

Inventing the Past: Regional Myth in Michael Crummey's *Galore* and Richard
Flanagan's *Gould's Book of Fish*

by

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In memory of my oldest and smallest friend.
1997-2013

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ABSTRACT

This thesis seeks to investigate the ways in which a novel from Newfoundland and a novel from Tasmania use history and myth to reimagine their colonial beginnings in light of recent debates about finding and defining regional and national identity. Specifically, I will look at how Michael Crummey's *Galore* uses folklore to tell a founding story of Newfoundland – a place where the impulse to recover a lost past is still strong, and where efforts to do so contribute to the region's dominant culture industry. In comparison, I address how Richard Flanagan's *Gould's Book of Fish*, in its retelling of the Tasmanian settler story, works to expose the myths of foundational and historical narratives and explore the impact that these forged narratives have on identity-formation in the present.

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CHAPTER 1: Introduction

Even before you open Michael Crummey's *Galore* (2009) and Richard Flanagan's *Gould's Book of Fish* (2001), there is a sense that these novels are in their own ways indebted to the great magical realist epic, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. Indeed, the reviews that adorn each cover nod to Gabriel García Márquez's influence. James Campbell writes that Flanagan's novel is "One part Rabelais, one part García Márquez, one part Ned Kelly" (Campbell, "Painting Fish from a Cliffside Cage"). A Maritime newspaper notes that Crummey is "One of Newfoundland's great storytellers . . . This novel has the same lushness as *One Hundred Years of Solitude*" (Chronicle Herald). These novels are marketed in a way that aligns them with Márquez and his acclaimed 1967 novel that tells the story of a South American nation. In Márquez's 1982 Nobel Prize acceptance speech, he explains, "The interpretation of our reality through patterns not our own, serves only to make us ever more unknown, ever less free, ever more solitary" ("Nobel Lecture"). Márquez is fervent about the need for Latin America to find its own voice, and use that voice to define itself and its "outsized reality" ("Nobel Lecture"). For Márquez, to be defined by others is to be imprisoned. Freedom means to define oneself on one's own terms. In *Galore* and *Gould's Book of Fish*, Crummey and Flanagan both take up this challenge in response to critical crises in their own nations' quests for identity.

Like *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, *Galore* and *Gould's Book of Fish* revisit colonial origins. As Philip Swanson outlines, *One Hundred Years of Solitude* "is very much about Colombian and Latin American history, and the 100-year span of action effectively corresponds to the story of 'Latin' America from 'discovery' to present

day" (59). *Galore* has similar historical breadth, as it traces the changes that a small, fictional town undergoes from the time of Newfoundland's first permanent settlements up until the early twentieth century. The novel explores the successes and failures of modernisation in a town called Paradise Deep, and through its rich use of folklore, it offers a nostalgic view of a way of life that is now gone. This nostalgia brings into question the role of modernisation in 'authentic' Newfoundland identity. Similarly, *Gould's Book of Fish* returns to the time of Tasmania's colonial occupation. Set in Macquarie Harbour penal settlement on Sarah Island in the early nineteenth century, Flanagan's novel features shifty narrators, one a nineteenth-century convict and the other a contemporary conman. At times, the past becomes indistinguishable from the present. While these novels reflect on the past and incorporate historical events and characters, they are not bound by historical accuracy. Instead, as in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, there is a constant blurring between fact and fiction.

Galore and *Gould's Book of Fish* are return-to-roots epics that parallel Newfoundland and Tasmanian history while at the same time offering an imaginative and sometimes magical recasting of the story of their formative years. While some scholars view magical realism as a "now overused and frequently vague term" (Williams 74), Stephen Hart provides a basic but useful definition of magical realism as "the deadpan description of uncanny, supernatural or magical events as if they were real" (129). Márquez's magical realism is implicitly involved in challenging the narrative of official history that presents itself as accurate, impartial and inclusive. The irony of *One Hundred Years of Solitude* is that Márquez's magical

realism (the treatment of marvelous elements as if they were real) corresponds with the way historical narratives create myths and sell them as truths. Philip Swanson explains,

Myth and magic are associated with the falsification of reality by an establishment culture that leads ordinary Latin Americans to internalize an essentially unreal version of their own history and identity as dictated by, say, Europe and North America and its clients in Latin America. (58)

These deceptive historical narratives have consequences for those in the present who have been misrepresented, exploited, or omitted from the official version. Myth and magic permeate Márquez's novel, but work to oppose and expose the powerful fictions of the dominant historical narrative. As Swanson continues, "Fictitious or unreliable 'official' versions of social reality must be questioned, then, and, despite all the talk of 'the marvellous' or 'lo maravilloso', it is vital that truth will out" (59). Márquez does not present his imaginative rendering of Latin American history as truth, but rather as a competing "truth," a version of Latin American history that ultimately works to undermine the 'official' account and free those that are manipulated by it.

This competing account also works to destabilize the notion that there is any singular, empirically true, national narrative. Benedict Anderson, in the introduction to his influential book *Imagined Communities*, states, "all communities larger than primordial villages of face-to-face contact (and perhaps even these) are imagined. Communities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the

style in which they are imagined” (6). To think of oneself as being part of a community takes imagination, “because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion” (6). Members of a community or nation are involved in the process of inventing the nation, and the narratives that help to create this image of the nation are what need to be questioned and made transparent. As Duncan Bell asks, “what are the key discursive elements that help to bind together the idea of a collective national identity? How is history, indeed time, represented?” (69). A collective national identity, as an imagined community, is made up of powerful stories that tell people who they are and where they are from. Historical narratives in particular can provide a nation with a shared past, giving the illusion of community. These narratives are essentially mythic in nature in that they are dramatized to suit particular national agendas. As Paula Hamilton and Kate Darian-Smith argue,

It is through the simplified and selective narratives of collective myths that historical events are rendered emotionally comprehensible and memorable. Mythic narratives are thus the wellspring of nationalism and they are constantly mobilized to serve differing ideological and political interests. (2)

While these nationalist myths help to tell us who we are, they are also aligned with existing power structures and can make us complicit in their prejudices, and control us with their influence.

Both Michael Crummey's *Galore* and Richard Flanagan's *Gould's Book of Fish* use or create mythic narratives to define a region in relation to a nation, but are at the same time skeptical about folklore and regional myths. This tension is what I aim to explore in the following two chapters. As Terry Goldie writes, "For the authors who create myths, both the cultural narratives and the authors' invasive manipulations of these narratives are important" (88). Therefore, each chapter will begin with an outline of the significant episodes of Newfoundland and Tasmania's respective cultural and political narratives that have helped to form each region's 'official' history. I shall look particularly at the ways in which these narratives have played a role in inventing or imagining the regions by informing a regional identity in the present. Then, I shall turn to the novels as texts that are born out of and respond to these cultural narratives, and investigate the different ways these two authors either use or challenge these narratives. In particular, I will examine how *Galore* and *Gould's Book of Fish* represent history and time. Furthermore, I shall demonstrate how both Crummey and Flanagan are keenly aware of their role in their region's official cultural industries by looking at how their novels and involvement in other creative projects contribute to the image of their region, and nation, on an international scale.

In Chapter Two I ask how Michael Crummey's *Galore* uses local folklore and the traditional outpost setting to tell the story of the founding of Newfoundland, and how this imaginative retelling responds to recent critical discussions about finding an 'authentic' Newfoundland identity in a rapidly changing world. I argue that Crummey's narrative, while relying on regional myths, is in the end a cautionary tale

about the dangers of holding on to the past and relying on tradition to inform an identity in the present. I will begin by explaining the significance of the outport as a romanticized image used to promote Newfoundland, and as the site of a lost way of life after the implementation of the codfish moratorium in the '90s. I will examine how Confederation with Canada, the provincial government's relocation project, and the moratorium, contributed to the decline of a traditional way of life, and how the ensuing anxiety over a lost way of life resulted in a cultural revival in the arts during the '60s and '70s. I will then analyze how this cultural revival was both a means to salvage a lost past that had for so long defined Newfoundlanders, and a romanticized myth that encouraged a false sense that an 'authentic' Newfoundland identity could not be located in the present. I will then go on to explain how this 'authentic' Newfoundland continues to be promoted by the tourism and culture industries, and how recent scholarship has responded to this strategy with disapproval and frustration.

I shall then begin the literary discussion of Michael Crummey's novel, *Galore*, as a reimagining of the founding story of Newfoundland, and study how its treatment of the past, and its use of local folklore and other tokens of 'authentic' Newfoundland identity, work to demonstrate Newfoundland's struggle to define itself in the present. Specifically, I shall look at how folktales have an identity-forming function in *Galore*, and how the community of Paradise Deep either relies upon or completely renounces folklore, magic and myth at different periods of growth, struggle or success. Echoing the Newfoundland predicament, the second half of the novel sees the community experience a period of rapid modernisation,

and this has consequences for one particular character, Abel Devine. Abel's search for identity in *Galore* provides useful insight into Newfoundland's search for identity in recent years. The culmination of Abel's search, which also ends the novel, is where Crummey's overarching message becomes clearer. In this concluding section, I shall argue that while *Galore* relies on regional myths to tell the story of Newfoundland, it proposes that holding on to the past is not productive, that adapting to change is inevitable, and that one does not have to give up one's identity to do so. Newfoundland as it was is still alive in stories.

In Chapter Three I turn to Richard Flanagan's *Gould's Book of Fish*. Initially, I explain how Flanagan's novel is decidedly more skeptical about regional myth-making than Crummey's. Flanagan is interested in looking back only to expose the deceits of official history. *Gould's Book of Fish* is intent on showing how national narratives sanitize the history of suffering, use myth to justify wrongdoings, tactfully forget and erase anything that would elicit shame, and in these spaces construct heroes, victories and tales of optimism to inspire pride. Before I begin my analysis of Flanagan's novel, it is important to first provide a summary of how key instances in Australian history have been distorted (or forgotten) to fulfill the requirements of official history. As Flanagan's protagonist, William Gould, declares, "Everything that's wrong about this country begins in my story: they've all been making the place up" (384). Through this historical background, I show the ways in which Australia has been invented since its colonial beginnings, from Captain James Cook's landing at Sydney Cove in New South Wales, to protests around the Australian Bicentennial celebrations, to contemporary debates about finding a usable past to

inform Australian identity in the present. I include in this section the violence and suffering of Tasmania's colonial beginnings, both within the penal colonies and as a result of the penal colonies' occupation of land that wasn't theirs. I address the incongruous fact that Australia's colonizers were also Britain's convicts, and the difficulties this has raised for nation-building attempts up until the present day. Finally, I compare Newfoundland's period of cultural revival to the sustained identity crisis that began around the same time in Australia. Here, I outline selected scholarship that addresses the artificiality and limitations of a 'real' or 'authentic' Australian identity. There is a clear sense that Flanagan's novel and other Australian writers are less convinced by regional myths, and acutely aware of the ways national identity is invented, nations are imagined, and what purposes they serve.

My discussion of Richard Flanagan's *Gould's Book of Fish* centers on how images of fish work in the novel to resist categorization, embody the imaginative elements at work in any historical narrative, and free Tasmania from the prison of official history and from being defined by others. While Flanagan's novel addresses similar themes to those of other contemporary Australian authors, it is the inexplicable and elusive fish that pervade the novel that distinguishes it from its peers, and saves it from easy classification. I give a brief summary of the existing scholarship on the novel, showing that Flanagan's fish motif has been thoroughly overlooked precisely because, like history, it is hard to capture. My analysis of the fish motif in the novel is set against a study of how American birds, painted by the historical figure Jean-Babeuf Audubon, came to symbolize the hope and optimism of a new nation. In *Gould's Book of Fish*, fish work to tell a less marketable and more

shameful story of Tasmania's settler history. *Gould's Book of Fish* takes to task not only the written word, but also the way official history is forged and sold as truth. Here, Flanagan's project is clear: historical narratives and regional myths are convincing, dangerous, and aligned with systems of dominance. Like the ending of *Galore*, the ending of *Gould's Book of Fish* is where Flanagan's warning resounds: an official history is a counterfeit narrative, and if you believe in it too much, you will be trapped in a false reality. As Gabriel García Márquez cautions, letting yourself be defined by others comes at a great cost to your freedom.

In conclusion, I explore the paradox at the core of Flanagan's novel by looking at the way *Gould's Book of Fish*, as much as it resists classification, can be seen as characteristic of Australian literature in its use of a conman protagonist and its preoccupation with forgery. Furthermore, Flanagan's outspoken contempt of national literature is complicated by his involvement in writing one of Australia's most recent national narratives, the 2008 epic film *Australia*, and his recent Man Booker Prize award. Rather than guessing at his motives for being involved in a commercial, nation-building project such as *Australia*, it is enough to show how powerful the image of a nation is, and how we wish to feel part of a community, even if only imagined.

Finally, in the concluding section I revisit the idea of the power of stories and storytelling to create and sustain a feeling of community, identity and belonging in the world. Particularly in the geographically isolated island communities of Newfoundland and Tasmania, one can escape being marginalized by lending one's voice to a place and having a say in how it is imagined. Cultural myths, like heroes,

are constructs that can have a positive impact on a community. As Graham Seal argues, “a world without heroes is unimaginable and would probably be unworkable” (1). So there is a sense that people create myths, imagine communities and believe in optimistic national narratives to satisfy a need, give the illusion of order, and feel a sense of purpose. This gives credence to the contradiction at the heart of the two novels I have chosen to study: that regional myths and historical narratives can be dangerous if one cannot see that they are made up of both truth and fiction.

