soul of Newfoundland manifested itself in the imaginations of those whose task it is to record the joys and agonies of life about them, the artists. ("Culture" 72)

The Head, Guts and Soundbone Dance is perhaps Cook's most successful play, in structural terms. Brian Parker comments that the play "has a form that is almost perfectly suited to its theme" (30), and is "successful in fusing realism and symbolism" (33). Set within the claustrophobic confines of a fishing stage, the play features only four principals and three lesser characters, in contrast to the opera-sized casts of plays like *On The Rim of The Curve*, *The Gayden Chronicles*, or *Colour the Flesh the Colour of Dust*. The action is similarly tightly compact, taking place over the course of one day. The play's action turns on a single dramatic event, the drowning of a young boy Outside the fishing stage, which occurs at the end of Act One. All the technical elements for tragedy seem to be in place, including a principal character with no shortage of hubris: the irascible Skipper Pete.

The play takes place in a splitting room, a shack constructed by fishermen which juts out on a "stage" over the landwash and which is used for splitting fish. Every element of the set carries a sense of naturalistic attention to detail and symbolic resonance, as described by Cook in stage directions which take fully one and a half pages: "The whole effect must be one of apparent mess and confusion, an immense

variety of gear representing man, and fish and sea in a tottering, near derelict place, and yet also reveal, as we become accustomed to it, an almost fanatical sense of order" (2)

Cook is setting out the play's central conflict in scenographic terms. To the uninitiated observer, Skipper Pete's splitting room is a decaying mass of old equipment that has seen better days. Skipper, a man of 80, is likely viewed in much the same terms by the younger men of the community. Within this realm, however, he is a king. Everything has a place, and each action has an order. The apparent disorder serves to keep out those who do not belong there. In this description of the set and its purpose Goffman's precepts of communal space may be recalled. All of the rough-hewn furniture and rusting equipment in the room represent *egocentric space*, items which Pete regards as his own and which he uses as *tie-signs*, markers of owned territory. Foreigners entering the splitting room will have difficulty negotiating the clutter; only Pete and his son-in-law, Uncle John, hold the key to this maze.

Pete's relationship with John is "pegged", that is, one involving extensive levels of mutual knowledge. The Skipper appears to have no other pegged relationships in his life. He has set up the splitting room as an island within his home community and restricts access only to those, like John, who are willing to follow the time-honoured rituals and codes which are practiced there. This solitary intimate relationship, and the fact that Pete manifests no desire to set foot Outside the splitting room throughout the play, suggests that Pete has anchored himself within the room and cut himself adrift from his former micro-community.

Within the room, Pete is the sole arbiter of conduct, its surveillance expert and enforcer of discipline. When John attempts to urinate out the hatch, Pete is quick to remonstrate with him:

> **SKIPPER PETE:** (*Savagely*) Can't you go outside.
>
> **UNCLE JOHN:** (*Startled*) Eh?
>
> **SKIPPER PETE:** Can't you go outside. Always was a dirty bugger. Tanned your arse once on the Labrador for pissin' into the wind. Sprayed on all of us. Dirty little bugger ye was.
>
> **UNCLE JOHN:** (*Defensive – a child as then*) I were only fourteen then. (14)

The exchange is instructive, not only because of the added significance it takes on when the habits of male dogs marking territory are recalled. After all, upon entering the room at the top of the play the Skipper has urinated from within, out over the water. One notes also Cook's use of a period instead of a question mark at the end of "Can't you go outside". The words are phrased as a request, but they are intended as a command. John is rendered instantly subordinate in status—to that of a child before an adult—by Pete's remonstrance. Pete specifically refers to the act of spanking a child as a punishment for transgression. The implicit threat is that he could do it again, and that John would be powerless to stop him. Pete defines the transgression not only as one of behaviour, as *per* the social homogeneity stipulated by Crenson and Hallman (see page 39), but one of inappropriate use of space (Newman 4).

The storyline of the play is straightforward, involving what appears to be a typical day in the splitting room world of Skipper and Uncle John. Both seem active, despite

their years, moving about the room with sureness, repairing equipment, making tea, and talking. Skipper's son Absalom has taken out to sea without him; they await his return. Pete refers to Absalom in terms which describe him as a boy who never grew up, and thus when Absalom appears with his pitiful haul of six fish it is surprising to see that he is a man of sixty, developmentally challenged and proud of his tiny catch.

Craig Walker notes that a key element of the play's structure are the three visitations that take place ("Versions" 343-4). Each is repelled by Pete: first, his daughter Rachel, John's wife, who wants to know if John will attend the funeral of her Aunt Alice; then the frantic calls from a boy announcing that another child, Jimmy Fogarty, has fallen in the water; and finally two men, representing the town, demanding to know why Skipper and John ignored the boy's pleas. As Walker notes, Pete, like his biblical namesake, ignores the three requests for acknowledgement (344). John does not ignore the third call, and so re-enters the community from which he voluntarily Exiled himself while with the Skipper.

Each visitation is significant. Rachel is called only "Woman" and "Wife" by Cook, indicating her depersonalized status within the world of the splitting room. In an earlier moment, Pete refers to her only as "that woman", scathingly describing her as "the God damndest child I ever did raise" (8). When he hears her calling for John his response again ignores her individuality, preferring to rank her as one among a variety of unwelcome intruders, from insects to Strangers:

A woman's voice outside.

WOMAN: John. John.

SKIPPER PETE: (*Looks up sharply. Cocks his head, spits with disgust.*) Get in anywhere, they will.

John staggers back through B/S door carrying a huge killick. Places it right centre.

WOMAN: John. Are ye there?

SKIPPER PETE: Don't let that in 'ere.

JOHN: 'Tis yer own daughter. (*Bitter*) Remember? (23)

Pete then fails a test of communicative competence, or what Harman calls cultural proximity. As a member of a small outport community, and a family member, he should be aware that Aunt Alice has died. He does not, and adding to this transgression, refuses to attend her funeral, stating, "I'll not be going. Never been to a Pentecostal service in me life an' I'm too old to start that foolishness now" (25). The religious divisions Skipper creates here are arbitrary. There is no indication that he has ever attended a Catholic service, though he is nominally a Catholic. To alienate himself from what he considers to be a corrupted community organism, he must create convulsive dissonance where there is harmony. As Brian Parker notes, "the Skipper's orthodoxy is wholly superficial" (32).

The second visit provides the key moment in the play, the action which results in a reversal in fortune and the subsequent ostracization of Skipper Pete from the community. That this seems in accord with Pete's own wishes is paradoxical. Pete still requires the community: his identity was established in its now-fading approbation, and his life depends upon its grudging willingness to supply the necessities for his shack on the water. Like a teenager who retires to his room assailing the corruption of his

household, Pete must reappear on occasion to re-supply the means of his delusional independence. He is an Exile, rather than a Stranger.

At the end of Act One a boy appears. Again the intrusion of a visitor is announced from off-stage, through the sound of the boy's voice, shouting. Skipper is once again able to prepare the Inside against the coming assault. He prevents John from turning around to face the boy, should he awake from the reverie of their reminiscences:

> **CHILD:** Uncle John. Uncle Pete. Jimmy Fogarty's fallen off the wharf fishin' for Connors and he can't swim. He's drowning.
>
> **SKIPPER PETE:** (*He and John still facing out. Pete with his arm gripped tightly on John's. They don't turn round. The child is behind them.)*
>
> **SKIPPER PETE:** I mind when young Amos fell overboard from his father's schooner on the Labrador. Remember that John? Wind a bit fresh. They wasn't watching the sail. Jibed a bit sudden and took him straight over the side into a school of dogfish.
>
> **UNCLE JOHN:** Aye. I remember that alright. (34)

The child persists, his determination weakening in the absence of any response from the two men. Finally he goes. This element of the dramatic structure has been condemned as "totally unconvincing" (qtd. in Conolly 120) and as a "structural weakness" (qtd. in Conolly 121). The fact that the Skipper and Uncle John are drunk is not considered sufficient to account for the manner in which the child is ignored. Cook appears to be counting on the spectator's belief in the power of the Skipper to weave a web from which his willing servant, John, fails to extricate himself. Pete has just finished a somewhat mystical paean to "the old way. The only way" (34) and the men and human structures which disappear before "the trees marching back over the hillside" (35).

While in rational terms this may not be enough to justify John's wholesale ignorance of a child calling for help, within the terms of alienation discussed herein a case can be made for the dramatic integrity of the scene. The child is a Stranger within the micro-community of the splitting room, an unwelcome visitor who makes no remediative interchange and, in fact, makes a significant request – that the two Insiders voluntarily leave their domain. As a child, the boy has nothing to offer and no status with which to enact the terms of this request. It is therefore justifiable within the informal juridical context of the splitting room to pretend, in quasi-monarchical terms, that the boy is simply not present. He has no status, no presence, and thus he is invisible and his call inaudible. Walker underlines this monarchical sense, within a tragic context, through a comparison of Skipper with Aeschylus' Agamemnon:

> As an old-order patriarch, Skipper Pete is the ethical equivalent of Agamemnon in the *Oresteia* or Creon in *Antigone*: the tyrannous personification of a conservative social order so self-assured and absolute as to foster a delusion that human nature has been transcended decisively, therein causing what proves to be a fatal blindness to ordinary human values. ("Versions" 344-5)

The third visitation takes place after Absalom has entered the micro-community of the shack with his six fish, revealing the pathetic nature of the Skipper's delusion. The table is put in place and carefully set and another ritual is undertaken: the preparation, cooking, and eating of the fish. The drowning boy announced (moments? minutes? hours?) previously has made no impact on the culture of the splitting room. Once again Pete assumes the role of supreme arbiter:

UNCLE JOHN: Drink, Absalom?

Absalom reaches for the mug eagerly, both lift mugs to their lips when…

SKIPPER PETE: Nobody drinks. Not yet.

Like guilty schoolboys, both pause.

SKIPPER PETE: The fish, first.

The two hold a tableau, mugs to mouth almost. Put mugs down. Move to table. Pete splits, guts and removes the soundbones of the fish. Absalom, at a word from John, draws water. With a swish of his hand he sweeps the offal to the floor. John guts the remainder of fish, passes to Pete who splits them. John takes the fish to the bucket still containing salt water and rinses them. (42)

At last they drink to "the end of the voyage" (44). John reveals the qualified nature of his membership in the community with a drunken assertion:

UNCLE JOHN: But ye knows, Skipper – they's no fish now. We're playing a game, that's all. A death game. The woman's right.

SKIPPER PETE: *(Suddenly strikes John – he stumbles and falls)* It's not a game. Ye cursed blind fool […]. We gits ready for the fish year after year, that's all. And we waits. And out there, they know we're waiting. And one day, they'll come back, in their t'ousands, when all the boats has gone away, and nobody thinks they's anymore. They's waiting for the old days like we is […]. We understood each other – the sea, and the cod, and the dog fish, and the sculpin and the shark and the whale. They knew us and we knew they. And if we keep ready, and we keep waiting, they'll come again. We can't give up on 'em. We can't give up on ourselves. I nivir give up on ye. (46-7)

Where the Skipper might be expected to follow up the striking of John with his expulsion from the micro-community, he instead appeals to John's received knowledge, his shared sense of the past and its significance to their identities. He invokes a mystical pact amongst the creatures of the sea who form the extended community of which the splitting

room represents the beach head. The problem is that a dream based in the past has become a nightmare in the present.

The three men begin to sing at Absalom's request, a piece of ritual Pete has momentarily forgotten in his reverie of rage and disillusionment. They begin the dance from which the play takes its name:

> *As Pete begins the second verse he holds out his hand to John. John slowly moves forward, and the three now form a kind of misshapen circle swaying, stamping their feet, shaking each other's hands up and down. All three raise their voices in triumph for the chorus at the end of the second verse. For a moment they are all one. All free.* (54)

It is to be their last moment of freedom. Before they can eat the fish, so carefully prepared, Rachel arrives. She announces Jimmy Fogarty's death, to no response from the drunken men. She approaches John, the weak point of the community's defenses: "John! You were here. They're saying ye could have saved him." (55) Pete turns on her violently, but she does not flinch. The defenses have been breached, and the community of the splitting room is now revealed to be a cancerous outgrowth within the larger community of the outport, one that its residents have now determined must be excised. A price must be exacted for having transgressed the community's standards of behaviour in so serious a manner.

The transgression—ignoring the drowning child—is a severe community transgression, a crime of sufficient weight that surely the Skipper will be unable to function within the community of the outport ever again. The presence of two men of the community, Lew and Aiden, indicates that Rachel is not acting alone and that her appeal

for redress will not go unheeded. Absalom returns, cradling the boy he has found in the water, claiming him as a fisherman might who has made a special catch: "I nivir caught a boy before. Can I have him?" (63) He will not be held accountable for his actions due to his impaired mental state. John explicitly contradicts Pete's authority, telling Absalom to ignore his father and acceding to Aiden's request to return to the town for an interrogative conversation:

> **AIDEN:** We wants to talk to ye, John. And Skipper there.
>
> **UNCLE JOHN:** Aye. I know.
>
> *Aiden goes out. John turns.*
>
> **UNCLE JOHN:** Skipper, are ye coming? (*No answer*) Skipper? No – they's nothing out there b'y. (*No answer*) I 'low it wasn't too bad a day after all Skipper. One hell of a catch. But I don't think I'll be shareman wid ye any longer. (*He is nearly crying*) I'm going home, ye see. Home….(64)

John has admitted that his true home is the greater community of souls whose norms he knows he has transgressed. His admission of guilt will help to mitigate the consequences of his crime, as will his intimate affiliation with Rachel. Pete, who has disowned his daughter, possesses no such micro-community, nor even a circle of affiliation to support his re-entry. Knowing this, Pete neither responds nor follows John. The crowd leaves and the sound of their voices recedes. The Skipper slowly resumes the rituals upon which he depends for his identity. The long-ignored fish are now ready to be eaten. He sits and begins what might be regarded as a last meal, like a prisoner facing execution.

While Skipper Pete is only possessed of a rudimentary greatness—now diminished by his searing bitterness—the tragic element of the play resides in the loss of

meaningful work that constituted a way of life for fishermen like Skipper Pete and Uncle John. While women like Uncle John's wife, the daughter of Skipper Pete, can go on living in outports in relative continuity, everything has changed for men who were fiercely independent, leaders in their communities and households. This sense of independence may have been largely illusory, given the depradations of the truck system and, later, interference from the federal Ministry of Oceans and Fisheries, yet it must still have been keenly felt. With the loss of the fish stocks—the 1992 moratorium on cod fishing announced by the Canadian government in 1992 is here presciently predicted—has come the loss of the freedom these men have cherished, and the identity they have nailed to it.

In *The Head, Guts and Soundbone Dance* Cook puts paid to a cherished cultural icon which has appeared repeatedly in Newfoundland culture, the stereotype of the outport fisherman: noble yet self-deprecating, long-suffering, endlessly toiling, tough-as-nails, salty humoured, tale-telling, ingenious, above all, *useful*. Skipper Pete fails to meet this exacting fantasy standard.[29] He possesses the salty humour required and even at an advanced age is as tough as nails. His ingenuity, however, has long been expended on turning other people's stories into his own. The most compelling deviation from the stereotype is that Skipper is no longer useful. It is this criterion which places him Outside the dyadic webbing of his community and which necessitates the creation of a micro-community which offers him the chance to reclaim his identity:

> **SKIPPER PETE:** Mind yer place, girl. Ye're in my house and don't forgit it.
>
> **WIFE:** (*Hurling across stage right*) House, is it? (*Laughs*) A house. Oh, sure, 'tis where ye spend time making fools of yourselves, the two of ye. Coiling and

> uncoiling the same rope day after day. Knitting nets you'll never use. Making killicks. And they's only fit now to make ornaments in the homes of the stuck-up in St. John's and upalong. Talking about things that once were and will never be again. Thank God. (64)

The notion of the Inside in *The Head, Guts and Soundbone Dance* is one of contracting rather than expanding circles of community, exemplified by the hermetic world of Pete's splitting room. Pete's primary sin is that he has not heeded the summons (made three times) of modernity, and has failed to shift as the realities of life within the outport have shifted around him. He is abandoned by the apostolic namesake, John, and, as Walker notes, the future of his family can hardly be assured in the form of the developmentally challenged Absalom, named for the failing son of the biblical David, nor in that of his daughter Rachel, who may be as barren as her biblical namesake ("Versions" 348). What in other circumstances would be considered principled behaviour takes on, in Pete's volcanic inflexibility, ominous and threatening overtones, revealed as "mindless adherence to the past" (Lynde, "Newfoundland" 87). In insisting on the primacy of his beliefs he is spinning out of any of the circles of affiliation which have tied him to the outport community of which he has been an integral part.

The Head, Guts and Soundbone Dance has on occasion been read by Newfoundlanders as an attack on a cherished aspect of their culture by a Stranger. There is indeed much to provoke those who believe dirty linen is best aired within the home. Skipper Pete is the antithesis of the avuncular, crusty sea captain with a fondness for home and hearth. Uncle John is an enfeebled man. Whip-sawed between his wife and the Skipper, he appears to have no inner certitude. The Wife, the character who is the most singular representative of the Newfoundland Outport's Inside, is not even

referred to by name. She is consumed with anger. It is unlikely that readers would adopt her as an emblem of harmonious rural existence.

Absalom, too, presents an affront. A disturbing link can be made between the boy's arrested development and that of Newfoundland, the phrase having been used by G.M. Story ("Newfoundland" 14) to describe the effects of political obstacles placed in the path of Newfoundland's social development by the British Crown. Absalom is the stupid, eager-to-please, happily satisfied "Newfie" who catches a boy and thinks he can keep it as a pet. The depiction of Newfoundlanders locked in time and nostalgia is lacking the sentiment which often accompanies representations of Newfoundland's folk history in music and literature.

Yet beneath this undignified communal squabbling it is possible to glimpse some hopeful signs. Pete's inaction harms, but does not destroy, the community, just as the loss of the fish stocks has damaged outport life but has not yet eliminated it. Critical in this discourse is Cook's view that harm comes from Inside in the form of complacency or inflexibility, and that the dramatist's job is to address comfortable assumptions and the self-image of his audience without restraint. In a 1984 article in *Canadian Literature* he quotes Bernard Shaw: "The dramatist has something better to do than to amuse himself or his audience. He has to interpret life" (qtd. in Cook, "Caricature" 77). Cook added that "we shall have to challenge both audiences and ourselves more, not less, than in the past" (78). Communities and individuals must accept responsibility for the totality of their circumstances, rather than conveniently casting blame on external Strangers. Pete becomes, through his actions, a dangerous Stranger to his community, but he can never be fully ostracized and his presence never completely erased because he is fundamentally

an Insider. Even more complex is the fact that hitherto his presence in the community has been neither benign nor lacking in impact. Until his usefulness is eliminated, he is one of the leaders of the Inside. That such a leader can be presented as a destructive internal force is deeply troubling to those who would wish for a homogenized orthodoxy in the making of folkloric narratives.

In reality all social organisms are beset by such tensions. Michael Cook, who chronicled the ways and the passionate self-belief of Newfoundlanders, set to writing his intuitive sense of the impulses within communities which can create or destroy communal identity. *The Head, Guts and Soundbone Dance* presents these tensions without qualification or apology in a manner which is unsentimental and which examines dearly-held myths in a clear light. Moreover, the play challenges orthodoxy in another manner. A spectator's initial view of the stage would have confirmed the adherence to the prevalent mode of realistic, psychologically-driven theatre which marked the theatre's past in Newfoundland. Soon after, however, a new direction is revealed in the mystical association between Skipper Pete and the sea, the plethora of religious symbols used to invoke the ritualistic nature of life within the splitting room, and the shocking – and in realistic terms implausible – ignorance of a young boy's pleas for help. The savage intensity of the play's tone, and its stylistic inter-mixing of forms, heralded a message for Newfoundland theatre that is echoed in the play: adapt to modernity or die.

5.3.3 *Jacob's Wake* (1975)

While the dramaturgy of *Jacob's Wake* may represent, in some views, a step backwards to "contemporary realism" (Parker 35), or simply a failed attempt to fuse realism and symbolism (40), no other Newfoundland play has excited as much critical reaction, both positive and negative, simplistic and nuanced. Myron Galloway reviewed the third play of Cook's "Newfoundland Trilogy" and his reaction was hardly less muted than previously:

> Cook's persistent attempt to present Newfoundland as inhabited exclusively by hideously venal, self-serving mini-monsters, seems to indicate a deep and abiding contempt for the province he has chosen to call home. In none of his plays does he give any indication of Newfoundlanders' legendary warmth, hospitality, indomitable spirit and capacity for enjoying life in a cold and brutal climate. (qtd. in Conolly 99)

Worthy of note in this patronizing defense of Newfoundlanders is that it reads very like the list of destructively comforting stereotypes Cook lists in his article "Culture as Caricature; Reflections on a Continuing Obsession: Newfoundland", published in *Canadian Literature* some ten years later. Galloway was not alone in regarding Cook's work with suspicion. Audrey Ashley of the *Ottawa Citizen* remarked:

> You'd think something would happen, with all that ranting and raving, all those recriminations, all that crudeness and ugliness […]. If, after *Colour the Flesh the Colour of Dust*, *[The] Head, Guts and Soundbone Dance* and now *Jacob's Wake*, Michael Cook still insists on being a playwright, we can only hope for better things from his next foray into dramatic territory. (qtd. in Conolly 101)

A more nuanced reading is given by Ric Knowles. Arguing that the organizing principle of the play is its "underlying biblical symbolic structure" (*Form* 38), Knowles argues that *Jacob's Wake* is a "tightly structured play" (38). Knowles notes that the play adheres to the neo-Aristotelian structure which represents Cook's stated attempt to create modern plays in the tragic form. The heightened realism of the play, or its "poetic naturalism" as it is referred to by Knowles (38) and Perkyns (109) leads inevitably to comparisons with the giants of that genre: O'Neill, Williams, Miller, and O'Casey. Richard Perkyns makes a close analysis of the play's kinship to Shaw's *Heartbreak House*, focusing not only on the play's nautical symbolism but also on the use of its biblical imagery. Perkyns admits, however, that "the play is, on the other hand, a compendium of so many styles that no single influence emerges clearly" (116). Walker makes a persuasive case for the play as allegory ("Versions" 358). Whether *Jacob's Wake* belongs in the pantheon of great realistic drama is difficult to assess. Denyse Lynde is more sanguine in her assessment: "*Jacob's Wake* is a bitter and brutal condemnation of a world that has slid into addiction, corruption, and self-complacency" (Newfoundland 87). More productions of this seldom-produced play would go some way towards resolving the critical impasse and determining its artistic and cultural legacy.

What can be said is that *Jacob's Wake* is concerned with the same issues which mark *Colour the Flesh the Colour of Dust* and *The Head, Guts and Soundbone Dance*. Three generations of the Blackburn family represent, as Brian Parker notes, "three successive stages of alienation from nature" (36). Like Skipper Pete, the play's patriarch, Eli, longs for a time when the fight was not lost, when people did not give in to their baser natures but rather struggled heroically against all odds to carve a life out of the

rocky terrain and the ferocity of the island's weather. Cook commented on this in an interview with Robert Wallace:

> **Wallace:** …On the one hand you suggest that spiritual life dies under the exigencies of survival; yet you also suggest there is a vitality to be gained by weathering those very exigencies. Newfoundland, 'The Rock' strengthens character, self-reliance, independence, community, but, at the same time, destroys the spiritual dimension of life…
>
> **Cook:** No, you are absolutely correct [...]. I've always been aware of it – a tremendous sense of joy and defeat […]. I've always been concerned that Newfoundlanders understand the conflict that has surrounded them all the time. The place inspires a spirituality at the same time that it denies it: it's a struggle you find only on the edges of civilization. When you become totally civilized you look back and you write in glowing prose about that as a golden age, but the struggle isn't golden. Newfoundland is now struggling for its spirit. It's something that everyone has to come to grips with individually. They fail or they win.
>
> **Wallace:** You say in *Stage Voices* that all your characters are pursuing a staggering path towards God.
>
> **Cook:** In a very literal sense the environment makes you conscious on a daily basis of the necessity for a belief in a guiding destiny. At the same time it undermines that by letting you know that it cannot possibly exist. (164)

The forces of an absent spirituality and an ever-present Nature combine to dominate the lives of the characters in *Jacob's Wake*. The characters carry names taken (in some cases, at least) from the Old Testament; Parker describes the play as "apocalyptic" (35). Nature continually makes its presence felt, battering the Blackburn family home as a fierce winter storm rages. The impression is, as Cook has described it elsewhere, of a nature impatient to wipe the traces of a complacent humanity off the map:

> **Cook:** [I]n Europe you're continually reminded by cathedrals, ancient walls and houses of the history which has stood for thousands of years; in Newfoundland if you abandon a monument for three years, it's gone. Somebody on the south of Newfoundland built an Elizabethan mansion in the Seventeenth century; today no one can find a brick of it. It's a land in which history is continually being washed away in front of one's gaze. (qtd. in Wallace 158)

In *Jacob's Wake*, Skipper Eli lies abed upstairs gazing, in metaphorical terms, at his family history being washed away. Cook ascribes an emotion to the wind which beats on the windows of the house: *"The storm howls. There is the quality of an inhuman voice in the sound, an intense and savage fury"* (120). Extensive stage directions—there are two full pages before the playtext begins—indicate Cook's focus on the metaphorical, rather than the purely realistic. After describing a two-level outport house in detailed realistic terms, Cook notes:

> An acceptable alternative would be a stark, skeletonised set. The levels have to remain essentially the same, but a structure as white as bone, stripped of formality, the house the equivalent of a stranded hulk of a schooner, only the ribs poking out towards an empty sky would serve the play's purpose, and free the director for an existential interpretation of the play. (9)

There are clear distinctions between an approach to staging that relies heavily on symbolism and one, as described above, which suggests an expressionistic approach. Cook seems to be hedging his bets. The play, in some respects, reflects this either-or thinking. The final scene, when the legless Skipper walks downstairs and his son Winston takes the helm of an invisible ship, plays more effectively in the setting described above. A more realistic set inspires the kind of peevish misunderstanding epitomized by the comments of Audrey Ashley in the *Ottawa Citizen*:

> What actually happens must be one of the most ludicrous cop-outs in the annals of Canadian theatre. After all the purple melodrama, cheap sentiment, ringing phrases and dragging skeletons out of cupboards, the playwright finally extricates himself from his play by having the legless Skipper come striding downstairs (on two perfectly good legs, of course) announcing that it's time for action. "There comes a time," intones the Skipper, "when ye must steer into the storm and face up to what ye are." So *that's* what it was all about. (qtd. in Conolly 100)

Like Skipper Pete, Skipper Eli's usefulness has vanished in a haze of fragmentary memories of life on the sea. He has been bed-ridden in his upstairs room for the previous thirty years. Like Pete, the Skipper believes fervently in the value of a rigid hierarchy and the traditional order of things. The direction the narrative takes, however, is very different from that of the earlier play. Cook concentrates on those spinning around Skipper: his son Winston and his wife Rosie; their sons Alonzo, Wayne and Brad; and his daughter Mary. The action swirls in an increasingly tight funnel, touching down in (and thus destroying) the family home.

The play begins in the quiet before the storm, physically and metaphorically: it is Maundy Thursday before Easter. Winston's sister Mary and his wife Rosie, who together care for Skipper, are downstairs. Mary is a schoolteacher who has descended into a passive despair of failed dreams: she remarks sourly on the lesser standards of new teachers and the lack of ambition of students. She fails to understand that her despair is due to her unwillingness to obey the codes of her two principal communities, the town and (most importantly) the Blackburn family. She values education in an environment where speaking of it is considered insufferably pompous. Mary insists on standards that the community is not interested in maintaining. Her proper enunciation is distinctly at odds with the fractured colloquialisms of Rosie, the first instance of a gap in

communicative competence and a signal that Mary, in spite of her blood tie to Eli and Winston, is a Necessary Outsider, an Insider possessed of blood affiliations and needed skills but whose demeanour and actions demonstrate a desire to be elsewhere. Such a desire in any manifestation represents a transgression.

Rosie, by contrast, accepts who she is, her role in life and the way of things. She is the consummate Insider. Unlike another wife and mother caught between feuding family members, Mary in French's Mercer plays, Rosie is not a dedicated peacemaker. Nor is she an idealized maternal figure. Each of the characters in the family counts on her in some way, but she plays favourites, allows them to fight, and distances herself from non-Insider behaviour. A redolent example is her greeting of her son Brad, newly de-frocked and returned from Toronto:

> *BRAD, disengaging himself from WINSTON, crosses to ROSIE.*
>
> **BRAD:** Mother…
>
> *He puts out his arms for an embrace. She turns towards him, holding the kettle.*
>
> **ROSIE:** Why Brad. I t'ought I heard ye when I wor upstairs…How are ye?
>
> **BRAD:** Mother…I've come home.
>
> *ROSIE crosses to the kitchen area. BRAD follows her.*
>
> **ROSIE:** I knows, son. Ye allus comes to see us Easter. Yer a good boy. (19)

One notes the stark difference in dialect employed by mother and son. Brad has not only gone away as an Exile,[30] but his level of communicative competence has fallen. Rosie

now denies him the kind of social proximity normally accorded to family members. Her sense of the borders of Insider behaviour is further underlined when Mary suggests that Eli would be better off in a hospital:

> **ROSIE:** In the hospital. In St. John's, ye mean?
>
> **MARY:** Something like that, yes.
>
> **ROSIE:** No, maid. I'd never sleep a wink worrying about'n getting his drop o' rum, knowing 'e'd have no one to tend to'n or read from his book. Having no real voices to talk to. (12)

Brad is tormented by his brothers and his father. His emotions appear to be at a fever pitch. He is returning involuntarily to the house where all the worst events of his life are recounted by those who precipitated them. Bereft of his ministry, Brad returns to the family house and a home he never truly had, seeking sanctuary. Mary, whose status is only marginally higher than Brad's, flatly announces that he can't stay. "We can't stand any more disruption, Brad. You know what it's like, here"(16).

Properly warned, the audience is treated in seconds to an example of what Mary means. Alonzo and Winston arrive together, drunk and singing. The animosity between this testosterone-fuelled father and son duo and the younger, priggish Brad is immediately apparent. Winston responds to the news of Brad's pastoral dismissal:

> **BRAD:** No mother. You don't understand. You see, I've come home for good. I've…Left the church.
>
> **WINSTON:** That's what Mary meant! Well be the Lard Jesus, what have I done to deserve that? (20)

In a family of alienated, qualified Insiders, Brad is the most estranged member. His syntax gives no indication that he is born of his parents, or influenced by their rhythms and beliefs; it carries none of the patois of the outport to which he has "come home". He can barely look at his brother Alonzo and does not speak to him for several pages from the point of his entrance, despite (or perhaps because of) repeated instances of physical and verbal abuse, including Alonzo grabbing and wearing the priest's collar Brad has so dramatically flung on the ground. His distaste for this crude and venal way of life should find a sympathetic ally in his Aunt Mary, but in taking up voluntary Exile he has gone further than her reflexive complaining. There is evidence, too, that his inability to defend himself has been divined by the men of the family from an early age as a critical deficiency and that no amount of remediative interaction will alter his status. Brad is one of the few Insiders in Newfoundland drama who must be considered Strangers within their home environment.

Brad demonstrates a tacit awareness that his situation is irremediable by expending little effort in re-establishing intimate contact with his family. He greets his father and mother formally; as mentioned, he does not bother to acknowledge Alonzo at all until he is physically assaulted; and he ignores his brother Wayne's proffered handshake (25). Having been made a victim, Brad plays the part. That he offers no evidence of desire to effect remediation, while yet expecting to find a haven based on blood ties, creates an explosive situation. The result is that he is at the mercy of the family's other men. A seemingly innocuous domestic scene takes on ominous overtones, as Alonzo races around the room wearing Brad's clerical collar:

BRAD: I don't expect you to understand … I don't expect anyone to share my burdens…But a little welcome…

ALONZO: *prancing about the kitchen, the collar firmly fastened* How do I look, mother?

ROSIE is pouring herself a cup of tea. She turns and laughs, the laughter of shocked delight.

ROSIE: Yer some shocking, boy. Have ye no respect? Take it off.

ALONZO: *in a dreadful imitation of Garner Ted Armstrong* I'll take your bets now […]. You're all gamblers […]. We all gamble with our souls […]. Yes, our souls […]. So I'll take your bets now on the second coming. What's that, sir … You haven't had one since you were eighteen […].

ROSIE: *putting down her tea and chasing ALONZO round the room, laughing* Lonz. Lonz! Give me dat.

He dodges round her. She pauses breathless and laughing at the table.
WINSTON staggers to the fridge and gets a beer. He raises it and drains half the bottle in one gulp. Sighing with satisfaction, he wipes his face with the back of his hand. He belches loudly and begins to sing.

…….

BRAD: Mother. Stop them.

ROSIE: Oh, don't mind them, b'y. Dey's only having a bit of fun wid ye. Now come on and I'll give ye a lunch. Ye must be starved come all day way.

He stands uncertain. ALONZO capers round him.

ALONZO: Brad, Brad wouldn't
Listen to his Dad,
Went to be a preacher
Cos his folks they was all bad
Whooooo…eeeee (21-2)

Winston and Alonzo conspire to bully Brad into a forced drink and, as the beer pours all over him, even Rosie laughs. Brad lacks the detachment to view these events

with a sense of humour. It is the same perceived failing identified by the Spokesman of the British officers in *Colour the Flesh the Colour of Dust*: "And ye – well ye've lots of leaders but no humour – It'll be the death of ye –"(*Colour* D18). Brad has returned home armed with the same ideas of appropriate and transgressive conduct with which he departed. The community—especially the micro-community of his family—has not changed. He has, in effect, ostracized himself. His failure to realize this has mortal consequences.

Wayne arrives. His Necessary Outsider status appears obvious; he is "immaculately suited and carries an executive overnight case" (24). However, he appears at the door without having knocked, carrying the assumption that his blood ties still accord him inclusion as a (qualified) Insider. Wayne left the house at the appropriate time, for school. He now represents the district as a provincial politician. In this way he is simultaneously representing foreign forces and yet also a source of pride to the family. Although he spars continually with Alonzo, Wayne remains at a higher status level than Brad due to the intimacy of his dyadic contacts with the family, particularly his close relationship with Mary, and his demonstrated political utility to the town.

Wayne's transgressions may be even more egregious than the fact of his voluntary Exile; there is some suggestion in the play of a previous intimate relationship with his Aunt Mary. When, later, she pleads with him to break off his corrupt dealings with Alonzo, Wayne's superior status, underpinned by his money and influence, will separate them. Alonzo and Winston immediately acknowledge Wayne's estranged Insider status by insisting that he submit to the "family ritual", which involves sitting down, drinking moonshine with hot water and sugar, playing cards, and verbally cutting and thrusting at

each other. Wayne is always abused in this ritual; he has too much the politician's knack for compromise. His loss, and outrage, are "worth coming home for", says Alonzo (36).

Within the micro-community of the Blackburn house there are none with the exception of Rosie who have not transgressed eagerly and often against the values and norms of family life. The result is that the entire ethos of the family has mutated into an ugly mass of corruption, envy, resentment and bitterness. In this new normative context, Wayne and Alonzo thrive; Winston, unable to be the son Eli wants, festers in a pool of alcohol and suppressed rage; Rosie endures relatively unchanged; and Brad and Mary are effectively rendered to the margins. The most dramatic effect is as yet unseen. Skipper Eli is aware of his family's failings.

Two other family members also play a part. Winston and Rosie's daughter Sarah died while young and Winston has not been the same man since:

WINSTON: Every time I gets afflicted with me family I thinks of the one that might have been different. And Skipper don't help much.

ROSIE: *smiling* Aye. She wor a bonny thing. Not like me or ye at all…

WINSTON hasn't heard.

WINSTON: She might have had a chanct.

He turns to ROSIE.

I asked ye, Rosie. How long is it?

ROSIE: T'irty one years and two months…She wor borned in the February dark.

She pauses, struggling with memories and affection.

Ye minds how ye had to rush me to the hospital in the starm?

