



The Wessex Society of Newfoundland: A Record of Historic Moments

by
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Soon the Wessex Society of Newfoundland will be one year old, for it was on the evening of October 25, 1984 that over a hundred people met in the Junior Common Room of the Raymond Gushue Hall, Memorial University of Newfoundland to form an association to promote understanding of Newfoundland's origins in Southwest England and to encourage close relations between the people there and people in this province.

It was a happy evening with an informative and entertaining program followed by a delightful social hour. It helped to emphasize the point that the Wessex activities should be a "fun" way of learning something about our heritage. After the meeting a healthy and provocative discussion took place at the Holiday Inn in Dr. Poole's suite where he had invited the executive and a few visitors.

In the meeting it was pointed out that over the past few years a number of people had suggested to each other that considering the great awareness growing amongst the people in this province of their old-country origins that those whose roots go back to Southwest England might at least come together for an exchange of ideas relative to setting up an association to promote and harness the interest and knowledge currently prevailing.

The idea to use the name "Wessex" first came from Dr. Gordon Handcock, professor of Geography, Memorial University of Newfoundland. Dr. Handcock's claim that Thomas Hardy's Wessex, since it encompassed practically the whole English area having historical ties with Newfoundland should be included in the title. In consultation with Dr. Cyril Poole, principal of Sir Wilfred Grenfell College, Memorial University, Corner Brook, it was decided to put before the meeting the title in the form suggested by Dr. Keith Matthews, professor of History, Memorial University of Newfoundland, namely, *The Wessex Society of Newfoundland*. The title was unanimously approved at the meeting.

I was asked to chair the meeting and the following is a brief account of its proceedings.

Tribute was paid to the late Dr. Keith Matthews who had encouraged us in our plans to organize. He also had agreed to accept our invitation to nominate him as Honorary President. Indeed it was intended that the first meeting be held on April 21, 1984 with Dr. Matthews being the guest speaker. Unfortunately, Dr. Matthews took ill and was confined to hospital and we were saddened when we learned shortly afterwards that he had died. In a sense the Wessex Society of Newfoundland is a Memorial to him. Newfoundland owes him a great debt — greater, perhaps than it yet realizes, for his scholarly research and teaching, relative to Newfoundland's fascinating maritime history. He was a Devon man who for years with his family lived here and became truly a Newfoundland man.

A tribute was paid to all those who paved the way in order for this society to be born. People like the Honourable Joseph R. Smallwood, the late Dr. Ted Russell, the late Dr. Ron Seary and the late Dr. David Alexander all of whom in very distinctive ways contributed to knowledge pertaining to Newfoundland's past and its place in today's society.

The Premier, Honourable Brian Peckford, was in attendance and had accepted the invitation to become the Society's patron. In a few words he spoke of his own studies of family history which led him on exciting visits to Dorset and of his establishing contacts with people and organizations there who were equally interested in their genealogical roots in Newfoundland.

The first life membership was conferred upon Dr. Leslie Harris, President, Memorial University of Newfoundland. The society wanted to recognize his distinguished achievements as a historian and through him to honor the contribution our University has made in promoting an understanding of Newfoundland history

and culture.

Dr. Harris was introduced in splendid fashion by Mrs. Jan Miller-Pitt, a young Newfoundland researcher studying this province's plans concerning offshore development, in the oil industry. She is a member of the executive of the St. John's Branch of the Humanities Association of Canada, and the Newfoundland Genealogy Association.

The guest speaker was author Dr. Cyril Poole, principal of Sir Wilfred Grenfell College, Memorial University of Newfoundland, Corner Brook. Dr. and Mrs. Poole had lived in Corfe Mullen, Dorset for three months or so, in the Spring of 1984 and during that time they had travelled extensively around Dorset and adjoining counties, meeting people and gathering information pertaining to Newfoundland. He was honored by being admitted to membership in *The Society of Poole Men*, an honor bestowed some years ago also upon Dr. Keith Matthews. Among Dr. Poole's pursuits in England was a study of the life and times of the teacher, cleric, poet William Barnes, whose poetry written in the Dorset dialect helped preserve words, idioms, and pronunciations that might otherwise be lost. Dr. Poole's lecture that evening on *William Barnes of Old Darzet* captured beyond description the interest and imagination of that wonderful audience. The text of the lecture appeared in the Newfoundland Quarterly (Winter 1985), thanks to the Newfoundland Quarterly editor, Dr. Harry Cuff (professor, historian, writer and publisher) who has encouraged many Newfoundland writers through his own publishing enterprises.