CHAPTER TWO: “And you believe that, do you?”: The Role of Folklore in Informing Regional Identity in Michael Crummey’s *Galore*

Set in a fictional town of Paradise Deep, *Galore* traces the lives of two families through six generations up until the onset of the First World War. The first half of the novel is filled with marvelous tales of witches, ghosts, resurrections, folk cures, and superstitions, but this mysticism all but disappears in the second half of the novel with the introduction of modern science and technology, and the changing political and industrial landscape. While the novel is a return-to-roots tale set during the time of Newfoundland’s first permanent settlements, it brings the reader into the twentieth century and documents the changes that outport life underwent during a period of modernization. *Galore* does not present an idyllic past where the outport is home to a united community and where the people are simple, happy and living off the land. Rather, there is a rift between the two central families, the Devines and the Sellers; the fish are increasingly scarce; and starvation claims the lives of whole families who are isolated from the community. In an interview with *The Telegram*, Crummey said “he began writing *Galore* wanting, culturally, ‘the entire story of Newfoundland to take place in this one little outport’” (Fitzpatrick, “A Certain Uncertainty”). Recognizing that Crummey’s over-arching project is consciously concerned with the development of Newfoundland culture and identity from the time of its first settlements, what this chapter seeks to investigate is the nature of the Newfoundland identity that Crummey is creating and sustaining in light of contemporary discussions about the dangers of an over-reliance on the past and the commodification of a “distinctive” Newfoundland culture. To do this, I shall first provide an outline of the events leading up to Newfoundland’s cultural

renaissance in the '60s and '70s, and how the efforts of this period to retrieve the past have been both sustained and critiqued in recent years through local art, theatre, literature, scholarly practice, and the tourism industry.

The definitive image of Newfoundland that readily comes to mind is that of rocky shores, lone lighthouses and small fishing villages far away from the rest of the developed world. This image of Newfoundland is one that is deliberately crafted by the tourism industry, artists, writers and other culture-makers. At the center of these representations of Newfoundland is the outport. The outport is a symbol of the province's history of isolation, its vital connection to the sea, and its simple, rural way of life. In Newfoundland today, you can go on a picnic tour of a lighthouse, or visit a heritage outport town and "imagine yourself seated on a patch of long grass, looking out over the pristine waters of the Atlantic Ocean" ("Newfoundland and Labrador"). But the outport is also the site of great cultural and economic loss for Newfoundlanders. Newfoundland's Confederation with Canada in 1949, the industrialization of the fisheries in the '40s and '50s, the government resettlement programmes from the '50s through to the '70s, and the Codfish Moratorium imposed in 1992 (O'Flaherty 232) all played a part in rendering the distinctive outport way of life practically obsolete. With the traditional outport lifestyle under threat, so too was the distinctive Newfoundland identity. As James Overton explains, "The outport is the seat of home-grown Newfoundland culture. It is a culture that has developed organically in isolation and it is the environment . . . that has been one of the key forces which has moulded the Newfoundland character" (53). The

gradual loss of the outports caused a crisis of identity within Newfoundland that can still be felt today.

Confederation with Canada in 1949¹ meant that Newfoundland's previously sheltered way of life was exposed to new influences, and modern technology took the place of more traditional practices, especially with regard to fishing. In an interview with Cynthia Sugars, Michael Crummey explains:

The world that Dad grew up in—the '30s and '40s—there were changes, they had electric lights and they had the inboard motor and they had the cod trap. But outside of those things, their daily life was very close to how people had lived in Newfoundland a hundred years before, two hundred years before. And since Confederation with Canada, that world has . . . it just does not exist anymore. (9)

Crummey's comments here illustrate the generational gap created between those who grew up in the Dominion of Newfoundland and those who were born in Canada, and describe the loss of a way of life that had been preserved and protected for centuries. Transitioning from a prolonged period of relative stasis to a sudden period of rapid transformation and development had consequences for Newfoundlanders' collective consciousness. The influence of "North American mass

¹ The vote that decided the fate of Newfoundland is evidence of the almost equal division between those in favour of confederation and those politically opposed to it. As Corey Slumkoski outlines: "In the first referendum, held on 3 June 1948, responsible government received 44.6 per cent of the vote, Confederation 41.1 per cent, and the Commission of Government 14.3 per cent. Since none had gained a clear majority, a second referendum was held a month and a half later, on 22 July. In that contest, Confederation emerged the victor by 4.6 per cent" (36). The close vote demonstrates that a strong separatist sentiment persisted after Newfoundland became a Canadian province.

media and consumer culture” threatened to “erode” and alter the newly exposed culture (Higgins, “Cultural Renaissance”).

J. R. Smallwood, who led the campaign for confederation and became Premier after confederation, ran a series of government centralization and industrialization programmes under his controversial “develop or perish” philosophy. As Jim Hiller and Melanie Martin note, “there was to be a break with a past characterized by poverty, uncertainty and backwardness. Under the new dispensation, the province was to be brought into the mainstream of the 20th century world” (“Develop or Perish”). This modernization effort and relocation of the population from the rural outskirts of the province to the urbanized centres meant that small communities were disappearing, and taking their traditional ways of life with them. As Sandra Gwyn states, “More than 200 communities were vanished from the map . . . [these communities] contained the essence of the Newfoundland form” (40). The government’s advancement strategies meant that some had to sacrifice their long-established way of life that fostered and protected a portion of their collective identity.

This sense of vulnerability and anxiety over a lost way of life spurred a cultural revival in the late 1960s and ‘70s known as “The Newfoundland Renaissance.” In her article that defines this movement, Sandra Gwyn paints a vivid picture of what she evocatively terms the “Newfcult phenomenon” (40): a “miraculous and exciting revival of art and theatre” that was a direct reaction to the destruction of the outports (38). This movement was fuelled by a surge of locally produced, locally themed art, music, theatre and literature that attempted to recover

and strengthen a traditional culture devastated by 'progress.' Bernice Morgan describes the spirit of the movement in an essay titled "The Culture of Place," which she presented at the Newfoundland Historical Society symposium on "The Idea of Newfoundland" in 2003: "Slowly a sense of place was being born – or reborn. The past was being found, gathered in" (375). By this account it is clear that the movement was a salvaging act, one that expressed nostalgia for a bygone age and began the process of "collect[ing], print[ing] and record[ing]" (375) Newfoundland songs, stories, dialects and other cultural products of the pre-confederation era. It is useful to point out here that both Bernice Morgan and Sandra Gwyn were born in 1935 and spent their formative years in what was still the Dominion of Newfoundland. The Cultural Renaissance was a reaction in the arts to a pervasive cultural shift happening during their generation's lifetime. Morgan called the movement "the lost-and-found story of my generation" (377), again revealing that this "rebirth" (375) was an attempt at reviving a fading way of life and holding on to an identity forged in the past. But the political and industrial transformations that the province had undergone since confederation changed Newfoundland permanently, and what was salvaged during this cultural renaissance was only a reproduction of once-vital traditions.

Peter Hodgins, in his article "Our Haunted Present: Cultural Memory in Question," addresses the role of collective or "implicit" (102) memory as central to nation building projects. He explains that this reliance on memory takes the form of "an incessant valorization and reification of the traditional cultural practices that distinguish the nation from its all-too-similar neighbours and dissenting minorities"

(102). Similarly, the Newfoundland Renaissance made use of collective cultural memory and turned traditional practices into symbols of Newfoundland's unique identity. Newfoundland's cultural renaissance could also be seen as what anthropologist Ralph Linton defines as a "nativistic movement" (qtd. in Pocius 58) wherein "certain current or remembered elements of a culture are selected for emphasis and given symbolic value" (qtd. in Pocius 59).

One such traditional practice that became "*the* collective identity symbol for Newfoundland's nativistic movement" (Pocius 76) was mummering. The value and emphasis placed on mummering during this cultural rebirth of the '60s and '70s is evidence of the complex attempt to redefine Newfoundland identity in the present by recovering the past. One way in which the memory and practice of mummering was revived was in the formation of a local theatre group in 1972 (Pocius 62) now known as The Mummers Troupe. As the name suggests, the group's performance style is loosely based on the traditional Newfoundland mummers play. Melvin M. Firestone provides a brief outline of the mummers play (also known as "mumming"), in Halpert and Story's book, *Christmas Mumming in Newfoundland*: "during the twelve days of Christmas, mummers, or 'janneys,' go from house to house adding to the merriment that characterizes this holiday" (63). Typically, mummers are "masked performers" who dress up in disguise (sometimes in drag), alter their gestures, body movements and voice (Halpert 37), and make informal house visits where the occupants "attempt to penetrate the disguises by a form of guessing-game" (37). Once their identities are discovered, the mummers "are offered, and accept, food and drink" (37). A folksong titled "Any Mummers Allowed

In?" written and performed by local band, Simani, became hugely popular in December of 1983 (Pocius 57). The opening lyrics, by Bud Davidge, play on the shared nostalgia of the time: "'Don't seem like Christmas if the mummers are not here,' Granny would say as she'd knit in her chair. 'Things have gone modern and I suppose that's the cause, Christmas is not like it was'" (Pocius 67). Here we see a further call to reclaim lost traditions that were experienced by older generations, or as Richard O'Flaherty terms them, the "real Newfoundlanders" (qtd. in Gwyn 45). The pervasive feeling that modernity put an end to valued tradition is evident here too. The fact that Newfoundland radio stations at the time were inundated with requests to air this song (Pocius 57) shows the collective longing for this lost time as well as how mummering became "a powerful identity symbol of cultural revival" (57). Chris Brookes, a member of The Mummers Troupe, describes the intention of their community-based theatre: "We have to show people themselves . . . before they forget who they are" (Gwyn 40). The intention here is a positive one, to give the community "a better sense of self" (Higgins, "Cultural Renaissance"), but it is also a sense of self that is founded on an idealized, irretrievable past, and not a lived present.

There were positive practical and psychological outcomes of this cultural rebirth, post-confederation. It fostered a new sense of community and shared identity within the province. It also worked to put Newfoundland on the map and presented a revived image of the province to an international audience. It created a sense of renewed pride in a distinctive identity and rich cultural heritage. As Jenny Higgins explains, "as the movement explored the province's culture, it also helped to

validate and shape it” (“Cultural Renaissance”). Bernice Morgan also praised the role that Memorial University’s Folklore Department had in the growing “sense of self” and “sense of place” that Newfoundlanders were experiencing at this time.

Academics at Memorial University, as early as the 1950s, began to study local songs, traditions, stories, regional dialects and other aspects of Newfoundland culture (Higgins, “Cultural Renaissance”). Similar to the renewed interest in mummering and the desire to revive lost traditions, there was an effort to collect and record Newfoundland folklore before it disappeared. In Herbert Halpert and J. D. A. Widdowson’s seminal collection, *Folktales of Newfoundland: The Resilience of the Oral Tradition*, Halpert writes with a sense of urgency:

We were consciously collecting linguistic data as well as folklore and oral history, since we were aware that outpost life in Newfoundland was changing radically and there was an urgent need to monitor these changes while those who had experienced the older ways of life were still able to talk about them. (xxii)

These stories and songs that were passed down orally through generations, inherited from the “older way of life,” or Newfoundland’s “golden age” (Bannister 182), provided Newfoundlanders with a direct link to the past and had to be preserved before they fell from living memory. The ideological foundation of this thinking was that the past was the heart of authentic Newfoundland culture. As Peter Hodgins argues,

Reasoning that memory is at the core of personal and collective identity, the prophets of amnesia warn us that if we do not somehow

reconnect with some sort of authentic past, we are doomed to a life of alienation, anomie, loss of meaning. (99)

The worry was that if Newfoundlanders lost this connection to the past then they would lose their 'authentic' identity after Confederation. Therefore, the scholars, artists, musicians and theatre-makers of this period aimed to tap in to Newfoundland's collective memory in an attempt to reconnect and sustain a connection with Newfoundland's past.

While the work at Memorial University and the creative output of the Cultural Renaissance helped to affirm Newfoundland's regional identity, it also further emphasized that the past was where the genuine Newfoundland character could be found. This is problematic in that it is a definition of identity that resists change, making the difficult work of adapting to new environments and transitioning into new ways of life even more challenging. Jerry Bannister neatly outlines the illogicality inherent in this reliance on the past:

folklorism in Newfoundland . . . has tended to embrace an anti-modernism which divides society into the authentic (traditional, rural, plebian) and the counterfeit (modern, suburban, middle class). In other words, this has produced an artificial distinction between real and fake Newfoundlanders. (180-181)

This is a dangerous distinction to encourage as it makes the increasing pool of modern urbanites feel out of touch with an authentic Newfoundland identity. This Newfoundland identity is also greatly simplified. According to James Overton, "the assumption of most observers is that there is a single, distinct Newfoundland ethos,

character, or culture” (11). This standardized Newfoundland character that is created and perpetuated is inherently exclusory. A consequence of fostering a homogenous regional identity is that it excludes visible minority groups and immigrants. The stories and songs about simple, outport living and rural ways of life are products of nostalgia for the past and are therefore often sentimentalized, stereotypical portrayals of the Newfoundland character. As Chafe suggest, “This Newfoundlander, though charming, is essentially primitive and unable to find a place in the modern world” (173). So there is a real danger on hinging a new provincial identity on the past, because it inhibits real change, makes an authentic identity unattainable, and creates essentialized accounts of how things were.

Leslie Harris, who was president of Memorial University during the ‘80s, Chairman of The Review of Northern Cod Stocks, and served on the National Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada, was deeply involved in Newfoundland life in academic, administrative, and humanitarian capacities. In a much celebrated essay published in 2008, "The Outport Phenomenon: Life by the Edge of the Sea," Harris concludes by saying,

The outport as it was has all but disappeared and will not be recalled. This may, indeed, be an occasion for nostalgia, but to deny the reality of change is as foolish as it is pointless. Nevertheless, we should not forget that it was the sea that shaped our lives and our society; nor that five hundred years of living by and from the sea has created a unique cultural identity that in some form will survive. (14)

This cautionary statement, as recent as it is, illustrates the delicate balance between remembering and letting go that Newfoundlanders have to manage today. What Harris is asking here is for the community to loosen its grip on the past, yet to recognize that given the important role the outport has played in the formation of a unique national identity, its legacy will never be lost. This recognition will open up a much-needed cultural space for real change and the creation of more complex identities that reflect a diverse and living Newfoundland culture.