WINSTON: Aye, bundled ye up in the sled like an old walrus. And Trigger ploughing through drifts up to his chest. Like he knew…

ROSIE: I never seed ye like it. Ye were like a wild man. Like yer fader almost.

Proud.

I believe ye'd 'ave faced the Divil dat night and gone on. (79)

Winston, as Cook points out in his notes on the use of dialect, is in truth a man of "considerable experience and education, both of which he seeks to suppress" (140). He is a family member who possessed potential that has gone wasted. The disappointment felt by his father colours their relationship and forces Winston into a more or less constant remediative role.

The intimacy between Rosie and Winston in this moment is only approached by the comfortable relationship Rosie enjoys with the Skipper. The Skipper, like his son, has his own painful memory of what might have been: the loss of his son Jacob under his father's command while on a sealing expedition.

With the family all under the same roof again, the storm intensifies. Scene Two is set the next morning. Upstairs, Skipper comes to life. He steers back and forth between this world and the past, a past consisting of a specific set of memories crammed onto a ship with a date for each. He is aware of the dissension below decks and how much Mary would prefer to have him "in the Mental". (80) Brad wakes from a nightmare of hellfire, due, no doubt, to being forced to share an upstairs bedroom with the demonic Alonzo. Winston brings Skipper his rum. He joins old Eli (the Skipper) in a conversation that is improvised yet well rehearsed, indicating a close affiliative vocabulary, effortlessly

parrying the old man's questions about whether the war is still on, and the performance of his inexperienced crew.

The old Skipper's confused memories centre upon "the swilin'", the days when he captained a sealing vessel and the particular events when he sent men, including his son Jacob, out on slob ice after a pack of seals. Winston is a willing participant in this dialogue, knowing that it constitutes effective remediation for his perceived failings as a son. Over time the Skipper's presence has faded within the family, from stern patriarch and virile husband to a spectral figure located upstairs, out of sight. That he has not become more Strange in relation to the others is due to the belief, on the part of Rosie and Winston, that respect must be paid to his position in the family, regardless of his inability to fulfill his responsibilities as a patriarch. Walker notes that the name Eli means "Lord" and the Skipper's full name, Elijah, means "Lord God" ("Versions" 360). The Skipper retains his position while effectively immobilized.

It is possible to observe in this treatment of the Skipper the fact that his exalted Insider status does not rely on blood-ties, power and influence, or temporal seniority. Eli's unbending belief in the old ways qualifies as a kind of Bible for the Blackburn family. As with the temporal duties of attending church, they have all strayed from its precepts, but they remain in awe of its presence.

It is notable in *Jacob's Wake* that there is no external influence on the family's fortunes, bar the weather. Their outport's institutions, whatever they may be, are nothing more than dimly perceived outposts of the foreign institutions to which Wayne has affixed his allegiance. To employ Foucault's observations in *Discipline and Punishment*, one would look to the micro-community of the Blackburn family to follow the precepts

of order laid down by Skipper Eli. The family, however, has failed to police itself in accordance with the dictates of its iconic presence. In his relative absence they have made their own laws and codes of behaviour, and have created anarchy as a result.

Scene Three opens with the vividly contrasting image of Brad sitting reading his Bible while Alonzo smokes in his underwear. The illusion of social proximity is soon shattered. Brad's obsession with religion is traced by Alonzo to his brother's teenaged coupling with Mildred Tobin, his single sexual experience. It is an event which led to Mildred's suicide after she was hounded out of her own house by her father.

Wayne arrives to undertake surreptitious negotiations with Alonzo, who acts as his local political fixer. For Mary's sake, Wayne wants to see Skipper committed. Alonzo's needs are more pragmatic. He wants a motel contract Wayne has previously promised, and will agree to forge his father's name to a document of commitment in exchange. There is a reiteration of Skipper's status in that even the corrupt Alonzo is disturbed at the level of their betrayal: "Christ! What a bunch of rats we are. Have ye got the forms?" (72)

They join Brad in the Skipper's room. Referring to his offspring, but within the world of his sealing vessel, he asks, "What happens to the roots? They isn't what they used to be. So much rotten timber…"(74). He treats each of the sons as Strangers, denigrating their individuality and their usefulness, underlining his own status:

BRAD: ...And his lamp above him is put out

His strong steps are shortened…

SKIPPER: *sitting bolt upright, roaring*

Miserable Comforter. What the hell do ye know about it. Get out. I'm not dead yet. Get out.

BRAD: *getting up a little hastily* How are you feeling, Grandfather?

SKIPPER: How do I look, fool. Better than ye do, I hope.

BRAD: You're fading, Grandfather. You should be …

SKIPPER: I'm not fading. What do ye think I am? A goddamned flower? I'm dyin', ye pasty-faced pup. And I don't need yer for company. It's hard enough as it is.

Pause.

From the look of ye, I judge ye to be 'Lonzo.

BRAD: I'm Brad, Grandfather.

SKIPPER: Ye all look and sound alike to me (73-4).

Alonzo enters, presuming he will receive a more positive welcome:

ALONZO: Well, Grandfather. Still around, I see.

SKIPPER: *coming out of it with a start* Ye're not Jacob. Get out (74).

The storm builds Outside. Skipper wails when Brad reasserts that Jacob, the son with whom he went sealing, is dead. Wayne joins the "wake":

WAYNE: *advancing with his best politician's smile* Grandfather. It's so good to see you.

SKIPPER: Is it? (75)

He begins to lash at them with his stick, wounding Wayne and yelling for Rosie to remove her "whelps" from his sight. Wayne, attempting to make sense of the situation, offers that "He doesn't know who I…Who we are obviously," a reference not only to their status as family members but his own cherished status as a government Insider. Alonzo's reply is terse: "He knows, brother. He knows too well" (76). Skipper Eli is the enforcer of discipline once more. He knows that destruction comes from neglect within the social organism as often as from without. Like Skipper Pete in *The Head, Guts and Soundbone Dance*, Eli's sense of the Inside revolves around his own presence in it, and includes only those who pay proper respect by living up to the rigid codes of behaviour he sets.

Act Two opens with Rosie turning Skipper Eli over in his bed. Their rapport is evident. Everyone, in fact, feels a special closeness to Rosie, who seems to offer what they want.[31] She, rather than the house, offers an ineffable sense of "home" to the family men. The Skipper asks Rosie to read to him from his ship's logbook and chooses the day Jacob was sent over the ship's hull out on the ice after seals, never to return.

Downstairs Mary and Wayne ready for church. He asks her why she won't leave; he can get her a job in town. Mary, the Necessary Outsider, senses the existential danger in voluntary Exile:

> **MARY:** Allow me some pride, Wayne. I'm not qualified. I survive here because I'm something of an institution, I suppose. And no one has the nerve to fire me. You do help me you see, indirectly. Perhaps when your father goes … (*she pauses*) It might seem petty, Wayne. But I'm entitled to something from here. After all these years. (89)

Wayne divulges his plan, without revealing the fraud he is about to commit. Rosie arrives downstairs and attempts to feed Wayne the breakfast Winston eats each day. Wayne finds it inedible; in his travels he has become used to more sophisticated fare, another indication of his growing estrangement from the family. The substrate topic of Mildred Tobin rises to the surface once more. Mary defends Uncle Jim Tobin's decision to throw Mildred out of the house on a winter night, citing the community's moral standards. Rosie is steadfast in her defense of Mildred:

> **ROSIE:** It were a wicked thing she done, I allow, dough God knows the fellers she did it wit' is alive and well enough to sing the Lord's praise on the Sabbath and nobody minds dat. (95)

Even for a woman of Rosie's unfailingly accommodating nature, not everything is relative. Where Mary has assumed the orthodox position in characterizing the transgressive Mildred as a Stranger (and thus deserving of her fate), Rosie's response, while perhaps initially surprising, indicates her belief that compassion and consideration, more than rigid orthodoxy, form the basis of a true community. There is little gratification to be gained from taking such a stance in her present circumstances. This can be seen as an act of enforcement of what Rosie believes to be the true community values, as they are contested by Mary.

Winston arrives with a fresh case of beer, having braved the increasing howl of the storm. Alonzo comes downstairs, and, inevitably, starts a fight with Wayne. Wayne threatens to cancel their contract, and Alonzo in turn threatens to tell their father of their

plot. Only Rosie is able to pull them apart. As Mary and Wayne escape into the storm to go to church, Alonzo's laugh is cut short by a sharp smack from Rosie. In the continued repudiation of her core beliefs, she has begun to take a more proactive enforcement stance.

Brad's manic determination has only increased. He calls on his father not to encourage Skipper in his fantastic ravings and tries to restrain his mother from serving him his rum. Cook notes:

> *BRAD has worked himself into a pitch of fervour. His is not true insanity, but the glorification of a mutilated ego as narrow as it is intense…He is The Messenger and even WINSTON and ALONZO are spellbound confronted by this immolation of the spirit.* (109)

Deep within the tormented confusion of his religious obsession, Brad has found a solution to the problem posed by his Stranger status within the family: he will cast *them* as Strangers to the True Inside, God's love, uncomprehending sacrifices to the coming apocalypse:

> **BRAD:** What do you think is going to happen when father and grandfather, and, yes, Alonzo too, stand before God in all His glory, stinking of rum. It is today, mother. Today. Listen. Listen to the Voice of the Angels.
>
> **……**
>
> Babylon has fallen, is fallen […] the same shall drink of the wine of the wrath of God which is poured without mixture into the cup of his indignation and he shall be tormented with fire and brimstone […]. And the smoke of their torment ascendeth up forever and ever and they shall have no rest […]. Day or night! (109-10)

In the fever of his delusion he asks Rosie to come with him. This is impossible for many reasons but is best summed up by Winston's flat response: "She won't be going, Brad" (110). Through the extremity of his actions Brad has transgressed past the point of remediation or tolerance. Rosie senses this. Although she is not shocked or awed by Brad's condition, she is also confused as to what to do. Mary allows Brad to bring her to her knees as he prays for her soul. This is too much for Winston. In terms of egocentric space or *possessional* territory, Rosie belongs to him, and as such is a critical element in defining his identity. Rosie is his one sacred, sacrosanct possession, available to others only at greatest sufferance and never to be subject to this kind of mortification. He throws Brad sprawling. In an exchange which defines the play's interplay of Inside and Outside forces and the shifting borders between them, Winston tells his youngest son to leave:

> **WINSTON:** Git out. I don't want ye in my house. Git out.
>
> **BRAD:** God, help me. Help me.
>
> *In the brief silence, only the howl of the storm is heard*.
>
> **ALONZO:** (*soft*) They's nobody out there, Brad. They's only us.
>
> **BRAD:** Mother … I've got nowhere to go.
>
> **WINSTON:** Then go to Hell and keep a place for me. (112-13)

Although Rosie prevents his immediate departure, it is clear that a sacrifice must be made to appease the forces which are tearing the family apart. Brad, armed with nothing other than his mother's uncertain support, is doomed to take the fall for his family's dysfunctionality. He cannot get her to clearly answer the question of whether she loves

him. Brad takes the decision in his own hands. Without a cap or coat or winter boots, Brad's exit is open to interpretation. On one hand the act can be observed as the final self-dramatizing act of a narcissistic personality. From a symbolic perspective, the departure is a form of crucifixion, an act of self-sacrifice for the greater salvation of all. In any case, a Stranger's acknowledgement of his status is a crucial element in any community's ability to define itself. Brad, in the only way he can, is contributing to not only the enforcement and punishment aspects of his family's codes, but potentially to their revision, should his death cause a re-evaluation.

Alonzo comforts Rosie, but she knows the family is now irreparably rendered. Winston reports for duty upstairs with the Skipper. Winston confronts Eli's conflation of past and present as the storm howls about the house:

> **WINSTON:** Skipper. We've got to have this out. We're not at sea. We're not in a boat. I'm not Jacob. We might be in hell, but they's probably better or worse ones. I don't know yit. Ye're at home, father. Stuck in yer own bed without the use of yer legs just as ye have been for the past thirty years and yer daughter and grandsons are plotting to have ye removed to the Mental. A few more roars from the Bridge and I allows you'll be gone, being pushed in a wheelchair down a long corridor stinking of piss and antiseptic, to yer grave.
>
> **SKIPPER:** Yer a damn fool, boy.
>
> **WINSTON:** Aye, I'm all of that.
>
> **SKIPPER:** A house is a ship. Lights come on agin the night … Some adrift…Some foundered, some rotting old hulks of the memories of men … They's no difference.
>
> **WINSTON:** (*surprised*) I 'lows that's right enough.[32] (119)

Skipper insists “Jacob” check the moorings of the house/ship, and Winston/Jacob agrees. Indeed, he has done so, by evicting Brad. Looking out the window through a telescope, an action which Richard Perkyns links to Beckett’s *Endgame* (116), he spies the figure of Brad disappearing in the gusts of wind and snow but fails to recognize him. He dissociates, as Uncle John does in *The Head, Guts and Soundbone Dance*, seeing something out in the storm, but failing to connect his own actions with it: “Looks to be agin the fence. ’Tis moving. (*Pause*) ’Tis gone. (*He rubs his eyes*) Ach, the old man’s got me seeing things now.” (120)

Mary and Wayne have made it back from church in the storm, but only barely. Its intensity has increased to lethal proportions. Alonzo and Wayne again spar over the contract until Winston seizes what he discovers to be the forged letter of commitment. The appropriation of his name proves to be the last straw. It represents a particularly serious transgression, an invalidation of identity. As Wayne attempts an explanation, Winston roars back into the parlour with a shotgun. A blast of wind cuts the lights as he fires, and the play has suddenly veered into a no-man’s land between melodrama and expressionism, a point Cook freely admits (qtd. in Wallace 167). Amidst the frightened cries of his sons, Winston fires again. The lights come back on; he has missed both shots. The radio’s power returns, as well: the government has resigned. Wayne unconsciously reveals his true affinities, and bridges the gap in proximity to the other community where he is an Insider, by jumping towards the radio and beating on it in an effort to keep it broadcasting. He, too, has fallen. The cycle of his estrangement from his family is nearly complete:

The radio crackles and fades. WAYNE, forgetful of WINSTON, leaps to his feet and rushes to the radio. He beats at it furiously.

WAYNE: Did ye hear that? For God's sake, come on … Come on…

WINSTON: *breaking into roaring laughter* Well, well … if that don't beat all.

ROSIE re-emerges and closes the door behind her.

Rosie … the government has resigned. That takes care of 'em better than me old shotgun.

WAYNE: *still beating the radio* Come on.

MARY: Wayne … Don't get so upset. I don't like to see you like this.

WAYNE: Will you stop nagging me.

WINSTON roars and claps his hands.

WINSTON: That's tellin' ye. (131)

Wayne exits in a panic into the storm, looking for a telephone. Alonzo is sent to look for candles. Through the melee, Skipper has died; his face has been replaced by a deathmask which remains lit until the end of the play.

Winston, true to his promise to his father, attempts a reconciliation with Mary, who rejects it. Wayne returns, disconsolate. In a passage that recalls Maeterlinck's *The Intruder*, Cook is explicit in his move to a symbolist/expressionistic tone:

There is an upsurge of wind and storm and the sound of timbers straining, crackling. A Distinct sense of catastrophe pervades the atmosphere. The light remains on the SKIPPER.

Into this mixture of fear and pain and expectancy, comes three loud, imperative knocks at the door. Everybody, appalled, looks fearfully in that direction. WINSTON raises his head. He looks aloft, and, not seeing, understands. He whispers…

WINSTON: ’Tis his token.

He moves slowly to the door.

ROSIE: Winston!

He opens the door and falls back. The SKIPPER stands there dressed in his Master’s uniform, his brass button coat and hat, seaman’s boots. ROSIE crosses herself. (135)

The ritual effect of the knock on the door is significant, but as an announcement of a return to formality, rigour, and discipline, rather than as the indication of a Stranger. The specter of the Skipper has returned to the helm of his ship. Cook notes: “*He strides into the room with the vigour of a man in his prime*” (136).

The Skipper’s “token” strides in, asks Rosie for a glass of rum, and instructs Winston to take “the wheel.” Initially confused, Winston obeys—Cook is careful to note that “*we must be in doubt that for him it exists*” (136). With three withering lines he writes off his daughter Mary, saying her mother would have never “turned her face to the wall and died like an old ewe” (136). He asks the two grandsons to name themselves and they answer as if reporting for duty. They have joined in this final struggle for the integrity of the ship/family:

SKIPPER: Who are ye?

ALONZO: ’Lonz Blackburn, Skipper.

WAYNE: Wayne Blackburn, Skipper.

SKIPPER: Fust voyage?

WAYNE AND ALONZO: Aye, Skipper.

> **SKIPPER:** Ach. That were always the way of it. But 'tis a pitiful crew for an old haverbeen on his last voyage. (*He roars*) CREW TO STATIONS. Women, git below. (137)

The women exit with the candles, leaving the four men aboard a ship only they can see. The wind and the storm howl furiously outside the house. Alonzo reports above (the Skipper's room) that "she's cracking up," and that "they's a lead ahead," a path out of the ice. The Skipper asks if all are ready to blast out; the three answer "Aye, Sir, ready."

Above the storm sounds, incongruously, is heard the bark of a seal, followed by another. In an ending tableau as sure in its stylistic technique as it is in its primal force, the men freeze in a picture of the Skipper leading them out onto the ice as there is a blackout and the escalating sound of a cosmic disaster. A blinding flash follows, with another blackout and the dying sound of the storm. The deathmask in the bed upstairs fades into the "lone quiet crying of a bitter wind" (138).

Jacob's Wake accelerates a process begun by *The Head, Guts and Soundbone Dance*, the increasing complexity of the Stranger and Insider figures in Newfoundland drama. Transforming an earlier dramatic template which utilized simple, more clearly defined markers based mainly on space and membership, Cook brings the Stranger figure further inside the family nucleus, demonstrating through the shifting internal divisions of families and communities that true danger exists in any environment where fixed attitudes prevail. All of the various types who populate the Stranger-to-Insider matrix are present in *Jacob's Wake*. Brad represents an Insider who has transgressed egregiously and is treated as a Stranger by his family, to whom he returns in a desperate bid to recover his fading identity. The voluntary Exile, Wayne, retains his family Insider status,

until he loses his cherished privileges as a Government Insider and in an instant repudiates his family. One senses that he, too, will become a Stranger to the Blackburn household. Mary, doomed to low-esteem Necessary Outsider status, seals her fate through the rigidity of her beliefs and her inaction. Alonzo, who transgresses in ways that might be considered more damaging to the body politic than does Mary, remains at a higher level of esteem because of his blood-tie to Rosie and his greater communicative competence; he is capable of more charm and humour than Mary and, in spite of his myriad seedy actions, he is more likeable. This provides him with an advantage in social currency. Winston is, as Walker notes, an Esau figure, robbed of his birthright (in this case) by a dead sibling, unable to fulfill his father's expectations. Brian Parker agrees, noting that:

> Winston is, in fact, the most complex character in the play, to whom our attitude changes radically. At first he seems merely idle, vulgar and malicious, drinking heavily, hazing his returned sons, and teasing his spinster sister with indecencies. There is a sense of violence in the man, moreover, which culminates in his ineffectual firing of a shotgun after he hears his son Alonzo has forged his name. His cry on hearing this—"My name! 'Tis all I've got left" reveals—the damaged self-respect beneath his coarseness […] our sympathy for him grows as we note his sensitivity and tenderness not only for Rosie and the dead Sarah but also for the tragic Mildred Tobin…. (37)

Amidst the repellent actions of all the characters in the play, the spectator fastens onto the moments of tenderness or honesty which each character produces, like secrets, at unsuspecting moments. The affective dimension of the play lies at the heart of its impact, unaffected by the commingling of styles. Cook once again plays fast and loose with the accepted codes of 1970s Canadian dramaturgy—summarized by Knowles as "patriarchal,

socially affirmative dramatic and narrative structures (and their mutually affirmative social formations and structures of consciousness)" (*Form* 31)—much like a Necessary Outsider in the Blackburn house. The result, however, is surprisingly similar to more naturalistic work produced contemporaneously, such as that of David French: characters whose objective is not to triumph in life, but to forestall the inevitable attrition of time and nature by making an impact, by surviving, as long and as loudly, as possible.

5.4 David French: The Mercer Plays

In a book of essays he edited with Rolf Althof, Albert Reiner-Glaap devotes an entire chapter to the work of David French, describing him as "one of the 'senior' playwrights who played a major role in the development of the professional English Canadian theatre during the seventies and eighties" (161). In the same volume Denyse Lynde contributes an essay entitled "Newfoundland Drama: An Ever Changing Terrain" (83-96). In it can be found no mention of David French or his plays. In the book *Contemporary Canadian Theatre: New World Visions*, edited by Anton Wagner, Terry Goldie contributes a short chapter on "Newfoundland" (96-100), in which French is the subject of a single sentence: "David French is certainly an established playwright but a Newfoundlander only by birth, and, to an extent, by the subject matter of many of his dramatic works" (96).

This demonstrated ambivalence presents a conundrum for the theatre researcher. Celebrated Canadian playwright Anne Chislett, to take one example, is seldom linked with her Newfoundland heritage. Though Chislett played an active role in 1960s

Newfoundland theatre through her membership in the St. John's Players, her plays make no reference to her native region and she has spent her adult career on the mainland. In contrast, Michael Cook is always mentioned, though not always kindly, in accounts of Newfoundland drama, in spite of his relatively late arrival in Newfoundland as a man of 34. The determining characteristic with regard to inclusion—though not Insiderness—would seem to be residency, rather than birth. Chislett, through her voluntary Exile, is viewed as have given up her Insider status; Cook, through his persistent participation and residency within the Newfoundland theatrical sphere, achieved status as a Necessary Outsider of high value (if not esteem).

The notion of what constitutes a Newfoundland theatre/drama Insider is a fascinating one, but not one which may be easily explained or which possesses a consistent set of determinative criteria. Lynde herself is an Outsider-resident, who writes favourably of Cook and laments that his "life-long love affair" with Newfoundland was unrequited: "Newfoundland always remained a cold and distant lover" ("Memoriam" 204). Her own residency on the island appears to render her ill-disposed to consideration of David French as a truly Newfoundlandic playwright. Goldie includes French, "a Newfoundlander only by birth," by virtue of his birth and six-year residence there as a toddler. He then moves quickly on, however, to call Cook "Newfoundland's one claim to a major playwright." Given the celebrity of David French in Canada and the success of his plays in many countries around the world, this would seem to indicate that French, in Goldie's view, is not truly a playwright within the dramatic landscape of Newfoundland theatre.

Within the terms of this examination, French can be considered an involuntary Exile from Newfoundland. As a six year-old, he presumably would have had little choice in the decision by his parents to move to the mainland of Canada. Once there, his experience of Newfoundland became second-hand, experienced through the accents, accounts and attitudes of his parents. This second-hand influence was strong enough to inspire five plays; however, only two of the Mercer plays, *Salt-Water Moon* and *Soldier's Heart*, take place on the island, while the other three involve Newfoundlanders adrift in Toronto.

More than the nature and subject matter of his plays, French's personal absence from the Newfoundland theatre scene renders his inclusion problematic. *Salt-Water Moon* has been produced regularly there; the relative accessibility and commercial appeal of such work provides theatres with a safer product than, say, the more challenging and provocative work of Cook. In interviews French has admitted his initial trepidation at working with material mined from his family past (qtd. in Zimmerman 305). Though he has referred to himself as a Newfoundlander (qtd. in Rudakoff 11), in the critical (and, arguably, the public) sphere he is a Canadian playwright who in his career has written plays about Newfoundland and Newfoundlanders. The region, for French, is the moody inspiration for the characters he portrays in the Mercer plays. An affection and acute interest in the people and culture of Newfoundland beats through each of the five plays. Absent is the savagery of Cook's love/hate relationship with his "cold and distant lover."

French's Newfoundland plays should therefore be seen as remediative interchanges within the context of his own family dynamic, rather than within the macro-community of a Newfoundland he left behind. Within the Newfoundland cultural

landscape, he remains a Necessary Outsider of the Transgressive Insider sub-set, whose plays are useful and whose absence is not mourned. Whether French has utilized his estranged vantage point as effectively as has Cook is open to question. The fact of French's long physical dislocation provides him with less credibility, despite his native-born status, than long-time resident Cook, and therefore a diminished ability to write critically. The result is that the Mercer plays, within the frame of their orientation to the island and its culture, function essentially as postcards to a Newfoundland perceived only at second-hand, in terms which are primarily nostalgic. French refrains from issuing a challenge—to the Newfoundland that is—to become what Newfoundland should be; from his estranged position the challenge would lack credibility.

Nevertheless the Mercer plays would not exist without the elements of Newfoundland culture they employ. There can be little doubt that the employment of French's distanciated knowledge is effective in dramatic terms, at least with regard to the popular reception of the plays. They have, as a body of work, made an impact on the culture French bases them within. This suggests that the Mercer plays deserve inclusion in any discussion of Newfoundland drama.

French's playwriting career came to public notice with the 1972 Tarragon Theatre production of *Leaving Home*. Contemporaneous with the forming of the Mummers Troupe in St. John's, and while members of the future CODCO group were auditioning in Toronto theatres, French was able, through his association with Bill Glassco, Tarragon's founder, to benefit from a growing enthusiasm for Canadian plays at the same time as his Newfoundland roots provided a distinctive element to his work. As Urjo Kareda notes in his introduction to *Leaving Home*, something on the order of fifty new Canadian plays

were produced in Toronto that year (v). In this flowering of Canadian dramatic literature, French was exoticized as a Newfoundlander who had written a Great Canadian Play.

The Mercer family, which includes Ben, French's alter ego, are not just any family from anywhere. Jacob and Mary are Newfoundlanders born and bred, and the Newfoundland Inside affects every decision they make—whether to leave for a more secure life on the mainland, as they have done in the first play, *Leaving Home*; Jacob's decision to return with the aim of courting Mary, as in *Salt-Water Moon*; to argue over the region's entry into Confederation, as in *1949*; or Mary's mourning the passing of a man hardened and formed by The Rock, as in *Of The Fields, Lately*. French's knowledge of Newfoundland may be based on recollection and research, but this distanciated environment does not undermine his intuitive and astute understanding of human nature, as it is produced in the micro-community of the Mercer household.

The creation of a home mythology, and the nature of Exile, is at the centre of French's Mercer plays. It is there one begins in tracing the marks left on the Mercer family made by the constant scratching of their family boat up against The Rock.

5.4.1 *Soldier's Heart* (2001)

Soldier's Heart is the most recent of French's Mercer plays. It was produced at Toronto's Tarragon Theatre in November 2001, directed by the late Bill Glassco, French's long-time friend and collaborator. Glassco represents an artistic link to all of the Mercer plays, as does the Tarragon, the theatre where his first works were produced. The decisions to work again with Glassco and to produce *Soldier's Heart* at Tarragon were

not randomly made. Glassco acted as a friend and mentor for the young French. The Tarragon is in more than one sense a "home" theatre for French; the theatre is only a short walk from his home in Toronto's Annex district. The importance of home and familiarity pervades any analysis of David French in relation to his work.

In the time since the première of *Leaving Home* 29 years previously, much had changed in the landscape of Canadian theatre. New Canadian plays are no longer a phenomenon. The cultural nationalism of the early 1970s has faded, replaced by what might be regarded as a more mature perspective with regard to issues such as the inclusion of Canadian plays within the programmes of major theatres. More plays are being produced. The field of Canadian dramatic literature is now well-established and diverse. Though still relatively young in chronological terms, the Canadian theatre and its playwrights have developed to the point where its plays are produced on the stages of Europe and America and its playwrights, if seldom accorded the kind of acclaim received by well-known Canadian fiction writers, have yet earned national and international respect. It is a an irony of the speed with which contemporary movements in art move that David French deserves some credit for this successful evolution in Canadian drama, even as it appears to have marooned his work in time.

In the period since the success of *Leaving Home*, stylistic elements long associated with Canadian theatre have also altered. Although there is still a body of neo-Aristotelian, realistic work produced each year, other forms have increasingly entered mainstream discourse. Playwrights such as Sally Clark, Morris Panych, Daniel MacIvor, and John Mighton, to name some of the most prominent playwrights of the past twenty years, have taken the realistic play in the direction of magic realism and the grotesque

(Panych) and poetic minimalism (Mighton and MacIvor), to name but two influences which have achieved success with audiences and critics. The well-made play, of which French's work is perhaps the most clear example in Canadian drama, is, if not out of fashion, not fashionable.

Yet there is a stubborn currency to both French's structures and his themes. Issues of identity never seem to be far from the consciousness of a culture, and the contexts of space and membership, as outlined in Chapter Two, retain currency in their manifestations of "home" and "family". *Soldier's Heart* does not break new ground, even within the work of French himself. This does not appear to be the objective of a playwright whose plays have remained, throughout his career, straightforward in structure and unafraid to access wells of emotion which, within other genres, might be found excessive.

In *Soldier's Heart* French continues the approach of working backwards chronologically begun with *Salt-Water Moon*. It is 1924, and Jacob Mercer is 16 years old. As the play opens he is found on the platform of a railway station in Bay Roberts, Newfoundland. That the play will return to the themes of family and belonging, and will use the relationship of father to son as its main model, is clear from the outset. All the characters in the play are Insiders within the micro-community of the Coley's Point area of Newfoundland. The status of two of the characters, Jacob Mercer and his father Esau, are in play. Jacob threatens voluntary Exile; Esau, involuntarily, is marginalizing himself within his core micro-community, his family. The station master, Bert, friend to Esau and confidante to Jacob, steps outside to chat with young Jacob. It is late at night; the train, called the *Caribou*, is late.

In the six years since they returned from the war Esau has avoided Bert, something noticed by the younger Mercer. Bert wants to know what Jacob is doing waiting for the St. John's train with a one-way ticket. He knows Jacob well, as is evident by the easy flow of their conversation and its relative intimacy. Jacob has occasionally talked with Bert about the events of the war. There is a wall that has sprung up around Esau, marked by outbursts of violence which appear irrational. It is June 30, and Bert knows that the following day, July 1, the anniversary of the tragic events which occurred near the French river Somme in 1916, can "set [Esau] off" (15). The event he alludes to is considered by many in Newfoundland as a national tragedy, a day in which a measurable percentage of Newfoundland's young men marched resolutely to their deaths at Beaumont Hamel, the victims of callous or inept military planning. [The day, in fact, is still marked with sombre remembrance rather than the festivities associated with Canada Day in the rest of Canada.]

Bert tells Jacob a story of how Esau worked as a train man his first year back from overseas, and saved a runaway train and its passengers. "Wonder he wasn't killed […] of all the jobs on a train, the Trainman has the most dangerous. And you know what, my son? I figure that's why he wanted it."(15) Jacob reveals that his father sometimes talks to his dead Uncle Will, killed in France on that fateful day; his mother awoke the previous night to see Esau in the churchyard waving a luger at the sky. Though Bert has found some solace in talking about the incidents of that day, Esau has never talked about the war.

Unlike the later Mercer play *1949*, the exposition here is carried out by the primary characters. Here French has decided on economy and concision in telling the

story. Esau arrives, listens in silence, and then reveals his presence. He is drunk and surly, and has come to take Jacob home. He searches Jacob's suitcase for the luger he knows Jacob has taken, but the boy has thrown it off a bridge on the way to the station.

The parameters of the dramatic structure have been set at this point. The triangular, dialogically-driven relationships remain static. Bert, an Insider whose status is not in question, is a conciliator, shifting back and forth between the son and his father and defending the motives of one to the other. Jacob operates essentially with a singular objective, the desire to know his father through a telling of his father's darkest secret. Esau is the first of the Mercers (in chronological terms) to retreat behind a wall of isolation and anger, a wall which will be built later by the son, after he has produced his own sons.

Esau demands to know whey Jacob was sneaking off "like a t'ief in the night" (23). The conflict flares. Bert intervenes and Esau begins to reminisce about the war, to Jacob's joy. He and Bert try to keep him talking. It is here that the structure chosen by French boxes him in. The play becomes a pocket history lesson, told in a series of anecdotes, leavened by the occasional joke. French is a seasoned story-teller. The stories and jokes are told well, and the recounting of historical facts is vivid. It does not hide the fact, however, that the play is almost completely static. There is little physical movement beyond Bert's occasional return to the interior of the station, and no physical contact of any kind is indicated between the men, or suggested by the text. The dependence on dialogue is almost total. This dependence is further burdened by the fact that so little of the play's action takes place in the present. The spectator is encouraged to concentrate on Esau's past. Jacob is not a scintillating character. He does not draw our attention or elicit

our sympathy. In fact, the character functions as a cipher, asking the appropriate expositional questions necessary to draw the story out of Esau. That Esau acquiesces with so little effort undermines the background story, that of his extreme reluctance to reveal the events behind his trauma. The rationale offered by French is, perhaps, that a defining moment has come in the lives of Esau and Jacob. Esau feels that Jacob may be leaving for good. Further, Jacob is sixteen, positioned in the period between boy and man, a fact that is mentioned several times in the play. Within the space of just six lines Esau tells Jacob that "Sixteen's still a boy" and "You'm sixteen years old: a grown man" (30). Further to this, Jacob reveals that Esau put a knife to his throat that morning. Jacob had startled Esau by walking up from behind, and it is clear the two are describing a form of post-traumatic stress disorder:

JACOB:
I was looking in your eyes. You didn't know who I was.

ESAU:
It all happened so fast. It was like I was still …

JACOB:
What, father? Still back in the war?

ESAU:
It must have been the rum I had this morning. Sometimes too much can—

JACOB:
(*cutting in*) Don't make excuses, OK? It's not the rum that's to blame, it's whatever happened to you in France. Admit it. (31)

Esau has become violent on a number of occasions. The secret of his past haunts him. Jacob decides to try questioning him on safer ground, about the days of basic training he

shared with Bert in Scotland. They spar back and forth, but it is clear that Esau will tell his story, in instalments. In this respect the dramatic structure recalls *Salt-Water Moon*, where Jacob, just a few years older, woos his future wife, Mary.

Esau tells the story of how he and his younger brother Will met a German at a detention camp in Scotland. The German asks for a smoke in perfect English:

> **ESAU:**
> "Don't look so surprised. He spoke it better than we did. (*A slight German accent*.) I lived two years in Winnipeg," he said, "six months in Montreal."
>
> **JACOB:**
> He mistook you for Canadians?
>
> **ESAU:**
> Will set him straight. 'I'm no bloody Canadian, kamerad,' he says. 'I'm one hundred percent British. As British as those guards there.' He didn't want to be mistaken, Will didn't. Not even by the enemy. (34-5)

Issues of cultural identity surface early. Here, in stark contrast to his son's expressions of Newfoundland identity in the other plays, Esau identifies himself through his brother Will as a British subject. The period in which the play takes place was one where the affiliation of the Dominion with the Crown was especially marked. Newfoundland donated millions of borrowed dollars and a large number of troops to the British war effort. The events at the Somme in 1916 marked a turning point in this relationship. The British influence began to wane in Newfoundland shortly thereafter as the Crown's disinterest and the scale of Newfoundland's sacrifice became more clear. Six years following the war few would criticize the sacrifice for King and country, but his participation in the war has served to divide Esau from those in his community who did not serve. Bert, another veteran, is learning proper English from his wife Sadie, who is

British. Esau remarks sarcastically upon this. He exists uneasily between cultures, having been raised to speak as a rural Newfoundlander, yet inculcated with loyalty to the Crown.

Although Jacob's range of tactics do not vary far from pleading and recitation of the facts he already knows, Esau continues to gradually unburden the load of his conscience. Drunk, taciturn, and declaiming an unwillingness to expound upon his war experiences, he is nevertheless skilful enough to wax poetically about his condition:

JACOB:
Father?

ESAU:
What?

JACOB:
Talking about the war might do some good. It's a way to let off steam.

