



The Voice of Newfoundland: A Social History of the Broadcasting Corporation of Newfoundland 1939–1949. By Jeff A. Webb. Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press, 2008. 272 pp. ISBN 9780802098207.

In Newfoundland, distance and isolation are the enemies. Distance from the great cities of the world, from markets, and, in the 1930s and 1940s, distance from the government that had stripped it of its self-governance and had ruled it as a colony; isolation of its outports, fishing, and logging camps, the isolation of boats at sea, all made Newfoundland a place that needed radio.

In most other places, radio augmented print media. Certainly, there was competition for news, but radio was mainly a source of cheap in-the-home entertainment. In Newfoundland, radio was a true public utility, one that weakened the hold of distance and isolation on the small colony.

Newfoundland had, for a brief moment, been at the forefront of radio technology when Guglielmo Marconi received the first transatlantic radio message at Signal Hill in 1901. For the next three decades, while much of the rest of the world embraced radio, first as a method of communication between ships and land, then as a news and entertainment medium, Newfoundland found that it had been left behind. It had also backslid politically, losing self-governance in 1934 as part of a deal to save the insolvent colony from bankruptcy. Until Newfoundland joined Canada in 1949, the Colonial Office ruled Newfoundland, with some help from local powerbrokers.

Newfoundland had a tradition of church involvement in education and community improvement that could use considerably more historical study. The first station, 8WMC, was, as Jeff A. Webb says in *The Voice of Newfoundland: A Social History of the Broadcasting Corporation of Newfoundland 1939–1949*, established to provide spiritual uplift to the island. The first secular station, Voice of Newfoundland (VONF) went on the air as a private station on 14 November 1932 and became a public broadcaster seven years later.

Like so many other government-controlled networks, it found itself saddled with conflicting mandates and in the middle of debates over whether radio should be an uplifting purveyor of “high” culture or appeal to popular tastes. It also had to balance the expectations of London’s agents in Newfoundland that the VONF mimic the BBC, with the need for radio that served the needs of Newfoundland.

It came up with a mixed solution, with a radio program that included recordings provided by the BBC, home-grown political and social talk, service announcements for the isolated communities, and detailed weather reports for the fishing fleet.

Then came the war. The station was put to use as a propaganda vehicle and was heavily censored of important news on the Battle of the Atlantic and the influx of U.S. military personnel, who established a strong presence in bases on the island Washington acquired under Lend Lease. The American service people had their own taste in radio, and it didn’t include British classical orchestras and home-grown fare like Joey Smallwood’s show “The Barrelman.”

In the end, most of the Americans left. So, too, did the British, who could no longer afford to administer Newfoundland, and who were eager to pass the colony off to Canada. Britain's preference for Canadian union was reflected in the VONF broadcasts. In the end, not only did VONF become part of the Canadian Broadcasting corporation, its stars, including Smallwood and Don Jamieson, would go on to have new, important careers in provincial and national politics.

Webb has crafted an interesting, concise, and articulate examination of the VONF and what it meant to the social and political life of Newfoundland. Many of the challenges faced by Newfoundland's public broadcaster are also faced by much larger national institutions: disputes over funding models and budgets; complaints of political interference; debates over "commercialism"; and battles between people who see public broadcasting as a way of exposing large numbers of people to "high" culture versus those who believe the people who pay for the service should see their tastes reflected in it.

It's a fascinating story, one that not only helps the reader understand Newfoundland's media landscape during the Second World War and Confederation, but also puts much of today's discourse about the role of public broadcasting into sharp focus.

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