In Newfoundland today there is a sense that this change Harris calls for is taking place. In an interview with Cynthia Sugars, Michael Crummey explains that he has noticed a “cultural shift” happening: “I think Newfoundland’s in the midst of a real sea change, that Newfoundland now is completely different than it was twenty years ago, and it’s going to be completely different five years, ten years from now” (13). This sense of dynamism and anticipation of change is evidence of a new sense of acceptance and forward movement in Newfoundland. This shift also reflects the time when the generation born post-confederation has found its footing and its voice. This voice is also linked with the recent “rise of Newfoundland nationalism” (Bannister 175) or “re-emergent nationalism” (Yeoman 8). What is significant about the recent scholarly discussions of Newfoundland art, music, literature and the tourism industry (as cultural products that promote and perform identity), is the emergence of a critical voice that challenges the production of an image of Newfoundland that is overly sentimental, idealized, or backward looking. This challenge shows a reluctance to accept images of Newfoundland that are promoted as authentic but are only nostalgic reproductions of the past. As Newfoundland

author Edward Riche exclaims, “I’ve had it up to here with authenticity” (qtd. in Chafe 177). He candidly proposes that Newfoundlanders’ tendency to “indulge in our past” has resulted in a Newfoundland “trapped in amber” (qtd. in Chafe 177).

This new voice emerges from the recognition that Newfoundland culture has become a marketable commodity, and from a growing concern about the consequences this may have for the province’s identity. To look at one example, Newfoundland and Labrador Tourism has recently released a series of one-minute video vignettes promoting the province’s natural attractions, as well as its friendly people, local dialects and rich heritage. On the province’s Official Tourism Website, three catch phrases are presented over idyllic photographs of icebergs, rocky shores and quaint village scenes: “Sometimes it’s nice to break away from the pack;” “This summer, take a journey off the beaten path;” and “Hundreds of unique dialects. And characters” (Newfoundland and Labrador Tourism). Newfoundland is in this way marketed as an exceptional place offering an experience that you can have nowhere else. It is a place on the margin (O’Dea 73), “the edge of the sea” (Harris 10) or “at the far east of the Western world” (Chafe 171). Newfoundland’s geographical and cultural position on the margin is promoted as an escape from the mainstream, but there are real disadvantages that come with this placement. Newfoundlanders have struggled through centuries to eke out a living from the land and the sea (Chafe 174). Their geographical and political isolation from the mainland has meant that they have had to be particularly self-sufficient, an aspect of Newfoundland life that is promoted as creating a sense of community and building strength of character. This

may be so, but the province's isolation has also contributed to its economically disadvantaged circumstances.

While the tourism industry constructs Newfoundland as a place of tranquil escape, with a "mystique" (Gwyn) generated by its remote location, these conditions have come with a price for those who live there. James Overton, in his work on tourism, culture and development in Newfoundland, has investigated the idea that the Newfoundland culture promoted by the tourism industry is "only a certain kind of Newfoundland, one which is idealized and romanticized" (106), and that "what is being packaged and sold, however, is the heritage of centuries of underdevelopment" (105). As this reaction to images generated by the tourism industry shows, there is a changing sense of identity in Newfoundland based on a move away from nostalgic or essentialized representations of the province, and toward more complex representations that are grounded in present, lived conditions. The idea that the traditional is authentic and the modern is counterfeit is therefore being reversed, or at least revised. The distinction between the "real" Newfoundlander and the "fake" Newfoundlander is exposed as "artificial" (Bannister 181).

Recent scholarship on Newfoundland literature displays a similar frustration with repetitive, conventional forms, and is acutely aware of the role that Newfoundland literature plays within the province's dominant culture industry. Newfoundland literature, particularly contemporary literature, seems to be under pressure to move away from the "artifice of the culture industry" (Chafe 171) and toward new, more challenging representations of identity. Paul Chafe suggests that

before one even reads a novel from Newfoundland, there is a preconceived idea of what “Newfoundland literature” is (171). He suggests that

such literature will undoubtedly contain suffering tempered by irrepressible humour; loss balanced by a mystical oneness with the land; icy waves crashing on harsh shores; a salty yet melodious language; and the lingering mystique of a unique, unspoiled people. (171)

This somewhat humorous expectation of what makes up Newfoundland literature is also a solemn critique of how its themes and content have become predictable.

Leslie Harris echoes Chafe’s critique in his own view that “the great spate of nostalgic literature that has been produced in recent years emphasize [sic] those sterling characteristics of the Newfoundland outpost, and tend [sic] in the main to cast in a romantic light a world we have lost” (11). Harris and Chafe recognize the tendency for contemporary Newfoundland authors to summon the Newfoundland of the past in their narratives, consciously or not. These “literary interpretations of the island’s past” (Bannister 183) are deeply rooted in the persistent problem of finding the balance between looking back in a way that promotes and validates an authentic Newfoundland identity and being stuck in a romanticized past, preventing change and fostering an inauthentic, artificial identity.

In the introduction to Michael Crummey and Greg Locke’s 2003 photography book, *Newfoundland: A Journey into a Lost Nation*, Crummey addresses the tendency to glorify the past and openly acknowledges the role that this publication plays in the province’s commodification of culture and history. He explains,

'The Past' is big business in Newfoundland these days. St. John's: City of Legends is awash in tourist kitsch: 'Newfie' stories selling Viking memorabilia and plastic sou-wester hats, faux screech-ins at George Street bars, fiddle music blaring from storefronts. People have to eat, I guess, and you give tourists what they want or they stop coming. But there's something about the undertaking that feels unhealthy and dishonest to me. (32)

In this telling account, Crummey shows an acute awareness of the extent to which Newfoundland culture and heritage is bound up in the tourism industry. In his description of popular tourist souvenirs, the words "kitsch", "plastic" and "faux" show how he deems these marketable identity symbols as counterfeit. He denounces these "cultural artifacts" as artificial, but at the same time is sensitive to the need for people to put food on the table, and understands the importance of the revenue that the tourism industry generates for the province. That Crummey sees the system as "unhealthy" and "dishonest" points to the troubling repercussions that peddling artificial products as representative of a Newfoundland identity has on the public, both within and outside of Newfoundland. They are false symbols that "perpetuate the Newfoundland stereotype" (23) and do not contribute productively and honestly to a more inclusive, varied, and honest Newfoundland identity.

Focusing on the title of the book, Crummey confronts the way it seemingly plays into Newfoundland's nostalgia for a lost past, but adds "if it . . . suggests that there's nothing to Newfoundland but nostalgia, however, it does a disservice to the people and the place itself" (32). On the surface, the book is marketed in a way that buys into Newfoundland's nostalgia for a lost past, but is also critically involved in

moving away from this dependency, challenging stereotypical images, and providing alternative representations of Newfoundland. As Crummey explains, some of Locke's photographs "exhibit a deliberate ugliness that exists somewhere beyond the stark beauty most often featured in films and poems and novels set in the province that has become a cliché in itself" (23).

2.1 "Devine's Widow cut him from the belly of a whale . . . they says."

Michael Crummey's third novel, *Galore*, published in 2009 during this current period of "re-emergent nationalism" (Yeoman 8), is a useful example of contemporary Newfoundland literature that is focused on finding and defining an authentic Newfoundland identity. The early reviews or, rather, promotional "praise" published along with the novel, do not stray very far from Chafe's satirical summary of conventional Newfoundland literature: "the setting breeds magic, and the individuals that populate its rugged terrain are nuanced and real, as gentle as they are harsh, as hateful and they are loving" (Grainger, "*Galore*: By Michael Crummey"). The novel is very clearly marketed as a Marquezian chronicle of a remote Newfoundland outpost "rich in folklore, folk songs, curses, spells and superstition" ("Crummey's New Novel"). These promotional reviews also further entrench the position of Newfoundland as a place on the margin: "Newfoundland and Labrador, situated as it is on the far edge of the country, often seems like another world entirely, and that's never been truer than in *Galore*" (Medley, "Strange Stories Galore on The Rock"). The blurbs, some of which are printed on the novel's cover, play on Newfoundland's remote location, folklore, harsh terrain and genuine people in

precisely the same way that Chafe critiques when he writes that “Newfoundland art, literature, and identity are most often packaged by a pervasive and persistent culture industry” (171). *Galore* is marketed as an archetypal Newfoundland story. However, it is not quite the sentimental, idealistic return-to-roots image of the outport promised by reviewers and promulgated by Newfoundland and Labrador Tourism.

While *Galore* does not explicitly tackle key social and political events in Newfoundland’s history, it is integrally concerned with aspects of Newfoundland identity such as the repercussions of (and reactions to) the cod fish moratorium, the limits of the sea as sustainable source of livelihood, ongoing out-migration, unstable economic circumstances, and feelings of marginality. Furthermore, in its use of Newfoundland folklore, *Galore* also explores the relationship that Newfoundland has with its past and with myths that are upheld as “authentic” in popular media, locally produced art, and tourism brochures.

Galore responds to continuing concerns over out-migration² in Newfoundland through the fluctuating population of Paradise Deep. Sons and daughters leave the outport and move to neighboring American cities such as Boston, or make the long journey to England, in search of an easier life. While out-migration is highlighted in the novel in the many grand departures that occur at the

² In recent years, the number of people leaving Newfoundland has risen due to the decrease of economic opportunities since the collapse of the cod fishery: “The 2006 Canadian census documented an 11.08 per cent decrease in the population of Newfoundland and Labrador—approximately 63,000 people—since 1991 (Antle, 2007), the eve of the cod fishery moratorium that halted the economic lifeblood of hundreds of communities” (Yeoman and Kelly 21).

local harbourfront, those that settle in Newfoundland are also emigrants in their own right, often fleeing difficult economic circumstances in England and Ireland. As Michael Cook asserts, “Newfoundland became a place for the dispossessed: from the famines in Ireland, the land enclosures in England, people came, hid, survived” (72). New entrants into the community also come in search of the freedoms that rural life affords. The young doctor Harold Newman left Boston “to avoid the stultification of urban practice, the straitjacket of Connecticut manners and expectations” (148). Paradise Deep is constructed as both a landing-site and point of departure, open (or vulnerable) to “the wider world” (253) of the New England states and of England. Embodying this vulnerability is Anne Hope, wife of wealthy merchant Absalom Sellers, who expresses a constant longing to follow her children to Boston and escape the unrelenting poverty, sickness and illiteracy of Paradise Deep (180).

Folktales and folk knowledge in *Galore* are demonstrated to have a practical, psychological function for those that perform their rituals, believe in their stories and depend on their wisdom. For the people of Paradise Deep, learning about one’s heritage through a local myth and believing that an old tree has healing abilities when all other options fail, are instances where the wisdom and value of folk knowledge are clear. The tales help to tell people who they are and tie them to the land and the community. The belief that Kerrivan’s Tree is a protective talisman brings hope and security during desperate times, even though the belief may only be a fallacy. A central talismanic figure in *Galore* is Judah Devine. “[B]orn out the belly of a whale” (Crummey 313), Judah Devine’s uncanny entry (or re-entry) into the town of Paradise Deep is the first in a string of supernatural incidences that occur

mainly during the first half of the novel. Upon first inspection by the townsfolk, it appears that Judah is of indeterminate age, and “colourless” (3) with “salt-white hair at the crotch” (3) as if he were a product of the ocean itself. Indeed, he is soon nicknamed a “sea orphan” (17). He emits “an astonishing stink of dead fish” (8) and is mute. Judah Devine, like Kerrivan’s tree, is believed to be a protective charm for the sickly young Lazarus, who is the grandson of the witch-figure Devine’s Widow and adoptive brother to Judah Devine. Lazarus is thought to be spiritually connected to Judah. Devine’s Widow senses that “the fate of one rest[ed] with the other” (12). With Lazarus in a hopeless state of ill-health, and without any practical options remaining, the family decides to pass the baby, along with Judah, through the branches of Kerrivan’s tree, an old apple tree used to christen newborns and protect them from disease. The ritual is a success and the baby grows stronger, and “the summer that followed was uncharacteristically warm and dry” (14). Already, there is a sense that Judah’s presence explains things that are out of the townsfolk’s control. In an interview with Beth Carswell, Michael Crummey addresses this reliance on folk belief and practice in Newfoundland: “a lot of superstitions and rituals that became a part of our folklore were adopted to help us feel like we had control over what we in fact had no control over” (Carswell, “Michael Crummey Interview”). These folk beliefs and practices help to assuage feelings of powerlessness or helplessness in the community.

Aside from being understood to have a protective connection with Lazarus, Judah is also thought to bring luck and plenty to the town’s fishermen. In an episode that surely resonates with Newfoundlanders today, the fishermen in the town

lament the decline of cod stocks and have to set out early to travel far in search of them (19), “as far as the Skerries or Monks Ledge or Wester Shoals, where they drifted with hook and line over the gunwhales, waiting” (19). The names of these shoals and islets are adapted from names of actual locations in Newfoundland: “Monk Islet” (Maxwell 149), “The Skerries” (Maxwell 359) and “Western Rock” (Maxwell 67). These names weave Crummey’s narrative in to the geography of Newfoundland, and forge a link between the remote past and the present through the steadfastness of the land. The men reminisce about the old days of plenty: “My Jesus, the cod, the cod, the cod . . . that irresistible undersea current of flesh, there was fish in galore one time” (Crummey 19). These memories of abundance are spoken about with “wistful exaggeration,” becoming folk stories in themselves: “Boats run aground on a school swarming so thick beneath them a man could walk upon the very water but for fear of losing his shoes to the indiscriminate appetite of the fish” (19). This elaborate and humorous tale that the fishermen tell on the barren sea is in this case a form of wish fulfillment.