Dr. Poole was introduced by the well-known and much beloved Newfoundland lecturer, writer and humourist, the Reverend Canon Dr. George Earle. We are pleased that he accepted the invitation to become Honorary President of the Society. In his introduction he recited some delightful verses he composed concerning an English pub towel which has been recognized as a kind of symbol of the Society. It was a "Wessex" pub towel which I once brought from England to my friend and colleague Dr. Les Karagianis (now Dean of Education, Memorial University), who presented it to Canon Earle for display in the Society's meeting. Canon Earle titled it *Our Symbol*

Our Symbol

All kinds of animals and tools,
All kinds of trees and flowers,
Are used by people of this earth
To symbolize their powers.

Some use the stars and some the sun,
The cross the crescent moon,
A hammer or a maple leaf
A beaver or a loon.

We Wessex folk in Newfoundland,
Might choose a fish or fowl
But as of now we only have
This beer-soaked Wessex towel.

Professor Betty Russell Miller, Department of English, Memorial University, herself a distinguished writer, offered a vote of thanks to Dr. Poole. She stated that her late father, Dr. Ted Russell (professor, writer, playwright) would have been pleased to know him because in many of his writings he reflects the soul of Newfoundland in much the same way her father tried to do in his play *The Holdin' Ground*.

On a motion by Mr. Wayne Thistle, Vice-President (Administration, Memorial University) and seconded by Dr. Arthur Scammell (professor, writer, poet, author of *The Squid Jiggin Ground*) the meeting approved the following officers:

Honourable Premier Brian A. Peckford, Patron
Reverend Canon Dr. George Earle, Honorary President
Dr. Otto Tucker, President
Dr. Cyril Poole, Vice-President
Dr. Gordon Handcock, Secretary-Treasurer

The whole proceedings were video taped for public viewing and as a record for the future, by Educational Television of Memorial University of Newfoundland, thanks to the kind arrangements of Messrs. Dwayne Starcher, Craig McNamara, Rob Pitt and John Power.

During the past year five meetings have been held. The excellent attendance and participation have been thoroughly encouraging.

Much interest was aroused by the lecture of Dr. Allan Williams from the faculty of Geography at Birmingham University. Dr. Williams, a native of Bristol, gave a stimulating talk on John Guy, also from Bristol, who in 1610 attempted to set up in Cupids, England's first colony in Newfoundland. We were delighted to welcome to our meeting members of the Dawe family and others from Cupids who are doing so much to arouse an interest in the history of that part of Conception Bay.

The talk given by Mr. Walter Peddle about his search for West Country influences upon early Newfoundland furniture proved to be extremely enlightening. His colored slides together with his commentary and a display of his book on that theme provided much new information on a topic which hitherto has not been treated very extensively in Newfoundland writings or lectures. Mr. Peddle is a researcher and administrator at the Newfoundland museum. Many of his findings are based on extensive travels in the south and west of England.

Dr. Michael Staveley's lecture on *Early Wessex* along with his collection of splendid colored slides of the west country presented thoughtful insights into the conceptual development of the notion of "Wessex" from ancient English history down to the days of Thomas Hardy's Wessex. Dr. Staveley was born and raised in England and studied and graduated in the field of Geography from Reading University. He is now Dean of Arts at Memorial University and with his family has lived in St. John's for many years.

Dr. Harold Paddock (Newfoundland writer and poet), a professor in the Department of Linguistics,

Memorial University of Newfoundland, made an excellent presentation on *Tracing Wessex Words in Newfoundland*. His interest in the Newfoundland dialect and in Newfoundland's history was aroused during his youth in his native village on Long Island, Notre Dame Bay. Later he graduated from Memorial University and also from London University where he earned the Ph.D. degree in the study of linguistics. He spent a considerable time during and following his student days at London, living in Dorset in the area where his ancestors originated.

