

**DEATH ON TWO FRONTS: NATIONAL TRAGEDIES AND THE FATE OF DEMOCRACY IN NEWFOUNDLAND, 1914–1934.** Sean T. Cadigan. 2013. Toronto: Penguin Group. xxvii + 384p, illustrated, hardcover. ISBN 978-0-670-06539-4. C\$34.

This is a book that should be of general interest to readers of *Polar Record* but possibly rather more because of the traumatic events described with regard to the infamous sealing disaster of early 1914 than because of the general thrust of the book that concerns events leading to the collapse of responsible government in Newfoundland in 1934. The tragedy in question was that in which 78 sealers from SS *Newfoundland* were lost at the ‘front’ to the northeast of Newfoundland ‘on which the sealherds whelp’ (page ix). A full description is given of this traumatic event and of the various enquiries and political/sociological consequences of it (Brown 1974). The author then passes on to describe the contribution of what became the ‘Royal’ Newfoundland Regiment to the allied effort in World War I. This was the only North American unit to participate in the ill fated Gallipoli campaign. Subsequently it distinguished itself on the first day of the Battle of the Somme (1 July 1916) in the area of Beaumont-Hamel, and, after this, in other engagements of the war. The regiment experienced terrible casualties throughout. Of 5431 Newfoundlanders who served with the regiment, there were 3565 casualties (a 66% chance) and of these 1251 were deaths.

The rest of the book includes a prolonged reflection on the influence of these two events on the political development of Newfoundland up to the period, in 1934, when responsible government was withdrawn to be replaced by a Commission of Government. In brief, the war had a profound influence over the subsequent crisis of economic depression and consequent social discontent. The general hope that the post war world might be reconstructed on a better footing was not to be realised. A central figure in social policy during this period was William

Ford Coaker, the leader of the Fishermen’s Protective Union, whose efforts at reform were intensified by feelings arising from the *Newfoundland* disaster and subsequent events related thereto. Coaker did not regard the sealing events as reflecting heroism on the participants but as the inevitable results of straight exploitation by the mercantile hierarchy in St John’s. The members of the hierarchy, for their part, saw Coaker and his supporters as a threat to their hitherto dominant social and economic interests. But he was frustrated and became disillusioned by the very people whom he sought to help. He became more authoritarian and less effective as a leader and the deep seated public *malaise* of economic deprivation led to the collapse of 1934 and ultimately to confederation with Canada in 1949.

It is difficult to imagine that there could be a better book on this topic than this one. The author writes lucidly and persuasively on matters in which he has obviously immersed himself. The reader even if he/she is only peripherally interested in the main topic of discussion will easily be swept along and will surely reflect on equivalent developments in other parts of the world. The only caveat that this reviewer would make is that the author’s touch on military matters seems slightly, but only very slightly, less secure than his obvious grasp of Newfoundland politics. This is quite reasonable and in no way detracts from the overall worth of the book.

The presentation of the book is excellent and the maps, illustrations etc are relevant and well chosen. The critical apparatus comprises more than 40 pages and will be of immense value to any student following up on the aspects of the author’s topic. Warmly recommended. (Ian R. Stone, Scott Polar Research Institute, University of Cambridge, Lensfield Rd, Cambridge CB2 1ER ([irs30@cam.ac.uk](mailto:irs30@cam.ac.uk))).

### Reference

Brown, C. with H. Horwood. 1974. *Death on the ice: the great Newfoundland sealing disaster of 1914*. Toronto: Doubleday.