Initially, the townsfolk blame Judah for the low fish stocks (22), and in their anger they form an armed mob designed to “make away with” (22) him. This attitude is reversed, however, when Judah is found the following day aboard the men’s fishing boat and hauls a supernatural amount of squid aboard. This begins a period of plenty in the community that is credited to Judah, and he becomes a savior figure, admirably named “the Great White” or “St. Jude” (28). This lasts for a time, but Judah’s role in the new period of prosperity is soon downplayed and sinks to the status of pure superstition: “each season saw Judah’s status dwindle slightly in the

minds of fishermen who preferred to think their success the result of their own cunning and skill and hard work” (51). The community’s conditional treatment of Judah, first as a protective charm for baby Lazarus, then as a scapegoat, then as a savior, and then as a fallacy, shows that his story is only needed if it can be used to explain the inexplicable or control the uncontrollable. During this period of economic success, the story of Judah’s origin is relegated to myth because it is not necessary or functional. This shows that the community’s reliance on (or disavowal of) stories, ritual, magic and superstition is a reflection of particular social and economic conditions. The story thread of Judah in *Galore*, specifically how the community either celebrates or shuns him, remembers or forgets him, according to their current social and economic state, works as a metaphor for Newfoundland’s relationship to its own folklore. As Gerald Pocius says:

Nations have turned to folklore in periods of both inferiority and superiority. The inferiority complexes that certain countries have experienced led to an interest in folklore, items perceived to be in need of both documentation and celebration. (40)

In *Galore*, the community’s treatment of Judah as a folkloric figure is dependent on these periods of inferiority and superiority. Looking at *Galore* within its broader context, Crummey may be pointing to how the image of Newfoundland as a place of magic and myth is not driven by a nostalgic longing for a mystical past, but by the practical and psychological function that such myths have for people, and the role that they play in nation-building processes. The community’s reliance on the folk ritual of Kerrivan’s Tree and the folk figure Judah Devine demonstrates in a broader

sense how folktales either lose or gain prominence depending on how prosperous and powerful people feel.

Folktales have an identity-forming function in *Galore*. This can best be seen in the story thread of Abel Devine and his search for identity that results in the supernatural transformation that concludes the novel. In the second half of *Galore*, which sees the arrival of a medical doctor from Boston, the unionization of the fisheries, the establishment of a school, and the realities of the onset of WWI, the magical and superstitious elements of the first half become only distant memory or myth. In a conversation with the new doctor, Eli Devine explains: “Devine’s Widow cut him from the belly of a whale with a fish knife, they says. Jude come out of it as naked as a fish.” To which Dr. Newman responds, “And you believe that, do you?” (155). Judah’s uncanny entry into the community, along with his entire existence, has been relegated to legend as the modern world of science, reason and rising industry encroaches on Paradise Deep. The consequence of this shift within *Galore* is that Abel Devine, part of the sixth generation to inhabit the shore, undergoes a crisis of identity. He asks his father:

—Did you ever know Judah Devine?

Eli sat back in his chair. —When I was a youngster. I hardly remember a thing about him.

—Esther says he was born out of the belly of a whale. And stunk like dead fish.

—Esther, Eli said and sighed. —You know Esther isn’t a well woman, Abel. (313)

In this interaction, Abel attempts to find out more about his origins and perhaps explain the stink of fish that still lingers on him. As Crummey observes, "So what we have at the end of the novel is a man who's . . . lost himself. He doesn't know where he came from, who he is" (Sugars 6). Abel's feelings of loss and his personal attempt at a "return to roots" echoes the state of Newfoundland as a province post-confederation, and mirrors the kind of work done during a period of cultural revival that has persisted in some form until today. This "return to roots" expresses nostalgia for a lost past, and implies that this past is the source of Abel's true identity. Recalling Bannister's critique of Newfoundland's tendency to treat the traditional as authentic and the modern as counterfeit (180), the story of Abel's nostalgic search for identity similarly prioritizes myth over modernity. Paul Chafe observes that for Newfoundland writers such as Sandra Gwyn, "Newfoundland modernism and Newfoundland mystique cannot meet. The essence of Newfoundland authenticity is in its juxtaposition to the modern, mechanical world" (172). Myth and modernity are in this way treated as antithetical, rather than as different ways of making sense of the world. So, is Crummey perpetuating this artificial distinction or his is stance more ambivalent and self-aware?

To answer this, it is useful to analyze the dramatic culmination of Abel's search for identity that is also the conclusion of the novel. Significantly, Part II of *Galore* ends with a definitive return to the marvelous. Abel, in the search for his own identity, transforms into Judah and answers the question of how he ended up in the belly of a whale. The legend of Judah and the whale is summoned to life:

The whale came full into the open air a second time and a third, it almost seemed to be calling his attention. And something in that detail turned like a key in a lock, a story spiraling out of the ocean's endless green and black to claim him. (333)

Here, the whale is the embodiment of the story of Abel's past and thus of the discovery of his lost identity. As Crummey explains, "What comes back to tell him who he is are those stories that he's been told about the people that came before him" (Sugars 6). Here, Crummey maintains that the stories about Abel's lineage create and confirm his identity. In this reading, Abel finds what he was searching for and is in this sense saved by the whale. But the whale, as a symbol of the past, also consumes him. The image of the key turning in a lock can similarly be interpreted in two ways. In one reading, the turning key unlocks a closed door. This allows Abel access to the past. But the recurring pattern of the cresting whale and the image of a key turning in a lock also suggest that Abel becomes stuck in an endless cycle, or trapped behind a locked door. Indeed, the novel ends precisely where it began, and Abel is fated to relive Judah's story and the story of *Galore*. Abel's return to the past means that he has no future of his own. That he transforms into Judah means that he has no identity of his own either. The novel circles back to the beginning, fated to repeat itself endlessly. The symbolic ending of *Galore* suggests that Crummey is conscious of the problems inherent in processes of cultural retrieval, and the tale of Abel Devine and the Whale is therefore a cautionary one. Crummey shows that abandoning the past causes amnesia, but living in the past is another form of imprisonment. In this way, Crummey challenges the perceived idea that an

authentic Newfoundland identity can and should be found only in juxtaposition to modernity. *Galore* is advocating for Newfoundlanders to loosen their grip on the past, but not to let go completely. This reiterates the heart of Leslie Harris' warning, "to deny change is foolish" but "we should not forget" (11).

The image of a place trapped in the past is explored further in a scene where Eli Devine walks alone along the shore after a wedding party:

Eli listened outside awhile but heard only the ancient sish of ocean on the landwash. The progress of time barely registered on the shore, he thought, circling on itself like that endless conversation of water and stone. They were bearing down on a new century and everyone Eli knew was still sleepwalking through the Middle Ages. All of them lost to the larger world no less than Judah was, shut away behind an unlocked door, scribbling nonsense on the walls. (247)

Like the cresting whale, Eli describes the movement of time in *Paradise Deep* as circling and endless, not moving forward or impacting his environment. The sea becomes a symbol of a primordial time in the sound of "the ancient sish of ocean" and its "circling" movement is an impediment to progress. Eli feels that the world is moving forward and fears that they will be left behind, or "lost". In this sense, his fear is not of losing the past, but of becoming lost because of remaining in the past. The lock motif recurs, but in this scene the door is unlocked. The impact of this is significant as it implies that the community is able to pass through the doorway into "the larger world" but either chooses not to or is unaware that they can. They are not truly locked behind anything. The use of "sleepwalking" here further displays

this lethargic state of mind. The act of “scribbling nonsense on the walls” is purposeless, unproductive and without meaning. Eli’s frustrated description of the circling movement of time and his criticism of the passivity of the community can be read as another way in which the novel is concerned with the disadvantages of dwelling too much in the past. In this way, Crummey is in conversation with those Newfoundland intellectuals who are calling for the public to more readily accept change, and challenge the “artificial distinction” (Bannister 181) that sees the authentic Newfoundland identity as being found only in opposition to modernity.

In the personal and autobiographical introduction to *Newfoundland: Journey into a Lost Nation*, Crummey talks about leaving Newfoundland and returning after more than ten years to what felt like a different place:

The Newfoundland I came home to is different from the one I carried with me when I was away. Not less itself, but more varied, more expansive. A culture deep enough to accommodate a world of influences without surrendering what makes it unmistakably of this place. Something alive and leaning towards the future. (33)

This is a decidedly more positive and forward-looking perspective of the province, showing that an inclusive, yet still distinctive, Newfoundland identity is being formed. While *Galore* is marketed as a folkloric, return-to-roots epic that can be criticized as buying in to archetypal, nostalgic Newfoundland literature, it is also aware of and involved in the critical conversation surrounding such literature’s longing for a lost past and the stultifying effects that this nostalgia has on efforts to

represent a more complicated and closer-to-life contemporary Newfoundland identity.

CHAPTER THREE: Myth making and Manifestations of Fish in *Gould's Book of Fish*

While *Galore* continues much of the identity-building work that was started during the cultural renaissance in Newfoundland during the '70s and '80s, using regional myths to create a narrative that retells "the entire story of Newfoundland" (Fitzpatrick, "A Certain Uncertainty"), Richard Flanagan's *Gould's Book of Fish* is skeptical of all regional and historical myth-making used to shape a collective identity in Tasmania. *Gould's Book of Fish* is reluctant to promote the possibility of any "unifying" Australian narratives and instead exposes them as useless fictions. For example, *The Australian Legend*, written by the prominent Australian historian, Russell Ward, is an attempt "to provide Australians with a self-sufficient national myth" (Curran and Ward 60) that would fill the cultural "vacancy" (19) left at the heart of post-imperial Australia. But even the popular Australian bush myth is found to be insufficient in *Gould's Book of Fish*, as the famous Tasmanian bushranger-hero, Matt Brady, is characterized as notoriously elusive and unreliable. Moreover, Flanagan does not supplant the bush myth with another. The hero of *Gould's Book of Fish* is instead unscrupulous, indefinable and completely unreliable. Flanagan's novel does not take up the task of defining an official Tasmanian identity using celebrated traditions, local folklore or regional history, nor does it attempt to provide a comforting foundational narrative on which to rest contemporary notions of Tasmanian identity. Tasmanian history in *Gould's Book of Fish* is not sanitized of its ignominious beginnings, nor is it retold as a tale of optimism to bolster community spirit and national sentiment, and it does not adhere to any "neat" and "tidy" (White viii) concept of national identity. Rather, *Gould's Book of Fish* finds that

such efforts can only be founded on lies, omissions, and misrepresentations, and are limiting and counter-productive ways of understanding Tasmanian identity in the present. Before exploring how *Gould's Book of Fish* critiques the way that history is written, it is first useful to look back on selected moments in Australian history that show how myths are made, who these myths serve, how national narratives are constructed, and how these narratives are put to use.

3.1 “They’ve all been making the place up”: Myth-making in Australian History

In 1770, English naval Captain James Cook sailed the eastern coast of Australia and named it New South Wales, claiming possession of it in the name of his monarch (Macintyre 1). Twenty years later the British government sent eleven ships from Portsmouth, England, to settle New South Wales. On the 26th of January 1788, 1066 people landed in Sydney Cove and their commander, Captain Arthur Philip, hoisted the British flag, taking formal possession of the new colony (17). Britain’s decision to establish a colony in Australia was motivated by the recent loss of their North American colonies where the British had been transporting convicts for most of the eighteenth century (30). The reasons for choosing to establish a penal colony in Botany Bay have been “keenly debated” (30) with one side of the argument holding that “Australia was settled as a dumping-ground for convicts” (31) and the other preferring to see the strategic advantages of the continent, including the opportunity to resume whaling after the loss of Nantucket, and the prospective commodities of timber and flax which were needed for ship-building

(30).³ Whatever the leading motivation, the colony was founded predominantly by convicts and “four companies of marines” sent along to control them under military law (31). This is the official history of the founding of Australia as a British colony, but the history of Australia does not begin with its colonial occupation. It is, rather, “the story of the second settlement” (17). The story of the first human habitation in Australia is less certain, and even that would only mark the beginning of an anthropocentric version of Australia’s history.

Another version of the settler story is one of intrusion, appropriation and dispossession. Stuart Macintyre writes, “The British authorities took possession of New South Wales according to the doctrine, derived from international law, that it was *terra nullius*, land belonging to nobody” (34). In Cook’s initial survey of the east coast, he estimated that “the Aborigines were few in number, mere nomadic inhabitants rather than proprietors” (34). Cook’s judgment that the inhabitants were living “in a state of nature without government, law or property,” worked in favour of the British government because, according to legal doctrine, possession of the land therefore “required no treaty or act of purchase from the inhabitants” (34). This misreading, or myth, was used to justify the usurpation of the land and expropriation of its people. However, there were around 3000 Aborigines⁴ living in the land around Port Jackson, and it soon became clear that they had “social organization, settled localities, customary law and property rights” (34). The

³ Botany Bay was situated “on the blind side of the Dutch East Indies . . . and could provide a naval base for British expansion into the Asia-Pacific region” (Macintyre 30).

