Newfoundland Studies

"A tune beyond us as we are": Reflections on Newfoundland Community Song and Ballad

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LIKE MANY ANOTHER who chooses a subject at what seems a comfortable distance from the time of performance, I have from time to time had reason to regret the rashness of my choice.[1] In accepting the invitation to give the annual W.S. MacNutt Lecture, founded to commemorate a distinguished scholar of Atlantic Canada, it would have been prudent to select a subject on which I have at least the pretense of authority. But I have chosen to speak on some songs and ballads which, familiar as they are to Newfoundlanders, have come to reveal, in addition to their dense regional significance, a perhaps broader interest, but also a strange complexity; and how I have come to look at them in these ways can, perhaps, be suggested by a lexicographer's metaphor.

When, in 1888, Sir James Murray issued the first part of the great *Oxford English Dictionary*, he described his dilemma in these terms:

> The Vocabulary of a widely-diffused and highly-cultivated living language is not a fixed quantity circumscribed by definite limits. That vast aggregate of words and phrases which constitute the Vocabulary of English-speaking men presents, to the mind that endeavours to grasp it as a definite whole, the aspect of one of those nebulous masses familiar to the astronomer, in which a clear and unmistakable nucleus shades off on all sides, through zones of decreasing brightness, to a dim marginal film that seems to end nowhere, but to lose itself imperceptibly in the surrounding darkness. In its constitution it may be compared to one of those natural groups of the zoologist or botanist, wherein typical species forming the characteristic nucleus of the order, are linked on every side to other species, in which the typical character is less and less distinctly apparent, till it fades away in an outer fringe of aberrant forms, which merge imperceptibly in various surrounding orders,

and whose own position is ambiguous and uncertain. For the convenience of classification, the naturalist may draw the line, which bounds a class or order, outside or inside of a particular form; but Nature has drawn it nowhere. So the English Vocabulary contains a nucleus or central mass of many thousand words whose "Anglicity" is unquestioned; some of them only literary, some of them only colloquial, the great majority at once literary and colloquial, — they are the *Common Words* of the language. But they are linked on every side with other words which are less and less entitled to this appellation, and which pertain ever more and more distinctly to the domain of local dialect, of the slang and cant of "sets" and classes . . . . And there is absolutely no defining line in any direction: the circle of the English language has a well-defined centre but no discernible circumference. (I, XXVII)

This is an elaborate passage, but probably nothing less elaborate would suffice to make clear why dictionary makers, in the Western tradition, tend to make their subject manageable by creating a hierarchy among their sources, in effect confining their evidence to what has appeared in print with the sanction of a literate, cultivated tradition (Story, "The Role of the Dictionary"). There is a parallel in the literary conventions in which I was formally educated and which only gradually came to appear to me to be unduly restrictive: I mean the assumption that, in English, there is a canon, a selected corpus of texts or list of approved authors (Chaucer, Shakespeare, and Milton): early, but not late (Wordsworth and Eliot); late, but not early (Yeats); no Stevenson at all, or, if at all, only the last, incomplete, and posthumous *Weir of Hermiston*; a little Trollope, but only for occasional bedtime diversion — the general effect being rather like that of the clergyman described by Mark Twain, whose sermons habitually, and monotonously, dealt in fire and brimstone, and thinned the predestined elect down to a company so small as to be hardly worth the saving.

As a way of drawing a more accurate, as well as more generous, defining line around the enormous corpus of compositions which might, for one reason or another, be found interesting, I once suggested that the literary historian might take, as a working guide to his materials in certain cultures, a linguist's definition of literature: "all those discourses or verbal structures, short or long, which people agree on evaluating positively, and which they insist shall be repeated from time to time in essentially unchanged form" (Story, "Notes from a Berry Patch"; Hockett 554); and this still seems a good starting point. Yet it still circumscribes too tightly, for Twain's clergyman, with his Doctrine of Unconditional Election of the Saints, has been before us again in that tradition of folklore scholarship which, for example, persisted in viewing the Mummers' Play, or Mummers' Act, surviving in nineteenth and early twentieth-century texts, as the fragmentary, garbled, fag-end survival of holy origins in ancient ritual, rather than, as is now clear, remarkably coherent, functional creations, shaped and adapted by and for the small communities in which they continued to be performed into modern times (Glassie, *All Silver and No Brass*).

