

Thomas Dunbabin

THE FIRST NEWFOUNDLAND NOVEL

IN THE YEAR 1858 the firm of Phillips, Sampson and Company of Boston published a two-volume story of life in Newfoundland, entitled *The New Priest in Conception Bay*. This was the first Newfoundland novel. It was also the first novel, and so far the last, to be written by a member of the great Lowell family of Newburyport and Boston which for two centuries held such sway in New England.

The author, Robert Traill Spence Lowell (1816-91) had known Newfoundland well. He had worked there for six years, from 1842 to 1848, as a medical missionary in the service of the English Society for the Propagation of the Gospel. During the famine year of 1847 he wore himself out in the service of his flock, and his health suffered so much that he had to leave Bay Roberts, where he was stationed, and recuperate in charge of a slum parish in Newark, New Jersey. When he left Bay Roberts he received the special thanks of the Colonial Secretary for what he had done for his people there. While stationed in Newfoundland he married, on October 28, 1845, Mary Ann (known as Marianna) Duane of Duanesburg, New York.

His publishers had high hopes of the novel. They proudly announced that it was "the best book ever written in this country". It was a bold claim. Seven and eight years earlier Melville's *Moby Dick* and Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* had been published. Prescott's *The Conquest of Mexico* and *The Conquest of Peru* and R. H. Dana's *Two Years Before the Mast* had also already been published.

The new work was very favourably reviewed in the young *Atlantic Monthly*, an eclectic and critical periodical, which happened just then to be edited by the writer's younger brother, James Russell Lowell.

Phillips Sampson might have done better for the author if the firm had not gone bankrupt in 1859; but although the book is reported to have been republished later, it does not seem ever to have made much stir. Yet, although its style is outmoded, it is still quite readable, and Lowell makes what appears to have been a good

attempt at reproducing local and contemporary language. The book, however, is now hard to come by, although the Toronto Public Library, at least, has one copy.

There is a good deal about religion in the story. The somewhat melodramatic plot turns on the smuggling of a girl into a convent when she wanders away from home in a delirium. She wanders out of the convent again and stows away on a vessel bound for Madeira and England. Father Nicholas Crampton and Mrs. Bridget Calloran are tried for abduction. The Attorney-General, in conducting the prosecution, hints at murder. However, the charge of abduction breaks down and in due course the vessel returns with the girl, Lucy. On that side all ends happily, and the girl marries James Urston, who had conveniently given up studying for the priesthood.

As a sub-plot there is the story of the "New Priest" of the title. This is Father Debree who had once, as Walter De Brie, been a clergyman of the Church of England, with a wife and two children—one of whom dies. His wife had, at some time not clearly indicated, been a novice in the Presentation Convent at Lisbon. The wife, now known as Mrs. Barré, is also in Newfoundland, at Peterport on Conception Bay. In happier days the De Bries had lived in Jamaica, as had Father Nicholas Crampton. To balance the sinister Father Nicholas, who appears to be a Jesuit, there is the good old parish priest, Father Terence O'Toole, who is pictured as amiable but somewhat stupid. Father Debree goes to Halifax to see the Bishop of the Church of England. He is reconciled to that Church and is hastening back to his wife when he perishes in a snowstorm. While on a wedding tour in Italy, Fanny Dare from Peterport recognizes Father Nicholas, who appears to be acting as "an agent for the Pontifical Police".

It must be remembered that the days when Lowell was at Bay Roberts were the days of the anti-Catholic "Know-Nothing" movement in the United States. A few years before Lowell went to Newfoundland, there had appeared the "Awful Disclosures" of Maria Monk, who claimed to have seen and heard shocking things in a convent in Montreal. Across the continent the Methodist missionary, Rev. Daniel Lee, used Maria Monk as propaganda against Archbishop François Blanchet and other Catholic missionaries in the Oregon territory—and incidentally against the British since it was alleged that the Catholics were hand in glove with the Hudson's Bay Company. In rebuttal Dr. Blanchet used the work of the American Protestant, Stone, who made investigations in Montreal and described Maria Monk as "a silly profligate woman".

Lowell, however, protested that his was not a religious novel. In a note

opposite the title page he wrote: "Religious Novels there are many: this is not one of them. These Figures of gentle, simple, sad and merry, were drawn (not in a Day) on the Walls of a House of Exile—Will the great World care for them?" Surprisingly for that day, Lowell did not put his name on the title page on which "The New Priest" is printed in red letters and "In Conception Bay" in black. A line from the *Agamemnon* of Aeschylus in the original Greek serves as a trade mark. The work is dated August, 1857, and dedicated to "One, to Whom I owe all. Will He take this at my hand, the best I have?"