⁴ Recent estimates suggest that there were around 750,000 people living in Australia in 1788 (Macintyre 14).

usurpation of Aboriginal territory by British authorities resulted in conflicts over land, resources, and tradition. Soon, these conflicts escalated into violence, and firearms gave the settlers a “lethal advantage” (33) over the Aborigines. As Stuart Macintyre outlines, “as early as 1795 a military expedition was sent from Sydney to kill the natives and hang them from the gibbets” (40). In just the first few years of British occupation, the Aboriginal population saw their sacred rights violated, their habitat destroyed, and their communities ravaged by diseases introduced by the settlers (35).⁵

The myth of Australia as *terra nullius* was used to claim New South Wales in the name of the Crown without needing a formal treaty, but once penal transportation ended, the British settlers “needed some broad ideological rationale for coming to Australia and taking possession of its productive capacities” (Melleuish and Stokes 112). The rationale they used to justify such extraordinary racial conflict was based on the recent and popular ideas of Social Darwinism, which Richard White defines as a “misapplication” (68) of Charles Darwin’s theory of

⁵ Robert Hughes, in his epic study *The Fatal Shore*, explains that even though the first governor of the fledgling colony, Governor Philips, had been given instruction to “‘conciliate their affections, enjoining all our subjects to live in amity and kindness with them,’ and punish anyone who harmed them,” cholera and influenza germs from the ships nevertheless “destroyed them”, and “by 1789 black corpses were a common sight” (91). Macintyre also cites an epidemic of smallpox that “swept the Aboriginal people of the region within a year of the European arrival” (33). However, the implication here should not be that European pathogens were the only cause of the devastation of the Aboriginal population in Australia. As Stuart Macintyre outlines, “It required a substantial European effort to subdue the indigenous peoples of the regions of settlement, and no less an effort to justify their expropriation” (21). So, while disease did claim many lives, one should not overlook the extreme violence and discrimination that aided the decline of the Aboriginal population.

natural selection as introduced in his 1859 publication, *The Origin of Species*. This theory proposed that “if a species did not adapt successfully, it was liable to become extinct” (68). Indigenous people were seen as lesser humans, racially inferior, weaker, or “lower in the scale of humanity than those found in the British Empire” (Melleuish and Stokes 113) and through the misuse of Darwin’s theory, the British settlers had a justification for the violence inflicted on the indigenous population. As Richard White explains, “[these ideas] provided a comforting, seemingly scientific explanation for the actual destruction of Aboriginal society” (69). This “comforting” fiction was therefore a powerful tool of oppression that suited the colonial endeavor. Robert Hughes called it “one of the chief myths of early colonial history,” and noted that it continued to be taught in schools up to the 1960s (7). It became an official myth used to explain away the ethical injustices that facilitated the establishment of Australia as it is today.

Tasmania, first known as Van Diemen’s Land, was settled in 1803 (Macintyre 37). Like the early years in New South Wales, conflicts broke out between the settlers and the Aboriginal people over scarcity of resources. These conflicts soon became what Robert Hughes describes as a “seemingly unfinishable guerrilla war” that “[dragged] on between whites and blacks for two decades” (414). Unlike the conflict in early New South Wales, the war in Tasmania was explicitly genocidal. According to Hughes’ estimations there were four thousand Aborigines in Van Diemen’s Land when the settlers arrived (414), and by 1830 there were “perhaps two thousand Aborigines left alive” (419). After Lieutenant-Governor Arthur’s 1830 scheme, the Black Line failed, he commissioned a local tradesman, George Robinson,

“to round up the remaining Aborigines” in what he intended to be a “friendly mission” (Macintyre 67).⁶ Throughout the next four years, Robinson “conciliated and captured the last defiant Aborigines and placed them on Flinders Island⁷, in Bass Strait, where their numbers declined until the survivors were returned to a reserve near Hobart in 1847” (68). There, the Aboriginal population dwindled to only a few. Hughes cites the 1855 “census of natives” as being only “three men, two boys and eleven women” (423). The last of them, a woman named Trucanini, passed away in 1876 (424). But the occupation of Tasmania was not simply a story of the genocide of the Tasmanian Aborigines; it was also a site of a cruel and unmerciful penal system where the colonizers were also convicts living in exile, prisoners in Britain’s most feared penal settlement.

Van Diemen’s Land was where convicts on the mainland were sent as punishment for second offences, and there they were subject to the gravest penalties. As Macintyre outlines, a prisoner who broke the rules was first subjected to “flogging or confinement, then consignment to public works or the chain gang, and finally secondary transportation to one of the special penal settlements set well

⁶ Lieutenant-Governor Arthur, governor of Van Diemen’s Land from 1824 to 1837 (Hughes 414), set in motion an operation that intended to “expel the aboriginal tribes from settled areas of the island” (420), by assembling “every white man in Van Diemen’s Land” (armed with a thousand muskets and 300 pairs of handcuffs), and driving the Aborigines through a bottle neck in the peninsula, “where they could be kept imprisoned forever” (420). This operation ultimately failed and is now recognized as a “fiasco” (421).

⁷ Robert Hughes saw Flinders Island as “a benign concentration camp” (423). Here, an attempt was made to Europeanize the Aborigines by giving them “clothes, new names, Bibles and elementary school teaching” (423). However, many of them died from disease and in 1835 only 150 Aborigines were left alive (423). After Robinson left the island in 1839, his successors treated it as a prison and by 1843 there were only fifty-four Tasmanian Aborigines alive (423).

away from civilization” (71). Exiles were exiled once more to the Van Diemonian penal institutions of Port Macquarie, Moreton Bay, Macquarie Harbour, Port Arthur and Norfolk Island (71). The punishment for any transgression committed by a convict in these secondary settlements was, as Hughes outlines, “one of prolonged and hideous torture” (114). A common and severe punishment was flogging: “A sentence of 200 lashes was called a ‘feeler;’ one did not forget it” (115). Another favoured punishment, as detailed by a head jailer on Norfolk Island, “was to make the leg irons more small each month so that they would pinch the flesh” (115). Convicts were also sentenced to time in a “black isolation cell” or “a water pit below the ground where prisoners would be locked, alone, naked, and unable to sleep for fear of drowning, for forty-eight hours at a spell” (115). Other summary punishments carried such nightmarish names as the “tube-gag,” the “spread-eagle,” and the “scavenger’s daughter” (535). Van Diemen’s Land was both a site of violent conflict between the settlers and the Aboriginal population, and a dehumanizing penal system.

In Britain, convicts were regarded as occupying the lowest position in the British class hierarchy. As White explains, “The lowest element of British society was to be cast out among the lowest form of human life; unnatural vice was to be exiled as far from home as possible, where nature itself was inverted and nakedness knew no shame” (White 16). Australia and its inhabitants were perceived as backwards and primitive: a fitting place to send Britain’s less-than-human convicts. These were the people that formed the majority of Captain Arthur Philip’s convoy. The British settler in the story of the colonization of Australia was at the same time

an abused member of British under-class living in exile and captivity. The oppressor was simultaneously oppressed. These early settlers did not arrive by choice, and this is what sets Australia apart from Britain's other colonies. However, in Australia up until the 1970s, this convict heritage was largely ignored (Hughes xi). Indeed, as Hughes describes, "the desire to forget about our felon origins began with the origins themselves. To call a convict a convict in early colonial Australia was an insult certain to raise colonial hackles" (xi). Australia's society ultimately "emerge[d] from the penal settlements" (White 22) and their convict history was a shared national shame known as the "convict stain." As White explains, even after transportation ended in 1868, "the common view was once a convict, always a convict: it was a stain that would never be removed" (22). Similarly, Hughes saw the idea of the convict stain as "a moral blot soaked into our fabric" (xi). It was also commonly assumed that the convict stain, or "bad character," could be inherited through a bloodline (22). What ultimately happened, then, was that a convict heritage "was often hidden" to the extent that "families developed fictional family trees" (Tranter and Donoghue 556). Australians censored the past and invented new personal histories. Attitudes toward Australia's convict heritage did eventually change, as notions about what it meant to be an Australian were brought to the fore. Where it was once a history to be ashamed of, having convict ancestry became a claim of "authentic" Australian identity.

The British landing at Sydney Cove in New South Wales was celebrated as "the formative moment of a new nation" and the events of Australia's colonial beginnings were re-enacted as Australia Day on the anniversary of the First Fleet's

landing, January 26 (Macintyre 18). The first official Australia Day was celebrated in 1935, although it wasn't until 1994 that it was celebrated consistently as a public holiday (Kwan, "Australia Day"). As a significant national day that is conscious of its role in representing a shared Australian identity, the disputation around Australia Day (in particular the bicentennial year of 1988) shows a nation struggling to come to terms with its past, and questioning how and to what extent the past should be used to inform a collective identity in the present. During the 1888 centenary of British settlement, the official celebrations were criticized for "sanitizing the past of convicts who made up the majority of Phillip's party" (Macintyre 18). As this objection shows, efforts were made by the organisers of the official proceedings to tell the story of the 1788 landing without including this significant element of Australia's history. In other words, the representation of the founding of colonial Australia was turned into a comforting fiction to hide a national shame.

The commemoration of Australia Day on the anniversary of the 1788 Landing has also historically drawn protest from Aboriginal peoples, who do not view the British occupation of Australia as cause to celebrate, nor recognize January 26th, 1788 as the formative year of their nation or the beginning of their story. As Paula Hamilton suggests, "One of the most powerful myths that dominates the Australian historical landscape is that this is a new country; and that we have such a *short history*" (13). In addition to perpetuating the myth that Australia was a new country, Australia Day did not adequately acknowledge the dispossession of the Australian Aborigines in its official ceremonies (Curran and Ward 208). In 1938, "Aboriginal critics boycotted the reenactment of the landing and declared 26

January a day of Protest and Mourning” (Macintyre 18). This was a rejection of another comforting foundational myth that “sanitiz[ed]” (18) the past of suffering. On Australia day in 1970, “Prominent Aboriginal activists Kath Walker, Faith Bandler and local Aboriginal residents threw wreaths into the ocean, to be carried by the tide towards the Cook landing site” (208). The wreaths stood in for (and paid respect to) the dead: the part of the official reenactment that was omitted. Protests became more and more prominent during the ‘70s (209), and in 1988, the Australian bicentenary would be remembered “primarily for the prominence of the nationwide Indigenous protests” (222). The protests were in response to a disingenuous and “sanitizing” reenactment of history that had repeatedly glorified colonial occupation and turned it into a public spectacle to encourage a feeling of national pride and belonging, and to mark two hundred years of European settlement in Australia.

An editorial in the *Australian* expressed the conflicting reactions to the bicentenary, noting that while “White Australians celebrated their 200th birthday yesterday at Sydney’s Kurnell—many black Australians mourned it as a death” (209). But the bicentennial of 1988 was also the first year that government decided not to fund the reenactment of the landing of the first fleet.⁸ The ABA (Australian Bicentennial Authority) was “keen to stress that the year would ‘represent much more than the anniversary of this event’. It would celebrate ‘all the people who have settled in this land over many thousands of years’” (234). This marked a change in

⁸ Consequently, Coca-Cola funded the 1988 re-enactment, and a ship that was meant to model a vessel from 1788 carried the company’s logo across its mainsail (Curran and Ward 235).

the way the story of Australia was told on a national scale. The ABA's decision not to endorse the reenactment of the British landing meant that Australian history was being revised, and their national day would aim to celebrate more than just the 200 years since colonial occupation.

The official decommissioning of the reenactment of Cook's landing on Australia Day was part of a much larger debate that was taking place about finding a coherent national identity. With the focus of Australia Day no longer being on commemorating the country's imperial origins, the meaning of 26th of January as a national day had to be re-examined. What part of the country's history could be used (or what story could be constructed) to unite the nation and encourage participation on this official occasion? Indeed, the attempt to find and define an authentic or archetypal national identity after the nation's "British-centered past no longer served the needs of the present" (Curran and Ward 225) became what has often been referred to as "a national obsession" (White viii). James Curran and Stuart Ward, in a provocative account of Australia's prolonged search for identity in the wake of the British Empire, write:

The events of the crucial decades of the 1960s and 1970s continued to reverberate into the 1980s and beyond, as governments, intellectuals, artists, historians and commentators wrestled with the question of what constituted a usable national past. The problem of defining and elaborating a coherent, cohesive Australian 'identity' would re-emerge, time and time again, during major national celebrations and commemorations. (224)

As I argued in the previous chapter, in Newfoundland during the '70s and '80s there was a similar resurgence of intense national sentiment known as the Newfoundland Renaissance. During this period, artists, scholars, and other cultural commentators, looked to local folklore for markers of a distinct Newfoundland identity. They reflected on and reproduced a romanticized version of the lost outport way of life in art, literature, tourist curios, heritage sites, and popular songs, and rekindled old-world traditions that connected them through a shared history. This was the “usable past” they felt defined them against the rest of Canada and their American neighbours after confederation in 1949, and after the gradual collapse of a longstanding economy based on small-scale fishing. While a “unique” and “distinctive” Newfoundland identity is still being marketed in this way, it is evolving into a more complex and inclusive idea, and the province’s artists, intellectuals and identity-makers (not to mention the public at large) are more self-aware about how their history is used and how stereotypes are perpetuated.

What happened at this “crucial” time in Australia is decidedly different to the Newfoundland predicament in that it wasn’t as easy to find the appropriate content from the past (factual or folkloric) to inform a “coherent, cohesive Australian ‘identity’” (Curran and Ward 224) in the present. It is then understandable that during the 1970s,

Australian scholars had begun to write and lecture routinely about ‘defining’ and ‘discovering’ a national identity. New titles appeared with ‘identity’ coupled with ‘search’, ‘quest’, and ‘going it alone’ implying that Australian identity was anything but ‘settled’. (19)

More recent titles suggest that the incessant debate is not over, with Richard White's, *Inventing Australia: Images and Identity 1688-1980* (1981); Paul Carter's classic, *The Road to Botany Bay: An Exploration of Landscape and History* (1987); Wayne Hudson and Geoffrey Bolton's, *Creating Australia: Changing Australian History* (1997); James Curran and Stuart Ward's, *The Unknown Nation: Australia After Empire* (2010); and Judith Ryan and Chris Wallace-Crabbe's, *Imagining Australia: Literature and Culture in the New New World* (2004). As these titles suggest, the question may no longer solely be about 'discovering' a national identity, but about the very need to invent a unifying and "typical" national identity. The words "inventing" and "creating" also express rising suspicions about the inherently constructed, mythological and limiting nature of any archetypal national identity or unifying version of history. Published a year before Benedict Anderson's seminal text *Imagined Communities*, White's *Inventing Australia* states,

There is no 'real' Australia waiting to be uncovered. A national identity is an invention. There is no point asking whether one version of this essential Australia is truer than another because they are all intellectual constructs, neat, tidy, comprehensible—and necessarily false. They have all been artificially imposed upon a diverse landscape and population, and a variety of untidy social relationships, attitudes and emotions. When we look at ideas about national identity, we need to ask, not whether they are true or false, but what their function is, whose creation they are, and whose interests they are. (viii)

Here, White is debunking the myth of the “authentic” or “real” Australian identity that has been so frantically searched for. He recognizes that there are many versions of the Australian story, and that the Australian people are too varied for any one narrative or any one “type” that will provide a steadfast foundation for a shared national identity. The idea that “social relationships, attitudes and emotions” are “untidy” is more accurate than any “neat” and “tidy” idea of identity. For White, there is no easy definition or essentialized account of what it means to be Australian. People and their histories are too messy and unknowable to be captured and classified. It seems, then, that the idea of distinctive national spirit founded on a shared history, memory, or folk story, is a powerful and dangerous conceit.