Cider and Apples: The Somersetshire Roots of the Bonavista Bay Sturges was given to a large and curious audience by Dr. David Sturge Artiss. He shared with us the results of his own genealogical studies. Dr. Artiss was also born and raised in England, and has spent many years in Newfoundland and years ago spent some time in the Wesleyville area where he was able to gather much information from older family members of the Bonavista Bay Sturges.

The names of the founding members of the Society are kept in a specially bound book and were written by Mrs. Christine (Small) Miller (formerly of Cottles' Island) using a particularly old English script style characteristic of much of the penmanship to be seen in very early Newfoundland documents.

A highlight of the year was the founding of the Newfoundland Wessex Society in Poole, Dorset, England on Monday evening, March 18, 1985. I was honored to accept the invitation to attend and to be asked to give a brief talk at the meeting.

The meeting was chaired by His Worship, Poole Mayor Jack Brecknell. About one hundred people were in attendance and some were there representing local organizations and groups. All were interested in the historical relationships between Dorset and Newfoundland and they voted unanimously and with obvious enthusiasm to set up an association to be known as the Newfoundland Wessex Society.

I have been notified that the Society is now duly constituted and former Poole Mayor Peter Coles was elected president. Mr. Coles with his family spent a summer holiday in 1983 travelling around Newfoundland and he has been an excellent ambassador of Newfoundland ever since.

A tribute must also be paid to Mr. Ian Andrews, Town Clerk (similar, in some ways, to our Deputy Minister of Finance) and Keeper of the Borough records. His own research has uncovered much valuable data relevant to Newfoundland's early links with Poole. Although Mr. Andrews has not yet been to Newfoundland, his understanding of and interest in Newfoundland's place in Dorset history is very impressive.

Both Mr. Coles and Mr. Andrews spoke at the meeting stating reasons why they believed an association to renew relationships with Newfoundland was timely and expressed the belief that they were responding to a growing interest both within and outside the county of Dorset.

Professor Derek Beamish gave an excellent slide presentation on his travels in Newfoundland a few years ago. The audience seemed delighted with his magnificent slides of areas around Trinity, Trouty, St. John's, and Brigus.

The C.B.C. film, *Land and Fish*, the documentary made by David Quinton of the *Land and Sea* program for the national C.B.C. series, *This Land* and featuring my own search in Dorset for my Trinity Bay roots was also shown.

I gave a brief talk and presented to the Society, (now displayed in the mayor's chambers) a framed greeting and A Newfoundland flag from the Honourable Premier A. Brian Peckford on behalf of the people of Newfoundland. I also presented an enlarged framed photograph of Winterton, formerly Scilly Cove (photograph, Roy Pitcher) as a representation of a Newfoundland fishing village first inhabited and later settled by early Wessex fishermen. It was also the place where John Masters was born (1687) and lived until he was ten years old. John Masters was elected mayor of Poole in 1748 and again in 1752. He is buried in St. James churchyard in Poole. I was presented with a wall plate and a ceramic dolphin (Poole emblem) made in the Poole Potteries, and also with an aerial photograph of Poole and its surroundings. These items become the property of the Wessex Society of Newfoundland.

A musical group, *The Yetties* (originating in Yeminster) who had taken part in Newfoundland's four hundredth anniversary were in attendance and presented me with a taped copy of their rendition of old English and Newfoundland folk songs.

It was very moving to talk to so many people who had very special connections with Newfoundland: people like professors John Hillier and Derek Matthews, two of the authors of that greatly treasured book *Mansions and Merchants of Poole*. Newfoundland shall be forever grateful to them for this marvellous contribution to a history in which this province has a share.

The media gave the meeting excellent coverage. The title of one article in a local paper was, "Links forged with friends across the sea". Another read, "Words that span oceans". Mr. Andrews and I were interviewed for two separate radio programs.

I left the meeting that evening and the people at the Poole Civic Center feeling spiritually enriched by the whole experience. I wished I could have been able to share every detail of my visit with so many of my fellow Newfoundlanders whose interest is so deeply embedded in the Wessex area as mine is.

The many letters, cards, phone calls and personal contacts directed to the Society through Dr. Poole, Dr. Handcock, myself and through others have been far too many even to acknowledge. Our hope is to deepen our knowledge of our Wessex heritage and strengthen the ties between ourselves and our people in that beautiful part of England.