ESAU:
A man ain't a machine, Jacob. Sometimes he breaks in a way that can't be fixed …. Now give your tongue a rest. You could talk a hole t'rough an iron pot and still have words enough for the Lord's Prayer. (44)

Continually the spectator is told about violent incidents in which Jacob has lashed out for no immediately discernible reason. There is, however, no evidence of fear or concern for physical safety on the part of Jacob during the interplay between father and son. Violent characters are not violent all the time. However, the threat of violence, particularly after such a recent incident as that of the morning, would surely create some element of physical tension. Esau is not treated as a Stranger, even though he is accused of Stranger behaviour. The lack of concern manifested by Bert—and Jacob, as well—undermines any sense that his Insider status is in jeopardy of an extreme outward shift. The root cause of Esau's outbursts acquires a name: Soldier's Heart. Bert mentions an

accident which has held up the *Caribou*. A man known to Bert and Esau as a former comrade has tried to kill himself by throwing himself in front of the train:

BERT:
(*beat*) According to Jack, the accident tonight was no accident.

ESAU:
What? …

BERT:
The engineer saw Angus step in front of the train just before she struck him … Jack knows Angus. He suffers from soldier's heart. (*To JACOB*) What we now call shell-shock. (49)

Bert's last line is addressed to Jacob. This reveals the coded message they have earlier shared. Bert suspects Esau of having suicidal thoughts as well. As Esau pleads again for Jacob to stay, Bert alludes to the commotion that will take place in St. John's on the following day. The new War memorial is being unveiled. Upon hearing that Field Marshal Haig is coming Esau expresses his anger at the commander's sending of 20,000 troops to their deaths at the Somme. This creates an opening for Jacob, who once more brings up the subject of France. Jacob appears to know the entire story by heart, but he is missing the crucial last scenes of the drama in which his father was involved. French indicates in this way that the facts are not the focus of his dramatic investigation, but rather the issue of a father's inability to share crucial events in his life with his son. The cycle of miscommunication in the Mercer family is backdated to the events of *Soldier's Heart*.

ESAU:
(to ***BERT***) Who told him all that? You?

BERT:
I might have mentioned it in passing.

ESAU:
He remembers every word he hears, Bert. Every goddamn syllable.

BERT:
But don't you see, boy? It's not the war he wants to understand, it's you.

ESAU:
Me?

BERT:
He wants his father back …. He's tried to talk to you in the past, but you walk away. That's why he sought out Sergeant Kelly and me … (56)

Shortly thereafter Esau reveals his perception of his membership status within the community upon returning home from the war, and the alienation he experiences upon seeing his son after an absence of six years:

JACOB:
That's when I saw you below on the road. Not that I knowed you. It was the uniform I recognized, with the red triangle on the sleeve …. I watched you set down your canvas bag. You stood looking across the water at Bareneed.

ESAU:
(to ***BERT***) I was recalling our last night in Scotland. Will and me lay outside the tent and talked. It was the last time the stars ever looked friendly.

BERT:
What did you talk about?

ESAU:
Home, mostly. Will missed Ruby from Bareneed. (to ***JACOB***) I missed you and your mother […] and yet home seemed different that Sunday morning. I noticed it the moment I stepped off the train.

JACOB:
Different? How?

ESAU:

> Distant, I suppose. Familiar, yet strange … I was trying to make sense of it all when I saw you climbing down from Jenny's Hill. (to ***BERT***) I didn't know him, either. He was only six when I went overseas. (60-1)

Jacob alludes to a promise he says Esau made on the day he returned. After staring at his wife without a word, Esau had swept all the china from the shelves, shattering it. (60-2) Esau says this was because it was made in Germany. The violence of the war has come home with Esau and he cannot let it go. Esau had then said to the little boy, "Tomorrow we'll talk, Jacob. That's a promise." Esau can't recall the promise, but Jacob is holding him to it. Whether the promise was in fact ever made matters little. Jacob has been accorded the responsibility for re-creating history in the play, and he can revise it as he chooses. It is ironic that this taking-over of his father's history represents a form of disenfranchisement.

Jacob presses on, accusing Esau of keeping a secret, one that has caused him to avoid Bert since coming back six years ago. A train whistles in the distance; the time to disclose the whole truth is growing urgent. Esau knows if Jacob boards the train he'll never return: "Life is like that." (65) Jacob strikes a deal; he'll hand over the ticket if Esau tells what happened on July 1st, 1916.

Esau begins to recount the missing elements of the story. The ever-helpful Bert assists Esau in providing a play-by-play of their experiences at the Battle of the Somme. The account is vividly told, and the depth of research is evident, as is French's emotional connection to the material. This does not disguise the inherently static nature of the verbal re-telling of past events on stage. Esau, desperate to spare his brother from the carnage, tries to shoot Will in the legs as they march forward to certain death, but fails. Esau is struck by a bullet that glances off his helmet and sits, with his helmet in his

hands, looking at it in the middle of all the carnage, wondering at the fact that he is still alive. Bert, having witnessed this scene, remarks, “I can still see you sitting there, dazed, bullets kicking up dirt like rain. Not a single one had your name on it.” (75) This is presented as the key to Esau’s despair—his inability to perform a primal family responsibility, to protect his younger brother from harm while surviving himself.

Esau recounts lying wounded in the field for hours, afraid to move even an inch, hallucinating. Finally he is called back to consciousness by a voice—Jacob’s. (82) The moment represents a rare moment of intimacy between father and son, yet Esau remains unaware of its significance to Jacob. He is still caught in the maze of the events of a far-off day when his brother represented the definition of family.

There is a secret still to be learned. Esau gets up from the field when evening falls and begins a cat-and-mouse game with a German soldier. Each tries to kill the other. At last he out-manoeuvres the soldier and stabs him three times in the heart. This is a telling image, as becomes clear shortly thereafter. Jacob holds on to the soldier tightly, fearing that he possesses a knife. This prevents him from seeing the soldier’s face until his legs give out. As the soldier collapses Jacob realizes that it is his brother Will, gazing at him in dazed, dying confusion. Jacob gives his ticket to Esau. “A deal’s a deal.” (93) He will not be leaving yet. What follows is a moment rare in the Mercer chronicle, one of almost complete reconciliation between father and son:

ESAU:
Look at him, Bert. The spitting image of young Will. Young Will in the prime of life.

BERT:
The same fire in his soul, too.

ESAU:
When we first came back from overseas, he was a boy. (to ***JACOB***) You've become a man right before my eyes. And I never noticed it till now ….

JACOB:
I never felt it till now, Father ….(94)

The discord which will mark Jacob's future life, and his own struggle to retain Insider status even as the micro-communities of which he is a member shift and alter, remain far off. Neither is there any indication that Esau will fall prey to his demons. The recounting has proven to be, as Jacob predicted, therapeutic. For the moment, Esau remains firmly in the past where Jacob has insistently brought him. Bert and Jacob join him there. The three men leave the troubled prospect of the present and future and, like old soldiers, take firm residence in the land of past brotherhood and an idealized celebration of home and family:

ESAU:
……

(*Sings louder*)
'Keep the home fires burning,
While your heart is yearning.'

ESAU & BERT (*sing*)**:**
'Though your lads are far away
They dream of home.'

ESAU & BERT & JACOB (*sing*)**:**
'There's a silver lining
Through the dark clouds shining.
Turn the dark cloud inside out—
Till the boys come home!'
Blackout. (96)

5.4.2 *Salt-Water Moon* (1984)

Written third in the sequence of Mercer plays, *Salt-Water Moon* takes the reader back to the beginnings of the relationship between Jacob Mercer and Mary Snow. The play has proved to be the most commercially successful of the four plays, with multiple international and national productions, including repeated productions in Newfoundland. The relative economy of production offered by the simple set and the two-person cast is a factor in such success. As important is the simplicity and sweetness of its narrative. It presents a Newfoundland that conforms to the stereotypes against which Michael Cook railed, and which continue to feature prominently in Newfoundland theatre through such works as Robert Chafe's *Tempting Providence* and the "Ed and Ed" plays of ex-Mummer Jeff Pitcher.

Salt-Water Moon is not regarded as high art by critics. Glaap describes the action as "simple," though without evident malice ("Family" 167). Though Glaap observes that "linguistic and narrative techniques and details play an important part in the conversation between Jacob and Mary" (168), the reference can be assumed to indicate the linguistic strategies employed by the two characters. As a dialectician, there are few indications that French is as familiar with the many dialects of Newfoundland English as was Michael Cook. Jacob and Mary's use of language is filled with "markers" which indicate their origins, words and occasional phrases which are redolent of a place and time without actually reproducing a dialect. The effect of a shared communicative competence is nevertheless achieved.

Denis Salter remarks on French's "remarkable ear for dialogue" (36). Salter goes on to describe French as "a chronicler of a Newfoundland culture which refuses to die" (36), an assertion that is palpably inaccurate. French provides no "chronicle" of Newfoundland culture, but rather finely-etched portraits of a small, extremely specific number of Newfoundlanders who have left that culture behind. This is true even in *Salt-Water Moon*, one of two Newfoundland-set plays in the Mercer quintet. Newfoundland functions as a backdrop which plays an effective role in explaining how Jacob and Mary came, in their later years, to be who they are. The presence of the island, beyond historical anecdotes, is limited indeed. Salter admits that "French's own attitude towards Newfoundland culture is not straightforward. At times, he sentimentalizes and patronizes his characters, making them verge on stereotypes […]"(36). John Astington, writing in *Letters in Canada*, is more direct: "[I]n the theatre *Salt-Water Moon* struck me as a very insubstantial piece of work; reading and thinking about the text has not changed my opinion" (65). Insubstantial it may be; the play's extraordinary popularity, however, renders it significant in any evaluation of Newfoundland drama, despite Astington's caustic assessment that such popularity is a sign of "the Canadian theatre-going public's approval of modest, mildly pleasing, sentimental material" (63).

Coley's Point in 1926 is the focal point of a "verbal tennis" match (Glaap, "Family" 167) between the newly returned Jacob, "a solidly-built, good-looking young man" (*Moon* 3) and the "fine-boned, lovely Mary" (2) he had left behind. Both characters are attractive and presented as winsome: Jacob is an outwardly confident lad who can spin a yarn with the best of them, while Mary is a plucky girl who has endured hard experience and managed to hold her head high.

Mary is found out on the porch of the home of the family for which she performs service, the upper-class Dawe family. The loose-limbed, roguishly charming Jacob appears on the road, having returned from a year's sojourn in Toronto. From the outset, French lays out straightforward narrative. Jacob has come home to court Mary, who has promised herself, in the intervening year, to local "swell" Jerome McKenzie.

Mary's initial resistance to Jacob's romantic entreaties is not persuasive, in dramatic terms. There is every expectation that Jacob will win the day. What underlies this simple storyline, however, is more interesting. Mary is a qualified Insider, one who has committed no conscious transgressions but who suffers diminished status from her position as, in essence, an orphan: her father is deceased and her mother is mentally ill. Furthermore Mary possesses little education. She has accumulated little esteem within her home polity, yet Mary possesses a status advantage over Jacob, who has consciously transgressed through his voluntary Exile.[33] He is, in effect, on her turf, attempting remediative action. Mary's repeated references to the positive attributes of Jerome Mackenzie are similarly unpersuasive in dramatic terms, but within the framework of the Insider-Outsider dynamic they have impact and currency. Even after a single year on the mainland, Jacob is now a Transgressive Insider, a returning Exile who left under no duress. Mary quickly challenges his right to come courting:

MARY: You're just spitting out the first words that pop in your mouth.

JACOB: I wouldn't have to, Mary, if I wasn't made to feel a stranger.

MARY: Well, you *are* a stranger.

JACOB: I wasn't once.

MARY: You are now. (15)

Mary explicitly attempts to position Jacob as a Stranger, repeating the word twice in a short span. Within the terms of social proximity, their physical positioning also indicates Mary's desire to retain a status advantage in her negotiation. She remains on the stoop, while Jacob stands below, on the road, at a distance. Upon his arrival, there is no contact—no hug or handshake. Jacob, aware of his alienated status, approaches warily; he "*crosses slowly to the porch*" (4). Mary turns away, indicating rejection, inviting a higher level of remediation than his simple reappearance on the scene. French marks their initial conversation with repeated pauses, suggesting an impairment to their mutual communicative competence. Jacob has not only been away from the macro-community of Newfoundland, and the micro-community of Coley's Point, but also the community he was beginning to build with Mary.

The alienated status of her figuration of Jacob is clear, but it is a false construction. *Salt-Water Moon* is not inherently dramatic; it is clear from the outset that Jacob will win the day. Jacob is *not* a Stranger, but rather a Transgressive Insider who is attempting to remediate his status with an individual predisposed to his remediation. The conflict is therefore muted and played for relatively low stakes. They differ in status levels but the level of estrangement between them is not a schism.

She asks him what he expected, "A band with me at the head, clapping my hands: 'Why it's the Prodigal Son, boys! All the way back from Toronto! Strike up the band!'" (15). Jacob *is* the prodigal son who has strayed and who now wishes to be accepted back in the fold, as represented by Mary. He has subsisted for the past year on a diet of

fantasies about the single evening they spent together; his home mythology has consisted of nothing more than a romantic frame of this memory, and he has expected no change upon his return.

There is a tension between past and present manifested in their initial encounter. Throughout the play their temporally-based notions of each other gradually draw closer to a synchronized mutual understanding. Jacob's present-past positioning initially lends him a singularity of intent which proves distressing for Mary. Her life has taken place very much in the present tense, devoid of romantic figuration. Living in Coley's Point as a maid for the Dawe family, feeling her youth and the opportunities it presents slowly ebb away, she is justly outraged at Jacob's easy familiarity. Jacob's life has been relatively easy; as a man "sowing his wild oats," under no scrutiny, he can be as faithful or unfaithful to his fantasy as he likes to be:

> **JACOB:** You ought to wear yellow more often, maid. It really do become you. Suits your black hair and fair complexion.
>
> **MARY:** Is that what you did the past year in Toronto? Sweet talk the girls?
>
> **JACOB:** What girls?
>
> **MARY:** 'What girls?' he says.
>
> **JACOB:** There wasn't any girls, sure.
>
> **MARY:** No, and autumn don't follow summer, I suppose?
>
> **JACOB:** *Beat* All right, perhaps there was one or two girls…
>
> **MARY:** One or two? Is that all?
>
> **JACOB:** T'ree or four, at most. (61)

Now that he has come home to make those fantasies a reality, the job has become at once more difficult and more exciting. The two will spar over the notion of what constitutes proper Exile behaviour, and where (in future) a mutually shared Inside might be located, but their course has been set. The play's narrative trades suspense for character study, and within this there is the complicating issue of Jacob and Mary's relationship with their macro-community, their homeland.

In fact, for Jacob, Newfoundland is no longer home at all. The mythology he has attached to it in his year away has more to do with Mary Snow than a desire to repatriate. Newfoundland exists as *the location of Mary*, and where, for the moment, her allegiances lie. In his Exile, he has made *her* his home, without her permission. The micro-community Jacob envisages initially comprises just the two of them, unqualified Insiders, master and mistress of their own domain.[34] Her indignation is, of course, equalled by a suppressed gratification at this potentially elevated status. As a Newfoundlander, and as a servant girl in Coley's Point, Mary's Insider status is low, devoid of the affiliative circles which would give her a greater store of social currency. Her mother is a negative-feedback mechanism (Goodson 44)[35] and her sister, also alienated from mainstream society, is in an orphanage (where she is abused).

There is, in fact, every chance that Mary will shift further along the line of alienation in degrees of Transgressive Insider status within these communities. The proposed marriage to Jerome Mackenzie represents an event of tangible importance to her. Marriage with an unqualified Insider who already possesses high levels of status and esteem gives the promise of protecting and upgrading Mary's status within the community.

This potential upgrade in status provides Mary with her bargaining chip in the negotiation she has tacitly agreed to undertake with Jacob. Within the context of Coley's Point, an affiliation with Jacob would do nothing to elevate her status or ability to defend her identity. While removing her from Coley's Point and Newfoundland would in some way remove the dangers she faces in status terms, new ones would arise. Mary is as yet an Insider within her home community. She instinctively realizes that Jacob has arrived to rip her away from the few affiliative circles in which she is a member, the safe ties of her neighbours and friends. A marriage to Jerome McKenzie may not be a romantic alliance, but it offers no threat to these community affiliations and promises the prospect of more. This can be defined as a form of "happiness," not in the conventional vernacular sense, but in terms of providing a stabilization of status which will allow her to live a relatively untroubled life. Jacob understands none of this. His view of romance and marriage is without nuance: he wants, he pursues, he carries away.

For Mary, marriage to Jacob promises romantic happiness and passion and the gratification of a micro-community she can call her own. Marriages often end, however, and though characters as orthodox as Jacob and Mary Mercer may harbour no such doubts about life-long affiliation, trading her web of relationships and local affiliations for the micro-community Jacob promises presents definable dangers, whether or not it constitutes physical removal from her birth community. The plays which treat the future lives of Jacob and Mary demonstrate the gravity of the choice she is about to make.

This reduction of the community to a single unit—the family, even, to a degree, a one-to-one relationship of husband and wife—marks French's Mercer plays. In *Salt-Water Moon* one can view almost nothing of Newfoundland beyond Mary's porch. The

characters spend a great deal of time courting through the medium of a beautiful starry night sky, one which may be visible in Newfoundland but which exists in a multitude of other contexts. The other plays of the quartet could be set in any city, taking place as they do within the confines of the Mercer family home. In the Mercer plays, location matters less than space. The world is progressively narrowed to the family home and most often to the public rooms—kitchen, living room, dining room—that serve as arenas for the dynamics of human interaction taking place within them.

In *Salt-Water Moon* the porch is a border territory—neither Inside nor Outside, but a liminal space between. Jacob and Mary demonstrate their awareness of this; each time she heads towards the door they are aware in semiotic terms that she will have chosen her original micro-community over that offered by Jacob. The porch acts as a physical metaphor for the process of Mary's consideration of the issues at hand.

There is, in Jacob's actions, a realization that he must create a new Inside, one which consists of only Mary and himself. He fights to create this altered Insider status by remembering detail after detail of their night together. She counters by remembering less flattering details. They spar over the significance of memory, the battleground for present and past. Within the dialectics of drama it is not a fair fight. There is little doubt that Mary will give in. The drama of suspense is traded for the dimensionality exhibited in the airing of the issue of whether the past can effectively dictate the future.

Their disagreement over the legitimacy of memory leads to the subject of superstitions. Mary, the Coley's Point Insider, takes them seriously; Jacob, the man of the world, does not. Forced to defend her point of view, Mary inadvertently reveals that she has seen her mother, who put her "in service" when she was nine and then disappeared:

> **JACOB:** I don't suppose she recognized you?
>
> **MARY:** I didn't expect her to. I was only nine years old the last time I saw her. That still bothers her, I can tell, that she had to put Dot in a Home and me into service. But what could she do? When Father was killed, she'd slip into those queer moods that still haven't left her. Moods that last for weeks on end, staring at the floor, forgetting to comb her hair […]. (25)

The fragility of Mary's Insider status is thus revealed. Abandoned by her mother, whose behaviour transgresses the acceptable norms of the community, and without a nucleus of her own, Mary is vulnerable to predation. Her father, a casualty of Beaumont Hamel, can offer her no protection, and this is keenly felt:

> **MARY:** Yes, and a lot of good it done, his courage. He left behind two daughters and a wife who can't look after us […]
> **……..……**
>
> Some days she walks out in the road and looks down it, the way she did that day when he left to catch the boat for Clarenville and the train to St. John's. She saw him turn the bend in the road, she said, and he was gone. Vanished from her life like a stranger […]. (32)

With this second invocation of the Stranger figure it is clear why Mary appears so orthodox in attitude and so wary of the Stranger she believes Jacob represents. Like her mother, though for different reasons, she lacks the resources to recover her position if a choice of mate goes wrong. The events of her childhood have estranged her from her micro-community, though she appears only simply aware of this. Notable, too, is the manner in which the past, for all Mary's reluctance, makes itself more and more present in her deliberations. It is this shared sense of the past—Jacob's father also fought in the war—that enables Jacob to cross the border space.

Jacob's task is to persuade Mary that two estranged Insiders can together create a new, and better, Inside. Assisting him is the fact that Jerome's father did not enlist; he is not a part of the collective memory of July 1, 1916, when a Newfoundland regiment was slaughtered at the battle of the Somme. Sensing an advantage, Jacob goes further in invoking age-old distinctions within outport and other micro-communities. He identifies Jerome as a schoolteacher, a member of an affiliative circle distinct from that which he and Mary occupy:

> **JACOB:** *Imitating Jerome, an earnest and studious young man* 'The distance betwixt the earth and the moon, Mary, is … oh, let's see … one hundred t'ousand miles, give or take an eighth of an inch'.
>
> **MARY:** It's a quarter of a million miles, stupid, and he don't speak like you.
>
> **JACOB:** My God, Jerome has some fund of useless knowledge, don't he? Teaches Grade Eleven in that t'ree room schoolhouse, but give him a fishknife, he'd slit his own t'roat. (27)

Mary's defense of Jerome spurs Jacob to recall the treatment Jerome's father Will afforded his own father upon his return from the war. He evokes a distinction between the merchant class MacKenzies and the working people of the outport such as Mary and himself:

> **MARY :** Father enlisted for the same reason yours did. Will MacKenzie wasn't in that position.
>
> **JACOB:** No, he didn't need the dollar a day they paid. The same wage as the Canadian privates. More money than he'd ever made in his life, father. More money than he could make at fishing, especially when he went into collar to a merchant like Will MacKenzie. That's a term I bet Jerome never explained to you, in collar ….

MARY: I knows what it means, in collar.

JACOB: What?

MARY: It means to sign aboard a fishing schooner. The fishermen go into collar the first of May and come out of collar the end of October when the schooner is moored for the winter.

JACOB: Yes. 'The First of May is Collar Day/When you're shipped you must obey.'

MARY: If your father had been a shareman, Jacob…

JACOB: But he wasn't a shareman, was he? He only shipped out for wages. Which meant that Will MacKenzie had him in collar for another two months and could do what he liked with him! (29-30)

Some of the factors for Jacob's stubborn unwillingness to remediate his status within the micro-community of Coley's Point now form a part of the discursive environment. His resentment of Jerome stems from the advantage in status Jerome's father used to abuse his own father. Jacob has less social currency or status than did his father, having severed his ties to any affiliative circles which included him. This provides the motivating force behind his efforts to pry Mary from her embedded position in the community.

Jacob's romantic strategy is undermined by Mary's awareness of the personal animus he bears Jerome. She struggles to explain the precariousness of her situation, and the social imperative she is subordinate to in agreeing to marry an Insider with the status of Jerome MacKenzie. Her sister Dot, the sole family member with whom she shares an affiliation, remains in a "Home" (orphanage) at age fourteen, abused by the Matron and dependent on the possibility that her sister will rescue her. The recounting of this story, which begins as a spirited defense of Mary's reasons for staying and marrying Jerome,

inadvertently creates a shared sense of estrangement and a bond between Jacob and Mary based on their disenfranchisement:

> **MARY:** Dot, I said, don't make a sound: don't even cry out, 'cause she'll only grind her heel into you all the harder. Just look into her eyes, I said, and let her know […] that the one t'ing she'll never destroy is your spirit […]. That night at the station, Mr. Dawe tried to buy me a ticket in Second Class. He always did that. Him and Mrs. Dawe would sit in First Class and he'd buy me a ticket in Second; once we was out of St. John's and the conductor had punched the tickets, he'd come back and say 'All right, Mary, you can come in First Class now.' Only this time I wouldn't let him. I said, 'No, Mr. Dawe, and that you won't! I wants a ticket in First Class and I don't care if I have to pay the extra twenty cents myself!'
>
> **JACOB:** Good for you. (67-8)

Jerome, however, gives promise of rescuing her and Dot from their perilous circumstances. She implies that Jacob has returned to seek revenge on Jerome MacKenzie without a thought for the shame she will endure:

> **JACOB:** Is that what you suppose this is, Mary? An eye for an eye? You t'ink I rode t'ousands of miles by train and boat, all to get back at Will McKenzie?
>
> **MARY:** I'm asking *you* that.
>
> **JACOB:** *flaring up* Well, if that's what you really believes, Mary, then you'm right. I *am* a stranger. More of a stranger than you realizes. And if that's the sort of man you imagines me to be, then the hell with you, Mary Snow! Keep your star-gazing fiancé with his bald spot and his bag of candles! *He slips on his jacket and picks up the suitcase.*
>
> **MARY:** *pursuing him* Why shouldn't I wonder that? The same question will be on everyone's lips tomorrow.
>
> **JACOB:** I don't give a damn what others t'ink! It wouldn't bother me if the preacher denounced me from the pulpit! It's what you t'ink that matters! You and no one else! *He starts to exit.* (70-1)

Jacob's reference to himself as a Stranger implicitly confirms Mary's secrets fears—and desires. He is, in fact, "Tom Mix riding in to steal the bride" (69). They both now recognize that Jacob has come to spirit her away; wherever they go, she will be a fugitive from her past. Rescuer or kidnapper, Stranger or maker of a new Inside, the verdict, he asserts, rests with her and her alone.

The test Mary has set Jacob appears to have failed. In accusing him of not considering her feelings or reputation, Jacob, stung, picks up his suitcase and begins to walk off. This is out of character for the irrepressible Jacob, and soon it becomes clear that he is playing an extreme tactic, waiting for Mary to break down and call after him. She is defiant, chanting a verse of the song with which he introduced himself at the top of the play, walking up the road. The words stall in her throat:

> *And suddenly the words choke in her throat and she sobs into her hands all the feelings she has stored inside her for the past year. Her hands try to stifle the sobs as if her soul were rushing from her mouth and she was trying to push it back inside … It is a sudden burst of emotion. She raises her head and looks down the road. She takes another step or two.*
>
> **MARY:** *tentatively*
>
> Jacob … *louder…*
>
> Jacob! … *Then she lets out a cry that splits the night.*
>
> JAAACOOOB! (73)

The moment is sentimental, but none the less powerful for its sentiment and the consequences it implies. Jacob retraces his steps and the die is cast. The couple will

attempt to make a life in a community they have already begun to subconsciously repudiate. They will leave Newfoundland after years of this unconscious estrangement, never to return; voluntary Exiles, Strangers in a foreign land. Mary will have renounced the community to which she has formed her initial protective ties and thrown all her luck in with the smiling man with the cardboard suitcase.

5.4.3 *1949* (1988)

Denis Salter, in reviewing the published editions of *Salt-Water Moon* and *1949*, comments on the prevalence of "quaint customs and folkloric expressions" which feature in both plays but also the "images of death, infertility and despair […] counterbalanced by images of life, fertility, and hope" (36). *1949* is a more complex play than *Salt-Water Moon*. This is due in part to a greater number of characters involving themselves in the lives of Jacob and Mary; in part because the lives of the couple have become more complex with the advent of children and a move to Toronto; and in part because of the introduction of a political dimension to the life of the Mercers.

1949 takes place some 23 years after the events of *Salt-Water Moon*, on the eve of Confederation. Glaap, with the laconic demeanour of one who views Canada from a great distance, describes the bitter Confederation battle and razor-thin result thusly:

> "Newfoundland and its people shaped from 'rock, fog and cod' find themselves on the eve of April 1st, the day they joined Canadian Confederation—April Fool's Day, as some Newfoundlanders ironically commented. Opinions were divided at the time; some emphasized the economic necessity of joining the Confederation while others drew attention to the threat of losing their own Newfoundland cultural identity." ("Family" 168)

Opinions were not the only thing divided. Families split apart over the question of Newfoundland's choices: Commission of Government, continued administration by the British Parliament; Responsible Government, a renewal of independent government; or Confederation. French effectively chooses a convulsive time in the history of Newfoundland for the temporal setting of his play. Like all of the other Mercer plays, *1949* is a realistic, single-set drama. It is less stylistically adventurous than *Of the Fields, Lately*, which features a framing device in which Jacob's son Ben acts as a narrator. Glaap comments on French's by now well-known penchant for careful detailing in set, language and plot: "[T]he details are sketched in unpretentiously and with great sensitivity" ("Family" 169), and observes that "as always, French is primarily concerned with people" (169). Glaap goes on to draw a parallel between the incidents of 1949 and the Free Trade debate which was raging in Canada at the time of the play's writing The link is problematic, not least because once again Glaap underestimates the impact of the Confederation debate on the small former nation. He finds a quotation from the play which supports his contention: "Take Canada. How would the average Canadian feel if he climbed out of bed tomorrow and found he wasn't Canadian anymore? That Canada suddenly belonged to the United States?" (160). Glaap concludes that "the year 1949, despite all the reminiscences and visions of the future which might be aroused in the minds of a Canadian theatre audience, was just an excuse for the portrayal of his characters" (169).

It is significant that the first two Mercer family plays written, *Leaving Home* and its sequel *Of The Fields, Lately*, have little to say about Newfoundland politics or its social culture beyond the behaviours and attitudes of the Mercers and their friends. In

expanding the parameters of the world of *Leaving Home*, French moved away from the father-son dynamic and tight, family-unit focus of his first two plays. Knowles comments that the quasi-Oedipal themes of father-son relationships were prevalent in Canadian theatre in the 1970s as a young generation of (male) playwrights addressed their own personal issues (*Form* 27), as was the "neo-Aristotelian" structure employed by playwrights like French and David Freeman (28). The assumed universality of the father-son theme requires geographic context only as a backdrop. In the later three plays of the Mercer quintet, *Salt-Water Moon*, *1949*, and *Soldier's Heart*, Newfoundland plays a more active role as a reference point for the characters, although it remains secondary to the interpersonal dynamics. The resulting plays are less compact in form, tending to digress from the tight, psychologically-driven dialogues which characterized *Leaving Home* and *Of the Fields, Lately* in order to make forays into political history. This creates difficulties in managing a smooth flow of exposition, particularly with a large number of characters (fourteen) to balance and present. *Salt-Water Moon* remains effective because its two characters are sympathetic and its aims are less ambitious. In *1949*, the ultimate significance of Newfoundland history appears to lie in the play's forceful emphasis on the distinct *national* identity of Newfoundlanders, even when far removed from their homeland.

The play is set in the working class Toronto home of the Mercer family in late March of the year of the title. It is 23 years since the courtship of *Salt-Water Moon*; Mary and Jacob have married and had two sons. Ben is ten, born in the same year as the playwright; Billy is nine. Both were born before the couple joined in the exodus of Newfoundlanders moving to the mainland, specifically Toronto, in search of better

opportunities, and Jacob's mother Rachel has joined them. Soon it is clear that Dot, Mary's younger sister, has also come to Toronto and married Wiff Roach, Jacob's boyhood chum. The Snow and Mercer families, then, have shifted their locus from Coley's Point to Toronto. As mentioned, the micro-community that stands as their primary home is the nucleus of Jacob and Mary, now widened to include their sons, Ben and Billy. A socially and culturally proximate circle of affiliation has sprung up in the concrete of Toronto with the arrival of Dot and Wiff and the expatriate Newfoundland community they have encountered, including Ned, a Newfoundlander boarding at the house. All gather at the Mercer house, an island away from the Island.

From the first image of the play French indicates that the Mercers' Insider status as Newfoundlanders is in play; a Union Jack hangs outside. A newspaper reporter from St. John's is coming to interview the family about their thoughts as Newfoundland enters Confederation. This political event raises profound issues of macro-community affiliation and identity within the small circle of the Mercer family:

> **BILLY:** The doctor says I can get up. He says if I stay in bed, I'll miss school on Thursday.
>
> **RACHEL:** Is that when your school sings 'Ode to Newfoundland'?
>
> **BILLY:** Yeah.
>
> **RACHEL:** Do you know what that song is, Billy?
>
> **BILLY:** No…
>
> **RACHEL:** It's the national anthem of the country you was born in. Do you know the words? (32)

Billy's failure to grasp the significance of the Ode to Newfoundland to its citizens indicates his growing estrangement from the land of his birth. In cultural terms this has already created a fissure that separates his view of the anthem from that of his grandmother and parents. Billy also speaks "Canadian," that is, without the signature inflections and argot of Newfoundland. Culturally, he is a central Canadian. This creates a social distance as well as a cultural distance: with less and less in common, the fabric of the Mercer micro-community is being stretched increasingly thin.

April, Ned's girlfriend, arrives at the Mercer home to confront Ned on the confusing manner with which he has ended their relationship. Jacob is the first to greet her; he learns that for weeks Ned has given April and her parents the impression that he is an Irishman from Dublin. Soon Ned arrives and, in the face of the embarrassing information given by Jacob that neither he nor Ned is Irish, explains the reasons for the fudging of his identity to April:

> **NED:** Look, I've wanted to tell you the truth for weeks now. I almost confessed tonight at the table.
>
> **APRIL:** Oh, sure.
>
> **NED:** I did. But just at that moment your mother asked me what part of Ireland I was from, remember?
>
> **APRIL:** What did you expect? You sounded like you were from the Irish Benevolent Society.
>
> **NED:** ... You didn't have to tell her I came from Dublin.
>
> **APRIL:** I didn't know my father felt that way.
>
> **NED:** 'Dublin?' he said. 'Wasn't Dublin neutral in the war?' And he stared at me like I was some kind of traitor. Like I'd planted a bomb in the basement.

APRIL: It was the perfect time to tell the truth.

NED: I thought so, too. Except right then your mother changed the subject. 'Isn't it awful,' she said, 'the expense that Newfoundland will bring on the Canadian taxpayers?' That's when I decided it wasn't such a perfect time after all. (88)

After April stamps out in a huff, Jacob accuses Ned of being "ashamed of his people" (90). Loyalties are being contested in a house of Exiles. The sense of growing displacement is intensified when Mary reports on her meeting with Miss Dunn, Ben's schoolteacher. Ben has received the strap for fighting with another boy, Junior Sanilosi. Ben could not identify Coley's Point on a map of Newfoundland that Miss Dunn has hung over the blackboard. Young Sanilosi, himself a "D.P.," or displaced person,[36] had whispered something to Ben as he returned to his seat. Later, Ned reveals that Ben was called a "Newfie," and that this initial incident has led to a more violent altercation:

NED: …Yesterday I was coming home from work, and I saw that Sanilosi kid and two others kicking the shit out of him. I broke it up.

JACOB: Yesterday?

NED: They had him down on the street in front of Mike's Fruit Market, trying to stuff rotten lettuce into his mouth…

JACOB winces

And you know why, Jacob? You know why?

JACOB: Tell me!

NED: Junior was sitting on his chest, screaming, 'You're just a Newfie, Mercer! Say it! Say it!' and Ben was screaming back, 'I'm not a Newfie! I'm not! I'm not a fucking Newfie!'

JACOB: Ben said that?...

NED: Yeah, Ben said that. Over and over. 'I'm not a fucking Newfie! I'm not!'

JACOB: Then what was that fight all about at school today?

Then

Ned?

NED: Maybe it wasn't what you thought, Jacob. Maybe it wasn't that Junior insulted Newfoundlanders. Maybe Ben was just upset that Junior called him one. Did that ever occur to you?

JACOB: No. No, it didn't...

NED: You preach to me about pride, Jacob, but what kind of pride are you teaching him? What the hell does Ben know about Newfoundland except that his own father can't wait to give it away? (91)

Jacob has come out in favour of Confederation, to his mother's consternation. Readers familiar with the saga of the Mercers would not find the revelation surprising, despite Jacob's vocal promotion of all things Newfoundland. Jacob and Newfoundland have been, in effect, estranged lovers for many years. While still claiming it as the touchstone of his identity, Jacob has both physically and psychically moved away from it. His conflicted feelings and marginalized status enable him to keenly feel the wound of Billy's betrayal of his roots and Ned's implication that Jacob's pro-Confederation stance is symptomatic of a malaise of identity within the household.

Jacob remains forever a Newfoundlander, despite the fact that he has fled it twice. His affiliation with his birth home constitutes an integral part of the fabric of mores which make up the Mercer family. As patriarch, and thus the chief officer for enforcement of community values, he has assigned the same identity, and the same codes, to Ben and Billy, without their consent or acquiescence. The codes have little meaning

for the two Toronto-raised boys; as a result, they will gradually become increasingly estranged from their mother and father. Billy will take the path of least resistance, finish his time, and bolt the house as early as he can find a girl to marry. Ben's rebellion will constitute the major part of two complete plays and end, at least indirectly, with the death of his father.