3.2 “My fish will free me & I shall flee with them”

Richard Flanagan’s *Gould’s Book of Fish* begins in present-day Hobart, Tasmania, and is narrated by a self-professed liar and forger, Sid Hammet. Sid’s account becomes a frame narrative for the principal narrator, William Buelow Gould, whose own story takes place in early nineteenth-century Tasmania in a British penal colony on Sarah Island. But the distinction between the two narrators and the two time-periods become increasingly blurred and uncertain. Sid Hammet, who is in the business of buying “old pieces of rotting furniture” (4), distressing them, and selling them to American tourists as authentic Australian antiques, finds what appears to be a relic from the past in a junk shop in Salamanca: the mysterious *Book of Fish*. The book seems to be written by a convict called William Buelow Gould in the manner of a journal, and in a “rainbow” (15) of colours, with its “hodgepodge”

(13) text accompanied by watercolour paintings of fish. Sid soon becomes enchanted by its bizarre contents and glowing cover, and once the book mysteriously dissolves into a “large, brackish puddle” (25), he resolves to rewrite the *Book of Fish* from “from memories, good and bad, reliable, and unreliable” (28), but not before he magically metamorphoses into a weedy seadragon, leaving William Buelow Gould to tell his tale. What follows is a strange retelling of Gould’s journal, and this becomes the primary narrative of the remainder of the novel, and concludes Sid Hammet’s framing story. Already, through the interest in fakes, forgery and unreliable retellings, there is a pervasive sense that the story we are reading and the novel we are holding are intent on undermining the dependability of personal, historical, and national narratives.

The appearance of the *Book of Fish* within the novel is mirrored in the physical novel itself, as each chapter is printed in ink of a different colour and set apart by watercolour paintings of fish.⁹ The characters within the novel also partially mirror real historical figures; even its protagonist, William Gould, is based on an historical convict of the same name. In an interview with Richard Flanagan for the CBC, Eleanor Wachtel asked about the use of this historical figure, to which Flanagan replied, “His life is fascinating, but it is completely different to the lies I made up about it” (Writers and Company). The fictional characters rarely retain anything more than the historical name, occupation and reputation of their

⁹ The 2001 Grove Press (New York) publication is printed in colour as Richard Flanagan intended. As Ashley Rose Whitmore explains, “The addition of coloured ink was a very definite and intentional choice of Flanagan’s to best replicate Gould’s narrative” (8).

historical counterparts. In this way, Flanagan's novel plays freely with the historical record, showing that he is not concerned with giving an historically accurate account of Tasmania's colonial past. The novel's stylistic excessiveness is another way in which Flanagan constantly reminds the reader that this account is the product of imagination. *Gould's Book of Fish*, in its colonial setting and themes, is in some ways an historical novel, but Flanagan is reluctant to accede that his novel is so easily classifiable: "I don't like historical novels. I wanted to write an anti-historical novel" (Writers and Company). This unclear division between characters, time periods, fiction and reality, is a central concern of *Gould's Book of Fish*. As Robert MacFarlane argues, "Flanagan has written a book whose uniqueness mirrors its principal theme – the dangers of classification" ("Con Fishing"). The novel's underlying critique of classification, capturing, and labeling is concerned with how official narratives (on a personal, spiritual, or national scale) are only myths or half-truths used to justify or whitewash over the injustices of the past for the benefit of those in power.

To define or classify is, for Gould, to be imprisoned. As Gould explains, "definitions belong to the definer, not the defined, & I no longer wished to have my life & death foretold by others. I had endured too much to be reduced to an idea" (338). *Gould's Book of Fish* is an epic account of one convict's attempt to escape both the violence and confines of his island prison, as well as the prison of the official narrative of history. Gould manages to find freedom through his watercolour paintings of fish, seeing fish in people, telling his story using fish, and eventually metamorphosing into a fish, thus escaping his identity as a man, a forger, an artist, a

father, a convict, a murderer, and a colonizer. Similarly, it is through Flanagan's use of fish in *Gould's Book of Fish* that the novel itself is freed from easy classification. Gould defends himself and his work from "the criticasters" who "diminish me with their definitions" (92). Gould says,

The criticasters will say I am this small thing & my pictures that irrelevant thing . . . They will try to define me . . . trying to trap me in some new tribe of their own invention & definition. But I am William Buelow Gould, party of one, undefinable, & my fish will free me & I shall flee with them. (93)

Fish are the central motif in *Gould's Book of Fish*. This is apparent just by looking at how the novel is packaged and structured: fish swim on the cover, watercolour paintings of fish begin each chapter, and names of fish form the titles of each of the twelve chapters. In the novel, Gould even uses the bodies and pigments of fish to create his *Book of Fish*. He explains that he is "seeking to tell a story of fish using fish to tell it in every which way, even down to the sharkbone quill & the very sepia ink with which I write these words" (127).

Flanagan takes on themes that are prevalent in many contemporary Australian novels, including the brutality of Australia's colonial past, the injustices and lasting legacy of the penal system, the fraudulence of official documents, the tendency to imitate European culture, the creation of false identities, the commodification of Australian culture, and the celebration of national folk-heroes such as the bushranger. But what sets this novel apart from other notable Australian

novels that explore similar themes¹⁰ is its fixation with fish. Only a handful of scholars have published on *Gould's Book of Fish*, and they have paid surprisingly little attention to the presence of fish in the novel. For critics to overlook this essential motif is evidence of how successfully it works within the novel. As I have argued, the way fish are presented is Gould's way of escaping definition and confinement. The novel is conscious of the reader's attempts to understand how the fish theme works, to capture the fish. But Flanagan does not make this easy. At the start of his story Gould admits, "I know I ought to make it clear from the beginning why I have come to be painting fish, & why the fish paintings came to be of such importance to me, but really, nothing is clear to me any more, & the whole matter seems beyond comprehension, far less explanation" (45). Gould cannot explain his own impulses toward fish, and it is through their inexplicability that they maintain their freedom.

Ashley Rose Whitmore, in her article "Reconfigurations of History and Embodying Books in *Gould's Book of Fish*," interrogates the written word in the novel by examining the different versions and incarnations of texts within the novel. Whitmore looks at how Gould's story "has changed through the written word as it has constantly been re-imagined, recreated, and rewritten again and again" (6). She argues that Flanagan's novel is "unique" in that it is as elusive as an oral tale (6) in support of her broader argument that the novel "traces the construction and forgery of history" (4). She does point out that "the content of *Gould's Book of Fish* is as slippery as the creatures themselves" (1), though her focus here is not on fish, but

¹⁰ Some examples of Australian novels that address these themes are Peter Carey's *Oscar and Lucinda*, *Illywhacker*, *My Life as a Fake* and *The True History of the Kelly Gang*; Matthew Kneale's *English Passengers*; and David Malouf's *Remembering Babylon* and *The Conversations at Curlow Creek*.

on how the text is made to “ebb and flow” and “elude such a solid embodiment” (2) to show that “true history . . . is not something that can be grasped easily” (2). Jo Jones takes a similar approach in her article “‘Dancing the Old Enlightenment’: *Gould’s Book of Fish*, the Historical Novel and the Postmodern Sublime.” Jones looks at Flanagan’s novel as “a self-conscious subversion of the classical historical novel” (115), and at how its postmodernism works to “reject” the Enlightenment narrative of history as a linear narrative of causation and progress (115). Like Whitmore, Jones explores the role of books in the novel, but extends her reading to include other examples of physicality. She looks specifically at “bodily experience” (116), such as evidence of extreme violence inflicted on bodies and bones, as well as sex and dancing. Jones argues, “*Gould’s Book of Fish* is an effective instance of storytelling that is necessarily self-referential, fragmented, anti-realist, ironic but grounded in ‘the real’ through the body” (128). Like Whitmore, Jones also argues that Gould’s book “shift[s] in a way that resembles the surface of the sea,” but does not mention fish in the novel in any other way.

Xavier Pons looks at fish insofar as they lend a surreal quality to the novel that moves it away from a historical account into a fictional one: “Recounting history in the guise of fish, that is to say metaphorically or allegorically, is a novelist’s ambition rather than a historian’s” (176). His two articles “‘This Sad Pastiche’: Texts and Contexts in Richard Flanagan’s *Gould’s Book of Fish*” and “The Authority of Words: History and Fiction in Richard Flanagan’s *Gould’s Book of Fish*” take on much of the same work. Pons examines the intersections in the novel between the historical record and the novelist’s imaginative and subversive use of it. He argues

that while Flanagan relies heavily on the historical context, his purpose is not to imitate or reproduce history, but to be a “reinvention of history through the imagination to reveal a dimension of reality that eludes linear narratives” (75). Pons looks specifically at the subject of fakes in the novel, and how its circular narrative is evidence of Flanagan’s project to show that the past is “very much alive in the present” (182). While he recognizes that “fish are of course the recurrent obsession that holds the novel together” (75) there is no further attempt to elucidate their meaning.

Jesse Shipway’s “Wishing for Modernity: Temporality and Desire in *Gould’s Book of Fish*” takes a more outlandish approach to the novel, arguing that it is a revisionist project that sees the Tasmanian present as “impoverished” and existing in a state of “failed modernity” (43). Shipway sees the novel as “return[ing] to the time of Tasmania’s *first* modernity in order to realise the hopes and ambitions for another modernity that is yet to come” (44). In other words, Flanagan’s “fictional past” becomes “the alternative future for a non-fictional present” (44). For Shipway, Tasmania’s “*first* modernity” is represented in the Commandant’s project to build a railway and turn Sarah Island into a new Venice (Flanagan 401). Shipway looks specifically at “railway fever” in the novel, as well as Flanagan’s environmentalist agenda concerning logging and hydro-electrification, and concerns over depopulation. Shipway’s argument sees Flanagan’s novel as consciously going back to erase the past and build a new one in what is ultimately a wish-fulfillment project (he even quotes Freud). Flanagan’s task is definitely not to “[re-imagine] his beloved island home” so that the “fictional colonial modernity of the island becomes the

object for cathexis, the investment of intense emotional significance and energy” (45), considering that the novel is largely intent on revealing the horrors of the penal colony and the gruesome violence inflicted upon aboriginal people within a dehumanizing and oppressive social system. Again, Shipway does not mention the word “fish” other than in the novel’s title. A summary of these selected essays show that scholars have consistently failed to interpret the fish in *Gould’s Book of Fish*, even though it is through the fish motif that Flanagan performs his most critical and original examination of the way in which history is written and the narratives upon which nations are built.¹¹ Fish pervade this novel, and, as I will argue, are an important vehicle through which Flanagan reveals the conceits of national myth making.

It is through William Gould’s watercolour paintings of fish, in contrast to Jean-Babeuf Audubon’s paintings of American birds, that the novel’s critique of historical narratives and regional myths becomes clear. The novel’s character, Audubon, mirrors real-life John-James Audubon, a historical “national icon” (Rhodes 72) and frontiersman who classified and painted birds in watercolour in a newly independent America. Audubon immigrated to the United States in 1803 when

¹¹ A sixth scholar, Zach Weir, in his essay “Set Adrift: Identity and the Postcolonial Present in *Gould’s Book of Fish*,” does not go into any significant detail about the role of fish in the novel, but he does offer a brief reading using the novel’s epigraph “My mother is a fish.” He argues that as it is this name that is attributed to his artwork, “The fish, as painted by the character Billy Gould, continually serve a maternal function, including and insisting upon the name ‘William Buelow Gould.’” For Weir, the fish in Gould’s paintings have a maternal authority to name him, and function only to assign Gould a title and maintain it throughout the novel. As I will argue, it is in fact only through painting fish, seeing fish in people, and transforming into a fish, that Gould can escape all forms of authority, and all attempts to control or label him through language.

America was only a “young country . . . barely settled beyond its eastern shores” (73). After the general stores he operated closed down in 1819, he committed himself to portrait drawing, taxidermy, painting natural backdrops for displays in museum of Philadelphia, and teaching art (73). Over the next twenty years he worked on *The Birds of America*, completing the series in 1838 (74). Audubon gave himself the title “the American Woodsman” (72) and more recently he has been celebrated as “America’s Rare Bird” (72). As Richard Rhodes explains, “no life was at once more unusual and yet more representative of that expansive era when a national character emerged than Audubon’s” (73). Painting birds became an “obsession” (75) for Audubon and that he, like William Gould, painted in watercolour (75). John-James Audubon’s *The Birds of America* is symbolic of the frontier era and the emergence of a new American identity. As Rhodes argues, we should “celebrate him for his wonderful birds, but recognize him as well as a characteristic American of the first generation” (73). Being “characteristic” of anything is precisely what Gould is trying to escape, and *Gould’s Book of Fish* is especially critical of this kind of myth making. Rhodes turns Audubon into a frontier hero through his depiction of Audubon’s life as a tale of triumph over financial difficulty, and as a nineteenth-century American love story with its signature happy ending. Rhodes concludes by drawing attention to Audubon’s strong relationship with his wife, “And together they remained, for the rest of their lives” (78). This is an example of the type of optimistic, colonial hero-narrative that Flanagan’s novel intends to subvert and expose.