Moreover, hazardous aesthetic assumptions still lurk beneath the surface of observations on ballads and the societies in which they are transmitted. Nineteenth-century Newfoundland outport life, for example, has been characterized as a peasant culture which produced little that has lasted, apart from a canon of derivative folk songs. That's a comment by an historian with his eye upon the more elevated subject of Newfoundland politics, and need not detain us. The remark by MacEdward Leach, that excellent scholar and enthusiastic ballad collector on the lower Labrador coast, requires a more elaborate perusal. He remarked that "the great significance for folklorists of this region is the fact that here is a culture closer to a pure folk culture than perhaps any other in North America" (12). But "this is not a 'good' folk culture," he added. "It is not good because it is static and not creative in any way . . . it is important only as a repository; but these folk even as custodians of the tradition bequeathed them by their English, Irish, and Scottish forebears, have not been very careful. Much of their lore they have let slip away; much they have imperfectly preserved . . . and have garbled." And in this their culture is contrasted with the folk culture of Scotland in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

I understand perfectly well why a student of literature admires "The Twa Corbies" in the text (Child I, 253) recovered for Sir Walter Scott's *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border* (1803), a grim, detached, terrifyingly objective and stripped ballad, rather than the tender little English ballad "The Three Ravens," which Joseph Ritson in the eighteenth century reprinted from a text of 1611; and why the fragmentary version, collected by Leach in Labrador (22-3) and bearing signs of transmission by way of music hall and popular song-book, might seem degenerate to the fine medievalist and "Child" ballad scholar that Leach was. It might be observed, though, that anyone who *reads* F.J. Child's great collection of *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads* (1882-98), instead of plucking flowers from it, will find, for every "perfect" ballad version, many variations which invite the same dismissive response. Maud Karpeles, that very exclusive collector of "Child" ballads, recovered in Newfoundland the first text of a gem among English folksongs, "She's Like the Swallow," in 1934 (*Folk Songs from Newfoundland* I, 8). On her return in 1970 she found that two other versions of similar quality had been collected on the island by Kenneth Peacock (Peacock III, 711-14). Her sole English version, gathered by her mentor Cecil Sharp in Cambridgeshire, looks to me, by the canons of aesthetic criticism, as though it might, like Newman's port wine, have been improved by a rough Atlantic crossing westward.

There is something to be said too about this search for the "pure folk culture." Leach found that the Newfoundland outports were like the Ozarks and southern Alleghenies, subject to modification from outside influences, and this is an interesting observation since it is one more nail in the coffin

of the old generalization about Newfoundland communities — the notion
that they were always extremely isolated and remote from wider contacts with
the world. I recall a passage in the Labrador book by the New England
naturalist W.A. Stearns, describing the house he stayed at during the 1870s
in a small community on the Lower North Shore. It was not a merchant's
mansion, and not a fisherman's hut, Stearns wrote, but an ordinary, modest
one-storey structure with a small attic: "a primitive affair, and perhaps lit-
tle better than the abodes our forefathers were accustomed, after a while,
to erect upon the rude and rugged shores of some seacoast town of our own
New England" (123-8). What interests me is what interested Stearns: the
papering on the walls, ceilings, and rafters was so executed with newspapers,
pamphlets, and magazines that he found himself, like his hosts, in a sort
of metropolitan subscription library, and spending dull days reading, among
others, leaves from the *Montreal Witness, Christian World, Apples of Gold,
Well Spring, American Messenger, British Messenger*, the *Nation*, the *Boston
Journal*, the *Springfield Republican*, the *National Quarterly Review*, *Harp-
er's Weekly*, the *Dominion Monthly*, and twenty-six other papers, each with
its quota of popular song and verse, adorning the rooms even as they insu-
lated them, and recalling, for all the world, Isaak Walton's ideal anglers'
inn "where we shall find a cleanly room, lavender in the windows, and twenty
ballads stuck about the wall."

Add to this the easy traffic in broadside and songster in both directions
across the western ocean and, equally, the movement of men — as sailors,
fishermen, sealers, loggers, miners — and one gets a good sense of the mix
of song and ballad that is displayed in the Newfoundland corpus (as else-
where in Atlantic Canada): Child ballads from the English and Scottish tra-
dition, broadside ballads from British, Irish, and American sources, ballads
of disasters and current events, sea shanties, lumberwood songs, sentimen-
tal compositions, and the rest, something over 1,500 titles by my count in
Paul Mercer's indispensable *Newfoundland Songs and Ballads in Print
1842-1974*. It is this large aggregate of compositions which poses the problem
of classification or order described by Murray the lexicographer, as well as
other questions of interest.