The impending Confederation has caused a revisiting of the issues of affiliation and identity within the Mercer household. This is accelerated by the arrival of Capt. Jerome MacKenzie. In *Salt-Water Moon* Jerome MacKenzie is never seen. He is derogated as a pedant and rich boy without practical skills by the young Jacob, even as having a "bald patch on the crown of his head, and him only twenty years old" (41). The Captain MacKenzie of *1949* presents a very different picture. Now a decorated war hero, Jerome has remediated the perceived deficiency pinpointed by Jacob as a young man—namely, the failure of his father to volunteer for war service. He saunters in with an attractive woman, Grace, accompanying him as a camerawoman. Jerome now works as a reporter for the St. John's *Daily News*. He has been invited by Jacob's mother Rachel to interview the family on their reactions to the impending Confederation, an issue about which Jerome has few doubts, given that he is an unqualified Insider of high esteem within the Newfoundland macro-community. He is a Newfoundland nationalist, come to Toronto to find evidence of the disrespect he is certain his country will receive as a junior partner in a larger political entity. The invitation from Rachel forms a convenient excuse for an objective of equal importance: to see Mary and assess whether or not a flame can be rekindled.

The respect with which Wiff, Dot and Rachel mention Jerome rankles the competitive and intensely insecure Jacob, who senses, correctly, that his territory and most cherished affiliations are at risk. At 41, Jacob works a lunch bucket job with no easy end in sight. His rough manner and lack of education compare unfavourably with the urbanity of the army veteran. Jacob's physical virility and insouciant charm, his two most effective assets, have worn down under the grinding pressure of years of hard work. Within the macro-community of Newfoundland, to which Jacob still attaches himself, his status is several lengths below that of the Captain. Jerome's arrival causes a primal reaction in both Mary and Jacob. He cannot help wondering if she is reconsidering her choice. She, in some corner of her heart, cannot help but reconsider, presented with the ill-concealed attentions of an attractive male suitor.[37]

Jerome faces one disadvantage. Within the micro-community of expatriate Newfoundlanders, he is an Outsider. The fact that his exploits are known to all results in a level of status attribution that elevates him quickly in the eyes of Jacob, his sons, and his best friend Wiff, who served with "the Captain" during the war. He is, however, not on home territory, but rather a space where loyalties and affiliations to that polity are in a state of flux. This constitutes terrain that is more difficult to negotiate.

Grace, Jerome's photographer and current girlfriend, hopes an encounter with the fortyish Mary will put an end to Jerome's constant evocations of her. It is she who is responsible for setting in motion the process of the interview, aided by a willing, if unconscious, accomplice in Rachel. Rachel exerts little influence on Jacob or Mary. She must therefore cast about for other ways to exert her influence within the Mercer family polity. A Newfoundlander of the old school, she ardently opposes Confederation and

wishes that opposition to be made public. She has placed a black wreath on the door and dramatically sports a black armband, a symbol of mourning for the impending loss of Newfoundland's sovereignty.

As in *Salt-Water Moon*, there is never a sense of suspense hanging over Mary's seeming choice. Jerome is figured as an Exile by Mary, someone who has returned out of her past, even though it is she who left, taking her *umwelt*, or mobile sphere of identity, with her. To choose him now, after a hiatus of twenty-three years, would constitute a transgression of extreme severity within both of the micro-communities she holds dearest, those of her family and the expatriate Newfoundland community. Criticism of French's work for this lack of suspense miss the mark, however. *1949*, like its predecessors *Leaving Home* and *Of the Fields, Lately*, is a careful character study of a micro-community that will eventually be doomed by its increasing inability to adjust to modern realities and the shifting of boundaries of their Inside. At the moment, however, the necessary adjustments are made. The family weathers the stress of the Confederation debate with a sense of reaffirmed loyalties and values. The future, in a sense, has occurred. It is known, for those familiar with the earlier plays, what will happen. *1949* is an examination of the steps in the process of a family's disintegration as a unit.

The males within the Mercer circle feel themselves under attack, as if their world is shifting beyond their ability to deal with or understand it. Ben and Billy have taken to acts of minor delinquency, stealing their teacher's wig at a movie showing. This represents a repudiation of cultural competence, a conscious subversion of norms they have already learned and to which they previously adhered. Miss Dunn represents the arc of learning that is expected in the new social unit of which they are now a part. To

subvert her dignity calls into question their willingness to appropriate the orthodoxy of the community.

Ned flounders in his relationship with April, having been caught in an outrageous identity deception. He has no physical home of his own and spars angrily with Jacob over issues of fealty to a nostalgically figured Newfoundland. Jacob feels his son Billy slipping away from him. Angry and insecure in the face of Jerome's confident presence, he resents the adulation accorded Jerome by Wiff, Ben, Billy and Rachel and the evident option Jerome represents for Mary. Wiff and Dot, now in their late thirties, have been unable to conceive a child. The issue of progeny is one of continuance of the micro-community. Wiff refuses to take the sperm test demanded by his wife Dot; she has moved out until he agrees. His intransigence appears to demonstrate his fear of being proved sterile, but in fact he fears what will happen to his marriage if Dot discovers it is she who is infertile. The true impotence lies in Wiff's inability to figure a way out of the situation.

Fear of impotence on a figurative level underscores many of the reactions of the expatriate community's males. Potency is a biological marker for the survival of a species, race, or tribe. The feeling of impotency which afflicts them is an indication of their fear of disappearing, just as Newfoundland, the sovereign entity which holds so much meaning for them, is about to disappear. After Dot discovers that she is the cause of their failure to conceive she recalls an event from the past which emphasizes this feeling of impotence:

> **DOT:** I'll never forget the day my husband returned from the War. It was July 30, 1945. Remember that, Wiff? The day the first draft of the Newfoundland Regiment sailed home.

WIFF: How could I forget? We hadn't seen each other in six years.

DOT: … A week later he was back in civilian life.

WIFF: That's a day I won't forget, either.

DOT: No, that was the day he packed away his uniform. Then he went out and sat on the porch and whittled a stick. He was there till long after dark, and he had this … this lost look on his face as though he wondered what he was going to do now with the rest of his life […]. I never understood, Wiff, how you felt at that time. No, I don't suppose I understood that till just now….(151)

Out of her earshot, Wiff reveals that Dot was unfaithful while he was away in the War, a secret not even her sister Mary has known. The back-alley abortion which followed has rendered her infertile. A dalliance with a Stranger has damaged the ability of these Insiders to further the existence of their micro-community and exacerbated their sense of insecurity at the forces without which threaten them. The damage is not just physical. Dot has transgressed against the mores each of the two micro-communities share, and the impact is felt by all, but most keenly by Wiff, who must deal with the legacy of the transgression.

Jerome, realizing that his future and Mary's are not destined to intertwine, proposes to Grace. A nationalist to the end, he has filed his story, entitling it "Elegy For A Nation." Jerome quotes doleful lines from Thomas Grey's "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard":

RACHEL: What's an elegy, my son?

JEROME: That's a mournful poem. A poem that laments the dead. *MARY reacts*. Like Thomas Grey's 'Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard'.
'Let not ambition mock their useful toil
Their homely joys, and destiny obscure;

> Nor grandeur hear with a disdainful smile
> The short and simple annals of the poor…
> The boast of heraldry, the pomp of power,
> And all that beauty, all that wealth e'er gave
> Awaits alike the inevitable hour:—
> The paths of glory lead but to the grave.' (158)

Mary is exasperated by this drenching nostalgia, and feels that the integrity of her intimate Inside has been stained by this political rhetoric: "For God's sake, let's stop speaking of death, can't we? ... This is not a house of mourning. This is not a wake. This is a simple house on a simple street, and death isn't welcome here." (158-59) As a woman of traditional beliefs, she feels keenly the responsibility to foster life, to actively guard against those threatening the perpetuation of the community. In the face of Jacob's increasingly manifest impotence, she has assumed the role of guardian of the community. Jerome, undeterred, relates a story of the passion with which Newfoundlanders treated the prospect of Confederation:

> **JEROME:** I saw a man in Shearstown put his fist through a two-inch door the night of the referendum. You think our new Premier understands the sense of shame and betrayal that would make a man crush his hand to stop his heart from breaking? (160)

Ben's thoughtless adulation for the Captain and resultant depreciation of his father—"Dad wasn't brave, stupid. Didn't you hear what Granny said? He never even got overseas" (162)—fuels Mary's defense of the sanctity of her home. She defines her idea of appropriate Insider behaviour:

> **MARY:** Why don't you ask your father what it's like to rise in the dark of winter and trudge off to work with his toolbox, to keep a roof over our heads and food on the table? Why don't you ask him how he feels if one of you gets a fever and he paces all night, pretending he's not tired? You t'ink for a minute he wouldn't give his life for either one of you? […] what I saw in your father from the first is what made him special. You see, I recognized that no odds what that man would always be there for me. Always be there for me and my kids. He'd sooner die first …. (163)

Jacob will end up giving his life in that pursuit, insisting on working even as his heart fails in *Of The Fields, Lately*. For the moment, Mary's outburst restores the equilibrium of the Mercer household and Jacob is even able to say a farewell to Jerome with relative equanimity. There is one more link to be made between the Exile of the Mercers and the state of Newfoundland, as Jerome makes his exit:

> **JEROME:** *to MARY* I'm only sorry we don't see eye to eye on things political. I don't suppose that's possible, is it?
>
> **MARY:** It's 1949, Jerome; the world is changing. How long could an island go it alone? Sooner or later Newfoundland had to be dragged into this day and age.
>
> **JEROME:** Maybe it did. But a country isn't just contained within its borders, Mary. It's contained within its people. It's what makes us special in our own eyes, and in the eyes of the world. Losing that sense of who we are is a high price to pay for comfort. Besides, who in Christ's name ever said we had to have comfort above all else? *Who?* (167)

Jerome's defense constitutes a resumé of Michael Cook's fear that Newfoundland will not recognize itself as it changes and modernizes. Mary, forced to choose loyalties between not only Jerome and Jacob but between Newfoundland and her family, chooses the smaller, more intimate and personal option in both cases.

Calm has returned to the Mercer household, but it is clear that things will never again be the same in their extended circle. Wiff and Dot will make up, but the revelation of Dot's infertility, and its constant evidence of her infidelity, will mark their marriage as Wiff begins a slow slide to alcoholism. Ben has unknowingly sowed the seeds of a rupture in his relationship with his father through his callow dismissal of the sacrifices he has endured for his family. For the moment all appears well.

Jacob and Mary dance, not a jig or reel, but a tango, a dance from a foreign culture but one they can safely adopt as their own. No one dances it well; the dance might act as a metaphor for the adjustments made by any new Canadian to life in Canada. The enthusiasm with which the attempt is undertaken is more significant than the act itself. They are soon joined by Wiff and Dot. Rachel puts aside her resentment; she is a survivor of many traumas, and this is not the most serious. April returns to Ned. The atmosphere is less gay than one of relief, the feeling of having narrowly avoided something calamitous. Despite the sentiment of the play's final scene, the underlying sense is that the calamity has occurred, and that its effects are merely delayed.

In *1949* the themes of loss and of the conflict between past desires and present circumstance are brought together with leitmotifs of decaying potency and hesitant, hopeful steps into the future. Despite its myriad sub-plots, its litany of minor characters who appear and disappear without notable consequence, and the layering of political rhetoric, *1949* manages to articulate a sense of the inchoate helplessness experienced by Insiders who find themselves Outside their home milieu. The play is most effective when Mary is defending the integrity of her family unit against the threats she sees arrayed against it. Her startling outbursts of anger effectively communicate the desperation of a

woman who fears for the safety of the only community to which she truly belongs, and who knows that there is only one course of action to ensure its security: to actively maintain the sanctity of the family unit against those who would destroy it.

5.4.4 *Leaving Home* (1972)

The first two plays of the Mercer quintet fared somewhat better in terms of critical reception than their successors. This may at least partly be explained by the currents of Canadian cultural nationalism which were sweeping the country in the early 1970s and what Knowles cites as "the context of what was almost universally referred to as the 'coming of age' in Canadian drama" (*Form* 27). French and playwrights such as David Freeman and James Reaney were at the forefront of a new generation of Canadian playwrights, writing with the "neo-Aristotelian […] dramaturgical techniques" in which, Knowles claims, "most Canadians" of the 1970s generation had been schooled. Knowles further asserts that the theatre artists who came out of the "four or five years of drilling" in neo-Aristotelianism that constituted university humanities education found it second nature to write realistic plays (26).

In an interview with David French in 1982, *Leaving Home* was described by Cynthia Zimmerman as "the most produced Canadian play in Canadian literature" (*Work* 305). French, in the same interview, claims the published version had by that point sold 40,000 copies and had had more than 60 productions in Canada alone (305). By Canadian standards of publication and production this is an unparalleled level of success. French did not attempt to explain this success: "I didn't try to hit a nerve, you understand. I

simply tried to write a very specific play about a very specific family." (305) The universality of the Mercer family's troubles was firmly rooted in a specific culture, however:

> **Zimmerman**: Is the issue of Newfoundland central to the play?
>
> **French:** Yes […] what [Jacob] feels is an unformed nostalgia […]. Jacob's values were shaped by life in Newfoundland, his sons' by life in an urban centre […]. I had tried to write plays about my family before […] and nothing ever seemed to work because I always shied away from making them Newfoundlanders. Now I cannot explain that except I guess I didn't think people would be interested. (305-06)

French, at least at this point in his career, positions himself as a member of the Newfoundland community, more through his family's affiliation than as a matter of birthright. He demonstrates the unease of a distant Exile, but also the realization that to write honestly this affiliation would have to be present in the work. This is underscored by remarks made in a different interview:

> I've never had problems of Canadian identity. We've been in Newfoundland since the 1700s […]. I always figured out I knew who I was—I was a Newfoundlander. Is Newfoundland part of Canada? No. Their attitudes are different, there are Newfoundlanders and mainlanders. A mixed marriage is between a Newfoundlander and a mainlander. (qtd. in Rudakoff 11)

Critical reception after the play's opening at the Tarragon Theatre in May 1972 was generally effusive. Herbert Whittaker remarked that "all of its characters have the quality of theatrical life" (qtd. in Conolly 88). Urjo Kareda called the play "exceptional" (89), possessing "remarkable dynamic life" (89) and the "urgent complexity of truth" (90), but

also notes that the play's "outsiders" are not written with the same level of complexity (89). This hints at French's determination to have the spectator view the world of the Mercers from the Inside, to become, as it were, a member of the family for a night, and to feel the growing alienation in the family in a personal way.

R.W. Bevis, writing in *Canadian Literature*, likened the play to the work of "a bright undergraduate" (106) and took issue with the play's subjective presentation of the conflict between Ben and Jacob, which he felt was weighted unfairly—and undramatically—in favour of the son. More typical of the critical response was the essay by Ed Jewinski in *Canadian Drama* entitled "Jacob Mercer's Lust for Victimization," in which French's play is favourably compared to the work of Arthur Miller, John Osborne and Tennessee Williams, particularly with regard to the issue of the "little man […] hero-as victim"(59). Knowles, writing retrospectively, is notably critical of this elevation of neo-Aristotelian modern tragedy at a time in world theatre when alternatives had been prominent for more than seventy years (*Form* 27).

Leaving Home was written in 1971-2, when French was in his early thirties. His remarks during this period indicate that he was still close enough, both temporally and psychically, to his childhood days to appropriate membership status in both of the communities most cherished of his father, the macro-community of Newfoundland and the micro-community of the family. The play takes place eight years after Confederation. All of the action takes place within the Mercer house in Toronto. The landscape has altered somewhat. In *Leaving Home*, Ben is eighteen and ready for independence. Only faint traces remain of the Jacob Mercer of 1926. Nearly thirty years later, he is an irascible, bitter, petty tyrant. Jacob has become old before his time. The play crackles

with tension and deft touches of percussive dialogue. In exploring the roots of the break-up of the Mercer family, French creates the moment when a family breaks apart as a result of slowly accumulating tensions. The pace of both *Salt-Water Moon* and *1949* is almost leisurely, as befits a simpler time. *Leaving Home* moves at a more urban, contemporary pace, punctuated by explosive encounters between Jacob and Ben. This urban atmosphere is decidedly at odds with the old-school traditionalism of Jacob Mercer. In this respect the play's cadence acts as a thematic underscore, indicating the disharmony between Jacob and his environment. Jacob has become *absurd*, in the dictionary sense of the word: out of harmony with his surroundings.

The play revolves ostensibly around the imminent marriage of Ben's brother Billy to Kathy, a local girl and the daughter of one of Jacob's old girlfriends, Minnie. Once again the circle of characters closest to the Mercers are, as they are, expatriate Newfoundlanders. Neither Billy nor Kathy is ready to marry, but as Kathy is both pregnant and Catholic the wedding is deemed necessary. Jacob appears to be concerned only with her Catholicism, which he despises as a result of the sectarian upbringing he received in the denominational school system of Newfoundland. The families are to meet for dinner before going out to the wedding rehearsal. The initial division of Catholic and Protestant is presented but not underlined; Minnie was courted by Jacob back in Newfoundland, and was prevented from furthering their relationship. Jacob has indicated that he is not standing in the way—a demonstration that his interpretation of the core community values of his macro-community has evolved, adapting to the new reality of life in Exile. Levels of transgression are being redefined in the new context. It is more

important that Billy marry a Newfoundlander, avoiding the ignominy of what French calls “mixed marriage” in his interview with Zimmerman (305).

If this first division within the nucleus of the Mercer micro-community has been addressed, a second soon appears. Ben’s high school graduation has taken place the previous night. Jacob was not invited. Ben has rationalized that, with his mother at a bridal shower, his father would not have come by himself. The breach which opened with Ben’s dismissal of his father’s military activity in *1949* and his shouted denial of his Newfoundland roots has widened since. The old man bullies and berates his oldest son, “testing him” (29). Ben announces—notably, this is addressed to Mary—his plan to move in with Billy and Kathy and share the rent of their apartment.

Jacob returns home drunk, ready for a fight—or a jig. He vents his bitterness against Catholics in anticipation of Billy’s nuptials, dances with Mary, and demonstrates that he is, even at a hard-living fifty, a force of nature.[38] Compactly built, a bristling bundle of insecurities, and manifestly ill-equipped to deal with the modern exigencies with which he is faced, Jacob Mercer confronts every challenge in the same way, marshalling the energy of anger and resentment. Still, as he ages, he has become a figure of mild condescension within the family. He tries on his tuxedo; it fits poorly. The mother warns the sons against any open show of disrespect, but they fail to hide their giggles.

A third fissure in the family has appeared. A pattern of covert signal and response between mother and sons, regarding the father, has been established. In the communicative environment of the family, Mary, Ben and Billy have developed an alternative loop, speaking frankly in Jacob’s absence (22) or utilizing code which Jacob is

not privy to (although he later manifests knowledge of its existence). Jacob dances, heedless to such signals, but within a few seconds he has to claim an injured heel. His energy is on the wane. As patriarch of the micro-community of the Mercers, the responsibility for enforcement and punishment of core values has begun to weigh heavily on him. Worse, the weakness has been sensed and a process of ostracization has begun. That such action would stem from loving family members at first appears contradictory, but within the context of survival, both of the individual and the family polity, it is seen as the most sensible action to undertake. These characters can rationalize that it is a manifestation of caring, even as they seek to avoid the conflict that inevitably ensues from a challenge to patriarchal authority.

The unspoken implication is that Jacob is beginning to glimpse his mortality and that it is approaching steadily. His resistance, however, has not yet abated. He relentlessly baits Ben, the more outwardly sensitive of the two boys. He reaches for the whisky and pretends not to find it so as to force Ben to drink Screech, the talismanic liquor of Newfoundland. Ben refuses. It is clear to Ben that this unannounced test of manhood fits a pattern of abuse:

> **BEN:** Do you ever hear yourself? 'Ben, get up that ladder. You want people to think you're a sissy? Have a drink, Ben. It'll make a man out of you.'
>
> **JACOB:** I said no such t'ing, now. Liar.
>
> **BEN:** It's what you **meant**. 'Cut your hair, Ben. You look like a girl.' The same shit over and over, and it never stops!
>
> **JACOB:** Now it all comes out. You listening to this, Mary?
>
> **BEN:** No, you listen, Dad. You don't really expect me to climb that ladder or take that drink. You want me to refuse, don't you?

JACOB: Well, listen to him. The faster you gets out into the real world the better for you.

(He turns away.)

BEN: Dad, you don't want me to be a man, you just want to impress me with how much less of a man I am than you. (*He snatches the bottle from his father and takes a swig.*) All right. Look. (*He rips open his shirt.*) I still haven't got hair on my chest, and I'm still not a threat to you.

JACOB: No, and you'm not likely to, either, until you grows up and gets out from your mother's skirts.

BEN: No, Dad—until I get out from yours. (30)

Exposed as a bully, Jacob's response—"Liar"—demonstrates the unsophisticated tactical arsenal he possesses. For a moment the relationship between father and son has been inverted, a foreshadowing of the inexorable descent of an aging father and rise of the growing son. Knowles remarks on the "Oedipal coming-of-age" quality of *Leaving Home* (*Form* 32-3). As with the original spectators' perception of *Oedipus Rex*, the question is not *if* the reversal will happen, but *how*. French is a reifying social playwright in both form and substance in the early Mercer plays; this progression to reversal is clearly depicted as negative, and the prevailing feeling is one of sadness. While its portrait of the lion in winter is not without sympathy and nuance, it is clear that Jacob, in refusing to adjust quickly or significantly to the changing nature of his family, is in the wrong, and that he will pay the dearest of prices. That the succeeding play, *Of the Fields, Lately*, in which Jacob dies, is told from Ben's point of view only underscores this.

Kathy, the bride-to-be, arrives. The arrival of a soon-to-be affiliated Outsider mitigates the tension temporarily. This encroachment on private space (Goffman, *Relations* 29) alters the nature of the personal interaction the Mercers can perform. Kathy

carries her own *umwelt*; she appears little affected by the conversation, focusing her attention almost exclusively on her own concerns. She finds a moment alone with Billy to tell him she has had a miscarriage. For a moment, they occupy a psychic *stall* (32), bounding themselves off from others, an anticipation of the micro-community they plan to form with the wedding. It is clear that Kathy does not value the Mercer micro-community except for what she is about to take from it. This demarcates her as a Stranger. Although marriage, should it happen, will tie her into the matrix of family relationships, she will remain apart, a Demystified Stranger whose appropriation of Billy, it appears, will not be easily forgiven (or remediated). A section of the dialogue indicates that this exclusion is not the action of Billy and Kathy alone:

> **KATHY:** I wish you wouldn't talk about me like that, mother.
>
> **MINNIE:** Like what?
>
> **KATHY:** Like I was invisible. I don't like it; I've told you before.
>
> **JACOB:** Now, now, Kathy.
>
> **MINNIE:** Listen to her, will you? Sister, you may soon wish you **was** invisible, when the girls from the office start counting back on the office calendar (72).

The fact that she is Canadian (as opposed to Newfoundlander) exacerbates Kathy's status as a Stranger. Jacob proffers a piece of advice that carries clear enforcement connotations:

> **JACOB:** You was born in Toronto, wasn't you? Someday you'll have to take a trip home, you and Billy, and see how they dries out cod on the beaches. He don't remember any more than you. He was just little when he come up here.

MARY: That was a long time ago, Kathy, 1945.

KATHY: (*slight pause*) Have you been home since, Mr. Mercer?

JACOB: No, and I don't know if I wants to. A different generation growing up now. (*glancing at BEN*) A different brand of Newfie altogether. And once the oldtimers die off, that'll be the end of it. Newfoundland'll never be the same after that, I can tell you. (36)

Jacob has accurately predicted the demise of his macro-community and links it to his own demise: "once the oldtimers die off." From his nostalgic perspective, that community already *has* changed irrevocably. The physically real Newfoundland will live on, but Jacob Mercer's Newfoundland will not.[39] In this passage there is much that explains the isolation of Jacob Mercer and the transformation from the carefree boy of *Salt-Water Moon*. Life as an Exile has hardened his exterior, his public adherence to traditional precepts, while withering his interior, his faith in their immutability. Jacob realizes unconsciously that his Inside, the Newfoundland of his youth, no longer exists and cannot be recreated. In the flush of his nostalgic loyalty to the home mythology he has created, he deliberately slurs Ben with the same insult shouted by Junior Sanilosi: "Newfie." The implication is that the young Bens of the world are not worthy Newfoundlanders. As guardian of the shrinking kingdom wherein is enacted his idealized version of Newfoundland life, Jacob retreats behind increasingly unachievable standards of purity of thought and deed. If Insiders are departing, the interpretation must be that they are not good enough to stay.

The discord between Mary and Jacob over Jerome MacKenzie from the events surrounding Confederation has been patched over, but the issue remains. Jacob, if anything, has become more insecure over the ensuing years since Jerome's visit in 1949:

JACOB: Oh, don't forget the most important part, Mary, the Q.C., the Queen's Counsel. Jerome MacKenzie, Q.C. (*to KATHY*) Jerome's a well-known barrister in St. John's, and Mrs. Mercer's all the time t'rowing it up in my face. Ain't you, Mary? Never lets me forget it, will you? (*To KATHY*) You see, my dear, she might have married Jerome MacKenzie, Q.C., and never had a single worry in the world, if it wasn't for me. Ain't that so, Mary?

MARY: If you insists, Jacob. (39)

Jerome is the model of the "pure" Newfoundlander to which Jacob feels inferior. In transferring his guilt at his unworthiness to his sons, he is dealing with the loss of status he has incurred in the only manner he knows, trying to reverse the flow through a diminishment of others. Once he has started, there is a wellspring of hurt in Jacob, and the various betrayals he has suffered begin to flow:

JACOB: And the likes of Ben may t'ink me an old fool, not worth a second t'ought—

BEN shoves back his plate, holding back his temper.

—and run me down to my face every chance he gets—

BEN : Ah, shut up.

JACOB: And treat me with no more respect and consideration than you would your own enemy!—

BEN: Will you grow up! (*Knocks over his chair and exits into his bedroom*)

JACOB: (*shouting after him*) —but I've always done what I seen fit, and no man can do more! (41)

In terror of his inability to control his rapidly declining health and maintain the integrity of the organism he holds most dear, Jacob is determined that Ben will not be

placed in the same position. The conflict within Jacob causes a disconnect between intention and action. Jacob believes the family will not survive unless his progeny are tough enough to fend for themselves. He pursues this objective by, paradoxically, continually alienating Ben. His sense of the challenges presented by the modern world is visceral:

> **JACOB:** (*to KATHY*) Israel Parsons was Mrs. Mercer's first cousin […] he worked summers at the pulp and paper mill at Corner Brook, cleaning the machines. Well, one noon hour he crawled inside a machine to clean the big sharp blades, and someone flicked on the switch. Poor young Israel was ground into pulp. They didn't even find a trace of him, did they, Mary? Not even a hair. Mary's mother always joked that he was the only one of her relatives to make the headlines—if you knows what I mean.
>
> **MARY:** She knows. And just what has Israel Parsons got to do with Ben, pray tell?
>
> **JACOB:** Because that's what the world will do to Ben, Mary, if he's not strong. Chew him up alive and swallow him down without a trace. Mark my words. (43)

Twice in this short section Jacob describes what he considers the ultimate ignominy, to disappear without a trace. To lack strength, to lack usefulness, to fail to ensure your survival, is to lack meaning. Without such definition a person (and a polity) vanishes without a trace. This exchange takes place in a context that, in emotional terms, French makes plausible. In his relentless badgering and apocalyptic forecasts, Jacob can be identified by spectators as a father who loves his son and seeks to protect him. This, after all, is amongst the most sacred tasks of a patriarch—to ensure the survival of the polity through his male heirs.

Minnie arrives with her new boyfriend, Harold, in tow. Harold is a curious yet effective dramatic device. The only Canadian in the play with no Newfoundland affiliation beyond his casual, sexual link to Minnie, Harold served as the undertaker at the funeral of Minnie's husband and quickly replaced him in her bed. Harold is a man of few words. In fact, he is a man of no words. Throughout the ensuing scenes Harold bears silent witness to the airing of soiled Newfoundland family laundry. His presence is at once comic and detached, enabling within this work of illusionistic realism a window for a more objective perspective—what, the spectator asks, must Harold think of all this shouting and dancing, yelling and crying? His Stranger status is underlined not only by his evident unease but by Jacob, who speaks of him in the third person:

> **JACOB:** What is he, Minnie? Newfie?
>
> **MINNIE:** No, boy—Canadian.
>
> **JACOB:** Harold, there's only two kinds of people in this world—Newfies and them that wishes they was.
>
> **MINNIE:** That's what I tells him, boy.
>
> **JACOB:** Why else would Canada have j'ined us in 1949? Right, Minnie? (62)

Minnie is a comforting link to Jacob's past, an ally in the creation and maintenance of Jacob's nostalgia. While Minnie is out of the living room viewing the shower gifts, Kathy and Billy argue about the consequences of the miscarriage. Billy wants to call the marriage off; Kathy vehemently disagrees. Faced with the imminent demise of an affiliation she regards as crucial—her mother's behaviour confirms that Kathy has no family organism on which she can rely—she is forced to extremes. She

tests the strength of her new micro-community by caressing Harold's thigh in front of Billy, teasing him. This is a taboo transgression on several levels—the flirtation with an older man who is a putative father figure, a betrayal of a bonded suitor—but most significant is the extremity of the action in physical terms. Kathy breaks through the *sheath* of Harold's persona by making contact with him in an intimate manner against his will. Billy is forced to respond in kind. He grabs Kathy's wrist. This gesture, which bespeaks threatened violence, is also taboo. They are playing a transgressive game of chicken, seeing who will give in first. Harold is mortified.[40] Billy and Kathy argue. The other adults return. Her tactic has proven unsuccessful.

An escalation of tactics is needed. Minnie derogates her daughter for getting pregnant and forcing her to pay for a wedding. Her status within her primary micro-community undermined, this provides the trigger for Kathy to act. She announces to all assembled that she is no longer pregnant (73). Consternation ensues. Minnie insists that the marriage will still take place, as she has already paid for it. Mary advocates on behalf of the young couple, saying it is their choice. Their fate, in her eyes, has nothing but positive elements to it. If they unite, it will create another intimate affiliative circle to bolster the Mercer family micro-community. If they do not unite, Billy will continue as a member of the family. As the matriarch of the micro-community her enforcement manner emphasizes inclusiveness and flexibility in the application of normative criteria, in contrast to the rigid orthodoxy espoused by Jacob.

The disagreement reveals the adjustment Mary has made in separating her family from the old ways of Newfoundland, as compared to the reflexive manner in which Minnie demands their application. The conversation is strained by these competing views

of orthodox behaviour. Yet Mary has not been so assiduous on her own affiliative territory. It is precisely the kind of intimate conversation which has been absent at the Mercer dinner table for years.

In the brief second act of the play the tensions of this initial crack in the family are papered over. Billy and Kathy retreat to the kitchen as the consensus appears to be leaning back to marriage. Once again they create a *stall* to further support their sense of independence. They remove themselves from social proximity in order to do so, shifting their private discussion to another room even as an impromptu dance breaks the tension. Minnie inadvertently reveals to Jacob that Ben, too, is planning to leave home. Her failure to realize the import of this statement reveals that Minnie does not possess the requisite communicative competence to be fully a member of the Mercer inner circle, and that the affiliative circle of expatriates of which she is a member has limited access to such knowledge. This seemingly innocuous bit of information catalyzes the final actions of the play. Jacob's outward process of estrangement from his family has accelerated.

Over the years of their adolescence, and in the face of Jacob's furious bitterness, the two boys and Mary have evolved as a sub-unit of the household, the place where all raw news and decisions are hashed out and reworked before presentation, in censored form, to the father. Jacob is "always the last to find out" (83). Enraged, he advances threateningly on Ben. This is inherently self-defeating. As explained in Chapter Two, violence tends to be categorized as Strange behaviour, and its enactment as a transgression of major significance. Such an act will only increase Jacob's level of estrangement from Ben and the family. Faced with the threat of violence, Ben's response demonstrates his awareness of this equation: "Come on. Hit me. I'm not scared. Hit me.

You'd never see me again!" (85). Disarmed for the moment, Jacob retreats behind a defense of the sanctity of the physical boundaries of the micro-community: "Why the hell do you think we slaved to buy this house, if it wasn't for you two? And now you won't stick around long enough to help pay back a red cent. You'd rather pay rent to a stranger!" (85)

The invocation, in a vernacular sense, of a Stranger to whom an Insider prefers to pay rent creates a sense of irony. Jacob left his own home behind at eighteen, a temporary Exile which eventually became permanent.[41] Jacob implies that his son has made him out to be of less social value in the sense defined by Homans (146), than a Stranger.[42] One boy is disrespectful, the other is converting to Catholicism, while his wife says he only has himself to blame. The three share a code which excludes him. The world is collapsing around Jacob Mercer in a manner so breathtakingly fast and unpredictable that he is unable to comprehend that his reactions only make the outcome more certain. In desperation he takes out a photo album and begins to show Ben baby pictures, a crude attempt to draw him back within the Inside. Jacob invokes the sacrifice made by his mother to bear him:

> **JACOB:** Look how lovely your mother looks, my son. No more than ninety pounds when she had you.
>
> **MARY:** Ninety one.
>
> **JACOB:** She was that t'in, you'd swear the wind would carry her off. We never believed she'd have another, after the first died. He was premature. Seven months, and he only lived a few hours.
>
> **MARY:** Enough of the past, boy. (90)

He describes the agony of Ben's birth, declares on Mary's behalf "the state she'll be in if you goes" (91). When this tactic appears insufficient to protect the family unit, he decides to sacrifice himself on the altar of her love:

> **JACOB:** Your mother always lived just for the two of you.
>
> **MARY:** (*pained*) Oh, Jacob.
>
> **JACOB:** Always.
>
> **BEN:** C'mon, Dad, that's not true.
>
> **……**
>
> **JACOB:** Confess, Mary. I don't count. I've never counted. Not since the day they was born.(92)

Jacob's humiliation is compounded by the easy deferral of this explosive statement. His efforts fall on deaf, or skeptical, ears. Cornered and desperate, Jacob calls on his one unfailing resource, his long-nourished sense of outrage. The emotion bears witness to Jacob Mercer's remarkable will to survive on his own terms even as his family implodes. He charges into the boys' room and begins to toss possessions onto the living room floor. This act occurs on both a physical and symbolic level. Symbolically, it is a transgressive act against a family member disguised as an act of enforcement. Jacob is removing the tie-signs which mark the *possessional territory* of Ben's bedroom (Goffman, *Relations* 38) and which announce Ben's membership in the family. This violation of Ben's *personal space* (29), accompanied by the shouted invitation to leave, neatly captures Jacob's implied threat to erase Ben's identity within the micro-community of his family.

Jacob's rage, however, is sadly, comically misplaced. Ben informs him that the projectile possessions belong to Billy. In the scalding heat of this humiliation Jacob stalks off. Ben senses a critical barrier has been breached, and confesses his unease to Mary:

> **BEN:** It's all our fault, anyhow.
>
> **MARY:** What do you mean?
>
> **BEN:** We've made him feel like an outsider all these years. The three of us. You, me, Billy. It's always been him and us. Always. As long as I can remember.
>
> **MARY:** Blame your father's temper. He's always had a bad temper. All we done was try our best to avoid it.
>
> **BEN:** Yeah, but we make it worse. We feed it. We shouldn't shut him out the way we do. (95)

Ben's use of the word "outsider" in reference to his father indicates an awareness that Jacob has gradually been pushed further outwards along the line of alienation within the family. Jacob confirms this with a piece of evidence from earlier in the evening:

> **JACOB:** I always knowed it would come to this one day. He's always hated me, and don't say he hasn't. Did you see him tonight? I can't so much as lay a hand on his shoulder. He pulls away. His own father, and I can't touch him. All his life he's mocked and defied me, and now he's made me turn him out in anger, my own son. (*to MARY*) And you can bugger off, too, if you don't like it. Don't let me keep you. Just pack your bag and take him with you. Dare say you'd be happier off. I don't give a good goddamn if the whole lot of you deserts me. (98)

Jacob cares, very much, about being deserted. He notes that Ben has rejected him physically, indicating the deep level of estrangement felt by Ben, which has served to marginalize his father. Jacob performs a final act of bravado in the face of a litany of

humiliations, couched in the language of what Jewinski describes as "deliberate self-victimization" (qtd. in Conolly 93). This act of self-immolation spurs Mary's account of how Ben has paid, over the winter, for four months of the family's bills, while Jacob was sidelined with an injury. Mary is revealing coded information, facts that were previously privy only to Ben and herself (and possibly Billy). Interestingly, she takes advantage of Ben's exit to the bedroom to create a *stall* in which to do it, talking to Jacob in a private space, unsure as to what effect her revealing of this previously coded information will have. Her lack of trust undermines the good faith of her actions.