In *Gould's Book of Fish*, Gould meets Audubon in Louisiana and becomes his apprentice. Gould assigns Audubon a bird-like quality, rather than a fish persona, in his description of him as a "bedraggled quail of a man" (Flanagan 60). Gould observes that "Audubon painted marriages, courting, all the vain pretence of polite society, & all of it was birds & all of his birds sold & it was all up a very clever thing that he was doing, a natural history of the new burghers" (63). Audubon uses birds to tell the story of America, just as Gould will later use fish to tell the story of Tasmania. But Gould is firm about the different kind of stories they are telling (and selling). Audubon's paintings of birds capture the optimism and celebrate the expansion of a new nation and are therefore highly marketable in settler circles. But for Gould, Audubon's birds are false:

Audubon painted the dreams of a new country for which there is always a prospective purchaser; my fish are the nightmare of the past for which there is no market. What I am painting is not clever like the work of Jean-Babeuf Audubon, nor will it ever prove popular: it is the natural history of the dead. (63)

Here, Gould's strange obsession with painting fish and seeing fish in people is described in opposition to Audubon's "dreams of a new country," which are what people want to see, believe in, purchase and possess. By comparison, Gould's fish are frightening and engage with a history that people are more comfortable forgetting. Gould explains, "the fish come to me in the true condition of this life: alone, fearful, with no home" (63). For Gould, fish represent a different version of history than Audubon's profitable, optimistic history that does not speak of death,

fear, or loneliness. Audubon's birds celebrate the conquest of America and promote the myth of Manifest Destiny without including the destruction of its natural resources or violence toward its indigenous population. Audubon's birds tell a story of progress and settlement that the settlers want to hear, even though it is a myth. Gould's fish tell a more complete and therefore unpopular story.

Gould's impulse to paint people as fish is a way for him to avoid "diminishing" (92) them or capturing them. As Gould believes, "I am not contained between my toes & my turf but am infinite as sand" (92). His ability to see "men as fish" (223) speaks of his desire to see beyond the boundary of their physical appearance, rank or even species. The resulting painting, therefore, does not perpetuate a false identity or set character 'type'. Rather, Gould's portraits attempt to portray an alternate view; a more expansive and abstract representation of the person and their story that includes things that are hidden from sight. These hidden, repressed things are usually elements of violence, suffering and disorder. This notion is explored in an episode where Gould is commissioned to paint a portrait of the island's crazed Commandant. Gould's intention is "to paint the Commandant a picture of Revelation & Profound Discovery that remade the world anew as Commerce" (172) in order to please and flatter him and avoid being put to death for causing any offence. The painting is intended to celebrate the Commandant's achievements along the way to making the island more accessible and open to trade, even though the Commandant's efforts are lunatic and unsuccessful (one of the Commandant's most lavish and harebrained plans is the construction of an endless, circular railway around the island). Still, Gould is under pressure to create a portrait

of the Commandant that displays his role as a leader and praises his ingenuity. But Gould inevitably paints the Commandant as a fish, a stargazer:

For what I had painted was not a warm thing or a happy thing, but a cold thing, a frightful, frightening thing. They had wanted of me consolation & this was desolation . . . They had wanted Hope & Progress, & to my horror I saw sullenly staring back at me—a *stargazer*! They had wanted a New God & in my monstrous confusion I had given them a fish! (173)

Gould's vision of the Commandant as a fish includes all that is left out of the official record. Where the portrait called for a man of great poise and authority, Gould transforms him into a stargazer. This is not a sanitized portrait of a sane man; it is a depiction of mad one. A stargazer is a fish with bulging eyes, and a pronounced and toothy frown. As the name "stargazer" implies, the Commandant is represented as someone whose goals are impractical, whose ambition has no end, and who is not grounded in reality. In this way, Gould's portrait of the Commandant as a fish is a more comprehensive representation of the man than a regal, posed portrait would be. Gould's portrait does not support a false and comforting narrative of the Commandant's reign on the island. Instead of an idol to worship, or a portrait worthy of a history book or museum wall, Gould strips away all pretenses and the Commandant is portrayed instead as a cold, wet, crazed, fish. If Audubon's birds allegorize a new nation of "Hope & Progress" then Gould's fish, as a comparable representation of Australia and its people at its colonial inception, are the antithesis of that optimism. Gould's fish are unflattering and critical of their subject rather

than celebratory, and expose the ideal of “Hope & Progress” as the myth that it is. The fish motif in *Gould’s Book of Fish* in this way works to tell an alternate story to the marketable and comfortable colonial narrative of progress and conquest.

Gould’s visions of men as fish also function as moments of transformation and freedom in the novel. Struck with fear at the prospect of painting such a powerful figure (who is also his jailor) Gould starts hallucinating that he is underwater: “The world rolled in waves around me; the roundhouse rose & fell like a forest of bull-kelp” (172). Moments of transformation and metamorphosis in the novel are often accompanied by feelings of weightlessness, dizziness and nausea. In this episode, Gould feels his “light body stumbling” and a “fug of nausea” (172). These sensations make moments of transition uncomfortable and disorienting. Everything becomes unstable. When Sid Hammet metamorphoses into a weedy seadragon, he explains how he felt during his transition as “a momentary sense that was both a sickening vertigo and a wild freedom” (38). The moment when he is not a man and not yet a fish, “without weight, support, structure” (38), is where he experiences freedom. These moments are also often preceded by colourful glowing imagery. When Gould looks at the Commandant, he sees his “two small eyes reflecting the disturbing glowing yellow of the mask” (171). When Sid Hammet first picks up the *Book of Fish* in Salamanca, the “mass of pulsing purple spots . . . brightly glowing” spread to his hands until they were glowing: “As I held my luminous hands up in front of my face . . . hands so familiar yet so alien—it was as if I had already begun a disturbing metamorphosis” (13). Vertiginous, unstable sensations and colourful glowing imagery all anticipate imminent transformation, slipping between

man and fish, and the escape from the rigid confines of identity. As Ashley Rose Whitmore points out, the glowing imagery and colourful lights are the “stimulus of change” (6) throughout the novel. This also sheds light on Flanagan’s decision to print each chapter of the novel in different coloured ink. Perhaps as the colourful, glowing pages of the *Book of Fish* transform Sid Hammet into a weedy seadragon, the colourful print of the novel is evidence of its intent to stimulate change in the reader.

Fish, in the novel, represent what is insufferable and ugly about reality; they swim outside of the anthropocentric version of history and view of the world. A human’s transformation into a fish also seems to be the consequence of living in a de-humanizing social regime such as the penal colony. As Marion Gymnich and Alexandre Costa suggest, *Gould’s Book of Fish* can be read as criticism of the way prisoners were treated within the colonial system: “A transformation into a fish almost seems to be the logical outcome of having been the inmate of a ‘fish cell’” (81). Gould is kept locked in a cell on the tide-line which fills up with water as the sea rises. Historically, this would be what Robert Hughes described as a “water pit” (115), where convicts were held to suffer repeated threats of drowning. Gould is kept in an underwater cell similar to a fish in a tank. It then seems inevitable that he transforms into the very creature he is treated as.

Words in *Gould’s Book of Fish* are powerful tools of oppression, imprisonment and violence. In contrast, fish represent wordlessness. As Gould asserts, “my pictures were so many mutes” (398). At the core of the book, Flanagan positions silence. Upon discovering the *Book of Fish*, Sid Hammet tries to understand

its layered and indefinable nature: “Because, you see, it sometimes seems so elusive, this book, a series of veils, each of which must be lifted and parted to reveal another of its kind, to arrive finally at emptiness, a lack of words, at the sound of the sea” (32). The same could be said of the novel itself. At the core of Flanagan’s novel, hidden underneath all the allusions, allegories and dense word play, is the sea. In *Gould’s Book of Fish* “the sea [is] an infinite love” (396), and it is eternal, “beyond the ocean, beyond death” (386). Water signifies chaos and circular time, as opposed to the Western notion of linear time: “there is no straight line only infinite circles, like rings proceeding ever outward from a stone sinking in the water of Now” (245). The sea is where Gould finds freedom. He describes “the world of the ocean” as a place “where the only bars are those of descending light” (93). Gould comes to realise that “it was not fish I was trying to net, but water, that it was the very sea itself” (385). Gould envisions the world as it could be if it were under water, which is another cause of his impulse to see people as fish. When Gould transforms into a weedy seadragon at the end of the novel, he describes his new, wordless environment in the sea:

We fish keep company it is true, but our thoughts are our own & utterly incommunicable. Our thoughts deepen & we understand each other with a complete profundity only those unburdened by speech & its complications could understand. (397)

Here, words are considered to be an impediment to understanding other people rather than a tool used to understand others. As a mute fish, Gould achieves a profound, unrestrained understanding of others. In *Gould’s Book of Fish*, Flanagan

uses the fish motif to express how language has limitations, and how we are in turn limited by language. Gould wonders “why an alphabet can be contained in a world, but a world could never be contained in an alphabet” (377). Here, the alphabet is just another classification system, of which *Gould’s Book of Fish* is relentlessly suspicious.

Gould’s Book of Fish explores the forging of official history and the power of words to imprison people in an episode where Gould discovers a library of falsified prison records. Jorgen Jorgensen (also known as “the old Dane” or “the King”) is charged by the Commandant to keep a record of all the activity on the island. The Commandant declares, “If I cannot control the past now . . . I will at least control it in the future” (246). His intention here is to invent a history that will satisfy the Governor of Hobart Town and the Colonial office in London, and omit from the official record the real horrors of the penal colony. As Gould envisions, “I tried to imagine the old Dane first compelled to reinvent all that barbarity & horror of our settlement as order & progress, material, moral & spiritual . . .” (285). Jorgen Jorgensen’s task is to tidy what is untidy and provide a more acceptable account of the penal colony that “would accord with expectation and not with reality” (284). When William Gould escapes his sea-cell through its rotting ceiling and climbs into Jorgensen’s library, he finds all the falsified records of the prison. After reading the records, Gould discovers that Jorgensen’s fiction is more tolerable than lived reality: “[Jorgensen’s] world . . . was at war with the reality in which we lived. The bad news was that reality was losing. It was unrecognizable. It was insufferable . . . It was also impossible to stop reading” (285). Here, the forged narrative is more compelling

than lived reality. It explains all that is inexplicable about real life on the island. As Bill Ashcroft notes, “The stories that survive as truth are the stories that best convince their audience” (28). Jorgensen’s forged narrative is the victor in a competition with the reality. Gould even praises Jorgensen’s work for the “inclusion of all the new gorgeous lies” (289). If lies are “gorgeous,” then fish are not.

In the vibrant and multifarious world of *Gould’s Book of Fish*, identities are fluid and changeable. Flanagan, like his peculiar protagonist William Gould, imagines the inhabitants of Tasmanian settler society as if they were fish. For Gould, fish are a way to avoid narrowly defining or “trap[ping]” (93) other life forms as they reflect what is incomprehensible and mysterious about reality. As Gould professes, “A fish is a slippery & three-dimensional monster that exists in all manner of curves, whose colouring & surfaces & translucent fins suggest the very reason and riddle of life” (133). Fish are “slippery” in the sense that they are physically difficult to capture, and because they are unsettled, unpredictable and irregular. In this way, fish are positioned as antithetical to Audubon’s birds and their tidy representation of the “dreams of a new country” (63), the idealized portrait of the Commandant as idol, and the falsified prison records. In *Gould’s Book of Fish*, the different manifestations of fish are used to expose the deceits of official history (which include archives, paintings, furniture etc.) that are created by those who are in a position to write the version of history that will be remembered. After Gould discovers the forged records he is determined to deliver them to the mythical bushranger Matt Brady, expose the Commandant, and rescue the island from being

misread in the future. Gould asks: “Was *this* what people would one day remember as their past?” (292).

Gould’s paintings of fish and journal of words (a convict’s experience of the atrocities of the penal colony) are a vital, alternative history that contests Jorgensen’s official narrative. Gould keeps a journal in his cell even though it is “forbidden” (14). As Robert Macfarlane explains, “Prison islands are notoriously wordless places. The authoritarian fear that language might get out of control has led to inmates being denied writing materials or even confined to silence” (“Con Fishing”). Gould is putting himself in danger by keeping a personal record. The novel itself, presented in a similar way to Gould’s journal, is a reminder of this subversion of the official record. Gould begins his journal by stating, “My own small part in the invasion of Van Diemen’s Land as we then knew it . . . shameful stories of the type I tell—has hitherto not been recorded, but I believe my role one worthy of both record and reflection” (41). Gould’s story includes the violence and suffering of Tasmania’s colonial past, a violence that implicates everyone including himself. Even the Commandant that Gould lives in fear of was in fact an escaped convict who at an opportune moment appointed himself the highest authority on the island. As Gould throws the falsified prison records onto the fire he explains that they gave him a false identity, and that the truth that they were attempting to cover up was that he was complicit in the invasion: “Onto the fire I threw those books of betrayals, of fantastickal rumours, of stories a little true and mostly false, all with treacheries great & insignificant at their core hiding from us our shame at how we were made to be both gaoled & gaoler” (338).