Among them, the ones which especially interest me are the native com-
positions, though to use that classifying adjective of the "open" Newfound-
land tradition is not without its hazards. Herbert Halpert has discovered that
an apparently local St. John's song about a man hauling a load of coal up
Carter's Hill is in fact a version of an American lumberwoods composition
(Mercer x); and the tunes come from all over. Yet these native songs tend
to form a recognizable, though not homogeneous, body of compositions,
grist for the laborious mill of the lexicographer of vernacular speech, and
also the lively subject of a brilliant essay, one of the best ever devoted by

a writer and critic to a corpus of local verse: I mean Paul West's "The Un-witting Elegiac."

Most of the famous songs — the ones everybody knows in Newfound-land, and even some which have spread beyond the province — are sampled in this piece, and the result is a vivid and true characterization of the songs of a people who are, I think, as the traveller in Spain, George Borrow, remarked of the Basques, "a singing rather than a poetical people," and West gives admirable analyses of the rioting vigor, an archetypal joy in one-self, in the percussive rhythm of

I'se the b'y that builds the boat,
And I'se the b'y that sails her!
I'se the b'y that catches fish
And brings 'em home to 'Lizer!

— a stamping hymn of praise at once vaunting and ironical, which is also a formula for the simple, hard life. Or "A Great Big Sea Hove in Long Beach," the grim words born in a time of depression, made palatable, en-durable by the jaunty tune and refrain. Best of all are the insights into the esoteric quality of these compositions (they don't always mean what visitors think they mean); their way of binding together — in a community of con-sent and rhythm — that takes us back to the first songs and ballads; and their sheer love of naming objects, producing songs that seem riotous, knobby catalogues offered to someone who does not believe in the external world. Above all, they are songs with a use.

I wish now to look at some compositions which are not less typical than those examined by West, but less known. They are of interest for a number of reasons: some of them are of a kind not commonly or readily given to collectors; they may be hard to find; and frequently they don't fit easily into the national and international ballad indexes and typologies or may be difficult to locate there. At another level some of them invite the question of what leads one person to repeat a song to another after it has been creat-ed and presented with a very specific context. And what do songs and bal-lads tell us about the nature of given problems in a community's social and natural existence, historical or otherwise?

My first composition is among the oldest surviving ballads composed in Newfoundland. It is also one that has never been printed and never, as far as I know, publicly performed, for reasons which will be evident in a mo-ment. The ballad is entitled "Croppy Winton" and deals with a celebrated historical incident which occurred in the late afternoon of May 19, 1835, when Henry Winton, editor of a St. John's newspaper, travelling on horse-back with a companion the few miles separating the Conception Bay towns of Carbonear and Harbour Grace, was attacked at a deserted spot called Saddle Hill by five people with painted faces, struck on the head by a stone, and felled from his horse. More blows followed, and one of the attackers

opened a clasp-knife, cut two pieces from Winton's right ear, and cut off the left one. Winton survived the ordeal, but despite an official enquiry, and a reward of 1,500 pounds sterling offered by the government and merchants, the identity of the assailants remains unknown. It was, however, widely believed that Catholics were responsible. According to Governor Henry Prescott, the event was "a matter of open triumph and rejoicing to the Catholics of low degree, even female servants and children expressing the greatest satisfaction." Proclamations announcing the reward were speedily torn from walls; and a ballad entitled "Croppy Winton" evidently composed forthwith (O'Flaherty, "Winton" 949).

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CROPPY WINTON

(Air. *Uncle Joe Drover* or similar)

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Now Winton was writer on the Orange Press
And wrote against Catholicks as you might guess
Until those bold heros they call "Shemaliers"
Attacked Bobby Winton and cut off his ears.

CHORUS

With a fol-de-mi-iddle a fol-de-mi-ail
The fox in the trap he was caught by the tail
So fill up your bumpers my lads without fail
And drink to the health of Old Graunuail.

The first place they met him was on Saddle Hill
Where the banner of freedom is flourishing still
And they drew out a weapon that might be a shears
And soon lacerated poor Winton's two ears.

CHORUS

His worthy companion he drew out his watch
With handfuls of silver for fear of dispatch
But we quickly assured him to quiet his fears
That we wanted no bounty but Winton's two ears.

CHORUS

Judge Bolton went home for to seek an advice
May he never come back, nor a bird of his price
Judge Bolton went home to consult with his peers
And to tell the sad story of Winton's two ears.

CHORUS

And Daniel O'Connell unto him did say
"Judge Barrister Bolton what brings you this way?