Mary's objective is to contradict Jacob's claims of having been ignored and belittled by an uncaring, ungrateful family, to reassure him forcefully that the micro-community's borders are intact. What Jacob hears, in contrast, is that someone has replaced him, rendering him value-less at a vulnerable moment. Jacob's anger competes with a sudden rush of fatherly emotion. Ignoring Mary's plea to keep the information to himself, he reaches out to Ben in the only manner he knows, clumsily, with great conviction and force:

JACOB: I wants to t'ank you. I'll pay you back.

MARY: You promised you— (*She stops, shakes her head in exasperation.*)

JACOB: (*slight pause*) I'm sorry what happened here tonight. I wants you to know that. I'll make it up to you. I will.

BEN: (*meaning it*) It's nothing.

……..

JACOB: Hear me out, now. We never seen eye to eye in most cases, but we'm still a family. We've got to stick together. All we get in this world is the family—

> (*He rises.*)—and it's breaking up, Ben. (*slight pause*) Stay for a while longer. For a few more years. (101)

The depth of his need for the primary micro-community of the family as a source of identity is apparent in these words. Ben refuses to stay. The breaking-point has been reached, and the borders must change to accommodate his new-found independence. Hereafter the family house will not be synonymous with the Mercer family; Ben may (or may not) retain his affiliation within the family unit, but he will be an Exile from its physical foundation. For Jacob, this represents the destruction of the polity itself. He has conflated the family space with the family's existence; violation of the borders of one is a violation of the other.[43] A *sheath* transgression results, a taboo violation which is self-fulfilling in its violence. Jacob takes off his belt and, shockingly, whips his eighteen year-old son repeatedly. It is a mistake from which he, and the Inside he cherishes so much, will never recover.

The lone individual who is there after the rage and the self-hatred have ebbed is Mary. She decides to stay with Jacob and miss the rehearsal. It is this act which confirms that Mary understands the true nature of her micro-community, and that, for her, a house is not where home is necessarily located. It is the show of loyalty she knows her husband requires. She employs an intimate level of communication to win him over, relating a funny story about a key the moment in their shared past, the instant she knew she would choose him over Jerome McKenzie. She follows this remediative interchange with a physical symbol, propping up her feet, indicating that it is time to relax. The family is shaken, but it remains intact, and Jacob Mercer has a purpose for another day.

Leaving Home's layered depth of characterization, noted by Rudakoff, Whittaker, and Kareda, allows for multiple perspectives on the progressive alienation of Jacob Mercer from his family, his identity, and his life. No one character is without culpability in the maze of transgressions which occur or are inferred. The lack of depth in the depiction of the secondary characters, identified as a deficiency by Kareda (qtd. in Conolly 89) has the fortuitous effect of reinforcing the sense of a nuclear family which will eventually succumb to estranging forces from within, a much more nuanced reading of the alienation narrative than a simplistic rendering of Strangers as foreign agents. As well, the setting's claustrophobic intimacy adds to the heightened impression of a pot coming to a boil—the play takes place entirely within the Mercer home, with only three characters added who are not immediate family members. The rest of the world seems very far away, although it is just outside the door. French's next play takes the reader out that door and is related from the perspective of Ben, after his departure.

5.4.5 *Of the Fields, Lately* (1973)

Of the Fields Lately opened in Toronto in the early autumn of 1973 at Tarragon Theatre. One month later the first incarnation of CODCO produced a twenty-minute version of *Cod On a Stick* at Theatre Passe Muraille (Peters, *CODCO* 3). The two plays, produced almost simultaneously, provided an indication of divergent directions in Newfoundland theatre. French's play represents a playwright-centred theatre tradition and a neo-Aristotelian approach to narrative. Writers such as Tom Cahill and Al Pittman, as well as Michael Cook and Grace Butt, were already engaged in the revival of this form

in Newfoundland, supported on the production level by the Newfoundland Travelling Theatre Company and later by Rising Tide.

The critical and commercial success of *Leaving Home* had created an atmosphere of expectancy surrounding French and his work; Kareda mentions "our uncompleted need … to examine ourselves through the experiences of this acutely specific, yet hauntingly familiar family" (qtd. in Conolly 130). Sixteen months after its opening at Tarragon—a relatively brief period, in playwriting terms—French opened his second Mercer play at Tarragon. The critical reception was, if anything, more favourable:

> *Of The Fields Lately* […] provides the sort of theatre that makes you think Toronto must be the only place in the world worth living in [… the play is] good and it's here among us […] and surprisingly, it's Canadian. Surprisingly, because its Canadianism isn't worn in a button-hole or flashed with deep significance … there's this Newfoundland family living in Toronto, see, and there are problems … (Fraser, qtd. in Conolly 129)

French had already been appropriated by English Canada as a "Canadian" playwright writing "Canadian" plays. Newfoundland is, after all, a part of Canada. The tendency to subsume a micro-community within a larger political organism causes identity distress in minority cultures. At a moment when both Newfoundland and Canadian cultural nationalism were flourishing, David French could not be a member of two jurisdictions which regarded themselves as separate entities. The production of his plays in Toronto and the critical acclaim they received there positioned him as a Canadian playwright. Indeed, *Globe and Mail* critic John Fraser's highest approbation, quoted above, is that French's play elevates one's regard for living in Toronto. With regard to the context of

subsequent critical writing on Newfoundland theatre, this positioning of French has not changed.[44]

Of the Fields, Lately begins two years after the events of *Leaving Home*. The family unit to which Jacob owes his identity has further eroded. French consciously attempted to depart from a linear temporal narrative (Zimmerman 309), but after the failure of a ghost device in early drafts, settled for framing monologues at the beginning and end of the play which direct the spectator's gaze through Ben. The framing sequences describe, in past tense, events he now feels were pivotal in creating the breach with his father which has not been mended. There is in the opening monologue a sense of loss, of something that is beyond recovery. The reader is not told that Jacob is dead, but the tone leaves little doubt that reconciliation will not take place.

The framing monologue which opens the play adds a sense that Ben is now the primary figure of estrangement in the play. Although he never assumes full Stranger status, his feeling of alienation from the family is extreme, and his reappearance on the scene produces the destructive impact associated with the actions of a Stranger. In the sequence we hear of a key moment in the relationship between Ben and Jacob, some nine years before.[45] The scene is played out by Jacob as Ben describes it. Ben is playing in the final game of a baseball championship and his father shows up, uninvited, to root for him. Ben relates his deep shame and embarrassment at his father's rough appearance, the sound of his dialect, and "most of all, his lunch pail, that symbol of the working man. No, I wanted a doctor for a father. A lawyer. At least a fireman. Not a carpenter. That wasn't good enough … " (2). His father grins, waves, and tries to get his son's attention as Ben gets a hit, makes his way to third base, and scores the winning

run. Ben fails to acknowledge his father. Departing the field with his teammates, Ben sees his father, still in the bleachers, slumped over, staring between his feet. This powerful image of unspoken hurt and distance underpins the play.

Jacob is staring death in the face. Still relatively young at fifty-two, he has had a series of heart attacks and is unable to work. Ben returns home for the funeral of his Aunt Dot. Mary has not told him of his father's condition; she remains the keeper of secrets in the house, fearing Ben's return will precipitate more fighting and perhaps a fatal heart attack. The missing information exacerbates the emotional situation between father and son. Jacob thinks Ben cares so little about him that he didn't bother to come home to see him during the time of his stay in hospital, and has now returned only for the funeral of a relative he barely knew. The rejection he senses stems from the absence of social proximity and expected, culturally appropriate communication in their greeting:

> **JACOB:** He hardly said hello, Mary…
>
> **MARY:** What?
>
> **JACOB:** Two years away, and he hardly gives me a glance.
>
> **MARY:** Well, give him time, he just got in. Besides, you wasn't much better, the way you kept your distance.
>
> **JACOB:** Not so much as a handshake…
>
> **MARY:** Perhaps if you'd put your hand out first ….(4)

Each expects the other to cross the distance which separates them physically and emotionally. The sense that their communicative competence has fractured continues

throughout the play. They speak constantly to and about each other through Mary. She disapproves:

> **MARY:** At least you could speak to him. Is that too much to ask? A few words, at least.
>
> **BEN:** I already said hello. What more do you want? He doesn't want to talk to me.
>
> **MARY:** Doesn't he? (*slight pause*) You might've shook his hand, Ben. He stood there, waiting […]. Both of you too proud to make the first move. What a pair. (8)

Once again there is evidence of a growing gap in social proximity and a gap in the intimate affiliative signals which are essential to maintaining a relationship. All are thus acutely aware of the importance of verbal and physical signals within the family's communicative vocabulary—and their absence. Despite Mary's vocal promotion of a reconciliation, she remains, however, the one who enables each man to remain isolated within the micro-community. She serves as a conduit for their attribution of blame to the other and herself utilizes their method of indirect address. Her fear of Jacob's heart condition prevents her from a more direct approach.

Ben is shocked to see his father's state. Mary, unaware of the role she has played in making a tense situation worse, prods Ben for evidence that he has returned to see his father while warning him not to begin any fights. The occasion of Dot's funeral widens the family's obsessive self-focus to include Wiff, Jacob's best friend and Dot's husband. A Newfoundlander by birth and inclination, in the later *1949* he appears as a younger man, driven to a torturous anxiety by his wife's infidelity. Eight years later, Wiff is a

wreck of a man, shattered by his wife's death and still unable to explain to skeptics such as Mary the true reasons for his transgressive behaviour.

Mary relates her anger with Wiff to Ben. On the way to visit Dot in the hospital, Wiff stopped at a local tavern and gets staggeringly drunk. Unable to face the inevitable moment of their parting, he misses the final moments of his wife's life. To Mary, the act is inexcusable, a transgression which causes her to treat him with hostility. She has resumed her socially proximate level of communication with Ben, although he now possesses the status of a returning voluntary Exile. The transgressions for which he is held accountable during his time within the family house are now augmented by his having left on bad terms with his father. The situation has changed in a fundamental way. His return carries with it the possibility of remediation, but it is clear from Mary's warning remarks that Ben's status as an Insider, while not in question, has become qualified. As Mary says to Jacob, "We was never so close as when the boys left. Never" (16).

The incidence of serious heart trouble has increased Jacob's reliance on his primary micro-community. Shut off from work, with no children at home through which to identify himself as a family man, Jacob is in a precarious position. The bounds of both his micro-community and affiliative circles are blurring, and as he begins to float away from his identity. Mary has been desperately fighting to keep him moored. Ben's surprise arrival sets the central action of the play in motion by loosening her grip.

Another point of alienation is easy to overlook. The Mercer's house in Toronto is not the same one in which Ben grew up. Jacob and Mary have moved since Ben and Billy's departures two years before, so Ben's homecoming is even more alienating than it

would have already been; he is a visitor in a house whose function is that of a structure housing Jacob and Mary.

Jacob reiterates his intention to go back to work. Mary can offer little in rebuttal beyond telling him he needs glasses. Ben reappears, dressed for the visitation, and while Jacob changes, Mary tells Ben the true nature of the illness which forced Jacob to the hospital the previous winter. Ben's dismay has as much to do with his realization of how much this has contributed to his father's bitter attitude towards him as it does with concern for his father's health. Mary, however, is unrepentant:

> **MARY:** What would you have done, had I told you the truth? You'd've been the first on the plane.
>
> **BEN:** So?
>
> **MARY:** Well, I wasn't about to risk losing him on account of you…. What if he saw you and went into one of his rages? (30)

Mary's objective is to engage Ben as an ally in her campaign to prevent Jake from returning to construction work. Ben agrees to try. He wonders aloud, "What's he trying to do, Mom—kill himself?" (31). Mary admits that Jake was on the phone to Wiff the same night, asking him to arrange a job, after she had mentioned in passing that her legs were hurting from her work as a waitress. Looking for a purpose in a world of diminishing returns, Jacob has found a small opportunity for chivalry.

Wiff arrives. He has lost some communicative competence in his alcoholic state; he fails to recognize Ben, who has only been gone two years. His conversation is distracted and emotionally disconnected. Bereft of his own intimate micro-community, Wiff is drifting away from the Mercer family, the social unit with which he is now most

closely affiliated. Mary actively promotes this marginalization, but Wiff retains support in the form of Jacob's temperamental loyalty. Wiff connects Jacob to a more innocent time back in Newfoundland. For the moment, at least, the situation is a stand-off. Mary can push him to the margins, but she lacks the authority to make Wiff a Stranger, as long as he enjoys Jacob's support. He remains a Necessary Outsider, offering the unconditional support that Jacob does not receive within his family. Over a lifetime of association he has accumulated enough social value and dyadic debt to ride him through this crisis of identity.

Wiff quickly implicates Ben in a way Mary has been careful to avoid. "Oh, he ain't the same man, Ben, since the night you run off" (37). He advises Ben to stay home and go to work, to take the load off the old man. Ben is in a bind. Within an evening he has become privy to new, devastating information about his father's condition, which implicates him not only in its cause but its solution, as well. Having repudiated the family unit—wandering to Saskatchewan, where he has pursued neither work nor personal affiliation with any conviction—he has returned to find his primary, and perhaps sole, source of affiliation in flux. The responsibility that he is now being asked to assume is contextualized as a form of expiation for his transgressions.

The family returns from the visitation. The fact that Jacob's life is increasingly in peril outside the walls of the Mercer house becomes clear. It has not taken him long to instigate an altercation with Ike Squires, a Newfoundlander who has been promoted to carpentry foreman in Jacob's absence. Mary is furious; Ben's reappearance within the family unit has persuaded her that he can enact enforcement measures that she cannot,

such as preventing such disturbances and dangers to Jacob's health. Ben, however, does not regard himself as being in a position of authority.

The incident, which seems minor, is significant. As in the later *Salt-Water Moon* and *1949*, French here draws a picture of a man who simply cannot restrain his instinctive competitiveness and territoriality. Even as he places his existence in jeopardy, Jacob is motivated by the belief that he must protect his identity at all costs. Upon returning to the house, Mary once more sends one of the men into the living room to have a talk with the other; Jacob is told Ben wants to talk with him.

Ben reveals that he has decided to stay home and look for a job. Jacob is secretly overjoyed; he redirects his happiness into a description of how happy Mary will be. Jacob underestimates the acuity with which Mary perceives that the micro-community has shrunk to herself and Jacob, and that, despite her love for her son, Jacob's life depends upon retaining the integrity of the new borders. She questions Ben as to his motives. He explains that the idea is for Jacob not to work while Ben is back at home. Jacob returns with the whisky to celebrate but before Ben can explain Jacob's part of the deal, Wiff arrives and warns Jacob that Ike Squires is known to hold a grudge. Under the pressure of Jacob's returning to work to deal with Ike, Ben's agenda is revealed. Together, Wiff, Mary and Ben persuade Jacob to reluctantly capitulate. As the first act ends, Jacob pours Wiff another drink and laments: "What have I got to live for without my work? You tell me that, Mary, if you can. What have I got to live for?" (78). She does not reply.

Act Two opens with telling hints of the intimacy Ben secretly longs to regain within his family. French describes the couch on which he sleeps: "The chesterfield has not yet been made up, and the sheets and blankets are tangled. BEN's pyjama bottoms are

tossed carelessly over the armchair. At rise, BEN is beside the fridge, drinking thirstily from a bottle of orange juice. He wears pyjama tops and blue jeans. He is barefoot." (79) Ben is still an adolescent, although he is now twenty. He does not demonstrate, in these details, the readiness to assume a life of his own, although he desires it ardently. Within these details—the careless tossing of pyjama bottoms, the bare feet, the rumpled sheets waiting to be ordered by another, the appropriation of the orange juice without a glass—lies the behaviour of someone who is *at home*, and, moreover, someone who is marking out territory. Ben may be relegated to a guest couch in the new house, but his presence represents a challenge to the established delineations of space and possession within it.

Jacob is irascible in the absence of his job. Mary at last loses her patience. She falters in her defense of the unit and blunders; in a fit of pique she tells him to go ahead work if he misses it so badly. It is, ominously, their first fight since Ben's departure two years before. Jacob gets into his truck and drives off.

That evening Mary and Ben, dining with Wiff, anxiously await Jacob's return. When he arrives, it is with a bruise and a cut on his cheek. The showdown with Ike Squires has taken place at a local bar. Squires has won a bet that Jake wouldn't show up at work that day. Jacob has suffered a public diminishment in status, in a manner directly related to his usefulness, and in, as Squires has put it, not having "the guts" to come into work. Feeling the loss of his manhood as his strength and stamina ebb, ostracized from a circle of affiliation he values highly, Jacob has chosen to go down swinging. Ben's response to the story marks a stunning reversal:

JACOB: (*walking away*) Dared me to come into work. Right there in front of the other men. Said I wasn't man enough … never had the guts is how he put it. Holy Christ, Wiff, I'd like to make him eat those words.

WIFF: Dare say you would.

JACOB: I'd like to cram every goddamn word down his gullet.

BEN: Why don't you, Dad?

JACOB: What?

BEN: Make him eat his words.

JACOB: How?

BEN: How else? Go in to work. (105-06)

Ben's reading of the situation is now more nuanced. If he stays, he knows his mother's relationship with his father will fray and that Jacob's sense of purpose will continue to erode. Jacob grapples with the essential truth of Ben's perception that he needs to work to feel valuable, and with his unexpressed need to have his son in the house. Wiff, too, sees the writing on the wall. Jacob must be allowed to retain his identity, even if his actions result in its extinguishment, to be what he is, a man who fights neither wisely nor well, but in all directions. If he returns to work, however, Ben's purpose in the household diminishes once more to that of a son with little evident self-purpose, one who possesses, like a hidden nuclear device, the destructive power to blow the family apart. In saving his father's identity, it becomes apparent that Ben will have to leave.

It is an act, ultimately, of profound respect. This transition in thought and action requires a rationalization that Ben is happy to provide. He lies about having a girl back in

Saskatchewan. Jacob is therefore free to reassume his mantle within the household. They part on terms as warm as any they have managed, though it is likely that both have some subconscious awareness of the probable outcome of their pact. Within a few short months, Jacob has died and Ben has returned for another family funeral. In the play's closing monologic frame, the unasked, unanswered question "How did you like the game?" stands in the air, representing the questions which refuse to be buried with loved ones. Ben and Mary have failed to salvage the structural integrity of the Mercer community.

In the Mercer plays, David French takes the insular culture of the outport and transposes it to a new location, where it takes on life as an autonomous micro-community of a different society. The outporters have been taken from the outports, but in many important respects, they have brought the outports with them. The shift in locale does not guarantee a faithful recreation of the old, traditional Inside. It cannot; too much has changed, including the Exiles themselves. Their lives thus take on a pattern of continual, accumulating estrangement, as the conflict of their inculcated behaviour grows in opposition to the new environment and the distance from the home they do not revisit. Of all the characters in the Mercer plays, Mary alone retains her sense of equilibrium in this new environment, even as everything around her which she holds most dear is gradually taken from her. As is evident in the dramatic sequence of events in *Salt-Water Moon*, she has never valued Newfoundland as anything more than the locus where she first formed the beliefs which provide her definition of a happy home and family; its absence does not damage her in the way that it does Jacob or Wiff. Like Rosie in Cook's *Jacob's Wake*, she becomes the centre of the family nucleus, more central than any set of beliefs or

behaviours. She becomes the arbiter of Inside behaviour. That this is eventually disastrous for her family is the irony which creates the dramatic power of *Of The Fields, Lately* and which lends a tragic grandeur to the travails of the Mercer family.

The Mercer plays are Canadian plays which take Newfoundland as the source or wellspring of their emotional power. Not one of the Canadianized Newfoundland characters takes delight in this new identity, with the possible exception of *Leaving Home*'s Minnie, whose standards are demonstrably low. All the Newfoundland Exiles struggle: for income, for acceptance, for an understanding of the world they have come to inhabit or the changes it has wrought in those around them. The little micro-community of the Mercer household totters and bobs against the fierce winds of change. In the end, change has come, as it always does, and some remain while others are lost. The sense of profound Exile which haunts all of the Mercer plays adds a meaningful and necessary perspective to Newfoundland's view of itself.

5.5 Al Pittman and Ted Russell: Elegiac Theatre

Michael Cook, in commenting on Newfoundlanders' propensity for a passive depiction of themselves as victims of Outside forces, exempted his contemporaries Tom Cahill and Al Pittman from criticism (in Wallace 162). While an analysis of Cahill's Confederation plays bears out Cook's statement in this regard, the same cannot be said of Al Pittman's work for the theatre.

Pittman is as famous in Canadian letters as Michael Cook. By the time of his death in 1999 at the age of 59, Pittman was recognized as one of Canada's pre-eminent

poets. Born and raised a Newfoundlander, Pittman was a life-long resident and ardent supporter of Newfoundland letters, helping to co-found Breakwater Books with Clyde Rose in the early 1970s, working with Rose, Cook and Richard Buehler on productions of The Open Group, and playing a critical role in the founding of the March Hare poetry festival which takes place annually in Corner Brook. Pittman was a member of that generation of Newfoundlanders whose parents voted in the Confederation referenda and who witnessed, or were part of, the resettlement program set in motion by the Smallwood government in the 1960s. Communities around Placentia Bay, amongst others, simply disappeared as the elements gradually wore down abandoned houses and schools. His family's home community on Merasheen Island was one of those affected; Pittman's two best known plays for the theatre are focused on this psychic loss of home.

5.5.1 *A Rope Against The Sun* (1974)

Denyse Lynde notes the similarity between *A Rope Against the Sun* and Dylan Thomas's *Under Milkwood* ("Newfoundland" 85). It is not surprising that the young poet, in attempting his first play, would take his cue from a poet whose vision and methods demonstrated a lyrically dramatic sensibility. This sensibility produces, in dramatic terms, haunting images and musical dialogue in *A Rope Against the Sun*, while eschewing the stock in trade of drama, action. The play is a portrait of a town frozen for a few moments in time. The conflict lies not between its residents, but between the town and modernity. The ephemerality of the outport community, the feeling that what the spectator is seeing may have already disappeared, provides the mood of the piece, what

Lynde refers to as "a lament and a celebration" (85). Alexander Leggatt, reviewing the published text in *Letters in Canada*, also notes the link to Thomas' work. He finds the "play for voices" technique admirably applied. His comments take note of the Outsider influence which is critical to the reception of the play:

> The characters range from the local drunk, who is almost too picturesque to be true, to the young school teacher from outside who finds the whole community not so much picturesque as frustrating and squalid. The inclusion of his viewpoint cunningly forestalls an obvious criticism of the play; and there is an implicit admission throughout that, however colourful these people's lives are, they are also narrow and repressed. (349)

A Rope Against the Sun takes place in a small community on Merasheen Island.[46] The fact that the community is located on an island—an island off an island, as it were—is not the focus of Pittman's depiction of insularity. Rather, characters appear as islands unto themselves, "as isolated as the community itself" (Leggatt 349). The Narrator of the play, a disembodied voice, is closer in form and function to the narrator in Thomas's *A Child's Christmas in Wales* than to the neo-Brechtian character employed by Michael Cook in *Colour the Flesh the Colour of Dust*. Pittman's Narrator does not restore objective distance or place the action in the context of larger events and issues. Instead, the tone is indulgent, even wistful—that of an old guide leading a tour of an eroding, but still valuable, site. There is thus a distance between the Narrator and the community he describes based on presence and temporality, but not a critical distance. Presented formally as an Outsider, perhaps even a Stranger, the Narrator makes no impact on the life of the community. It is as if a bystander is passing a fishbowl and peers in at the oblivious fish he finds there. As a mediator between play and spectator, the Narrator does

not perform a choric function; he fails to establish an objective gaze. It is an Insider's look from an Outside position, a formal incongruity which establishes intimacy but also a feeling of unease. The spectator is invited to listen to a deeply personal recounting, without the opportunity to engage in a dialectic. This function of the Narrator betrays an Aristotelian agenda to achieve a simplified variation of catharsis. Sympathy is solicited, even as the characters reveal that they are "narrow and repressed" (Leggatt 349). Unlike his contemporary and fellow writer Ray Guy, who also "makes his sympathies clear by his choice of subject and focus" (Fralic 150), Pittman fails to avoid the trap of idealization and stereotyping Cook explicitly criticizes ("Culture" 74).

The characters appear one by one in isolated frames, linked textually as a response to the words of the previous character. Frame by frame the exposition is sketched through the use of local references and gossip. The Inside featured in the play is the micro-community of Merasheen to which each of these characters belongs, and from which each is estranged to greater or lesser degrees. It is a small community where informal modes of communication are predominant; each individual knows information about the others and makes use of such information in assigning status and levels of esteem. The information is presented here as equivalent to actions undertaken in such communities. Pittman emphasizes that this kind of knowledge actually binds a community together, in a pact of shared secrets, rather than tearing it apart. In dyadic terms, or those of Homans' social value, this knowledge is used as currency to dictate at what levels each community member will function.

The secrets of *A Rope Against The Sun* are not especially dramatic, nor is there what could be described as a narrative throughline to the play. The play functions instead

as a portrait of a community at a moment in time. The issue of relocation of settlements in Newfoundland, to which those of Merasheen Island were subject in the 1960s, is not treated as a cause for outrage or debate, in the manner of Tom Cahill's dramatic discourses on Confederation. For Pittman, the time for outrage is past. That the communities on Merasheen Island had been resettled some seven years before the writing of the play lends *A Rope Against the Sun* an elegiac tone. There is no need of contrived dramatic action; the elegy *is* the action.

The community's relocation and the subsequent loss of its soul require, in Pittman's view, proper observance and respect to be paid, rather than a call to arms. Outsiders have attacked, they have succeeded in the invasion, and the war is over but for the scattered remnants of buildings and people which lie in the dust. That the Outsiders, in the form of the Smallwood government, could be considered either Strangers (i.e. non-resident foreigners) or Transgressive Insiders, depending on which micro- or macro-community perspective one takes, is of less import than the effect of their actions. There is no denouncement of Outsiders in the play, and nearly no mention of the Outside forces which will, in real life, eliminate this community. There is a sense that to Pittman such a shift in focus would be inappropriate. As an Insider, the playwright chooses here to focus on Insiders.

In the course of the play Pittman explores the private anxieties, desires and injuries of nine of the community's residents. The action follows a loose chronological structure: a day in the life of the community. The characters are affectionately rendered, connected by shared superstitions that go back centuries and which frustrate the local priest, Father Power. Such superstitions constitute a particularly effective set of Insider

codes which severely test not only the communicative competence of Demystified Strangers such as Father Power but the ability of such Outsiders to undertake orthodox actions when such superstitions arise. One such superstition involves the belief that a child should never be born while the sunkers are breaking.[47] Another is the legend of the "Naked Man," a leafless tree with rocks piled high around its base by residents paying it tribute. A third is never to coil a rope "against the sun." The fact that the title incorporates one of Merasheen's superstitions speaks to Pittman's belief that these superstitions are the shared beliefs which bond the community together, that they possess an ineffable power. The two Necessary Outsiders in the play, Father Power and the young priest-teacher Michael Kennedy, are subject to, but not initiates of, these traditions. The locals do not see the enactment of these various rituals as pagan, as Father Power does, but as quasi-religious in nature, as indicated by an exchange between the Priest and his young housekeeper:

> **FATHER POWER:** Jennifer child, why in Heaven's name are you going around making the sign of the cross while you watch the toast burn? You know how I hate burnt toast.
>
> **JENNIFER:** I'm sorry, Father. It's just that you spilt some salt, Father. It's terrible bad luck, Father. (14)

Michael, the teacher, fails to satisfy his own expectations, or those of Father Power, and feels trapped within Merasheen. The people of the village stubbornly cling to their superstitions in spite of his efforts. Michael fears that if he requests a transfer to another parish, Father Power will "surely punish me by making me spend the rest of my life here." If he does not voice his deep unhappiness, however, the Priest will "think I'm

happy here and leave me here to spend the rest of my life. What an awful state to be in" (13). The Priest also believes a Catholic schoolteacher should be more enthusiastic about organizing the myriad fund-raising activities essential to the community's well-being; in other words to undertake remediative interchange with full commitment. Any sign of lack of interest or sincerity presents a danger to the institution which the two priests represent. The church, in Foucauldian terms, is an iconic presence intended to foster a moral faith-based environment in which its adherents perform self-regulation. The priest mediates this intention in assisting this process of self-regulation through sermons and community involvement. Transgressions on the level of mediation have the potential to destroy the iconic power of the institution.

Michael has progressed through the Stranger's evolution of response to immersion in a new culture, beginning with romantic infatuation, progressing to qualified support, and culminating with an obsessive awareness of the community's perceived deficiencies. He believes he is assiduous in keeping these feelings contained within himself, but the spectator is privy to his thoughts:

> **JAKE:** Tell me, how do you like it here on the island?
>
> **MICHAEL:** Oh, fine sir. Just fine.
>
> **NARRATOR:** says Michael, and immediately begins hating himself for saying so. What he would say if he could be honest about it is
>
> **MICHAEL:** I can't stand it, sir.
>
> **NARRATOR:** But he doesn't say any such thing and he hates himself for it because he is already beginning to realize that he'll never tell these people the truth about themselves and their lousy little island, and he hates himself all the more because he realizes too that they don't really care one way or the other how he feels about them, and that makes his lie altogether useless. (21)

The play shifts stylistically when "visiting time" arrives after supper. A point that bears mention is the implicit social orthodoxy which attends such a ritual. The individual citizens of the community gather in three separate micro-communities: women, who appropriate the interiors; men, standing at the dock, whose territory is the exterior community; and children, who must run back and forth between the two, possessed of no territory within the micro-community that is theirs alone. Notably absent from these circles of affiliation are Michael and Father Power. As teacher and priest, they are Necessary and are accorded a role within the community. Their lack of inclusion in these critical affiliative circles renders them effectively powerless and presents a barrier to augmenting their status level to a position from which Father Power, at least, might effect true religious influence.

Lynde notes that "from Mrs. Ennis' plea that her child be born when the sunkers are quiet to young Jennifer's self-questioning about nuns or boys to aged Jake's wish for death and Nell's tears of despair for her sterile life, the remote community … appears in pain." ("Newfoundland" 86) A note of hope is sounded "by the hopes and dreams of the young" (86), as when Billy conjures an image of Jennifer: "you are soft like roses and white like roses and you are mine forever" (58). The young members of the micro-community of Merasheen will survive its demise, but in what polity?

Mary Walsh, in an interview with Michael Fralic, stated, "[W]e Newfoundlanders are no more romantic than anyone else. We are, after all, human beings." (qtd. in Fralic 153) One suspects that Pittman, in *A Rope Against the Sun*, disagrees. His characters are celebrated "lyrically and romantically" (Lynde, "Newfoundland" 86), achieving an "almost mythic dimension" (85).

There is no climax to the play. It is as if a camera slowly pulls out of the community, leaving its dreams, hurts, and petty squabbles behind to face another day. What is notable about this otherwise slight drama—it plays on stage in an hour or less—is Pittman's determination to let the spectator hear the voices of those who have vanished, or are vanishing. As bell hooks has stated, works which focus on the suffering or victimhood of marginalized people have the unintended consequence of appropriating their voice. The pain, not the person, becomes the subject, one in which the Outside commentator is the expert and the authoritative voice (hooks, "marginality" 343). By contrast, in *A Rope Against the Sun*, Pittman's objective is to celebrate the voices of a vanishing Inside in all their imperfect harmony, rather than mourn their loss.

5.5.2 *West Moon* (1980)

Written some six years after *A Rope Against The Sun*, *West Moon* represents a further erosion of the resettled communities of Newfoundland. The Inside of a tiny outport community so lovingly depicted in the earlier play has disappeared. The residents of the community of St. Kevin's on Merasheen have long departed, relocated under the Smallwood resettlement scheme. All that is left of the community are the hulks and timbers of slowly decaying houses and buildings, and the memories of life there, as related by ten of the town's deceased citizens.

West Moon is, like its predecessor, a play for voices. As a poet writing for the stage, it may be assumed that Pittman felt his greatest artistic strength lay within the weaving of words. Nuances of characterization that arise from action are almost

completely absent, except as reported by other characters, although in their reactions to each other the spirits of the abandoned town manifest distinctive traits. Lynde asserts, "it is the lazy reader who terms it radio drama" (*Landwash* xiii). This statement is at least arguable, given the static nature of the play, but it must be noted that *West Moon* has received numerous productions in Newfoundland and appears to have been accepted by the public as a legitimate dramatic work.

As in *A Rope Against the Sun*, Pittman utilizes a narrator to set the context for the action. The tone of the opening monologue is similarly lyrical to that of the Narrator in the earlier play, but the mood is darker, filled with images of death. It is in this shift to darker colours that the play veers away from the influence of Dylan Thomas to that of W.B. Yeats, notably his 1939 play *Purgatory*. The Narrator, simply termed " A Voice," directs our gaze to the "dead village," with its lack of "human eyes alive and shining" (53). In the "wilderness of ruins" (54) only wild animals go about their business. The town is empty, save for the graveyard, come to life on this night of All Souls. As in the work of Michael Cook, weather, announced through soundscape, plays a significant role in the play, as it does in the lives of Newfoundlanders generally. A crack of thunder announces the appearance of the first of the voice, Jack Leonard. Pittman carefully notes the birth and death dates, Christian and family names of each of the characters in the Cast of Characters of the published edition of the play (52). The emphasis is that these were real people who should not be forgotten, even as their voices fade and are lost in the memories of those who have departed the town.

Jack is soon joined by others, of varying ages: first Ray, dead in his fifties like Jack, then old Bill, and Rose, who died at 90, then the younger Maggie, stopped in time

at 36, and the child Sheila, her life barely begun at eleven. Ned, a merchant who made his own coffin, joins them, followed by Bill's wife Bride, Jack's son Aaron, and finally by Nish, the last to be buried in the old cemetery, a mute who in death has found his voice. The wonder of their yearly resurrection on the part of returning souls, and their gratitude at seeing loved ones who have joined them, is soon replaced by the same issues which, to Pittman, unite rather than divide the living in *A Rope Against the Sun*—rivalries, gossip and backbiting. Above all, the issue of resettlement looms over the world of St. Kevin's, as becomes apparent with the news Nish relates.

The metaphoric social and cultural distance between characters which Pittman represents in *Rope* is replaced here with a liminal space where each character is separated from the others by a vast, unbridgeable chasm. They are separated from the living by the Stygian barrier between the dead and living, and a further element of estrangement is added by the physical absence of the remaining ancestors, who have departed the community. The physical marker of memory remains in the form of the cemetery and its untended gravestones, but the risen spirits manifest deep unease at the absence of a unified social context in which they would have retained an honoured place. Husbands and wives, fathers and sons are isolated from each other; all the typical Insides, the micro-communities and affiliative circles of a community, have been riven. Resettlement, in *West Moon*, is the primary estranging act, not death.

The dead community members try to re-form the old hierarchy of Inside-Outside, to little avail. Maggie attempts to restore the divide between the townsfolk and the merchant, Ned, a Necessary Outsider in his living days:

MAGGIE: Robbed from the poor 'til the day you dies, I s'pose.

NED: That got to be Maggie.

……

Contrariest customer I ever had.

MAGGIE: Well, you was the crookedest shopkeeper I ever dealt with.