Gould is talking here about how the prison records were attempts to write over a complicated and dishonorable history, but that the price for this whitewashing would be for present and future generations to become imprisoned in a lie. For Gould, this is the danger of creating a mythicized version of the past for the purpose of nation building. Unlike Audubon's birds, which neatly represent the colonization of America as a tale of "Hope & Progress" (173), Gould's *Book of Fish* is a record of shame revealing the irreconcilable truths that in colonial Australia the oppressed were also oppressors. Standing near the fire fuelled by the prison records, Gould is freed from "the untrue literature of the past" which had "shackled & subjugated" him (338), and declares, "I knew who I was: I was the past that had been flogged on the triangle, but I am the flagellator dipping his cat in the sand bucket to give his tales extra bite . . ." (338). Gould's fish are able to slip between categories and resist easy classification, and in so doing somehow embody the irreconcilability of these incompatible truths.

But what happens when we discover at the end of the novel that the book Sid Hammet found in Salamanca is a fake? Nothing happens. In fact, this reveal is a crucial part of Flanagan's critique of national myths. Just as Gould burns the falsified prison records because they claim to be the truth, so too does Gould's account dissolve into lies. Like Michael Crummey's *Galore*, the end of *Gould's Book of Fish* circles back on itself. Just as Abel Devine becomes his own great-grandfather Judah Devine, Sid Hammet and William Gould are locked in an endless cycle. Gould, having metamorphosed into a fish, gets caught by Mr. Hung in the present day, to end up as the weedy seadragon that Sid Hammet will soon trade places with. So it is Gould

himself who occupies the body of Sid Hammet in the beginning of the novel, who is then able to tell (or retell) his own tale. Gould then reveals that Sid Hammet's own business partners forge the journal "& try to flog it off as national history" (402) that eventually consumes and imprisons him. The only way that the cycle can be broken is if Sid Hammet is instead suspicious of his find, rather than fooled by it. If it hadn't been clear up until now, this is where Flanagan's message makes its last resounding attempt to be heard. Gould, recognizing that Mr. Hung is in the business of profiting from counterfeit narratives, says, "I will stare out at them wondering what it would be like to be like them, knowing that a scam is just a dream, & that a dream is a dangerous thing if you believe in it too much. For out there, only just beyond our vision, the net is waiting for us all" (402). And just like a fish in the sea, we have been caught in Flanagan's net, only to learn that believing too much in any "official" narrative comes at the cost of our freedom.

The novel's preoccupation with forgery and lying is not new or peculiar in Australian literature. Celebrated Australian author Peter Carey had previously dealt with hoaxes, tall tales, and the lies of official history in a number of his novels, including *Illywhacker* (1985), *True History of the Kelly Gang* (2000), and *My Life as a Fake* (2003). John Dugdale, in a review of *Gould's Book of Fish* for the *New Statesman*, recognizes that Flanagan's "biggest debt is clearly to Carey, and perhaps particularly to his early novel *Illywhacker*, a journey through the twentieth century in the company of a conman" (50). One of the novel's epigraphs quotes G. A. Wilkes' definition of an illywhacker as "A professional trickster, esp. operating at country shows." Sid Hammet and Gould are frauds of a similar nature. Furthermore,

Illywhacker “exposes the delusoriness of national dreams” (Woodcock 66) just as *Gould’s Book of Fish* does in its final big reveal. So, there is something quintessentially Australian about Flanagan’s untrustworthy narrators who get ahead (and are heard) through their works of forgery. As Gould admits, “You want to know what this country will become? Ask me—after all, if you can’t trust a liar & a forger, a whore & an informer, a convicted murderer & a thief, you’ll never understand this country” (400).

But to classify *Gould’s Book of Fish* as being typical of Australian literature would meet the disapproval of both Sid Hammet and Richard Flanagan. As Sid says of his cherished find, “The *Book of Fish* may have had its shortcomings—even if I wasn’t willing to admit them—but it never struck me as being sufficiently dull-witted and pompous to be mistaken for national literature” (21). Again, Richard Flanagan’s voice can be heard through Sid’s passionate critique of national literature. In an interview with Flanagan for CBC’s *Writers & Company*, Eleanor Wachtel asks him to explain Sid’s critique, to which he responds:

There is always that search by certain . . . literati for the Great Australian Book . . . What’s that line of Kafka? “The cage went in search of a bird.” So much of criticism, so much of book chats, is trying to imprison books in very narrow ideas of this and that and national literature is one of them. And I don’t think it’s helpful at all because any book worth its salt will be something much larger than that. So, yeah, national literature seems to me to be a sorry joke and in its

name we have to endure some of the most appalling novels. (“Writers & Company”)

Here, Flanagan is relating a similar concern to the one he explores in *Gould's Book of Fish*. He is wary of any system that defines and captures for the purposes of nation building, and sees the effort to represent a nation in one exemplary book as misguided in that it limits both the book and the nation. As Graham Huggan explains, “A common view of Australian literature is that it represents a collective national project. According to this view, Australian literature is an index of the national consciousness, if, at the same time, a necessarily unreliable descriptor of the rapidly transforming realities of national, social and cultural life” (5). Though not as fervent, Huggan is as skeptical as Flanagan about the usefulness of attempting to group certain novels by Australian authors together, calling it Australian literature, and considering this as being representative of a fixed national identity. National literature is also part of the nationalist narrative that Flanagan and his slippery protagonist are so adamant to undermine, and to be celebrated for creating or perpetuating a national myth is not what *Gould's Book of Fish* sets out to achieve.

But Flanagan has been directly involved in just that. Seven years after *Gould's Book of Fish* was published, Flanagan worked as a writer on Baz Luhrmann's 2008 film *Australia*, which “became the second highest grossing Australian film of all-time” (“CBC Books”). A popular film internationally, it told the story of a nation. Through its title, historical themes, outback setting and “iconic characters” (75), the film became (and was intended to become) the equivalent of Flanagan's reviled “Great Australian Book”. As Jackie Hogan explains, “What is clear from audience's

responses . . . is that the public read the film as a narrative of nation, a telling of the national story” (Hogan 65). Furthermore, the film was produced in connection with the tourism industry that wished to encourage more international travel to Australia. This resulted in, as one critic noted, “national drama morphing into national PR” (Rundle). *Australia* became a marketing tool; Luhrmann’s (and Flanagan’s) narrative was intended to sell Australia. As Hogan outlines, “Tourism Australia would launch a \$50 million global promotional campaign building on the imagery and storyline of the film” (73). The expensive campaign was ultimately a success, and soon after the film’s release Tourism Australia reported “it had reached an estimated audience of 580 million potential consumers with its marketing efforts” (73). Flanagan’s hands-on involvement in creating a wide-reaching cinematic myth of Australia is inconsistent with his earlier critique of national literature and with Gould’s final warning about buying in to these kinds of narratives. And finally, with Flanagan’s recent Man Booker Prize win for *The Narrow Road to the Deep North* (2013), he has now become a household name synonymous with Australian Literature, and made even more vulnerable to the criticasters who diminish with their definitions (92). Whether it is in a birdcage, a fisherman’s net, a fish tank, or an underwater cell, Flanagan has been caught.

CHAPTER FOUR: Conclusion

By aligning themselves with or against the project of regional mythmaking, Michael Crummey's *Galore* and Richard Flanagan's *Gould's Book of Fish* are overtly connected. Parallels can be drawn between Newfoundland and Tasmania geographically, economically, culturally and historically. The most significant of these parallels is that both places have been geographically and culturally isolated. Just as José Arcadio Buendía shouts in Gabriel García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, "God damn it! . . . Macondo is surrounded by water on all sides!" (Márquez 13), so too are Newfoundland and Tasmania separated from the land by water. Newfoundland is part of the Canadian province, Newfoundland and Labrador, and is Canada's eastern-most province. Similarly, Tasmania is part of the Commonwealth of Australia but is an island state separated from the mainland. Their geographical isolation from the mainland has had a huge impact on both Tasmania and Newfoundland's historical and cultural development. Largely separated from outside influences, these island communities have been slow to change. The negative consequence of this isolation is a deep-seated sense of marginalization. As Newfoundland scholar Shane O'Dea explains, "This isolation is really a form of marginalism that has determined our culture" (74). Similarly, Richard Flanagan says, "Well I suppose we were a really marginal society. Australia is a marginal society and we were marginal to Australia. I suppose the image of my world was that it was red necked and backward and you were sort of brought up to believe you were second rate" ("Writers and Company"). These feelings of marginalization born out of geographical isolation provide further incentive for

these writers to sing their worlds into being. As Márquez warns, if this does not happen, they are in danger of becoming “ever more unknown, ever less free, ever more solitary” (“Nobel Lecture”).

Edward Chamberlin describes the profound influence that stories and storytelling traditions have on the process of identity-formation in the introduction to his book *If This Is Your Land, Where Are Your Stories?*. He states,

Other people’s stories are as varied as the landscapes and languages of the world; and the storytelling traditions to which they belong tell the different truths of religion and science, of history and the arts.

They tell people where they come from and why they are here; how to live, and sometimes how to die. (2)

The regional myths that Crummey relies upon promote a distinctive Newfoundland story and culture. They create a sense of community that is considered valuable even if it is only imagined. The psychological and social benefits of relying on these regional narratives are numerous. As James Overton explains,

the promotion of regional cultures . . . may be seen as a way of giving people a sense of identity in an increasingly homogenized and alienating world. For those who do feel uprooted and uncertain, being part of an ‘imagined community’ may be comforting. It provides a sense of belonging, and through this the world is ordered. (18)

Chamberlin and Overton’s accounts explore the ways in which regional myths can be used to contribute positively to a deeper sense of self, a comforting sense of community, and a feeling of order and stability. The folkloric and traditional

elements in *Galore* work in the same way, but there is also a sense that Crummey is aware of the limitations and dangers that can result from an overreliance on regional myths.

Michael Crummey's *Galore* deliberately tells the story of Newfoundland just as Márquez told the story of Colombia in 1967. Crummey admits, "There's no question that this book wouldn't have existed if I didn't read *One Hundred Years of Solitude*" (Barber "Globe and Mail"). Its multi-generational plot and heavy reliance on oral tales are further evidence of its indebtedness to Márquez. Published over forty years after *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, *Galore* nevertheless takes up a similar project of representing an authentic Newfoundland identity. Crummey's use of local folklore, regional dialects and a traditional outport setting are all ways in which the novel defines Newfoundland on its own terms. Crummey sees the cultural value of local folklore, and these regional myths become the "key discursive elements that help to bind together the idea of a collective national identity" (Bell 69). But *Galore* differs from *One Hundred Years of Solitude* in important ways, the most apparent of which is that Crummey is keenly aware of how his writing fits into Newfoundland's official culture industry.

Galore is a sprawling historical epic that transports the reader back to the lone Newfoundland outport. This satisfies the reader looking to indulge in the return-to-roots narrative that has experienced a recent rise in popularity, but however the novel is promoted and whatever the reader's expectations are, it ultimately shows that overreliance on the past is deadening. While *Galore* sees the value of folklore and regional myth in informing collective identity in the present, it

also shows the dangers inherent in trying to locate any 'definitive' or 'authentic' Newfoundland identity in an irretrievable past. This is the novel's response to recent discussions about how Newfoundland culture is marketed in the arts and in the tourism industry. *Galore* is a cultural product, sold to readers on an international scale. Selling a founding story of Newfoundland, it is involved in the commodification of Newfoundland heritage. However, as I have argued, Crummey seems aware of his role in this project and discerning readers of *Galore* will come away with the sense that it is both a celebration of Newfoundland culture and a call for change.

At the core of Richard Flanagan's *Gould's Book of Fish* lies a similar conflict. Flanagan's novel is unlike Crummey's in that it is against the project of regional mythmaking. *Gould's Book of Fish* distrusts any official history; it shuns the use of any comforting foundational narrative, and sees history and tradition as a prison, not as value-laden markers of collective identity. But Flanagan's novel, by virtue of its historical characters, locations, and events, does deliver a version of Tasmania's history. It is a historical novel that is acutely aware of its involvement in national myth making and its simultaneous rejection of it. Like Márquez and Crummey, Flanagan's novel is also the product of a desire to tell the story of Tasmania on its own terms. In an interview with the CBC about *Gould's Book of Fish*, Eleanor Wachtel asks Flanagan about the ways in which he thinks Tasmania has been misrepresented in literature, to which he responds:

Well that's true . . . It's always been just a backdrop for the sublime thoughts of others . . . It's where Gulliver is shipwrecked just north of

Van Diemen's Land . . . you have the sense that it has been put to various uses by other writers. I don't object to that . . . But I myself wanted to, I suppose, sing my world into being in terms that were true to it. (Flanagan "Writers and Company")

Just as Márquez wrote that "Latin America neither wants, nor has any reason, to be a pawn without a will of its own" ("Nobel Lecture"), Flanagan is determined to become involved in the literary representation of his own world. But *Gould's Book of Fish* is not comfortable with its own role as a narrative of Tasmanian history and is quick to remind its readers of this discomfort. The novel's convict protagonist sets out to write an account of his experiences in the penal colony, "an annal of a life etched in blood" (Flanagan 52). But before he begins, he asks his drifting cellmate, the King (the decomposing remains of a records room clerk),

How might I commence such a mighty chronicle? By singing a new genesis? . . . No. I could see the King thought it better to cack your dacks & smear it over the page than to write such rubbish, for who would ever wish to sing this country anew? (52)

In this passage, Flanagan's task of singing his world into being is ridiculed in his own novel by a character that compares the project to smearing excrement on a page. Perhaps the King believes that this segment in Tasmanian history is not worth committing to paper, that from the vantage point of a sea-filled cell there is nothing worth remembering. But Gould's journal is committed to documenting his experiences if only to save Tasmania from being misrepresented in the future. So, even though Gould's narrative is ultimately also a forgery, the novel's intention is

clear: don't rely on Gould and his fish, don't trust The King and his false records, don't believe too much in what the history books tell you, don't go looking for a 'real' or 'definitive' regional identity; it has all been imagined to tell you who you are and where you come from. And while there are endless benefits to these imaginings, and they are natural responses to the human predicament, we should be wary of their power and their ability to control and confine.

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