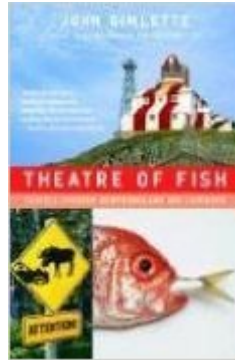


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Theatre Of Fish: Travels Through Newfoundland And Labrador



Synopsis

Newfoundland is one of the most intriguing places in North America, a land of breathtaking but cruel beauty, populated by some of the saltiest, oddest characters you'll ever find. In *Theatre of Fish*, John Gimlette vividly describes the dense forests and forbidding coastlines and recounts the colorful and often tragic history of the region. He introduces us to the inhabitants, from the birds and moose to the descendants of the outlaws, deserters, and fishermen who settled this eastern edge of North America. Leavened with irreverence and affection, this is an irresistible portrait of life in extremis.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

"Fish without end" is Newfoundland and Labrador's social, economic and political burden. For something no longer there, the weight seems strangely ponderous. In this account of Canada's youngest Province [cliche for sale - cheap], barrister and travel writer John Gimlette takes us on an historical and sociological tour of the Newfoundland that was - and is. Although a Londoner, Gimlette has ties to "The Rock". His great-grandfather, Dr Eliot Curven, tended bodies and souls in the distant colony, and Wilfred Grenfell was headmaster of Gimlette's school. Grenfell's adventures in Newfoundland clearly helped inspire Gimlette's sprightly prose in relating his follow-along journey. Gimlette understands the multicultural foundation of this location at "the Edge of the World" as many Canadians do not. He reminds us of the Basque, Portugese, and Spanish who preceded the first hesitant British probings along those shores. He reminds us that cod [the only fish under consideration here] could be taken up in baskets. Photographs in the book show these weren't "pan fries" but substantial animals. With fish so plentiful and the means to take them so restricted, it was

natural that control of the industry would pass to a few. Gimlette describes the rise of the "Fishocracy" where a few merchants controlled the flow and price of fish. That control passed along to the entire social structure of the island. Even the "home" government in London had far less power than the merchants. There were the merchants and the fishermen - no "middle class" could arise and farming was next to impossible on the rocky barrens. And now the fish are gone. Using his great-grandfather's journal, Gimlette tours The Rock [Newfoundland] and along the Labrador coast.

This book has me totally exhausted. John Gimlette is a poet and so much more. In such few words he can paint the most extraordinary mind pictures. He combines his impressionistic descriptions with a palatable dollop of extensive historical research, some rather esoteric. (But isn't that one of the reasons we read these sorts of books?) Who would ever have thought that the people of Newfoundland could be so incredibly varied? Not only in regards to where they live, but where their ancestors came from, when, and how they live. What an incredibly interesting place! It's probably the most interesting part of Canada. John Gimlette certainly convinces this reader. I read this book and then I read it again out loud. Every so often I had a hard time suppressing the tears in my voice. More often I had to laugh and at times marvel at his expressions. Except for the few Gaelic quotes, this book is superbly written for reading performance!!! I hope someone records it!! I think he has portrayed the people and their situation in an even-handed way. There were many people he met whom one must admire for their intellectual honesty, their resilience in the face of life's hardships and their generosity as an expression of their integrity as human beings. I realize that Newfoundlanders don't appreciate being explained by those from 'away' so I'll be interested to read their views. The people are portrayed as being proud of their heritage, their ability to survive and to enjoy life. The quotes are hilarious. Islanders everywhere develop their unique patois and Newfoundlanders definitely have theirs. They even have a huge Dictionary of their own. Gimlette's ancestor worked as a doctor in 1893 briefly with Grenfell. So there's a great romantic quest here to retrace his footsteps.

John Gimlette is downright poetic as he describes the geographic, social and sad economic landscape of Newfoundland and Labrador. This prose poetry has a style, but I'm at a loss to say what that style could be called. His ability to turn a phrase, though, is outdone by the Newfies and Labs themselves... "She'd an eye for my father... always put her tent up he did"... a boat ran into "dirty weather" (a hurricane) and "Got no eyes... got no teeth... but I still shoot". Once you get into it, you laugh out loud when Gimlette tells a local he's a lawyer. Without any of the modern sensibilities

about this, the Newfie responds, "So you're a liar, you say." It's a harsh world he describes using information that I don't believe is available anywhere else. Besides quotes from his great great grandfather's journal, there are recounts of new stories and oral histories. One weakness is that not all sources are attributed in the text and there are no footnotes. He catalogs many horrible ways people have died of cold, hunger and dogs. He tells of famous people who came to this area, made history and left without a trace. Gimlette describes the "Truck" system that ruled till the 1950s, the fish equivalent of sharecropping, that served to entrench poverty. (Some fisherman never used money in their lives.) With the end of fish in the 1990's, government assistance helped some and 50,000 others left. I've been to the South Coast of Newfoundland, which he briefly describes in more positive terms than any other place in the book. Reading about this merely "Dickensian" area is somewhat like a relief after all the tragedy JG describes elsewhere on this rock. I stayed in a home much like he describes (clean... momentos... scant furnishings...no running water).

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