JACK: Now, don't be gettin' on with that stuff. That's all over with, all past, that stuff. (57-8)

Each soul provides a revelation for the others as they appear. Ned enjoys a small revenge on Maggie, informing her that her husband has found a new wife. Aaron, a strapping young man apparently murdered by his brother while out birding, is another. His news deeply disturbs his father Jack. Aunt Bride, the widow of Skipper Bill, joins him at last. Her appearance, at the age of 80, is not unexpected, but the nature of their liminal state and the abyss which divides them is a fresh and dismal discovery.

The yearning of the characters for proof of the enduring construction of their identities, through human contact and the material joys of living, is palpable. The play is full of redolent references to the joys of salt meat, peppermint knobs, tea, Dominion beer, the rough play of a man's hand on a woman's skin and the sting of salt spray. These are demonstrations of the easy lapse back into communicative competence each of the characters associates with a sense of truly being home. Inspired by each reference to the familiar, each character paints vivid pictures of places they would like to revisit and events they wish they could relive—being kissed goodnight, snow on the eaves, the smell of new things. All such daily things, seemingly mundane aspects of everyday life, gain in value for each day they are absent. They enable the spectral characters to create an

illusion of *social* proximity through the reiteration of cultural proximity; they cannot touch each other physically, but they do so emotionally.

If the tone and style of the first Act of *West Moon* function in very similar terms to *A Rope Against the Sun*, the second Act represents a notable departure. The issue of resettlement, absent from the world of the earlier play, surfaces with the arrival of the character Nish, the mute church helper who has apparently been listening to the others for some time before discovering that he can speak:

> **JACK:** How come you never spoke up sooner? If you been here all the while, and you could talk, how come you waited so long before you spoke up?
>
> **NISH:** I was just lyin' here wonderin' and listenin'. It never even came into my head that I could talk until ye all started in on resettlement. I wanted to have a say in that so bad I just started talkin' almost without knowin' it. (81)

Resettlement has given the mute a voice, even in limbo. That the border space the characters occupy is neither heaven nor hell is underlined by the circumstances of Nish's demise. His heart broken, Nish has hanged himself from the rail of the church balcony. His news that the town, divided over the compensation offered to those agreeing to resettlement, has reluctantly broken up and moved to other communities is a blow to the souls of the dead:

> **NISH:** First it was the people against the government, and then the priest got into it on the side of the government, and then it was the people up against the government and the priest, and then, more and more, it got to be people against people. It got pretty ugly betimes because lots couldn't see no sense in movin' out of here. And I was one of 'em, certainly. What was the sense of me movin' out of here into a place full of strangers? […]. Lots like me couldn't see no sense in givin' up their homes and gardens and boats and stages and stores and whatnot,

> and goin' off to try and find the same things someplace else among a crowd of strangers. (82-3)

As with the plays of Cook, Walsh, and Guy, the church plays a role in Pittman's plays. It is neither as omnipresent nor as influential as in the neo-gothic dramas of Walsh and Guy, nor as symbolic as in the work of Cook. Rather, Pittman portrays the church as a traditional element of outport life, one which is no more elevated in status than the local shop. Both are places for congregation and the exchange of information and reinforcement of community values. There is no mention of "worship" in the religious sense of awe in Pittman's work. Nish gives some indication of the taboos associated with the physical space of the church through the guilt he expresses at having hanged himself in the church; but it is clear that he also feels that this was an appropriate transgression in the absence of the church's protection.

Sundered from life, they have now been separated from the community which marked their graves. Nish's invocation of "strangers" now applies to these dead souls, and influences their discourse. Anxiously they discuss the question of the collective memory of the town, and the individuals whom they loved. Who will remember them? Aaron worries about his fiancé: "What'll become of her, off among strangers?" (84) The fear of Strangers, and of becoming a Stranger, permeates the play. The fact of the characters' demise adds an existential element to the danger. The dead will become Strangers, left alone in an untended cemetery on an abandoned island, unremembered. All feel their own memories fragmenting as the place those memories are attached to becomes irrevocably distant. Jack says "I can feel the memories slippin' away on account

of I got nothing to hang 'em onto anymore … they're slippin' away. Slippin' fast away." (86)

In an echo of Skipper Pete in Cook's *The Head, Guts, and Soundbone Dance*, who fails to recall the words to a song he has known and sung all his life, the balladeer Ray struggles and fails to remember the lyrics to a song he wrote and which he has sung a thousand times. The matter of the song being lost carries symbolic significance. For the poet Pittman, the resettlement of a community results in the loss of its soul, a communal soul shared by each of its members, greater than any individual. A community which loses its songs loses its memories and any sense of the lyrical quality of their existence.

As the evening wanes each character slowly loses consciousness and returns to their long sleep. The last of them, Jack, Ray, Rose and Bill, ponder whether they are in Hell, given the news and the presence amongst them of "mortal sinners" such as Nish, as Rose terms them. They cannot come to a conclusion, but the feeling of dread, of an unknown future severed from its past, is enough to haunt them. Caught between past and present, the physical and the immaterial, the spectres of *West Moon* are liminal figures who are estranged from the Insider identities they have known, unable to gain access to them on any satisfying level. This represents an inversion of Goffman's *stall*, a personal space created within a larger space of shared possession; the spectres in *West Moon* are trapped in stalls they did not devise, able to see and hear the wider possessional space of which they long to be a part, but unable to break free and gain access to it (*Relations* 32). They have risen from a void to witness a second void. Unmarked, unrecognized, they are

condemned to return each year until their collective memory—and the memory of the Exiles—finally vanishes entirely.

West Moon shares, with *Albertine En Cinq Temps* by Michel Tremblay and *The Rez Sisters* by Tomson Highway, a unique structural and thematic approach to the Proustian theme of lost time. Like these plays, *West Moon* manages to fill its characters' existences with rough humour and a visceral feel for the lives they have lived, without apology for the challenges that attended those lives. There is no washing over of the difficulty of life on Merasheen Island, no sense of an expectation that life is supposed to be perfect. There is instead a haunting reminder of the need for the Insides which are often taken so blithely for granted in the quotidian flow of our civil existence, a remonstrance that their easy continuance should not be assumed, that, shorn of these shells for meaning, meaning itself is jeopardized.

5.5.3 *The Holdin' Ground* (1954)

Ted Russell is remembered as one of Newfoundland's best known and most revered humourists and social commentators. Russell's *Chronicles of Uncle Mose* provided astute observations of Newfoundland life over the course of a generation. Russell remains known primarily as a satirist and radio dramatist; *The Holdin' Ground*, his most famous work for the stage, began as a work for radio. Given that Russell was a highly respected public figure within the macro-community of Newfoundland from the 1940s through the 1970s, it is an intriguing question to ask how much latitude a writer in such a privileged Insider position is allowed in criticizing the society which holds him in

such approbation. Ray Guy, a radio and newspaper columnist of similar renown, has employed a sharp satirical pen in his dramatic work. Russell, in *The Holdin' Ground*, chose not to do so.

Russell's play has slowly, over the years, come to be recognized as a landmark in Newfoundland drama, not only for the timing of its production but in its affecting evocation of outport life. First produced for radio in 1954, it was first staged in 1956 and subsequently televised. A production by Gander's Avion Players was featured at the regional Dominion Drama Festival in 1969, and the play also featured at the Eastport Festival in 1970 and 1971. In addition the radio version of the play has now been produced four times, three of them national broadcasts.

There is no secret to the success of *The Holdin' Ground*. Elegantly written, resonant with the accents and imagery of outport life, it portrays a nostalgic past and an image of themselves which Newfoundlanders hold dear. *The Holdin' Ground*'s title refers to the location, well-known in every harbour community, where one can drop anchor. It is a powerful metaphor for a reifying social vision of an eternal community which neither shifts its values nor alters its practices, a community to which one can return to reaffirm an identity. It is no wonder that newcomer Michael Cook could identify Russell's work as socially deficient, quoting Donald Bartlett of Memorial University who described the play's ethos as "secluded, predominantly Protestant, restrained and neighbourly" (qtd. in Cook, "Culture" 75). The characters of *The Holdin' Ground* conform to the sacred archetypes of Newfoundland tradition. There is no conscious act of transgression against either a macro- or micro-community, suggesting a strength of orthodoxy that is unassailable. The Stranger figure is characterized in a positive manner,

a figuration that is relatively uncommon in Newfoundland plays; the Ranger Hepditch in Guy's *Young Triffie's Been Made Away With* provides another such example. The play's narrative implies that any Strangers can be Demystified, and that the primary (or primal) micro-communities of family and outport easily withstand assaults from without through the moral quality of their interactions with Strangers.

The strong community support for each member of a town, the pull of "home", the importance of paying active homage to the past, and, above all, the notion that the familiar is the source of community strength: all these principles are at play in *The Holdin' Ground*. As a mythologized home narrative it exceeds even the work of David French in terms of its tendency to elegiac reminiscence.

The play's locale is Pigeon Inlet, the fictional outport where Russell's stories are famously set. On an otherwise typical day Grampa Ben Walcott and his wife Aunt Lizzie hear of the arrival of a Stranger, staying at the home of their daughter Sophy. Immediately Ben is insistent on finding out more about the Stranger. In the manner described by the social anthropologists in *Christmas Mumming in Newfoundland*, Grampa's immediate response to the news manifests an intent to demystify the Stranger:

> **LIZ:** She got a boarder. Come on the steamer this evenin'.
>
> **BEN:** Oh. Who is he?
>
> **LIZ:** I dunno. 'Twas Emma Jane Bartle that looked in and told me about him. But she hadn't found out his name.
>
> **BEN:** Did she say what he looked like?
>
> **LIZ:** No. Except that he was tall—with a dark suit, dark hat, dark coat—and a dark scarf around his neck.

BEN: Scarf? This time of the year?

LIZ: Yes. Emma Jane figgered he didn't look well.

BEN: But Lizzie—didn't you see him at all? (12)

Ben is clearly agitated by the lack of knowledge available. He cannot locate the new arrival in town in the community's hierarchy of belonging. Their friend Joe arrives—without a knock—but fails to provide much in the way of information. As the town's patriarch Ben feels an obligation to act:

BEN: …Got a fry and a few for Sophy besides. I'm goin' to take 'em over in a few minutes. Gives me an excuse to meet the stranger.

JOE: 'Twon't be no good. I just come from there.

BEN: Why won't it be no good?

JOE: He's gone to bed.

BEN: Gone to bed this hour? What's the matter with him? Ain't he sociable?

……

BEN: Now Joe, who is he and where's he from?

JOE: I dunno, Grampa.

BEN: But didn't Sophy tell you?

JOE: She don't know neither.

BEN: Well, why in the world don't she? Didn't she ask him?

JOE: No.

BEN: Well, she should have. She should have had that much pumped out of him before he was in the house five minutes. What's comin' over Soph? (14)

Grampa Walcott disapproves of the inappropriate behaviour of his daughter, who has allowed a Stranger into her house without so much as learning his name. This involves several transgressions: failure to assess communicative competence of the Stranger; failure to assess the danger he may or may not represent and of what type it might be; the ceding of personal, possessional space. In response to Walcott's questioning Joe provides some mitigation for Sophy, replying that the new man is puzzling, and not the kind given to responding to questioning.

Faced with this deficit in Insider information, Ben grills Joe about the Stranger's qualities, desperate to have some basis with which to demystify the Stranger. An opportunity presents itself; the man has asked for the most experienced hand in the harbour to take him out in a boat the next day. Grampa Walcott, still hale enough to steer a boat, and amongst the community's most-highly esteemed and unqualified Insiders, fulfills that criterion. Joe and Grampa speculate as to whether he's a "writer fellow": "You know, the kind who goes back and writes about us 'quaint and backward people'" (15). This reference would surely have resonated with rural Newfoundlanders. Ray Guy's books teem with examples of naïve or ignorant visitors visiting outports and treating the residents as if they are mentally deficient. He retorts, "these so-called 'poor humble fishermen' had to have more knowledge tucked away in their weather-beaten skulls than a jet pilot has" (*Urchins* 31). Story, in an essay in *Christmas Mumming in Newfoundland*, asserts, "though today they would be classified as 'unskilled' on the modern industrial market, [outport residents] achieved a virtuosity in technical accomplishments which enabled them to construct their own houses, build their own boats, and conduct a fishing operation requiring judgment, skill, and daring." ("Fishermen" 33)

There is no anger in Grampa's remarks; the residents of the outports know how to deal with such Strangers. He is merely inquiring if this is the quarry they face. Aunt Liz replies that from what she's heard he's more "respectable" than that. This little joke, originally shared over a radio broadcast in the homes of Newfoundlanders across the province, reaffirms the boundaries of the outport's Inside and establishes its superiority, in ethical terms. Offered to an audience of far greater diversity than a typical modern-day theatre audience, and one whose macro-community was largely sympathetic to outport concerns (if not attentive to them), the passage vocalizes outporters' perceptions of how they are perceived, offered with only the merest hint of resentment and with an implicit reiteration of their superior status as Insiders (writers being less "respectable").

Russell's writing in *The Holdin' Ground* is always from Grampa and Aunt Lizzie Walcott's point of view. Older, respected, with access to the legends and stories of the area, they are authoritative Insiders with the power and influence to enact enforcement of local norms and mores and to punish transgressors. They will decide whether the Stranger is friend or foe, and whether he stays or goes, and there is no countervailing voice in the play. They are accorded, in metonymic terms, the status of *being* Pigeon Inlet. Thus the fact that the Stranger has become the focal point of their interest makes him the focus of the town.

The next morning Ben takes the Stranger out in his boat.[48] He initiates the conversation, indicating that the socially proximate situation of sitting together in a small boat does not remove the Stranger's obligation to supply remediative information. By the use of this tactic Grampa learns his first significant fact about the Stranger: his name, Michael. The process of demystification has begun. Michael does not volunteer any

further information, however, aside from requesting a specific course to steer the boat. His knowledge of sea and land in the area, and natural sense of orientation in the boat, lead Ben to guess that he's a seafaring man.

Michael replies that he is not, and the awkwardness of social proximity to a Stranger, combined with a disconcerting, if undefined, cultural proximity, deepens the mystery surrounding Michael. The Stranger possesses Insider knowledge, but no appreciable level of communicative competence—his accent is that of a mainlander, and he talks with the refined diction and syntax of an educated man. The boat heads in the direction of Hartley's Harbour. Michael suddenly asks if there isn't a place on the shoreline before that, and after some memory-jogging, Ben realizes that Michael is talking about a vanished settlement, Muldoon's Cove.

Deepening Ben's wonder, Michael asks to take over the tiller on the way into shore. Ben is reluctant to give it over. The water around Muldoon's Cove is full of shoals, mud and kelp, best navigated by a knowledgeable hand. His social need to acquire further information about Michael trumps Ben's judgment as a sailing man, and he gives over the tiller. To his astonishment, Michael then performs an Insider's maneuver. He lines up the sole remaining house on shore with the rock face behind the town, and having established the proper course through the shoals, steers the boat in with a sure hand.

The Insider knowledge manifested by Michael is not of the nature to cause serious concern, but it is nonetheless noted by Grampa Walcott. The micro-community has been breached. Its secrets have been communicated to a Stranger, and there is no knowing the extent of his knowledge or the use to which he will put it. Ben, however, is in a state of wonder at the Stranger's knowledge of local landmarks and the sea. Safely ashore, it is

Michael who takes the initiative, willingly divulging the extent of his own Insider knowledge while demonstrating a need to know more. This act of request functions in status terms as a remediative interchange, by implicitly valorizing such knowledge.

Michael asks Ben about the three families who founded the settlement and kept it running until the last member was waked some years ago. Ben's answer might be considered a dramatic digression except that it has so much to do with the underlying theme of the narrative. The Muldoons, the Cassidys and the Shannahans had all emigrated from County Galway. With their Irish love of the soil, they had "fished only because they had to" (21), and had cleared the land a long ways back from the shore, attaching their names to features as they progressed: Muldoon's Cove, Cassidy's Brook, Shannahan's Ridge. In effect, they had recreated the macro-community of Ireland, in their new environment. In an unfortunate piece of historical symmetry, the settlers of Muldoon's Cove were then forced to leave. There was not enough land for the offspring to share, nor available marriageable members of the opposite sex, and gradually the settlement had emptied.

Walcott mentions a close affiliative relation to the former community, through his friend Fergus Shannahan, whose wife Maggie had also been Lizzie's best friend. The Shannahans, Ben relates, had been the first to depart. As a result of the Walcotts' dyadic ties to the community, Ben has been returning to the abandoned settlement each year to ensure that the fence around the cemetery is properly maintained. The contrast with the sad figures of Pittman's *West Moon* is dramatic. In *West Moon* there is no hope for renewal, and no sign of respect for the identity of the community or its individual members. Grampa Walcott is made of sterner stuff; as the patriarch of Pigeon Inlet, and a

neighbour with a dyadic debt to replay—Fergus had once saved Ben's life—Ben will perform this duty as long as he is able.

After a few more stories and a spontaneous meal of mussels dug from the sandy beach, suggested by Michael, the day grows late. The waters have become more dangerous, and the two men return in the boat to Pigeon Inlet. In the intervening time Lizzie has also been busy in the demystification process. Ben is informed that Michael is a clergyman—and hence a very different level of Stranger, one who enjoys institutional status within the community, a Necessary Outsider by virtue of the community's affiliative religious circles. Ben frets at not having accorded Michael the respect due such status; he has committed a transgression of which, as patriarch, he is keenly aware. Lizzie relates a vision she has had, of Maggie O'Rourke, her childhood friend, walking up the path with Ben. The Stranger's appearance in Pigeon Inlet has clearly changed the atmosphere and tenor of daily life. Lacking clarity, Ben heads over to his daughter's house determined to find out the true nature of Stranger Michael's identity.

There is no diminution in dramatic value in the fact that, by now, the reader/spectator has deduced that the Stranger Michael is Michael Fergus Shannahan, the sixtyish son of Ben's neighbour and friend. As has been noted, few works of Newfoundland drama are based on suspense, and the interest in the unmasking of Michael's identity lies with his motives for coming to Pigeon Cove, rather than with his identity. His familiarity is more critical to the discursive environment of *The Holdin' Ground* than the Stranger's Strangeness; the process is one of a drawing in, rather than of a casting away. Again the contrast with Pittman's elegies is clear; the residents of

Pigeon Inlet are inclusive and welcoming and will continue to revivify their community. It will not die from insularity.

Michael's knowledge of places and conditions he has never himself experienced, of codes of the Insiders along this part of the shore, forms the core of the play's reassuring ethos. He is not a Stranger at all, but the son of Insiders, an involuntary Exile who has chosen to return. The fact that he was not born at "home" does not seem to be an obstacle to his reacquired status. Perhaps one factor lies in the affiliative circles to which Michael is immediately able to gain access. Lizzie provides the necessary rationale to satisfy any nagging concerns amongst native-born spectators. Michael was already in Maggie's womb when the Shannahans left for the mainland, *ergo* he is a native son. The possibility of the construction of identity appears to include such a stretching of affiliative boundaries in outport dramas.[49] Michael returns with Ben to see "Aunt" Lizzie and the ease with which he and Lizzie talk confirms his new status:

> **BEN:** And come he did—the minute he could get away from Sophy's table. And through the kitchen window, Grandma's eyes followed him every step of the way, from Soph's door to ours. I was uneasy that the excitement might be bad for her, but I needn't have worried. They met as if they'd been doin' it every day for years. (40)

Lizzie's earlier vision, Michael's established status as a priest, and his rapidly mounting status in the community contribute to a process of mythologization, of which the play itself functions as a document. Lizzie shows Michael a begonia she has tended lovingly since his mother's departure some sixty years before. She helps him cut a sprig from it and put it in water; now there will be two people to keep alive through the memory

inspired by the flowers. Michael takes his leave. A few weeks later the news of his death arrives with a note, penned by Michael before his passing. In it Michael mentions that his begonia must now be blooming. The flower has indeed bloomed, marking the exact day of his passing. The mythologization of Michael, which completes his neutralization from Stranger to esteemed Insider, is sanctified by Ben's use of a well-known outport saying: "You can take the man out of the Bay, but you can't take the Bay out of the man".

Michael has been taken out of the bay, but he has, in truth, never left it—and will now never leave it. He joins Jacob Mercer in Newfoundland drama as displaced persons, DPs who retain a strong sense that their environment is not truly their home. Unlike the Mercers, Michael returns. The past *is* the present in this portrayal of outport culture. The suggestion is that there takes place a necessary conflation of past with present, so that cherished beliefs and values may be maintained, appearing immutable (and thereby requiring less outward enforcement).

Ben persuades Skipper Joe to begin accompanying him over to Muldoon's Cove, where he intends to place a wooden plaque on the cemetery fence, featuring a Latin saying Michael had used while they sailed. Joe, initially skeptical, acquiesces at Ben's insistence. Perhaps brass screws would be better than nails, he offers. Good things should be made to last.

In *The Holdin' Ground*, there is indeed much "holding" that goes on. In the outport world depicted by Russell, there is no confused, violent conflict between Insides, as there is in Horwood's and Walsh's *Tomorrow Will Be Sunday*, or the raging tempests of *Jacob's Wake*. There is instead a gentle remonstrance: the values and behaviours which bring a community together need tending. The cemetery in Muldoon's Cove will

not suffer the fate of Pittman's Merasheen Island community. Vigilance is required, but with the application of a living tradition, the Stranger can be rendered neutral, and perhaps even enabled to contribute to the ongoing health of the polity.

5.6 Des Walsh and Ray Guy: Anger as Purgative

The two plays represented in this sub-chapter share many common elements: apocalyptic, non-denominational pastors, town eccentrics who have been pushed to the margins of the community, a young female and male who do not fit into the established structure of their outports, tales of sexual abuse, and, above all, a preoccupation with Stranger figures. The approach they take to the issues of outport life as it was lived in the 1940s bears little resemblance to the nostalgic lyricism of Pittman and Russell. Guy's *Young Triffie's Been Made Away With* and Walsh's *Tomorrow Will Be Sunday* are suffused with anger, even though, in the case of *Triffie*, there are moments of humour and even outrageousness. Guy and Walsh depict the moral rot which destroys outport society from the Inside, depicting the various forms of corruption graphically and without apology. Where audiences could laugh in shocked horror at Andy Jones' Father Dinn character in CODCO's "Father Dinn on Sin" (Peters, *CODCO* 147-48), the same sexual perversity presented within these two realistic narratives produces a much more sobering effect. The residents of Swyers Harbour, in *Triffie*, and Caplin Bight, in *Sunday*, display both "intimacy and antagonism" (Sider 164), "warm alliance and cold distance … [that] does seem particularly intense [in outport life]" (105). In defending their interests the

residents of both fictitious outports are capable of a wide range of behaviour which such societies would normally consider reprehensible.[50]

Communal homogeneity and solidarity, as defined by Crenson (256), are absent in these outports. Institutional authority is absent as well, save for the visits of *Triffie*'s Ranger Hepditch. The towns have been left to themselves, a situation consistent with the historical reality of many outports, and one that hints at barely suppressed chaos. In this the residents of Caplin Bight and Swyers Harbour resemble the feuding family members in *Jacob's Wake* and *The Head, Guts and Soundbone Dance* far more than the passive victims of *West Moon* or the sturdy citizens of *The Holdin' Ground*'s Pigeon Inlet.

5.6.1 *Tomorrow Will Be Sunday* (1992)

Des Walsh moves easily between artistic disciplines. A renowned poet, fiddler, and screenwriter (*The Boys of St. Vincent's, Random Passage*), he is also an actor and playwright whose work is often featured at the Summer in the Bight Festival in Trinity, Trinity Bay. His adaptation of *Tomorrow Will Be Sunday*, produced in 1992, gives evidence of Walsh's cinematic orientation. The novel's exposition is condensed into a series of concise, dramatically effective episodes which shift easily from one locale to another and which establish context and character in vivid terms. The subject matter of the play, which involves moral corruption, and that of hard-hitting plays such as *The Fragrance of Sorrow* (2004) and *The Queen of Swansea* (2003), the latter about a real-life tragedy which occurred off the Newfoundland coast in 1867-8, demonstrate that

Walsh is, as Helen Peters notes, “a talented playwright fearless in the practice of his craft, who confronts awesome issues with humour and unnerving integrity” (“Fragrance” 56).

Set in an outport community of the 1940s, the narrative centres on the Pallisher family, notably the young son, Eli. His father Elias is a fisherman in the outport of Caplin Bight. Eli, though “good on the water,” loves books. The community is teeming with tension and secrets. Brother John McKim, pastor of an apocalyptic, cultish flock, is the new minister in town. He has his eyes on Eli; his parents think it has to do with the boy’s religious aptitude.

Virginia, a few years older than Eli, is a free thinker and a rebel. She and Eli meet at the home of Joshua Markady, an older man who supplies them with books and a perspective free of religious devotion. Joshua exists at the fringes of the community, literally and figuratively. It seems clear that he wants no part in its day to day suppression of uninhibited behaviour, but it is not as clear that he has any choice in the matter. His stubborn independence from orthodoxy is adjudged to be a transgression sufficiently serious that his intercourse with townsfolk, and thus his stock of dyadic currency, has been severely diminished.

Father McKim’s followers have organized a gathering to witness the end of the world, which McKim has predicted for a specific night. Even those who do not profess to be devotees of Father McKim’s rabid evangelical radicalism, such as the Pallishers, will come to the graveyard for the event, to *be* witnessed if not to witness. Such is the degree of peer pressure and orthodoxy in the town that no one, save Joshua, dares to openly question the preaching of McKim, a Stranger whose trajectory within the town has been the opposite of Joshua’s. The priest invokes fire and brimstone, but the event does not

come to pass. McKim talks his way out of blame and retains his position amongst his followers.

More cataclysmic in terms of the Insider-Stranger dynamics of the town is the arrival of the new teacher, Christopher Simms. Simms is a returning voluntary Exile, having gone away to receive a formal education. Armed with his degree and a desire to assist others in furthering themselves, he has returned to make a home in his birthplace. Logically his return would result in an inward shift in his Necessary Outsider status in terms of increased esteem levels and perhaps, if sufficient remediation were to be undertaken, a return to unqualified Insider status or something close to it.

The assumption of valued skills which underlies this expected shift is inaccurate, however. The essential service that Simms has returned to perform is questioned by Elias Pallisher and others, who would prefer that their sons quit school to assist in the fishing trade once they have learned the basics of reading, writing and doing sums. A second assumption, that as a returning Exile Simms will be welcome, appears to be undercut by the absence of immediate family or affiliative circles to which Simms belongs. Alone, armed with a skill held in some quarters of the community to be dangerous, Simms is effectively isolated, with the exception of his young students. A student who respects the skill Christopher contributes to the community is Eli Pallisher, joined by the lovely Virginia, who is as interested in finding a non-traditional man as in other forms of education. Christopher quickly befriends the two misfits. This association with Transgressive Insiders does not necessarily constitute a transgression, save that Virginia is one of the most eligible of the community's females and Eli is much younger. In the

moral code of a traditional society, a teacher who spends too much time with students, as opposed to other adults, is performing suspicious behaviour.

The first sign of trouble comes, as it often seems to do in Newfoundland culture, with a knock on a door. Elias Pallisher enters Joshua's hideaway at the edge of town to inform him that his son is spending too much time there. Joshua, like Christopher, is guilty of associating with members of the community who are considered the most vulnerable (and valuable). In fact Eli comes to read from Joshua's extensive book collection, but this fact only increases Pallisher's animosity. Jealous of Joshua's sway over the boy, and suspicious of the effect of the informal learning Eli is subject to, Elias is supported in his demands by Brother John McKim, who has denounced Joshua as an agent of the devil. Few Stranger figurations carry more import than an association with Satan. As they spar over the level of independence Eli should be allowed, Joshua shrewdly notes a link between Brother McKim and Eli:

> **JOSHUA:** He might've been a better man if he'd had the chance that I'm askin' you to give Eli.
>
> **ELIAS:** Whaddya mean by that?
>
> **JOSHUA:** I mean McKim is a person with a clever mind and almost no learning … because he was most likely denied his rights growin' up I'm tellin' ya.
>
> **ELIAS: …**the boy will learn to walk a good road with Brother McKim.
>
> **JOSHUA:** McKim was copped up in a little harbour with nothin' but rocks and Bibles and hymnbooks to feed his mind. He never had the chance that Eli's got.
>
> (*ELIAS is quiet with what he's heard.*)
>
> **ELIAS:** You really think the boy has somethin', don't ya? (321)

Brother McKim sees Eli's potential, too, as both a spiritual protégé and an object of the Reverend's lust. With the acquiescence of Eli's parents, Eli and Brother John head off up country, ostensibly in search of moose. While stationed at a cabin in the bush, McKim begins a crude effort to pull Eli away from the influences of the schoolteacher by characterizing Simms as a Stranger:

> **BROTHER JOHN:** Evil companionships keep many a soul from the Lord, ya know. That Simms fella that ya spends so much time with … he don't know God, and the Bible teaches us that the devil often shows hisself as an angel of light. (324)

Eli resists, defending the role of knowledge:

> **ELI:** But a path of knowledge is not an evil one […] there's been great books written on the history of Christianity, the history of civilization […].
>
> **BROTHER JOHN:** And what of the other books […] the ones that denounce the Lord and praise the ones that do 'em wrong?
>
> **ELI:** Then you have to trust yourself to believe or not believe […] you can't just dismiss it like a plague because it's not a plague and books shouldn't be treated like that. (324)

Eli defends himself, and by extension, his community, against the dogma preached by Brother McKim. Even with the gap in age, the simple threats and fear-mongering McKim employs with the townsfolk do not affect Eli; he has already outgrown the appeals of reductive argument. The tug of war over his membership in the micro-community McKim has formed of credulous churchgoers will be decided, it seems, by the boy himself. Eli's composure and ability to think for himself demonstrate the potential which

excites so much interest, and fear, regarding his fortunes from various parts of the community.

As an adolescent, this potential triggers an interior tension within Eli. There is an implicit acknowledgement among several characters in the play that Eli's curiosity and intelligence have already moved him Outside the community. His association with an adult teacher, the friendly attentions of the older Virginia, the inability of his parents to interest him in their way of life, and the avid interest of Brother McKim all point to a life which is rapidly outgrowing the boundaries of his home community. Eli possesses great value, both as a young male and in terms of his intellectual potential. The struggle between factions is over whether or not he should be allowed to go.

Brother John retreats from his terror-based tactics, and the two grow closer as they hunt successfully. As they camp for the night, McKim indulges his most base desires and seduces the boy. There is an echo here in McKim's actions with those of some members of the now notorious Christian Brothers,a Roman Catholic lay order whose real-life crimes feature in *The Boys of St. Vincent's.* It is more interesting, however, to analyze McKim's motivation and the transgression itself, within the parameters of the community of which he has become a member.

John McKim is a notable religious character in that he carries no traditional denominational affiliation, which would associate him with a powerful affiliative circle and provide a measure of added influence within Caplin Bight. This added authority does not appear necessary at the beginning of the play, but McKim's vulnerability is soon exposed. In Caplin Bight McKim is a Stranger who has shifted inward to the status of a Necessary Outsider, providing a highly-valued skill in what appears to be the absence of

competition from official religion. His status is tenuous. Self-taught, possessed of no family (or having rejected it), with few or no friends in Caplin Bight, and unable to join the town's affiliative circles due to the nature (or self-perception) of his vocation, John McKim relies on his awed flock for his dyadic network. He is otherwise alone. His seduction of Eli, while unconscionable, becomes more understandable when the circumstances of his position within Caplin Bight are considered.

Joan Sullivan has commented on "the prevalence of religious imagery and allusions in Newfoundland theatre" and especially its appearance in comedy; she traces its "natural" presence in the theatre of the culture to the fact that "any Newfoundland actor has come through the denominational school system" (18)—a system which persisted until the late 1990s. She alludes to a second, unfortunate characteristic associated with attendance at a sectarian institution, the tendency to stereotype the other: "The Protestants were wealthy merchants, the Catholics rum-guzzling fishermen. The Protestants were strict and sober citizens, while the Catholics rampaged so frequently mummering was outlawed more than once." (19) Unlike the more complex allusions made by Cook in *Jacob's Wake*, the religious allusions in *Tomorrow Will Be Sunday* fall closer to this stereotypical line. McKim is not one-dimensional, in the manner of Pastor Pottle in *Triffie*, but the trajectory of his character is never in doubt within the play.

Act Two opens with Virginia warning Eli away from Christopher. Rumours are spreading of an illicit relationship, even though it is she the schoolteacher has "been chasin' all over the harbour." (327) She guesses, correctly, that Brother McKim has planted the story. McKim acquires needed social capital in trafficking in rumours and deceptions. The Priest believes Christopher is vulnerable to such an attack and is unlikely

to have the means to retaliate or defend himself. There is irony in the situation, as a foreign-born Necessary Outsider subverts the position of one who is locally-born. John McKim, by virtue of his foreign birth and the taboo-breaking level of his transgressions, is already a Stranger, one who is as yet unperceived, a form of Goode's "secret deviant" (56).

As the litany of rumours builds, and the scandal becomes an intolerable humiliation for the community, McKim reveals the distinctive behaviour which identifies him, in Walsh's script, as the primary Stranger. He covers his tracks by committing a second serious transgression—lying about the actions of others. Eli confronts Brother John, and then falls into an argument with Christopher. The Pallishers, caught between their devout religious beliefs and their love for Eli, are paralyzed, unable to take decisive action. The younger Eli is susceptible to the growing pressure to conform to community standards of behaviour and expression. Christopher, in contrast, seems relatively happy, despite the mounting campaign against him. He and Virginia have vowed to marry. His response to Eli's anger and bewilderment is philosophical:

> **CHRISTOPHER:** …You'll leave here soon, like I did. Travel around ….
>
> **ELI:** I'd like to […] like Josh Markady […]. Barbados, Trinidad, Oporto ….
>
> **CHRISTOPHER:** But I think you'll come back, too. You can never forget. None of us can. (331)

Their rift healed, they wrestle playfully, half-clad after skinny-dipping; they are discovered by Brother McKim. *Per* Goffman, this intimate horseplay exhibits the dangerous characteristics of penetration of each other's skin-sheaths and a mutually-

shared occupation of intimate levels of personal space. To McKim, it looks like sex, and he is not as far off as the participants later make him out to be. He is abiding by a common community taboo against sexual contact between same-sex participants, even though he has committed sexual transgression with the same boy he is accusing. Thwarted in his romantic objectives with Eli, McKim assumes the mantle of community enforcement officer in lieu of his ability to woo Eli back.

Christopher underestimates McKim's ability to rouse indignation amongst the people of the town. He is arrested and taken away to St. John's. Eli will be forced to testify at the trial: he becomes aware that his allies lack the status to influence community events of this magnitude. Joshua blames McKim for the arrest, but his status position renders him impotent. Virginia, still loyal to Christopher, criticizes Eli for continuing to go to church. His parents do not believe his account of the events by the water. In this moment Eli is caught between conflicting ideas of right and wrong, between his instincts and his learned responses, a step within and a step Outside each of the Insides which have given him identity since he was born.

The web of alliances and substrate relationships rife in the community cannot withstand such a conflict for long. The community begins to divide over the accusations. Elias Pallisher does not share the confusion of his son. His family, the only micro-community about which he truly cares, is under siege by Strangers. He is mortified by the stories which are spreading; unsure what to believe, he believes the worst. Pallisher is determined that his son will not stray from the righteous path, a path of religious orthodoxy which mirrors the desired obedience to the strictures of the community. Elias

vows to recover Eli into the micro-community of the Pallisher family, beginning with symbolic act of accompanying him to the trial in St. John's:

> **ELIAS: [**…] because like it or not, this is a family and by the word of God I'll see to it that it stays that way ….
>
> **MARTHA:** Yer father's right, Eli […] we have to go and be with ya and when it's all over, we'll settle down to what we were before all this started.
>
> **ELI:** I don't know if we can, mother […] because I don't know *what* we were before ….(336)

In this direct questioning of the most intimate Inside to which he belongs, Eli demonstrates a profound level of estrangement. For him, there is no Inside to go back to; he is already gone. At the trial, McKim is questioned first. Unable to satisfactorily rebut the questions, he indignantly defends his status:

> **BROTHER JOHN:** listen here, Solomon Marks already told ya how he had seen the both of 'em behind his shed late at night indecently exposed and in a shameless embrace […] the whole harbour knowed about 'em and the whole harbour is behind me. I'm not on trial here…he is. (337)

Christopher appears next in the dock. The first question by the Crown lawyer brings into play the notion that the idea of belonging is on trial: "are you a Christian, Mr. Simms? […] answer me this Mr. Simms, would you call this Christian love, between you and Eli Pallisher?" (339). As the trial winds to what appears to be its inevitable conviction of the teacher, in a moment of clarity Eli decides to tell his secret. He admits to having had sex

with Brother John, and identifies the priest as the true Stranger: "he's turned the whole harbour against us […] the three of us" (341).