The two volumes are of a handy size and contain a total of 641 pages. The copy in the Toronto Library once belonged to H. W. (Henry William) Le Messurier (1848-1931). Born at St. John's in the year in which Lowell left Newfoundland, Le Messurier was editor of the St. John's *Evening Herald* from 1889 to 1892 and then entered the Island's civil service. In 1898 he became deputy minister for customs. His hobby was local history, and he wrote, while in the civil service, many historical articles for the newspapers.

Books were written in Newfoundland almost 200 years before Robert Lowell was born. Sir William Vaughan, once of Jesus College, Oxford, lived at Trepassey from 1622 to 1625. He wrote, while there, an allegory in praise of his Welsh colony entitled *The Golden Fleece*, which he published in 1626. He also wrote a Latin poem entitled *Cambrensius Caroleia*. This he published, with a map of Newfoundland, under the pseudonym of "Orpheus Junior". The only copy known to exist is in the British Museum.

Another Oxford graduate, Robert Hayman of Exeter College, was governor of the colony at Bristol's Hope, Harbour Grace, from 1621 to 1627. There he wrote a book of verse entitled *Quodlibets*, published in 1628. He appears to have been the first to write original English verse to any extent in any English colony in America.

For a novel of Newfoundland life, however, Robert Lowell appears to hold first place. Just what his family made of it is not recorded, except for the praise in the *Atlantic* edited by his brother. Many of the Lowells wrote at vast and varied length. James Russell, whose journal spoke so well of his brother's novel, wrote *The Biglow Papers* in the New England dialect. He supplied an excellent, if homely, motto for disarmament with the lines:

"Ez for war, I call it murder—
 "There you hev it plain an' flat;
 "I don't want to go no furdur
 "Than my Testyment for that."

Other literary Lowells included the cigar-smoking woman poet, Amy Lowell, and Perceval, who wrote of Japan and of the marvels of Mars, as seen from Flagstaff, Arizona, with the aid of a telescope and a vivid imagination. The Lowells wrote of nearly everything under the sun, but they did not write novels; and although several Lowells were clergymen, including Robert's father, the Rev. Charles, they did not go to Newfoundland, or anywhere outside New England, as missionaries; nor were they apt to join the Church of England.

Some of the Lowell family discovered the key to the unusual ways of Robert Trail Spence in the name "Spence", which had come to him from his mother, Harriet Spence. Although the Spences were Boston people who had lived in New England for some time, they had come originally from the Orkneys, those misty Norse isles lying north of the Celtic fringe of Britain. They were also Anglicans. In fact it was felt that there was a strange strain in the Spences, not to be found in the families of the Cabots, Russells and others with whom the Lowell men intermarried.

However, the family did what it could for Robert. Like nearly all the Lowells he was sent to Harvard. After he had graduated in 1833 he studied medicine, though he did not take a medical degree. Then he conformed reasonably to pattern by going into business in Boston with his brother Charles. After the depression of 1837, however, he broke away and decided to enter the ministry of the Episcopalian Church, his mother's faith. He studied theology at Union College, Schenectady, and in 1841 he spent a year as an Anglican curate in Bermuda, an island linked to Newfoundland by many ties. From Bermuda he went to Newfoundland.

He began his novel by describing Newfoundland, with its fringe of small forests on the coast. Inland, he says, is a vast wilderness of moss and rock and lake, and dwarf firs about breast-high: "These little trees are so close and stiff and flat-topped, that one can almost walk [on] them." He speaks of the sealing on the ice in March and April:

In early summer a third part, or a half, of all the people go by families, in their schooners, to the coast of Labrador and spend the summer fishing there; and in the winter half of them are living in the woods, in tilts, to have their fuel near them. At home, or abroad, during the season, the men are on the water for seals and cod. The women sow and plant and tend the little gardens, and dry the fish; in short they do the land-work; and are the better for it.

St. John's, Lowell wrote, had grown into a city of 20,000 or more people, but it was still a fishing town.

The little town of Peterport, along one of the slits in the shore of Conception Bay, was a pretty place 30 or 40 years ago, with its cliffs & ridges and coves. Its people, four-fifths of whom were church-people [Anglicans], lived by clans—Yarls, Franks, Marchants and Resses—in different settlements.

