

Becoming Masterless

A Myth for Our Time

Quincy B. Thorn

a review of

In Search of the Masterless Men of Newfoundland by Seaweed & Ron Sakolsky. Ardent Press, 2017 ardentpress.com

Seaweed and Ron Sakolsky have put together a book to inspire current and future rebels. Much more than history, it relates a myth with the potential to nurture hope for freer ways of life.

At a time when existence is shadowed by the possibility of nuclear war and the near-certainty of climate-pushed calamity, listing the causes seems much easier than listing, let alone carrying out, potential solutions.

One obvious cause is the fact that those in control—the masters—are unwilling to rid humanity and the world of the direst dangers we face.

Nevertheless, throughout history and on all continents, people have taken personally the threats, degradations and humiliations heaped on them daily and declared themselves masterless, no longer under the control of individuals and forces determined to deny them life and liberty.

Like our predecessors, those of us living today are capable of striking out in the direction of such a solution. For the journey, we might bear in mind the adventures of those who went that way in the past. This would include the story told by Seaweed and Ron Sakolsky in this fascinating book.

As summarized by Seaweed in the book's opening essay, during the 18th century, consortiums of wealthy English merchants decided to build a colony in eastern Canada around plantations based on bound labor. "These were settlements of indentured servants, primarily Irish, many of them very young...abducted from Ireland by either force or guile and brought to the south shore of Newfoundland where they were literally sold to fishing masters," Seaweed recounts.

For the servants, life in the settlements was marked by exhausting work and routine public punishments, including floggings and worse, for infractions of rules.

Joining together and escaping their bondage in the fishing and processing village of Ferryland around 1750, some of the unwilling newcomers formed what became known as the Society of Masterless Men, which persisted for fifty years by some accounts, a hundred by others.

In time, the breakaway group, which included women and children, became part of local lore and its members featured in a traditionally-told tale, despite a paucity of documentary evidence.

Yet the story is compelling. As we learn from Seaweed, "In 1774 a petition written by Bonavista [Newfoundland] merchants, justices of the peace, and others, was sent to Governor Shuldham, complaining of a number of 'masterless' Irishmen who had gone to live in a secluded cove and 'were there building fishing rooms.'"

Beyond the usual portrayal of "outlaws," Seaweed and Sakolsky provide details and analysis that allow us to understand the Newfoundland rebels as builders of autonomous communities free from life in pre-industrial capitalist society.

Sakolsky stresses that the tale of the Masterless Men, “though it may not be based entirely on provable historical fact, reminds us that the poetic truths associated with myths of revolt can act as an antidote to despair even in times characterized by great pessimism.”

Despair attacks the imagination, pessimism (to the extent it spurs imagination) engenders resistance and revolt. To inform and inspire your pessimism, read this book.

Quincy B. Thorn lives in an undisclosed location and has no associations with social media.

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