If you're out for collecting blood-money in arrears
You'd better bethink you of Winton's two ears."

One thousand, five hundred it was the reward
(I wish they'd give fifty unto a poor bard)
Och. how Ireland, Hibernia, will laugh when she hears
How the wild savage Injuns cropped Winton's two ears.

CHORUS

Now Orangeman gentry wherever you be
Whether in Newfoundland or home over the sea
Don't treat the poor Papists with scorn and with jeers
Just remember what happened to Winton's two ears.

At an obvious level this ballad makes its point with clarity and force: it is at once joyful and threatening. A perceived enemy of the Roman Catholics, the Protestant editor of the *Public Ledger*, whose columns and editorials reflect the factionalized society of the time, has been deservedly punished and others of his persuasion have been warned.

But the composition is also, in literary-historical terms, what the anthropologists call a "thick" text. In contrast to the Newfoundland vernacular vocabulary, which has a very large number of loan words derived from Irish Gaelic, the verses of Newfoundland songs and ballads seldom include Irish words: macaronic compositions are rare (Kirwin). In this ballad, however, the first stanza contains the odd word *Shemaliers*, to which the conjectural emendation *chevaliers* may be preferred. But is it possible that the word conceals, through its oral transmission over a century and a half, something like the Irish Gaelic *seanmhairnealach*, "an old sea-dog, mariner, or sailor"? And is it to be connected with the choral repetition of *Old Graunuail*? Behind this is an allusion to the Irish chieftainness Grace O'Malley (1530?-1600?), queen of the O'Malleys of Connaught whose proper name in Irish was Grainne Ni Mhaille, Grania Uaile in the popular form. She was a famous seafaring leader of her people in many marauding excursions with her first husband, Donall an Chogaidh O'Flaherty, putative heir to the Lord of Connemara. Their galleys harried the western coast and islands and their names — hers especially — became legendary (Colum, *A Treasury of Irish Folklore* 152-8; *Dictionary of National Biography* 975). By the early nineteenth century, in the form our ballad gives it (or variants thereof), her name appears in Irish song, as it does in "Croppy Winton," as a synonym, a personification, for Ireland itself (Colum, *The Road Round Ireland* 100; O Lochlainn 6-7, 205; Zimmermann 29).

And what of the title "Croppy Winton"? That epithet is first attested in the *Oxford English Dictionary* in 1798, in the sense "one who has his hair cut short," applied especially to the Irish rebels who thus showed their sympathy with the French Revolution. It occurs also in other contexts, of course,

some of them legal, and quickly passed thence into balladry and song: e.g.,
"The Croppy Boy" (Laws 135).[2] Rich with these overtones, the ballad also
contains the choral reference to the fox in the trap who was caught by the
tail: cropped indeed! So the title achieves a complex effect: Winton has been
both cropped and, ironically, transformed from a Protestant establishmen-
tarian into an Irishman — become one of them, for (a final note) Grainne
Ni Mhaille means "the cropped," her hair cut short as a convenience in her
life of marauding and rebellion (Porter 51).

In an essay about growing up Irish in a Newfoundland outport, an out-
port not far from the scene of our ballad, Patrick O'Flaherty has written
vividly of the immense distance, and dimness, the memory and experience
of Ireland had come to be felt by his generation a hundred years later. But
in our ballad, the Irishness is immensely strong in more than the ways I have
suggested. "Judge Bolton" was the Englishman Henry John Boulton who
came to Newfoundland in 1833 as a harsh Chief Justice, and it was Daniel
O'Connell (the "Liberator") who presented a petition to Parliament in Lon-
don on behalf of the Newfoundland reformers, urging Boulton's dismissal
from office; these current events and personages are the subject of lively
familiarity in the ballad. So too the Orange references. In Newfoundland,
the first Orange Lodge was not established until 1863 (St. John's); others
were established at Carbonear and Brigus in 1869, and at Bay Roberts and
Harbour Grace in 1870. Conceivably, the ballad could belong to the decade
leading up to the celebrated Harbour Grace Affray of 1883, when an Orange
Parade, persisted in despite warnings of a Catholic ambush enroute, touched
off that murderous folly. But the Irishness of our ballad is more probably
that which already existed in the decade of the 1830s itself, and the terms
"Orange press" and "Orangemen gentry" indicate a lively consciousness
of the founding in Ireland in 1795 of the Order as a secret society to main-
tain Protestant ascendancy. One might hazard the guess that the composer
of the ballad was, in fact, a first generation Irish-Newfoundlander, a recent
arrival:

> Och. how Ireland, Hibernia, will laugh when she hears
> How the wild savage Injuns cropped Winton's two ears.