Despite Eli's revelation, Christopher is found guilty and goes to jail. The truth is a casualty of the tribal mentality which is found in a community under threat. The speaking of it has a catalytic effect on Eli, however. He is now comfortable with his identity as a Transgressive Insider. His actions take on an air of certainty. Eli's refusal to attend church with his parents leads to a rupture. The only sanctuary to which he has recourse is the house of Joshua Markady on the edge of town. Safe, for the moment, within it, there is a knock—the knock of a Stranger—on the door. It is John McKim. He has been vilified by his former Inside community and is now loathed by Eli, the only individual for whom he appears to truly care. There will be no expiation on this night. They run him off.

Virginia, who functions throughout the play as a kind of primal sexual entity, has not suffered much from the expulsion of her fiancé from the micro-community. She quickly seduces her younger friend Eli. That she will leave him behind as she begins her own independent journey through life—Outside the community—is obvious to the reader but not to Eli, who has now had two sexual initiations which are entirely distinct, except that neither can be considered satisfactory. Brother John, bidding to remediate his status, admits his transgressions before the congregation, which reverts to its traditional orthodoxy and expels the priest. McKim has reverted back to his original status as a Stranger, free now to find another community of souls. Eli is left to sort all this out with the eccentric sage, Joshua:

ELI: What do I do now?

> **JOSHUA:** Do what's best fer ya […] get yourself ready for college and get that education you always said you wanted […] see the world and then come back and straighten this place out, 'cause for all its faults, ya know, it's worth savin'. (348)

Joshua seems an unlikely choice to defend the community, but eccentrics such as he must exist on the margins of something definable. Critical to the notion of Insider-Stranger dynamics is the feeling, on the part of most people, that they must have a primary Inside, a home, a place where they are known and identified. Caplin Bight is Markady's home.

Not all Outside influences are negative, nor are all Inside beliefs above question. Individuals are responsible for making determinations of what they will believe, and to what Inside they will adhere. The tone of the play's final scene is fundamentally communal and positive:

> (*ELI, on his way to the salmon pool, stops for a moment where he and CHRISTOPHER swam and where he last held VIRGINIA. Then he hears it, the unmistakable cry of an eagle somewhere overhead. He hears VIRGINIA'S voice somewhere in the sky above.)*
>
> **VIRGINIA:** (*Voice over.*) Like eagles, Eli … free as eagles.
>
> (*He takes off his clothes and stands with his arms outstretched*.)
>
> **ELI:** (*Shouting.*) Here I am, Lord…your obedient servant. Strike *me* down in all your righteous glory. If not, let me walk to the end of the world alone.
>
> (*ELI dives into the water*) (348)

Eli's dive in the water recreates the baptisms of St. John, freeing himself of his original sin.

In adapting a novel to the stage, Walsh makes use of his screenwriting skills to create short, active scenes full of meaning. Snippets of scenes interlock with others and gradually a picture emerges of a community in crisis. The structure supports the perception that the play's protagonist, if there is an entity so identified, is the community itself. In establishing Caplin Bight as the focus of his enquiry into the nature of how justice becomes elastic when under any form of social pressure, Walsh indicates that such communities must stand up, as if on trial, and be accountable for their deficiencies.

The Stranger Brother John McKim is not credible as a source of all that is corrupt in Caplin Bight. He has merely arrived and taken advantage of an opportunity. The Stranger Christopher Simms, as he is denoted upon his conviction, has had more influence; Eli, his young friend, appears certain to follow him into Strangerhood. The Strangerhood of characters such as Christopher and Eli, however, is one of increased education and a desire to challenge and improve oneself, aspects which are difficult to condemn. What remains is the community entity. Exploding with unresolved resentment and frustrated ambitions, the moral code of Caplin Bight has turned inward and rotted at the core. Its citizens are no longer capable of enforcement and protection; they run from villain to villain in a confused state of anger and despair.

Far from the rustic, rough-hewn charms of Pittman's "Merasheen", Caplin Bight is presented as an example of an outport which does not deserve to survive, because it has lost its moral compass in a mire of insularity. *Tomorrow Will Be Sunday* argues for a wider, not a narrower world, and for the ascendancy of the individual in order to build a stronger collective. In these themes can be found the seeds of the next stage in the

development of Newfoundland playwriting as represented by younger writers such as Robert Chafe and Torquil Colbo.

5.6.2 Young Triffie's Been Made Away With (1985)

Ray Guy is known across Newfoundland as a humourist whose *Evening Telegram* newspaper columns have been collected and published in book form, and as a magazine columnist and radio commentator. He has also written three plays, all commissioned by the Resource Centre for the Arts (RCA) Theatre Company in St. John's. His career spans nearly forty years in the public eye. Guy has never been known for pulling his rhetorical punches. He is a natural contrarian who distrusts fashionable political causes and cant. A Newfoundland nationalist in the 1970s, Guy stopped writing newspaper columns in that vein when nationalism became the war cry of the rising arts community (Fralic 151).

Outport-born and raised, Guy is from the same generation of writers as Tom Cahill, Michael Cook and Al Pittman, but his work for the stage began much later, with the production of *Triffie* in 1985 at the Resource Centre for the Arts in St. John's. Unlike any of these three writers, Guy had no grounding in the theatre. Perhaps it is this freedom from formal training that allows Guy, in *Triffie*, to take a neo-Aristotelian narrative structure and "tease and stretch realistic conventions" (Lynde "Newfoundland" 92). The actions, and their consequences, which take place in *Triffie* range from the bizarre to Gothic horror. Characters are drawn in an extreme fashion closer to *grand guignol* than to the *pièce bien-fait*, but what surprises the reader is the consistency and continuity that

attends these outrageous characters. For all the seeming absurdity of the violent actions piled one atop the other, the over-all effect is one of a disturbingly plausible reality.

To read *Triffie* as a play which takes its psychological realism over the top and past all credibility, or as a display of rabid contempt for outport life, is to misread not only the style of the play but the intent of its author. Guy is a satirist. His play makes judicious use of the "bizarre, uncanny and absurd" (Lynde 92) to create a memorable picture of the destructive effects of insularity. The outport residents of the play are archetypes, to be sure, but they are not romanticized or idealized. Fralic notes that "Guy does not generalize about the feelings of those in the outports, and he certainly does not pity them. Instead he specializes in the depiction of options, variance of choice" (151-2). Faced with extreme situations, his characters take extreme measures.

An argument can be made that, for all the genuine empathy and knowledge with which Pittman and Russell treat outporters, they have assisted in their further marginalization. The sharp satirical edge with which Guy skewers the hypocrisy and venal aspects of micro-community life works to "strip the outports of mystique and reveal them as the sites of controversy, struggle, and change" (Fralic 153).

In comparing the work of Michael Cook's Newfoundland trilogy with works such as *Triffie* and *The Swinton Massacre*, it can be hypothesized that Guy's status as an Insider of considerable esteem and influence in Newfoundland allows him more latitude to create works that appear critical of the status quo. Guy's plays are seldom re-mounted. Then again, apart from festivals such as the Gros Morne Theatre Festival, Stephenville Festival and Summer In The Bight Festival, theatre production in Newfoundland is concentrated on new work. *Triffie* has been made into a film, directed by ex-CODCO

member Mary Walsh; this demonstrates, more than twenty years after the writing of the play, a willingness to tolerate acid-tinged criticism, even from one of their own.

In *Triffie* a 1940s outport community is torn apart by the discovery of a young girl's body. In contrast to the occasionally tendentious gravity of *Tomorrow Will Be Sunday*, Guy draws the residents of Swyers Harbour with savage humour. The tone of the play veers between melodrama and even camp, but can never be fully dismissed as implausible. The characters are resolute in pursuing their intentions with utter seriousness. Whether we are meant to sneer at them, or to gasp in horror at the extremes humans may fall prey to, is left to the spectator.

Triffie is structured along the lines of a suspense drama. *Triffie* provides a clear contrast not only to elegiac plays such as Pittman's *West Moon* and *A Rope Against the Sun*, but also to memory plays such as the Mercer plays of David French and the neo-tragic forms of Cook's *Jacob's Wake* and *The Head, Guts and Soundbone Dance*. In such plays fate rules with a heavy hand. Characters march to their destinies with ferocity or fear, but without suspense. The certainty of their fate, it can be argued, mirrors a profoundly fatalistic aspect of the traditional Newfoundland character. The "whodunit" is a popular genre that lends itself to satire, and this may in part explain Guy's choice of the form. A deeper reading, however, may be possible when the play is viewed from the politicized vantage point of marginalization. The characters in Swyers Harbour face difficult choices throughout the play. Nothing is consigned to fate: all interaction is in play. At play's end, as Fralic notes, the characters face still more difficult choices:

> The three protagonists in *Triffie* are left with a difficult choice: invite the Ranger's (the outsider's) help and risk more unwelcome outside influence, or refuse to

> assist the Ranger and risk never improving their defenses […]. Guy's protagonists tend to be torn between adaptation […] and resistance […] the plays are characterized by ambivalence." (149)

Guy appears to believe that it is irresponsible to blame or to passively accept one's "fate". His background as a politically-engaged commentator on Newfoundland affairs must be considered in assessing the motives behind his choice of form and style for *Triffie*. Considerable sympathy for the underdog is intertwined with an insistent underlining of each character's ability to perform whatever actions are required for their benefit and survival. Guy chooses to address "not the pain and damage of marginalization processes…but rather the active responses to these processes" (Fralic 151). The effect is not just humourous but, as Lynde describes it, "painfully funny" ("Newfoundland" 92).

Within the suspense structure Guy subverts the convention associated with the genre. A "whodunit" focuses on guessing who the killer might be. In *Triffie* Guy does not allow the spectator such an easy perspective from which to view the play. Instead he keeps on killing or injuring people, until the list of victims and perpetrators is hopelessly confused; everyone is innocent and guilty at the same time. This places an emphasis on *agency*, and the present, as opposed to reactivity and the past.

Guy's writing directs the spectator to examine the nature of Stranger-Insider behaviour in a claustrophobic Inside environment in a more clinical manner than the suspense genre would typically allow. The play mercilessly depicts parochial attitudes and the corruptive nature of tribalism: a Newfoundland society at war with itself, where virtually every character exhibits Strange behaviour and suffers differing consequences depending on their status within the society of Swyers Harbour. The play's central trope

is that of the Stranger. In *Triffie* the Stranger is invoked as the mythical figure once common in the social discourse of rural communities across Newfoundland, the silent rover, a figure often conjured after a disastrous event has taken place. As events occur, however, it becomes clear that this figured Stranger is not responsible for the ills which beset the community. The Stranger lurks within, shifting from character to character as the margins of Strange activity are continually redefined.

The play's first scene quickly introduces the spectator to a landscape of division and levels of exclusion. Dr. Percy Melrose arrives late to dinner and explains to his wife Grace his difficulties both with a patient and in suppressing a lynching planned by the supporters of a fundamentalist church against the town eccentric. The alacrity with which he pours himself a drink is a signal that alcohol is a more intimate partner than his wife; there is no kiss, no hug upon his entrance, although their relationship appears to be a caring one.

The couple are mainlanders who have been residents for over twenty years. The eccentric, Mr. Washbourne, reminisces that the couple came to outport Newfoundland from Ontario drawn by "the Grenfell thing you see…off to a terribly remote area to do good works among the natives" (qtd. in Fralic 29).[51] Grace "organized women's groups and God knows what" (29), groups she still maintains but which are now marked, Washbourne adds, by her bitterness and contempt: "Oh, she still trots along to play mother hen at her women's group. But she flings out the most bitter sarcasm at them…in a form she believes to be well above their wooden heads" (30). Grace has become addicted to prescription medication. She and her husband indulge in different forms of anaesthetization to dull the pain of their existence.

It is Washbourne, a character very similar to Joshua Markady in *Tomorrow Will Be Sunday*, who is the topic of their conversation. Grace wants to know why anyone would wish to persecute the town recluse. Melrose explains that a rumour had spread in the town that Pastor "Damnation" Pottle and his congregation were set to march on Washbourne's shack at the edge of town. A series of sheep have been slaughtered in recent days, for no apparent reason. Washbourne, it is feared, makes a convenient scapegoat.

This story is the first of several instances where the divisions in the town's status hierarchy are introduced. Melrose describes the town coming to the defense of Washbourne, albeit in a passive manner (by asking Melrose to do something about it). Washbourne, although he has been pushed, or has pushed himself, outwards along the community's line of alienation, remains an Insider. The son of mainlanders, but born in the community, he possesses low Transgressive Insider status. This is sufficient, however, to lay claim to protection in some form against the prospect of violence enacted by Pastor Pottle's adherents. Pottle is a Demystified Stranger, having come to Swyers Harbour one or two years after the Melroses. Melrose recalls, "You remember. His wife died in childbirth. She was one of my first, um, losses" (106).

The "um" in the previous line is Guy's indication that the "losses" Melrose refers to may not have been as a result of the hand of God, but rather the increasingly shaky hand of an alcoholic doctor. It represents, along with the reported sheep maimings, the introduction of the play's litany of violent acts which form the backdrop for its events.

Pottle's fire-and-brimstone church bears a remarkable resemblance to that of Brother McKim in *Tomorrow Will Be Sunday*, and not without reason; along with the

archetypes of the Teacher, the Doctor, the Fisherman, and the Merchant, the Priest is a cornerstone of traditional Newfoundland society. Guy had identified the destructive impact of the excessive members of the clergy in his newspaper columns when the subject was still a sensitive one:

> Columnist-playwright Ray Guy loathes hypocrisy and the 1970s were full of it. Guy's newspaper columns were one of the few signs the media was paying any attention [to the case of the Christian Brothers' abuse of orphans], and in his plays (he's written three so far) the religious figures were always revealed to be complete reprobates. (Sullivan 19)

As explained in the unpublished version of the play, Pottle faced opposition from the townsfolk when he arrived in Swyers Harbour and as a result he has established a flock constituted from disenfranchised citizens, the kind, Grace explains, that "come from the low end of the scale. And the economic scale. They're more or less despised…" (107). Pottle has created his own micro-community, one which exists at odds with the community's Insiders. Guy is scathing, through the Melroses, in his denunciation of religion:

> **MRS. MELROSE:** […] But, by God, one day, the Great Judgement Day, won't the tables be turned. Then they'll be the one […] while the others are howling forever over a slow fire […] they'll be the ones enjoying the new chesterfield suites, the Aladdin lamps, the gas washing machines, whatever goodies they suppose are waiting for them up there.
>
> **DR. MELROSE:** That's why they're so hot to trot for the end of the world, I guess.
>
> **MRS. MELROSE:** Ah, yes. Revenge is what they want. And they know it's coming sure and soon. So they gloat. And that makes them happy. What a comfort religion is, to be sure, in more ways than one. (107)

An Insider-Outsider split within the town becomes increasingly apparent. The problem with such binary distinctions is that the margins of membership are always shifting, just as they do with any affiliative circle or bordered membership space. It is as yet unclear on which side the Melroses will end up, but for the moment, the Doctor and his wife are included within the Insider camp, not as Insiders *per se* but as Necessary Outsiders of long residence and remediation.

The situation surrounding the sheep maimings is sufficiently tense that one of the play's Strangers has been called in to investigate the crimes. Ranger Hepditch, a Newfoundlander from another part of the island, represents a rare instance of a positively-figured, non-resident Stranger in Newfoundland drama. The Rangers, enforcement officials who were constituted in rural communities in the 1940s, were, like Hepditch, based in a single community and would then travel to the other centres which fell under their jurisdiction. Hepditch is new in the job, although he is known to some degree and is therefore neutralized. When there is no crime to investigate he has little or no contact with the people of Swyers Harbour. Fralic notes, "Guy limits his criticism of outsiders to those who would attempt to impose changes on a community rather than listen to and consult with the people they desire to help." (59)

The most recent ewe to fall victim to mutilation belongs to Aunt Millie, the town's postmistress and key informal enforcement authority. Melrose describes her reaction:

> **DR. MELROSE:** Anyway, lordy, but Aunt Millie Bishop was a sight to behold. Couldn't blame her, I suppose. She'd gone out around her henhouse to look for one of her pullets and this … this thing hit her square in the face. It was hanging by the neck with its one unbroken leg pointing straight up at the sky like the

> finger of doom or something. “The Stranger” shrieks Aunt Millie. “It was the Stranger done it. I knowed it. I knowed it. I seen him. (108)

Then he adds,

> **DR. MELROSE:** Yeah. The Stranger. Every place comes equipped with a stranger. Surely you’ve heard of him. I’ll bet the Stranger was around ever since Swyers Harbour was founded. Maybe before. Anyway, he’s a lively old bird, the Stranger is […] especially during a war or just after. Lots of people have seen his footprints in the sand or the snow or the mud. But few claim to have ever seen him.
>
> **MRS. MELROSE:** Aw, it’s just more of their idiotic hogwash.
>
> **DR. MELROSE:** Maybe so, my dear. But, you know, the Stranger always leaves his calling card. If a horse has been snorting and terrified in its stall all morning, why the Stranger has been sleeping on the hay all night ... It’s the Stranger, you see, who steals turnips from the cellar or hens from the roost. It’s he who’s spotted skulking through the woods on the other side of the harbour. And if, some pitch black night, someone is coming toward you and you hail him and he doesn’t answer but picks up speed and hurries past … well, you’ve just had a brush with the Stranger ….
>
> **MRS. MELROSE:** Oh, stop it, Percy. Surely you don’t believe that nonsense. Good Lord, you’re as soft in the head as these … these people, themselves.
>
> **DR. MELROSE:** Ok. Ok. But I think there’s a reason they believe in the Stranger […] suppose you were stuck in an isolated place like this, hemmed in, little communication from the outside. Your imagination goes sort of funny. You get a little bit paranoid. After all, when these communities were first founded they were founded where they are for two reasons, fish and fear. Fish and fear of the Stranger […] the Pirate, the Navy, the Law, the Pillagers, the French […] right now the Stranger could be an escaped murderer, a stranded Nazi spy, a shell-shocked veteran, an army deserter, an escaped lunatic. (108-09)

This extended passage highlights the importance of the Stranger figure in the world of outport Newfoundland. Melrose, not without sympathy, traces the figuration from historically factual examples of predators which would be familiar to most Newfoundlanders to its almost wholly spectral presence in the mind of Insiders such as

Aunt Millie. He then essays various contemporary possibilities of which individuals would constitute Strangers in 1947 Swyers Harbour. The Stranger is both a corporeal and spectral figure, a creature with heightened powers (or least a heightened impact).

The passage also reveals Grace's savage contempt for her neighbours. She has ceased to be a neighbour in Hallman's sense of the term, in fact, withdrawing within herself and denouncing the community in which she resides, but does not call home: "Shut up. Shut up. Shut up. God, I can't stand it. When are we going to go? When? When? You promised. You promised." (109) The Melrose's negotiated status as Necessary Outsiders requires consistent remediative interaction. The Doctor continues to perform such acts (such as assisting in the Washbourne issue), while Grace does not. She actively seeks a return to her own home community and a repudiation of the community where she now lives.

Another aspect of the passage is instructive. Melrose refers to "shell-shocked war veterans" as Strangers. One already lives within the community: Millie's son Vincent. Vincent manifests a nasty tendency to attack the local girls and assault them sexually. He is kept out of sight in the back of the Post Office by Aunt Millie, where his ravings and shrieking profanity form the background music for Millie's daily interaction with her neighbours. Vincent's status is negotiated by his mother, who protects and apologizes for him, blaming Outside forces for his condition, "because he suffered a lot, you know, in them long war years. He been hardened in the crucible of battle" (qtd. in Fralic 46). This successful mediation retains Vincent's position within the community as a Necessary Outsider by virtue of affiliation.

Pastor Pottle has a daughter, Tryphenia, who is developmentally delayed. Her

condition may or may not be due to the birth process, the delivery having been botched by Melrose (Fralic 11). Triffie, by nature of her condition, is also a Transgressive Insider. She will soon be found to have been murdered. While alive her status had been that of an estranged community member, based on the non-conforming aspects of her developmental disability. In her short and troubled life—there is evidence supplied by Melrose that Potter has beaten her regularly, and that he has locked her in a room whenever he leaves town—she has never benefited from the protection of an affiliation with an authoritative Insider who might help mitigate her status in the way that Aunt Millie manages for Vincent. Her place in the community is accepted, but she is not part of daily discourse. Her sole friend, Billy Head, is a laconic loner, regarded warily for his friendship with Old Man Washbourne. Together they form a troika of the disenfranchised, Necessary but shunned.

Billy is Tryphenia's half-sibling, the son of Pastor Pottle, although he is not initially aware of this. Mrs. Melrose, who is aware, warns him against any congress with Triffie, who assumes that the quiet boy who loves little more than hunting and fishing is also developmentally disabled. Dr. Melrose describes Billy's activities thusly: "Well, that's about all the young bugger does […] prowl along the beaches, skulk through the woods with that dog and axe of his […]." (Fralic 50) Fralic notes this Outsider reading of rural life: "[T]his interpretation of the recreation activities of outport youths is something that Guy has taken to task in his columns. He suggests that youths in the outports, free to roam and explore, may have been lucky not to have to endure the intensely organized leisure activities of city youth." (50) In support of this view, the Insider Washbourne describes Billy as "a regular Daniel Boone, is young William." (51)

Billy chooses to ignore the orders of the Doctor's wife and, as a result, in the action prior to the events of the play Triffie has become pregnant. As Mrs. Melrose screams "Rip it out! Rip it out!" in the background, Melrose performs another botched operation. This revelation is held, with respect to the exigencies of the "whodunit" style, until the play's final scene.

Matters begin their descent into chaos with Billy's discovery of Triffie's dead body in the landwash. He concludes that she didn't make away with herself, that "you been made away with" (*Triffie* 111). This discovery accelerates the play's centrifugal destruction of the community, begun with the news of the sheep maimings. A desperate struggle is commenced to identify, and vilify, the Strangers responsible for the outbreak of evil deeds, as manifested in Triffie's death and the revelations of abuse and incest that arise along with it. When the Ranger asks Melrose why the island's authorities weren't notified of the bruises found on Tryphenia, evidently inflicted by her father, a new, more amorphous, Stranger comes into play. Melrose describes the indifference of the provincial government, based in St. John's. Its relevance and authority in relation to Swyers Harbour is mocked: "Inform our so-called welfare system? Contact that farce of an orphanage in St. John's? Pardon me, Sergeant, but lodge a complaint with you? Fine. In six months, perhaps a year's time, perhaps something *might* be done. Might. Might." (114)

Gerald M. Sider notes the "total absence of any local government outside the capital city, St. John's […] one of the most salient features of the Newfoundland state … [which] persisted past the mid-twentieth century." (99) With no local formal political structure—there is no reference to one in *Triffie*—and only the occasional visits by a

Ranger to fill the absence of an iconic, Foucauldian-style macro-community authority, the residents of the outports have learned not only to fend for themselves, but also to create their own informal extra-juridical processes. Ranger Hepditch's appearance is a sign that events are spiraling beyond the ability of the community to control them.

With this parade of eccentric, disabled and defective community members, Guy presents an Inside with a siege mentality, hostile to an Outside perceived to be an indifferent, perhaps malignant, entity. The Outside world is not relevant to the daily dynamics of Swyers Harbour. As Fralic states, "a general distrust of outsiders has developed in Swyers Harbour because of the centuries of careless or hostile treatment at the hands of strangers." (39-40)

The list of Transgressive Insiders within the community continues to grow, as panic spreads in the community. Aunt Millie blithely lists the possible suspects to the polite, but impatient, Ranger, lamenting, "so many strangers on the go, too. You don't know who is who or what is what" (*Triffie* 116). In her function as postmistress Millie is a gatekeeper, a filter for contact with the Outside. She regulates discourse with this world, acting as judge and censor with regard to incoming mail. Her knowledge of the sort of mail received by residents, and her daily contact with them, equips Millie with a store of negotiable social currency. In one instance she has chosen to hold back the Pastor's package of pornography, having of course checked its contents first. She is particularly suspicious of Old Man Washbourne, who unknowingly indicts himself not only through his solitude but the type of mail he receives:

> Who is he? All I can do is s'pose …. And you bein' a man of the law, sir, knows you can't go around s'posing about people […] especially when what you're

> dealing with is a murder […] nobody knows what his first name is. Although he got three of 'em […] the initials is on his cheque. J.D.W. Washbourne. And he's one of them "esks"[…]. Ee, ess, Q, full stop. (121)

After the outrages of sheep maimings, a proposed lynching, and the discovery of the bruised body of a murdered girl, things are only beginning to get interesting in Swyers Harbour. The Gothic overkill with which Guy lays on extreme actions and events walks a fine dramatic line between the ludicrously implausible and the fascinatingly grotesque. The satirist's desire to have the spectator recoil, not only with disgust but with bemusement, can be seen as akin to other forms of reason-based distanciation.

Hepditch receives a telegram from headquarters revealing that Pastor Pottle has been sodomizing the children at the orphanage in nearby Whitbourne for years. The over-worked Ranger goes to the church to arrest him. In a disturbing scene Guy reveals his conscious use of the Insider/Stranger dynamic as the defining motif of the play. Hepditch enters the church. A man is sweeping the floor angrily, in great agitation, muttering to himself. Hepditch asks the sweeper if he is Pastor Pottle. Pottle denies it.[52] His intent is not to evade the law, as one might think, but to deny his own identity as a sodomite and abusive father. In a profane, incoherent rant filled with obscure biblical references, Pottle reveals himself, with all the force of his scalding self-hatred. Pottle has become a Stranger to himself, and to his spiritual flock. Bleating like a sheep, he is led away, a lamb to the slaughter.

The list of suspects matches the expanding number of Transgressive Insiders. Vincent has chosen an inopportune time to run away, and is briefly under suspicion. Washbourne prods Billy to confess that Mrs. Melrose threatened to chop off his sexual

organs if he fooled around with Triffie. In response, Grace, in the throes of *delirium tremens*, tells the assembled group of Billy's fraternal relation to Triffie, news that is a revelation to Billy. Melrose decides that the time has come to put Grace out of her misery. He injects her with "enough morphine … to drop a Clydesdale." (140) Melrose is then killed rapidly thereafter by a deranged Pottle, who has escaped the Ranger's custody by jumping from a moving train. The Pastor is subdued as Billy nails his hand to a table. Surrounded by two dead bodies, the picture is a roguish recalling of the Crucifixion. Billy, Washbourne and Aunt Millie remain to decide what action to take.

Fralic notes:

> [T]he uncertainty with which the play is concluded is important. The trio decide to 'sleep on' the decision whether or not to help the Ranger complete his investigation […] the Ranger is from away. The decision will be to risk another round of disastrous outside involvement by accepting the assistance of outside agents who can augment with social and legal mechanisms the personal strength of the Swyers Harbour characters, or to persist with defense mechanisms which the disasters in the play reveal to be inadequate. (61)

In leaving the play's central action unresolved, Guy demonstrates his thesis that action is up to the individual and is not resigned to fate, and that this sense of responsibility extends to the polities of which they are a part. The community must decide whether to adapt to Outside influences or to resist them, to accept a share of the responsibility for the horrors which have taken place, or to keep blaming Outside forces. The audience must make their decision, too.

Guy's intent appears to be to take all the archetypal characters of rural outport life and pound them into a mash where no one prejudice rises above the others. The theme

therefore transcends issues of prejudice and justice. There is a need, as Ahmed has demonstrated (22), for any community of Insiders to create identifiable Stranger figures, individuals who can be culled from the community in purgation for its sins. In Swyers Harbour, all are guilty, all are implicated.

By taking clichéd tales of rural behaviour and expanding them to breaking point, Guy appears to be indicting the audience in a similar manner. The play's effectiveness and intensity belie the implausibility of its narrative and suggest the playwright's ulterior motive. Guy identifies and heightens the position of the spectator as the Stranger. Only in adopting the gaze of a Stranger, in Guy's view, can individuals gain a measure of objectivity in viewing the actions of those on the Inside.

5.7 Robert Chafe and Torquil Colbo: Re-defining the Stranger's Identity

If early playwrights such as Ted Russell perpetuated assumptions about the nature of cultural identity in Newfoundland, recent playwrights such as Torquil Colbo and Robert Chafe have begun to question these assumptions. The significance of Ray Guy's *Young Triffie's Been Made Away With* lies in its anti-fatalistic message of choice over pre-destiny. A succeeding generation of playwrights throughout the 1990s and in the new millennium, writing primarily within an urban milieu and with an increasingly urban orientation, have taken up this message of enfranchisement. Rather than an oft-sentimentalized picture of the old home town, or its mythologized corollary, the lonesome expatriate adrift in the miasma of Canadian culture, this evolving self-definition incorporates the notion of familiarity as a vehicle of estrangement.

Robert Chafe's work in particular presents the thesis that, in modern urban Newfoundland, Necessary Outsiders can shift the trajectory of their status away from Strangeness, towards a greater state of inclusion in the community. Necessary Outsiders in the plays of Chafe, Colbo, and other urban playwrights such as Janis Spence, Berni Stapleton and Pete Soucy control their destinies to a greater degree than before, and in acting, rather than reacting, achieve a level of status within their micro-communities (family, friends, colleagues) no more perilous than that of other Insiders. In this representation designations such as Necessary Outsider become increasingly irrelevant in a society that practises greater tolerance and inclusion, expanding to include increasing numbers of citizen-members.

In traditional insular cultures significant value is placed on ancestry and long-term residence. Members of a micro-community are identified within a hierarchy defined in this examination by the terms Stranger, (Necessary) Outsider, and Insider. Chafe, in such plays as *Tempting Providence* and *Under Wraps*, suggests that Necessary Outsiders, both foreign- and native-born, have the potential to become Insiders, without qualification. The key to this transformation, his work suggests, lies with the refusal of the individual to accept their pre-assigned status—pre-assigned in the sense that such status has been accorded previously to other individuals who fit a similar profile. To take examples from the two plays mentioned, rather than assimilating Insider beliefs and actions as a remediative strategy, a gay man or a foreign-born Nurse simply *act*, on the presumption that they are, or will become, Insiders. The transformation, it is implicitly stated, takes place in the attitudes of others who regard such characters; it is their "problem", not that of the individual.

5.7.1 Tempting Providence (2000)

Robert Chafe has achieved great acclaim as the most successful and talented member of a new generation of Newfoundland playwrights. He alternates between writing scripts with a conventional (if impressionistic) narrative structure for theatre companies across Canada and work as the co-founder and half of the artistic force behind Artistic Fraud of Newfoundland, a company he founded with Jillian Keiley in 1995. Working in tandem with Keiley's *kaleidography* method of notating and choreographing actor movement, and the director's love of technical innovation, Chafe has written extensively for Artistic Fraud, employing his trademark lyrical dialogue and gift for concise characterization in a context that broadens the parameters of psychological realism.

The results have been impressive on both fronts of Chafe's career. Artistic Fraud has produced Chafe's plays across Canada, including a national tour of the striking *Under Wraps*. The more conventional *Tempting Providence*, a play commissioned by Theatre Newfoundland Labrador for its Gros Morne Theatre Festival in 1999, is arguably the most successful play in Newfoundland theatre history. The play opened in Cow Head in the summer of 2000 and has been playing there ever since, while touring across Canada and internationally in the fall and winter seasons.

Tempting Providence is a biographical play told in a series of vignettes. In undertaking a stage treatment of a legendary outport nurse, Myra Bennett, Chafe remarked in an interview that his challenge was to find a small slice "that worked dramatically and shape it to fit the stage" (Fletcher 14). Bennett's life spanned 100 years, culminating with the award of the Order of Canada and an Order of the British Empire

designation. She was born Myra Grimsley and raised in England before emigrating to the then-Dominion of Newfoundland in 1921 to work as a nurse on the island's west coast.

Within a year, Grimsley had decided to commit her life to the small communities stretching more than 400 kilometres from the southern boundary of the Great Northern Peninsula to St. Anthony at its northernmost point. Not all such Grenfell-inspired cultural transplants were successful. Michael Fralic notes the difficulties faced by the missionaries—religious, medical and educational—who "intended to bring the advantages of various forms of enlightenment" to isolated communities (9). Conditions were generally more rugged than they had imagined, the culture was now notably distinct from its British roots, and the isolation, which was nearly total in winter, could drive a non-native to distraction, as the characters in Guy's *Triffie* demonstrate.

The work itself was arduous. There were few vehicles and roads on the west coast until the presence of American bases necessitated infrastructural building during the Second World War, and few of these improvements arrived quickly on the peninsula. In the early twentieth century Grenfell's floating hospital was the only medical facility on the coast. Once within the communities, the temptation to "romanticize and idealize" (West 34-5) the inhabitants soon wore off.

Myra Grimsley fits the description Grenfell himself provided of those who possess the "'ineradicable British trait [that] makes them actually crazy to go and leave the fleshpots and dwell in the uttermost parts of the Empire'" (qtd. in Rompkey 212). Working in a community and assimilating into its social hierarchy, however, are quite different endeavours. Shifting status from that of a Stranger inward toward a higher level of esteem, social value, and status as a Insider involves mastering codes of

communicative competence that are all but inaccessible to those who are unfamiliar with them. Where formal structures, as noted, do not exist, informal modes of information dissemination and enforcement become paramount. In "A Tangly Bunch: the Political Culture of Outport Women in Newfoundland", Marilyn Porter comments that "[women's] command over channels of informal information is in itself a considerable resource" (22) and that this command extended to most of the informal structures of social organization, the affiliative circles wherein members sought to ensure or augment their status within the community.

Myra Grimsley is an intensely self-aware character. She describes her arrival early in the play: "The stranger arrives to the strange land." (75) Throughout the play the spectator is subject to her gaze, as she narrates the events of her life, aided by the townsfolk. Her initial encounters with the informal regulatory forces of the outport create a picture of a gap in cultural proximity:

MYRA I'm Nurse Grimsley.

No response.

And you are?

No response.

My first patient.

WOMAN Knows it all, do ya?

MYRA Pardon me?

WOMAN Thinks ya knows it all.

MYRA Well, I've certainly never said that.

WOMAN Oh yes, you knows it all, all right.

MYRA Perhaps enough to help. What is the trouble?

WOMAN Where you from?

