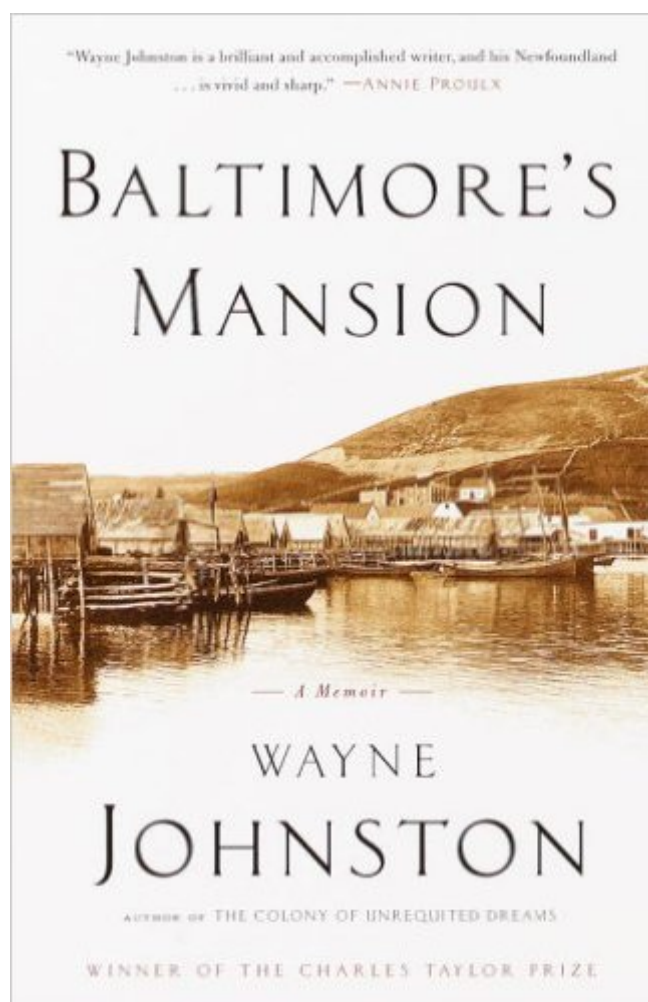


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Baltimore's Mansion: A Memoir



Synopsis

In this loving memoir Wayne Johnston returns to Newfoundland-the people, the place, the politics-and illuminates his family's story with all the power and drama he brought to his magnificent novel, *The Colony of Unrequited Dreams*. Descendents of the Irish who settled in Ferryland, Lord Baltimore's Catholic colony in Newfoundland, the Johnstons "went from being sea-fearing farmers to sea-faring fishermen." Each generation resolves to escape the hardships of life at sea, but their connection to this fantastically beautiful but harsh land is as eternal as the rugged shoreline, and the separations that result between generations may be as inevitable as the winters they endure. Unfulfilled dreams haunt this family history and make *Baltimore's Mansion* a thrilling and captivating book.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Any book that can make a reader who hales from the land of pleasant living (i.e., the mid-Atlantic region of the United States) seriously consider spending a winter in Newfoundland is clearly worth reading. Wayne Johnston once again manages to turn what most of us would consider a very dull subject (growing up in Newfoundland) into a minor masterpiece. If you enjoyed "*Colony of Unrequited Dreams*," you will be equally charmed, intrigued and entranced by "*Baltimore's Mansion*" but in a more personal -- and, perhaps, more meaningful -- way. I expect that if Mr. Johnston were from the USA, his books would stay at the top of the best seller lists. As it is, he remains a bit of a hidden treasure. Perhaps "*Baltimore's Mansion*" will help change the situation.

This is a book about loss. About the loss of communication between generations. About the loss of a proud nation when its citizens, by the slimmest of margins, voted to be assimilated into Canada. And about the loss of opportunity to lay to rest family ghosts and unresolved questions. Unlike his novel "The Colony of Unrequited Dreams", Johnston's memoir is episodic and compartmentalized. The underlying theme is the anguish felt by so many Newfoundlanders when they were forced to choose in a referendum between remaining an independent country or casting in their lot with Canada. We experience that anguish through the relationships between generations. There is Johnston's grandfather, an outport blacksmith who carries a secret about the referendum to his grave. There is Johnston's father, a reluctant federal civil servant who rarely misses an opportunity to bemoan Newfoundland's merger with Canada and berate those who voted for it. And there is Johnston himself, who is so conflicted about his relationship with his father and grandfather, and with his native Newfoundland, that he can only write about it by leaving. "Baltimore's Mansion" is most successful in its marvelous vignettes: a nearly disastrous trip into the country to cut ice from a pond, a ride across the island on a much-loved but hopelessly inefficient passenger train about to be taken out of service by the Canadian government, the last enigmatic meeting on the beach between Johnston's father and grandfather, and Johnston's own confrontation with a howling winter storm on a remote island where he has retreated to come to terms with what he wants to write. Each is a short story unto itself and full of vividly descriptive writing. "Baltimore's Mansion" also has moments of humour, but the lasting sense is one of regret. Regret for the lost intimacy of small harbours and houses, regret for questions unasked and words left unspoken, regret for a time that was that will never be again. While this must have been a difficult book to write, it is a pleasure to read: full of character, atmosphere and a sharp sense of what was lost when Newfoundland surrendered its nationhood.

Being from the other side of the confederation with Canada event (my family was pro-confederation), I found Johnson's memoir a real eyeopener to the sense of defeat and angst found in the loss of Newfoundland's precarious nationhood. The political subtext amplifies the family melodrama of loss and defeat. Although a bit too 'Irish' for my taste in Newfoundland set stories, the writing is profound and the best in the English language currently being turned out these days. Johnson's family were smiths with iron and his writing is the same; that is, he turns the raw iron of language into something minimal, economical and heavy that carries the weight and experience of generations. Like the anchors, nails, and iron shoes, Johnson's writing will stand the test of time's weathering I'm sure.

An elegy for a country, a place, and a family - which can describe much of Maritime Canadian writing, but Johnston is such a gifted writer this one really stands out. Read it for the description of the horse leading the way home in blinding snow, read it for story of blacksmithing, just read it. And if you like this, you'll love "the Danger Tree" by David MacFalane - a different part of Newfoundland, a different family, another incredible writer.

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