They had one minister ("pareson they called him in their kindly tongue"), five merchants, one schoolmaster, two smiths, three coopers; every man, woman and child, besides, wrought in the fishery. Along the harbour road there "dwelt much innocence and peace; as over it there went the feet of many sturdy toilers and thronging churchward-goers."

On a bright day in August "thirty years ago or longer" the church missionary, the Rev. Arthur Wellon, walks down to the harbour, swinging his cane. (He is the central person, though not the chief actor, in the story.) He is on his way to see a parishioner, Mrs. Barré (known to most of her neighbours as Barry). She is not at home. On his way back Wellon meets a stranger who looks like a clergyman. As they meet the stranger remarks "This atmosphere becomes the scene extremely". In the talk that follows the stranger quotes both Virgil and Horace. This newcomer is the hero, the New Priest.

Mrs. Barré has been in Peterport for a few weeks only. She has come with two children but one, a boy, had died and been buried in Peterport. She is reputed to be a widow but is in fact the wife, or former wife, of the New Priest. She has made a great friend of Fanny Dare, niece of Worner, the leading merchant.

Miss Dare is friendly with Lucy Barbury, the eighteen-year-old daughter of Skipper George. In love with Lucy is James Urston, who has given up studying theology and decided that the vocation of a priest is not for him. Urston's father is said to have been born and bred a gentleman but "had, as others like him have done, come young to Newfoundland and become a planter." Evidently a planter in Newfoundland could not be a gentleman. James Urston's mother had died when he was young, and his foster mother is Mrs. Bridget Calloran.

Lowell had probably heard of the "Cabot Rock" at Grates Cove, mentioned in 1822 by W. E. Cormack. He makes Lucy speak to James Urston of writings on the rock cut by strange men on a great cliff over the sea. To this Urston replies that this is said to be somewhere on the face of Mad-Head. In a footnote Lowell says "So it is believed in Peterport of a certain cliff; and, very likely, in other places of other rocks". With this tip from Urston, Lucy and Miss Dare go to Mad Cove to look for the names carved on the cliff. They think, however, of Norsemen, not of Cabot. Lucy also thinks of "Captain Cook, who set up the stones at Sandy Harbour."

What they find carved on the cliff is "I.V." and "Lucy Barbury" in old German black letter. As Miss Dare points out, I and V were interchangeable with J and U in Latin. This is the end of that section.

Then comes the "abduction" episode. Lucy Barbury is taken with a fever. Her father goes to Bay Harbour to get some "figs" (raisins) to tempt her appetite; her mother is out, and old Granny Frank has been left in charge. The girl asks for a drink of water from the Harpool, a famous spring. While Granny is fetching it, Lucy, in delirium, leaves the house and wanders to the Urston home. There no one is at home but Bridget Calloran. It seems to her that Lucy might rightly be a brand plucked from the burning since her mother had once been a Catholic and Lucy herself had been baptized into the Church.

Bridget, in some way left unexplained, calls in Father Nicholas and two nuns. Father Nicholas brings a boat and the nuns, who take Lucy to the little convent of which Father Nicholas is the spiritual director. The spiriting away of Lucy is seen by William Ladford, a smuggler and former deserter from the Royal Navy, who is a little shy of coming forward.

Although she has been seen at the convent by a comic American, Elnathan Banks, who pretends for no obvious reason to be a possible convert to the Catholic faith and persuades Father Nicholas to show him over the convent, Lucy is sought for high and low. She had taken her prayerbook with her when she wandered from home. This is found, partly burned, in the hands of Mrs. Calloran. By this time, however, Lucy had wandered away from the nunnery, sculled herself out to the "Springbird", about to sail for Madeira, and stowed away on board. The two nuns who had accompanied her from the Urston house to the nunnery had, at the direction of Father Nicholas, left for parts unknown.

There are dark suspicions that Lucy has been murdered, but of course there is no body. Father Nicholas and Mrs. Calloran are arrested and charged with abduction. Bail for Father Nicholas is set at £2,000. Of this a Catholic merchant provides surety for half and a Protestant for the other half. Mrs. Calloran's bail is fixed at a mere £200, but whether anyone put up bail for her does not appear.