MYRA Madam –

WOMAN Not Newfoundland. (77)

The Nurse's insistence on full medical disclosure is at odds with the traditional rural attitude towards Outsiders, which discourages intimate disclosure. As Fralic comments with regard to the outport community depicted in *Triffie*, "Guy suggests that there have been institutional weaknesses in many of Newfoundland's social structures which have made outport people reticent to report abuses by people in their communities." (39)

Rather than remediating her behaviour, Nurse Grimsley does not desist. She knows what she is doing is correct, both procedurally and in terms of the greater health of the community—in effect, as a Stranger, she is establishing her value. Her assertion of a stubborn, plain-spoken authority acknowledges the cultural gap and even makes use of it to establish status: "You will refer to me as Nurse. Nurse. Nurse Grimsley if you prefer, but never Miss. And certainly not Mrs. I would demand your respect just as I'm sure that you would expect to have mine. I will be seeing patients as soon as humanly possible. I trust you all know where to find me." (77) The Stranger Myra Grimsley begins her transformation into the Insider Myra Bennett even as she challenges local orthodoxy (Devine "Place" 6). The critical agency lies not in her marriage to a local man (and subsequent altering of her foreign surname to one of local provenance), as one might

think, but rather in her defiant ability to define herself by effecting change within her adopted community. She demonstrates her ability to view the world through their eyes, even as she insists on being viewed through her own:

> **MYRA**
> There is a cautious curiosity here. I must remember that. I must remember that these people, not only have they never had any formal medical aid, but they also rarely meet someone new. I am standing in front of Mrs. House's, and I am watched by my new neighbours. They look at me from the paths. They whisper as they walk. They exist in this sublime world of friends and relatives. So, of course, there will be a trust issue, with a stranger in town. A stranger barking commands. And this is fine. I'm not here to make friends. That is not my intent. I must remember that too. As I knock on the door. As I start to talk pleasantries. (80)

Myra acknowledges that she exhibits Strangeness, as one whose manner is at odds with local standards of appropriate behaviour. Seemingly timid patients probe her with personal questions in an attempt to demystify the Stranger in town. Rather than undertake the obsequies of remediation, her response is a reaffirmation of her own codes of conduct:

> **MYRA**
> And the day I come to your place of work, where you have set aside some of your time to speak to me about where I am from, where I originate, then that day, madam, you shall know every last detail of my history and upbringing, but as long as you walk through my door, as long as you stand in my place of work, I will ask the questions, and I will refuse to be apologetic about it or my personal privacy.
>
> *A short pause. The WOMAN starts a slow chuckle that turns into a laugh.*
>
> **WOMAN**
> You're all right. (78)

This exchange, taking place early in the play, effectively removes any suspense with regard to Myra's fate within the community. The play proceeds as a celebration of an indomitable spirit who integrates into a small rural community through force of will, demonstrations of exceptional skill, and an ability to adopt some of the social and cultural codes of the outport. A further exchange over tea indicates the issues at hand:

WOMAN
What difference does it make?

MYRA
Honestly I don't know. But my mother would have it no other way.

WOMAN
Foolishness really. It is.

MYRA
Call it a habit then.

WOMAN
We all got them. Habits. You might be having to break some of yours.

MYRA
I'll just start some new ones. You're smiling.

WOMAN
Lovely accent girl. Not polite to say that, I suppose.

MYRA releases a small tight smile.

You bake?

MYRA
Bake?

WOMAN
Bread.

MYRA
I've never had much occasion to.

WOMAN
Now see. That's gonna change.

MYRA
Is it.

WOMAN
Got to. You got to bake. No self respecting woman on this coast that don't bake. Sew. Knit.

MYRA
Really.

WOMAN
Yes. This crowd around here won't be paying you no mind with you do this and you do that if they finds out you can't even do that stuff. I can hear Wallace Carter now. Yes now, go and see her, have her mend my body when she can't even mend a pair of socks. (80-1)

The informal enforcement of community mores undertaken by the Woman is not explicitly rejected by Myra, but it is clear that remediation and integration will take place in a negotiated context. While acknowledging the need to adopt the cultural practices of the community, she retains an Outsider's scepticism:

MYRA
So, I've got some learning to do?

WOMAN
Yes girl, women round here got skills, do anything. Knit a house they could. Predict the weather.

MYRA
Soothsayers too eh?

WOMAN
Not all, no. But some girl. Some of them are right spooky. There's a few of them on this coast, can tell, just by looking at you, if you're with child.

MYRA smiles.

It's true as I'm sitting here. Tell a young one she's pregnant before she even knows herself.

MYRA
Do you believe that?

WOMAN
Some of them. I tell ya. Lean over the table and say, do you know you're pregnant? Just like that.

MYRA
And they are always correct?

Mrs. House smiles.

WOMAN
Well who can say eh? No one really keeps track of who said what and when and who was right or no. But you'll come to see all that yourself by and by. You'll come to see all that yourself. Break a few habits. Make a few new ones. Fit right in eh? (82)

This exchange reveals the negotiation that takes place between an agent of enforcement and a newcomer. Both gain and give ground; the short scene acquires a pleasing symmetry in the trading of smiles, a sign not only of concessions made but that each is enjoying the process of negotiation. Myra's ingrained scientific scepticism is no match for the "superstitions" of the community, as it turns out. Later in the play a woman will lean over and divine her pregnancy (140-1). This initial exchange, then, is deceiving in its appearance as a contest of equals. Myra will end by adopting far more of the community's habits and attitudes, while retaining enough of her own to persuade herself that she has not compromised her identity.

Myra begins as a Stranger and slowly transforms into a Necessary Outsider. This in itself is not an unusual shift in status position. She is able, seemingly, to take the process one step further. The residents of Daniel's Harbour come to respect her stubborn

independence and her insistence on the maintenance of a separate identity. She is different; but they have enough of a sense of how they too are perceived as different—by mainlanders, merchants and the government and residents of St. John's—to accommodate her difference rather than excise it from the body politic.

This would not be possible were there not a degree of shared values demonstrated in Nurse Bennett's flinty self-reliance and driven need to help the community's working people – a built-in level of communicative competence based on cultural proximity. These shared values, and the dyadic relationships and affiliative circles created as a result of these value-added actions, become a passport to micro-community membership, dislodging the hierarchy of ethnic, geographic and familial intimacy upon which membership in traditional, homogeneous cultures is based.

Myra chafes at the cultural codes of politeness and diffidence which hinder her work. A man sent to inform her of an impending birth first chats about not wishing to bother her. Later, the same man, Alex, severs a foot in a logging accident and reiterates the importance of this code:

MAN
I told them they shouldn't bother you.

MYRA
No?

MAN
No. This time of night. Don't even hurt anymore.
MYRA
Alex, your foot.

MAN
Yes girl. Something ain't it. Weird looking.

MYRA
We have to get you up. And on the sleigh.

MAN
I can't walk, I don't think.

MYRA
That's alright.

MAN
Don't even hurt anymore though. Shouldn't have bothered you. Could have waited until morning. (133)

The well-mannered struggle over Myra's identity continues throughout the play. Residents repeatedly ask Myra how long she will stay, testing the strengths of her affiliation to the community. She, in turn, replies elliptically, retaining negotiating power in the potential withdrawal of the valuable services she provides. This notion of her value represents the ownership of her identity. She will affix it to the gathered micro-communities of the Peninsula, if she chooses to, rather than reacting to the demands or criteria of its informal regulations.

Myra's presence in Daniel's Harbour provides cultural and social proximity, as she learns the manner and ways of the people there while determining on what issues she can retain the values and practices she has learned in her native community. At times there is confusion in her expectations, as occurs with the cultural code of politeness. A man sent to help her with her bags as she walks between communities stands about until Myra questions his purposes:

She gives a disgruntled sigh.

MYRA
Goodbye then.

MAN
Okay.

He begins to walk away.

MYRA
Were you even going to offer?

MAN
Pardon.

MYRA
Assistance. Were you even going to offer, in politeness.

MAN
Truth be told Nurse, that's why mother sent me down the path. Saw you wobbling under the bags. Thought you could use a hand down the shore.

Small pause.

MYRA
She, did?

MAN
Her express orders. Not to offer. Make yourself be known and if she needs you she'll ask. Said she wouldn't have a fine independent woman like yourself bothered by the likes of me. (90)

Generally, however, her communicative competence improves rapidly. A local man, Angus, has begun to court her. She resists the lure of sentiment, deflecting his compliments and reasserting her individuality. Angus has worked as a merchant marine, and has therefore lived beyond the community's borders and seen something of the Outside. In psychological terms this explains, in one respect, his attraction to the exotic figure of the Nurse. He is not intimidated by the brusque authority she exerts, in the way that other citizens are, but rather by her exotic quality:

ANGUS
They are all afraid of you, you know. Terrified. Gotta do what the Nurse says or else.

She looks at the sky silently.

It's just the way you talk to them.

MYRA
It's necessary sometimes, to make myself clear, and listened to.

ANGUS
Oh you don't have to tell me. It's just…I think they see this one side of you. They see this Nurse. A very good Nurse, well respected, don't get me wrong. But they just see that side. And that's a shame. Because […] I get the feeling that Nurse Grimsley has a depth that would put the Atlantic to shame. (101)

Angus is a key neutralizing agent. In this exchange he is explicit about Myra's status in the community as a highly esteemed Necessary Outsider. Implicitly, he is offering her the prospect of a deeper inclusion within the community, through an intimate affiliation with an Insider. In the next moments, as Myra agrees to exercise her aching legs with one more dance at the kitchen party, Chafe indicates that the (Demystified) Stranger will succumb to this attractive prospect and shift further inward on the line of alienation. She will then be integrated into the oral tradition of the community, its way of seeing itself, something that Angus acknowledges:

ANGUS
They will tell you now, they will tell you when you ask that she was hopelessly in love. Love at first sight is what they will tell you. They will tell you that the first time we met at Mom's house was the beginning of everything. An inevitable chain of events in which she was a helpless pawn to something bigger than herself. They will tell you that, and they are wrong. (115)

Whether “they are wrong” or not, the story will become part of the lore of the community of Daniel’s Harbour, and acquire greater significance than its factual truth. Chafe contributes to this impression in the manner in which the courtship is presented. The scene at Mom’s house acts as the beginning of the courtship in the spectator’s mind. While presenting the appearance of choice, Chafe, perhaps unconsciously, subverts this principle with a symmetrical mirroring of Angus’ allusion to “an inevitable chain of events”.

The marriage takes place, to the delight of all in the community. Chafe’s disdains the appearance of conflict even as slight as that represented by the villainous Tom Gahn in Butt’s *The Road Through Melton*. The marriage symbolizes the binding of Myra to her new community just as the changing of her surname reflects the binding of woman to man in traditional matrimony:

MAN
Oh, she was all nerves, I hear.

WOMAN
Oh yes, I heard that.

MAN
What with her being from Britain and-

WOMAN
And Angus being from home.

MAN
Too different, see.
WOMAN
Afraid they’d be too different, culturally, eh.

MAN
But sure she was one of us by that point. (118)

The new Mrs. Bennett—one recalls her insistence in the opening scene upon being referred to as a Nurse, rather than in affiliative terms—retains a public version of the courtship and marriage as a practical transaction which enables her to perform her duties as a health care worker more effectively. Angus is aware of her need for this demonstration of independence, and accepts it as a condition of their affiliation:

> **MYRA**
> Angus Bennett is a very nice man whom it makes perfect sense to make my husband. Yes, that's what I'm talking about. It just makes sense.
>
> **ANGUS**
> And she'd say it to my face. Partly because she believed it. But partly because deep down she knew that I knew there was more there than that. (115)

Angus colours her justification with his own. Myra's syntax "to make my husband" indicates that she feels she retains ownership over the decision to marry. Together they are happy to tacitly acknowledge the subjective views of the other. The binding effect of the marriage is further augmented with the arrival of a child, and subsequently a second; this represents a material contribution to the continuity of the micro-community of Daniel's Harbour, as well as a fulfillment of the traditional responsibilities of a wife. Myra's actions may or may not be subject to her right to choose, but in any case she is now firmly integrated within the community. She acknowledges this growing affiliation:

> **MYRA**
> I love my husband. And my baby. My beautiful little girl. And my beautiful little house.
>
> **ANGUS**

Oh, now, don't start.

MYRA
It is Angus. It is a lovely little house you've built. I do love it.

ANGUS
Why?

MYRA
What?

ANGUS
Why do you love it? What about it do you love?

MYRA
That. That it's.

ANGUS
Yeah?

MYRA
Mine.

He smiles.

ANGUS
Ours.

MYRA
Ours. Ours. (122)

Angus' playful insistence on the reasons for her assertion of affection is telling. His teasing questions represent a form of enforcement, a testing process designed to push beyond generalized statements of affiliation to more specific statements of commitment.

Myra's rising status in the community is sealed with her discovery that the epidemic of breach births which has plagued the community for years beyond memory is a result of the unsupported bending the women do during harvest season. This contribution is more than a medical innovation; along with her own babies it constitutes a

material gain in progeny. She describes the last stage in her integration, the abandoning of her home mythology and its nostalgic appeal:

> **MYRA**
> I have had doubts, since I've been here, creeping in and begging an audience. I have seen myself in England, in a quaint country hospital. I have seen safety and convention and sanity and God help me I have wanted it. My feet have been cold, tired, my legs dying. I have lost patients to the stupidest of reasons. And amidst it all I have seen a life that could well have been and it looked so good. And put me out here, strip it all away until there is nothing left here but something to lose, and the means to lose it. And let me see it, see this. Eight men coming toward us. Shaking our hands. Unhitching our mare. Lifting Alex. Eight men with their strength and generosity as much a part of this place as the snow and the wind. Let me see that, and every doubt is all gone. And I am completely here, and ready, and able. And I can stare down the devil himself. (138)

Chafe, through Myra, allows no "doubt" to be raised in the depiction of Daniel's Harbour, and by extension the macro-community of the Peninsular outports and Newfoundland itself. Chafe's use of the past-perfect ("I have had") throughout underlines the certainty and correctness of Myra's decision. It is a grand place to live, the inference states, harsh but rewarding, and all that is required of Outsiders is to realize this. The passage veers perilously close to a romantic mythologizing of the people of the outports, underscored by the quasi-religious use of invocative syntax, verbal repetition, and imagery ("the devil"). It is difficult to discern whether Myra is a convert to the religion of outport orthodoxy or whether she retains the independence of identity and right to choose, as she maintains. The play ends with a listing of the honours accorded Bennett during her long life and, from Angus, perhaps the highest praise that can be accorded a (former) Stranger: "You're a good hand girl, you're a good hand." (144)

There is an apparent contradiction or inconsistency in Chafe's work. Where his work with Artistic Fraud pushes the boundaries of theatre practice in his home province (and beyond), plays such as *Tempting Providence* can be placed within the elegiac-nostalgic dynamic found in the much earlier plays of Ted Russell, Al Pittman, and French's *Salt-Water Moon*. Part of this inconsistency can be traced to the demands of the marketplace. Simple structures and straightforward narratives which conform to societal expectations of characterization will always be in demand by companies and festivals which depend upon attracting a broad range of spectators. As a working theatre artist whose "career has been a struggle for survival" (Chafe iii), Chafe plies his trade on both sides of the artistic fence with equal commitment.

The trend, however, is worrisome in some respects. The unparalleled success of *Tempting Providence* speaks to people's need to be reassured, rather than to the larger theatrical objective of questioning received attitudes and behaviour. Such plays look back, rather than forward, not only in their choice of subject matter, but in their perspective. It is difficult to imagine a progressive evolution within a culture which spends so much time preoccupied with a nostalgic view of its history. The inconsistency of Chafe's *œuvre* extends beyond his Artistic Fraud/conventional theatre dichotomy to the double message of plays such as *Tempting Providence*, where a reifying social message competes with one which states that Outsiders previously considered irremediable must be allowed entry into the society they choose.

A "quickly-paced, simple and smooth play", as Chafe describes *Providence* (72) establishes a tension between the transformative quality of the narrative and the retrogressive aspects of such a conservative approach to playwriting. Nurse Bennett's

story is told in sentimental terms, described by Lynde as "a quintessentially Newfoundland saga of isolation and deprivation transformed by the goodness of heart, dedication, and courage found in both individuals and community" (in Chafe v). The characters, while drawn with care and nuance, can be found within Cook's list of comforting stereotypes: the stoic outport male, the doughty, devoted Nurse, the good-hearted, sharp-tongued townsfolk. There is little real conflict in the play beyond Myra Bennett's struggle for acceptance, which is never placed in doubt. A question arises as to whether Chafe's work in two genres ultimately places his plays at cross-purposes.

5.7.2 Beyond Zebra (1996)

Torquil Colbo is a playwright and actor who remains something of a celebrity in the small but fiercely loyal St. John's theatre scene, even though he has lived in Toronto since 1999. Colbo's background—he was not born in the province but moved there as a child—and subsequent decision to Exile himself voluntarily from his home community has created a living metaphor for the situations he describes in his plays. His protagonists speak from a contested border space or possess identities which are in a process of shifting membership. Colbo's own background provides some inspiration for these depictions; he was born in England, spent time in Canada and Indonesia, and moved to Newfoundland while still young.

Colbo views himself as a Newfoundlander. He is considered by members of the St. John's theatre community as an Insider both within their particular micro-community and within the macro-community of Newfoundland. This represents something of a shift

from the insularity which has traditionally characterized attitudes towards Michael Cook and David French, to use two examples.

Colbo now focuses on his acting career. He is chiefly known as a playwright for his two small plays *Beyond Zebra* and *Blue Blazes*, each of which have been produced several times in Newfoundland and on the Canadian mainland. Colbo, like Chafe, writes plays which promote the thesis that Necessary Outsiders are now capable of embedding themselves in Newfoundland culture as more than Demystified Strangers or Transgressive Insiders. His estranged characters do not so much demand inclusion, in the way of Chafe's Myra Bennett, as discover the fact of their inclusion.

Beyond Zebra takes its title from an obscure children's book by Theodore Geisel, whose *nom-de-plume* was Dr. Seuss. The book *On Beyond Zebra* relates the story of a boy who is encouraged to seek the letters which exist "on beyond" the existing alphabet. Colbo's acting and writing possess a quality that researcher and devised theatre practitioner Hannu Heikkinen refers to as "serious playfulness", a quality of using playful attitudes and childlike imagery to gain access to subjects which possess deeper levels of meaning. That *seeking* is the central trope of *Beyond Zebra* is underlined by the name of the protagonist, Muckle Muggeridge. Muggeridge is a nod to the intellectual titan Malcolm Muggeridge; "Muckle" is the name of an obscure, though real, island off the shores of Newfoundland. *Beyond Zebra* combines these disparate elements—children's literature, pop culture associations, the quasi-science of cryptozoölogy, and the exotic quality possessed by Newfoundland itself—into a compelling fantasy that functions as a meditation on difference.

Beyond Zebra takes place in one extended scene, packed densely with nuance and

metaphor. Muckle Muggeridge, a junior cryptozoölogist (one who pursues the study of mythological creatures), has washed up after a storm at sea on the shores of a small island. The off-stage sound of Muckle's Grandfather is heard reciting the confident words of the child in Seuss' *On Beyond Zebra*:

VOICE OF GRANDFATHER:

The A is for Ape. And the B is for Bear.
The C is for Camel. The H is for Hare.
The M is for Mouse. And the R is for Rat.
I know all the twenty-six letters like that.
Through to Zed is for Zebra, from the start to the close,
Now I know everything anyone knows –
Because Zed is as far as the alphabet goes. (2)

This text establishes the play's structure for examining boundaries of demarcation, a series of assumptions that will, like forgotten landmines, explode one after the other until the air has cleared. Amongst the first detonations is Muckle's assumption (shared by the spectator) that he knows nothing of this place, and that hence he is a Stranger. This is the first of a series of acts of spectator-implication in the play. Through a gradual process of deduction he concludes that he is on Muckle Island, the island first visited by his Grandfather and after whom his Grandfather's son and great-grandson (Muckle) have taken their names. Muckle has discovered an intimate affiliation with a piece of land he thought he did not know, having never set foot there. There is an echo of the visitor Michael in *The Holdin' Ground* in this distinct form of mitigated Strangeness, except that Michael re-visits his land consciously, not knowing quite where to find it, while Muckle stumbles upon his without ever looking for it.

Muckle's discovery presages the multi-faceted themes of *home* and *homecoming* that are interwoven throughout the play. Further evidences of this alienated familiarity begin to appear. Muckle's spoken musings are echoed by a soothing, unseen female voice, uttered by a creature who darts by, just out of sight. Muckle is excited by the appearance of the creature. As an aspiring cryptozoölogist sent to Newfoundland on a "work term" by the Seuss-like Nazzim of Bazzim, he is eager to capture this seemingly undiscovered creature.[53]

Believing that this may be the legendary "Ray Woman of Newfoundland" whose exhibition at a London Museum in 1925 led to his Grandfather's humiliation, and later insanity, Muckle's motivation for discovering and capturing the creature becomes personal. In a moment of clarity he realizes that his father was half sea creature: **"**Could this mean that Father, with his cold clammy skin…his lidded nostrils…his lack of speech…or teeth…his, his pulsating cheeks…he was partly a creature of the Sea? I just thought he took all those long Epsom salts bath because that's what senior citizens did!" (9). His sense of dislocated identity deepens further when he recalls how his Grandfather often sang odes to his "Muckle Harbour Jenny" and that an alternate name for the creature is "Jenny Haniver". Muckle, it turns out, is descended from a mythological sea creature – in other words, from no definable or tangible physical space. Having encountered his mythical progenitor, he is "HOME AT LAST." (10)

The question of ancestry from a mythological creature causes the whole issue of birthright to be put in play. Muckle is in practical terms *of the island,*[54] yet he just as clearly is estranged from it. He exists in a state of alienation with this aspect of his

ancestry. Another layer is added which questions fixed notions of difference. The creature's haunting song, woven as soundscape throughout the play, bears a close resemblance to Welsh Gaelic. This form of Gaelic would have been at once familiar and alien to 19th century Newfoundlanders of Irish extraction. Its familiar quality would have derived from its occasional use within communities, and the similarity of its rhythms and intonations with Irish Gaelic. As a Breton language, however, it shares few cognates with Irish and therefore would have also a quality of Strangeness.[55] This intimacy of Strange and Inside is central to Colbo's worldview as expressed in *Beyond Zebra*.

Colbo then entwines, in a thoroughly postmodern way, proto-text and text. Muckle brandishes his personal copy of Seuss' *On Beyond Zebra*, which he uses to establish a basic communicative competence, deciphering what the "Jenny" says. The language of the book is evidence of an "indigenous Newfoundland language", given to him as a child by his Grandfather not as a simple gift, it turns out, but as a kind of Rosetta Stone connecting Muckle to his forebears. Muckle, like Russell's Michael Shannahan, has thus been inextricably tied to this place from his earliest childhood, coached in the nuances of membership—and has also always been definably *alien*. He begins to come to terms with this identity rooted in difference: "and…*I'm* not entirely human. All those schoolyard taunts were true." (9)

Colbo's use of the schoolyard metaphor, within the context of a fantasy world with few references to the world of the spectator, functions as an act of implication. It pushes the spectator to regard this perception of the Stranger as Insider as their own. In the arena of the schoolyard all have been bullies, victims, or witnesses. Colbo's act of implication renders the witness active in the acceptance of Strangers. Colbo implies that

all people are “not entirely human”, and by extension never entirely linked to one physical space, just as Muggeridge shares his ancestry between various locales.

A further layering of this idea occurs with the fact that Colbo has played the role of Muckle Muggeridge on four different occasions. The playwright from No Fixed Address appears to be speaking for, and defending, his belief in his Inside status as a Newfoundlander. Muckle states: “Three quarters human. How could this have affected my perspective on the world? It’s suited me fine up until now. It seems to be about right, actually.” (9) The fusion of place and alienated identity grows. He calls out to the “Jenny”: “Jenny? Don’t be afraid of me. Washed up on this Island of Myself, I can see clearly for the first time!” (10)

What follows is, even within the gossamer-light comic fabric of the play, a profoundly desolate moment. The Jenny fails to respond. Muckle’s identity, and his fragile affiliation with this singular micro-community, is momentarily at play. After a few tense moments, however, the “Jenny” begins a call-and-response dialogue with Muckle which demonstrates his instinctive command of the codes of communication. Unlike Camus' Meursault or other Strangers who look homeward and see only an unbridgeable abyss which displaces a person from the context of their identity, in *Beyond Zebra* Colbo reverses this assumption. Distinct from the nostalgic, illusion-ridden sensations of the Exile’s home mythology (such as those of Jacob Mercer), Muckle’s rediscovery is tangible and therefore more accurate. Where the Exiles of the Newfoundland diaspora in the plays of Michael Cook and David French make their despair-inducing error is in their assumption that “home” is inextricably linked to a place in time. Colbo’s Muckle has been carrying his home with him, *umwelt*-like; his revelation is an act of rediscovery

rather than re-creation. The implication is that, although his presence on the island triggers this revelation of identity, it is not essential for its maintenance—or for continued membership as an Insider.

In the call-and-response dialogue between Muckle and the Jenny there is a linking of estrangement to the criteria of community membership which takes place in stages. The first stage is one of *communion*, or cultural proximity (Harman 12), as Muckle realizes that he is being accepted as fitting into a community based on a shared language, knowledge that is the result of native affiliation. The second stage in the dialogue is *intimacy*, Harman's social proximity (12), as Muckle and the Jenny use their shared knowledge to make a rude joke about Muckle's mentor, the Nazzim of Bazzim. The third stage of this call-and-response dialogue, which encapsulates degrees of Insiderness within a home community, is that of *estrangement*, illustrated through spatial proximity (12).[56] Muckle and the Jenny disagree over whether the last line of Seuss's description of the sea creature is "rubbery tubs" (Muckle) or "blubbery tubs" (Jenny). As the disagreement escalates, Muckle unconsciously approaches the Jenny, wading deeper and deeper into the sea from whence they both come. He vanishes completely underwater, apparently continuing the debate – simultaneously joining his forebear community and affirming his estrangement from it at the same time.

The words of Muckle's Grandfather are heard. They summarize Colbo's acceptance of his Insider/Stranger status, and the necessity and value of extending one's identity *beyond zebra*—that is, beyond conventional definitions of home, community, and borders (or the alphabet). The Grandfather says, as Muckle vanishes from view under water:

GRANDFATHER

I led him around and I tried hard to show
There are things beyond Zed that most people don't know
I took him past Zebra, as far as I could
And I think, perhaps, maybe, I did him some good. (12)

Like that of Dr. Seuss, Colbo's work is easily underestimated. The erudition and theatrical imagination which operate under the surface of *Beyond Zebra* are as resonant as the Seussian source it takes as its point of departure. Seuss's exhortations for children to see "things beyond zed" can be interpreted as a call for the kind of creative rebellion which results in a truly responsible citizenry and a more social society.

As members of Newfoundland's "new guard" theatre generation, Colbo and Chafe question old shibboleths upon which much of Newfoundland's culture and its literary expression have previously been based. Home is not "where the heart is". It is not a place to which the prodigal returns; it is not where difference is suppressed with a descent into the familiar and unchallenged. Rather, for these artists, home—the culture and community of Newfoundland—is a space which includes the role or identity of a questioning or wandering Stranger. The questioning presence of this familiar-Stranger is to be accepted, rather than tolerated, as an integral part of the fabric out of which a unique and healthy Inside culture is created.

Notes

[1] The term "normative boundaries" is used here in place of "membership", for purposes of clarity. Even Exiles who have not returned to a community, and Strangers who are foreign-born and non-resident but who have spent time as a presence (corporeal or otherwise) in a community, must be considered *affiliated* with that community. In considering these aspects of affiliation, the term membership might confuse this issue.

[2] Within the context of the assigning of Transgressive Insider status, it's also possible to hypothesize that a Demystified Stranger may take part in this labelling process as an attempted act of remediation. This would seem a pretty risky business, particularly if the Insider being labelled enjoys a high amount of esteem in addition to their status.

[3] The ability to shift to the inward extreme of the line of alienation also depends, of course, on the status accorded such individuals *before* they departed the community. If they were, at that point, already in a median status position, the chances of their acquiring unqualified Insider status upon return would be very low indeed, as this "record" would still be counting against remediation.

[4] Interestingly, on the dust jackets of her plays, published in the 1980s, she describes herself as a "Canadian writer". It is unknown whether a Damascene conversion took place or if this was simply a publisher's ploy.

[5] Although a period is not mentioned, Helen's costume is described as "the stylish flat-bosomed, short-skirted mode of the twenties". It is difficult to imagine Helen being stylish if her dress is not period appropriate.

[6] Annie, described by Butt as an "elderly, buxom working-housekeeper" reminds the reader of the stereotypical Negro maids of 1930s and 1940s American film. Butt's dialogue often appears derivative of this genre, as well.

[7] All of the family animals, it turns out, have Christian names, another indicator of a tightly circled Inside.

[8] Government House is a social unit of a kind, comprising the various people who work there. It can hardly be described as a community or neighbourhood, however. In any such foreign government residence there are wide gaps in association between people based on class and hierarchy. While the sincerity of the Government's mission, and that of its representatives such as H.E. and Alderbee, should not be casually dismissed, it is unlikely that the Newfoundlanders working in menial capacities at Government House would be possessed of anything more than a mercantile view of the Government's presence. Even if they did possess such a perspective, it is even less likely that they would have the opportunity to share it with the British officials who are their superiors. The House functions however as a circle of affiliation.

[9] Please refer to Chapter 3 for details regarding the circumstances of Newfoundland's Confederation with Canada. Peter Neary in particular has written cogently about the role played by the British government in actively pursuing such a course behind the scenes.

[10] In "A note to be included in the programme" prefacing the playtext, Butt refers to a newspaper's printing of a "pseudo-tribute" to the last departing Governor in 1949, while emphasizing that the play's narrative and characters are fictional.

[11] Tom Cahill's *As Loved Our Fathers* was written in 1974. Literary examples existed by 1970, but the play catches the spirit of its time in giving voice to a rising sentiment within the Newfoundland arts community.

[12] While making this analogy, I grant that Trojans were in fact the native-born Insiders, being attacked by the Greeks. The analogy holds, however, in the sense of an entity naïvely taking in a toxic force.

[13] Please note that the basis of this analysis is taken from the 1974 edition of the play which serves as a record of the performances of the play, rather than from the later 1979 edition published by Playwrights Canada Press.

[14] These ridings would include the Great Northern Peninsula, the coast including Deer Lake, Corner Brook, and Stephenville, and all of the French shore down as far as Port aux Basques.

[15] Please see p. 30.

[16] Like all the Confederation-related details of Cahill's play, this is factual. Cahill exploits it well, only explaining the Catholics' provocation later in the play—a letter in the St. John's paper from the Bishop advocating Responsible Government and directing all parishioners to vote accordingly.

[17] In 1969 the Smallwood government completed an energy deal with the Québec provincial government which allowed Newfoundland electricity to be routed through Québec to American markets. The cost,

however, was substantial; Québec received a below-market rate for the energy which it would use and excess wattage which it could then sell, at market rates, to the United States. Worse, the rate was not indexed to inflation. Québec still receives Newfoundland hydro-electric power at rates that are almost microscopic in comparison to global levels, and makes billions of dollars a year re-selling the energy to energy-hungry American markets. Numerous entreaties to re-open the deal have gone unheeded; the contract runs until 2041.

[18] Much of the play consists of verbatim text or paraphrased versions of Smallwood's recorded speeches and interviews, or verbalized renditions of his memoirs.

[19] Cf. Ch. 3, p. 71-75.

[20] He also maintained publicly that the only reason for his departure was that he needed a community: "I can't function in isolation" (qtd. in Wallace 159). He had been isolated from the theatre community in St. John's by dint of temperament and especially by his greater fealty to the objective truth. He remained, however, a Newfoundlander, and died there.

[21] One must here consider Newfoundland as a nameless, geographical entity, rather than assuming it belongs to a community of people.

[22] One might call it "the gestus of taking possession of what is lost".

[23] Described by Cook as "a fat – dissolute red-faced man in his late forties" (D22).

[24] At least he begins the process of adapting.

[25] This is not to dismiss the supernatural elements present in the work of Euripides. Arguably, however, they are less central to what is at play in his extant works than the sense of the supernatural is in Aeschylus.

[26] Cf. p. 14-15.

[27] Playwrights are always practitioners, but not always practical. They generally work outside the milieu of theatre practice, and their concerns can be quite distinct from those involved in production.

[28]Reviewing *The Head, Guts, and Soundbone Dance* in the St. John's Evening Telegram, 5 April 1973.

[29] It is interesting that Cook created precisely this stereotypical fisherman character in the only play he wrote for young audiences, *The Fisherman's Revenge*. The play, directed for adult audiences at the Gros Morne Theatre Festival in 1998 and 1999 by this writer, proved extremely popular.

[30] The nature of his exile status, that is, voluntary or involuntary, being somewhat in play as we discover later.

[31] Which indicates that she represents a kind of prism, able to be what she is represented to be, without necessarily feeling the same level of intimacy.

[32] The section also reveals a dramaturgical problem; Winston has not yet discovered the plotting by Alonzo and Wayne. This could be rationalised to some degree; Winston says later that "I allus knew they'd like to, but…," but not concerning Alonzo, whose involvement is, in relative terms, objective. Even granting Wayne's earlier remark that "We're all concerned about mother. How much more can she take," which even Alonzo dismisses, the short and efficient nature of the transaction seems to mitigate against a long term series of plots. Why does Winston say it at this moment, considering he has no immediate indication that something is afoot? His seeming acuity adds little to the scene's drama and potentially detracts from his later discovery.

[33] It should be noted that this transgression occurs in two contexts: that of the macro-community of Coley's Point, and that of the micro-community, not yet secured, of Jacob-Mary.

[34] It is small wonder, when viewed in this light, why so many young people in similar positions to Jacob and Mary see marriage, somewhat inexplicably, as a positive upgrading of their identities.

[35] Cf. p. 17.

[36] This was a common, sometimes derogatory, shorthand used for refugees who came to Canada after the Second World War. We find later that the Sanilosi's hometown was wiped out by an Allied regiment which included Newfoundlanders in 1943, providing further motivation for the confrontation. (98*)*

[37] It is a strength of French's writing that this element of reconsideration is not manifested by Mary, and in fact is denied. It requires no elaboration, simply existing as scent in the room, and Mary's vociferous, sincere denial indicates the strength of her commitment to Jacob.

[38] The performance of Sean Sullivan as Jacob in *Leaving Home* was universally praised, especially by Kareda in the *Toronto Star* of 17 May 1972: "Sullivan, as Jacob, gives a performance which simply could not be equalled anywhere. Brawling, tormenting, self defeating, the anger always a beat ahead of the thinking, Sullivan's contribution is extraordinary" (qtd. in Conolly 90).

[39] Another irony which underscores the nostalgic aspect of this enforcement activity is that Jacob has precious little more experience with the fish industry than does Billy.
[40] Appropriately, considering his occupation.
[41] This irony would only be evident to those who, some sixteen years later, were able to piece together the autobiographical references in Jacob's lines from *Salt-Water Moon* and *1949*; this fact is not mentioned in *Leaving Home*.
[42] See p. 17.
[43] Jacob Mercer is not entirely wrong. Such symbolic acts as leaving home are nearly always acts which establish independent micro-communities.
[44] French's work is seldom mentioned in works which deal with the development of Newfoundland theatre in the 1970s. Peters does refer to his work in "Down East" (1996:237-44). He is absent, however, from her preface in the anthology of collectively created works *Stars in the Sky Morning*, Lynde's anthology of playwright-centred theatre *Voices From the Landwash*, her article on publishing concerns with Newfoundland playwrights, "Writing and Publishing," or her articles in Glaap (*On-stage and Off-stage*) and Brask ("In/Visible Drama of Atlantic Canada"). As noted, writing about Newfoundland is not enough, apparently, to qualify a playwright as an Insider in the Newfoundland theatre scene, even with the advantage of birthright. Cultural proximity appears to be the primary criterion.
[45] That is, one year prior to *1949*'s events, indicating that the schism between father and son had already occurred prior to that play's context.
[46] The island lies off the south coast of Newfoundland in Placentia Bay.
[47] Large rocks or shoals in, or within range of, the harbour, which are invisible in calm waters.
[48] Surely another cherished part of the Newfoundlander myth is hardiness and self-sufficiency. Grampa Walcott is over eighty years old, and spends the day squiring the Stranger around without a second thought.
[49] It can be hypothesized that the invocation of legend or superstitions, outright lies and the imposition of influence outside the accepted parameters of approved normative practice could also occur, as long as the source from which they derive is unimpeachable.
[50] Cf. p. 46.
[51] Michael Fralic's dissertation quotes from a pre-production manuscript of Guy's play; some quotes from the earlier version have been cited here.
[52] There is perhaps an allusion here to the Biblical story of Peter, who refused to identify himself as a follower of Jesus.
[53] In *Beyond Zebra*, at least, it is clear that Colbo is putting forth his thesis that such worlds as that of the Seuss book are themselves real, to those who treat them as real.
[54] Which, metaphorically, serves as the island of Newfoundland.
[55] The intentional use of Gaelic words and phrases was suggested by Colbo's original director, Gillian Raby.
[56] Cf. p. 31.