The Attorney-General comes from St. John's to conduct the prosecution. He describes Father Nicholas as having left a very undesirable reputation behind him in more than one place that he had hastily quitted, and as having harmed the good name of one lady and the peace of another. It appears that the Attorney-General had been in touch with Mrs. Barré. However, the judge says that the Court must object to the attempt to blacken the character of the accused by bringing in matter

not relevant to the charge. On this the Attorney-General drops this line of attack. He also, at the direction of the judge, drops references to the presumed murder of poor Lucy.

Just how the Attorney-General could claim to be so well-informed about Father Nicholas is not stated. Father Ignatius, the New Priest, had earlier, in the presence of Father O'Toole, charged Father Nicholas with debauching Clara Wantley of Ross Park in Jamaica and with driving Clara's father to despair and death. But Father Ignatius declares that he has buried these things, which had occurred a little more than two years earlier, in his breast. There is a stray reference to an English gentleman who has come to Newfoundland to avenge the dealings of Father Nicholas with his daughter. It is a mere hint; the gentleman does not appear in person.

Father Ignatius is not a witness. He has gone to Halifax to see the Bishop, since Newfoundland was then in the diocese of Halifax, and to be received again into the Church of England. The Attorney-General had relied much on the evidence of Warrener Lane, alias Ladford, the Navy deserter, whom he describes as "an intelligent witness". There had been a singularly inconclusive effort to kidnap Lane and to silence him. He had escaped the snare but had been the only man drowned in the loss of the schooner "Ice-blink" with fifteen men on board. Elnathan Banks, the comic American, proves a broken reed as a witness.

In the absence of any real evidence both the accused are found not guilty. In a short speech to his cheering supporters Father Nicholas tells them that they have endured provocation that would have driven a less patient and orderly people to violence. They also have the power to sweep the arrogant contemners of their religion into nothing. He concludes: "I am a minister of peace, and though I know that in the sight of men you would be excused and in the sight of God you would be justified if you were to show a sense of your wrongs, yet I must counsel you to wait patiently for the day when you will at length have full justice."

This inflammatory utterance seems out of character. As the crowd is milling around, Father O'Toole tells them to go home and be quiet. This is just what they do, after complaining that the life is being tramped out of them.

Hard on the heels of the verdict, and of the departure of Father Nicholas for parts unknown, the schooner "Springbird" comes to port with Lucy on board, in good health and spirits. At first the crew had taken her for a ghost and been scared nearly to death, but they had soon recovered. James Urston goes to Halifax,

enters the Church of England, is ordained and sent to the mission at Castle Bay. "And a fine fellow he proved to be." Of course he marries Lucy.

"Father Ignatius", now reconciled to the Church of England though not in orders, hastens back from Halifax. Impatient to return to his wife, he sets out to walk to Peterport, is overtaken by a snowstorm and perishes. He is found with a look of peace on his face. Mrs. Barré, or De Brie, lives on nobly and sees their daughter Mary the "happy wife, as she had once been, of a young Anglican priest".

Father O'Toole goes quietly on his way, beloved of his flock, even if some of them call him "the Protestant priest." And "indeed an assistant came down to him who was of another sort than himself."

Fanny Dare, Mrs. Barré's friend, marries and takes a wedding tour in Italy. At Civita Vecchia she is struck by the appearance of a person in the "dress of an avvocato" who is bestowing the most animated attentions on an English clergyman and his wife, to whose party he seems to belong. Seeing her eyes fixed upon him, the avvocato lifts his hat with a grave courtesy. She had already recognized both the voice and the features of Father Nicholas. "She saw the same man, playing the same part, in Rome afterwards. From the best information that she could get in both places she believed him to be an agent in the pay of the pontifical police."

Lowell gives a few words of the Newfoundland vernacular of his day. He says that loons were called loos, because they cried "loo, loo, loo", which seems far-fetched. Other local terms, according to him, were brewse, shipbread soaked to a pulp in warm water; cracky, a little dog; drung (from throng), a narrow lane or passage; dwall, a doze or nap; and beclux, between. He has a note to explain that "scrod" is "a fresh young fish broiled." One would have imagined that scrod needed no gloss for New England readers. It is familiar enough today on Boston menus.

After he had left Newfoundland in a blaze of glory, Robert Traill Spence followed a more Lowell-like course of life. Following a year at Newark, he held the Duane family living of Duanesburg, New York, for ten years. He then became the headmaster of St. Mark's School, Boston, for three years, and finally, he was Professor of Latin Language and Literature at Union College, Schenectady. If he ever wrote another novel, at least he never published it.