Indeed, there can be little doubt that the ballad is to be attributed to Johnny
Quigley of Ferrins Town, County Wexford, who arrived in Newfoundland
in the early part of the nineteenth century, "a wild and spirited Irishman,"
says an old account, and a balladeer of note (Murphy 147, 162-4). Little of
his work has survived, but among it is the famous "Quigley and Picco" in
which "the bard of Erin," as he called himself, recounts his hostile recep-
tion at the house of John Picco, an established settler of West Country or
Channel Islands origin in the colony. Among the fragments of his work which
have survived is the grim couplet:

The Instrument used resembled a shears
That cut the tops off of Winton's two ears.

"Croppy Winton" is not a ballad that one is likely to hear of a Saturday night in a Conception Bay tavern. I know of three complete, though variant, manuscript texts, and three further, again variant, fragments.[3] Its transmission has been mostly by memory within Conception Bay families of Irish descent; and this is also the case with a succeeding ballad, of which only a couplet survives, describing Winton's return to Harbour Grace after the assault:

O doctor, doctor, come show your skill,
I'm Harry Winton from Saddle Hill.

Two much later ballads dealing with the 1883 Harbour Grace Affray, one related from the point of view of the marching Orangemen, the other from the vantage point of the Catholic ambushers, are also known in fragmentary form.

General questions arise: how many compositions don't get into print, or even recorded by visiting collectors, because the singers — or even the communities — don't wish them to be set down or given out? I am thinking here not especially of ballads dealing with events such as "Croppy Winton" treats, but of the satirical compositions of such local poets as Paul E. Hall of the west coast of Newfoundland, of whom John Szwed has written an important essay. What shall we call a ballad such as "Croppy Winton" and its fellows? In Ulster it is called a "faction fight" song, a denominational clash. But in Newfoundland in the nineteenth century, "faction" meant identification with the Irish county of origin — Tipperary, Waterford, Cork, Kilkenny, Wexford — with their transplanted rivalries and vexations and pastimes (*Dictionary of Newfoundland English* 166). In a new and fresh collection of songs and ballads of Newfoundland, the compilers speak of songs that they weren't allowed to tape because the singers thought they were "treason songs" (Lehr and Best xi-xii). The term and the genre to which it refers need to be investigated.[4]

Time for another ballad, and I select one that has evidently puzzled some of those who have collected and printed it. It is a native ballad called "The *Norfeld* and the *Raleigh*":

Come all ye noble fishermen and listen to what I say;
'Tis about the steamer *Norfeld*, with coal she was on her way,
'Twas near about Belle Isle when the Captain sot his course;
He thought to clear all points of land, 'twas on the rocks he forced.

He put her ashore on Flower's Ledge at four in the afternoon;
He put her ashore on Flower's Ledge, she was in her full bloom.
It must have been a dreadful day, for the seas were making high,
To put her ashore here in the Straits to let her live or die.

'Twas early the next morning the people went on board,
To take the Captain and his crew, find places for to board;
But when the Captain came on shore he got four men to go
To take care of the *Norfeld*'s store, where nothing would be stole.

'Twas early the next morning the Captain went on board,
His ship was stripped from end to end, and nothing left in store.
It must have been a blessing for ships to go ashore;
One of our British battleships is ashore on Point Amour.

But if the Captain chanced to come he would not know his ship;
The coal would soon be taken out — with holes chopped in her deck.
To keep the men from hauling wood, and the devil from the door
You'd need the British Army and the Navy's Man O'War.

The *Norfeld* and the *Raleigh* are about nine miles apart;
If we were on the Labrador, I guess we'd get our part;
And now my song is ended, I have no more to say
Because I am so tired, for my bunk I am on my way.

This composition was first recorded by Greenleaf and Mansfield in 1929 (288-9) from Ellen White of Sandy Cove, a community of about one hundred people on the St. Barbe coast of northern Newfoundland. Their text has a lacuna in stanza five. The version I have used was collected and printed by the visiting singer Omar Blondahl in the mid 1950s. Blondahl confesses in a note that he "still cannot make head or tail out of parts of it" (64); and indeed there are explications to be made of this composition at many levels.

It opens in fine, vigorous ballad style: a narrative, we think, of a disaster at sea, sung to an audience of "noble fishermen," men familiar with the hazards of a dangerous stretch of water, precisely located. It is so economical that the stricken *Norfeld* is "on the rocks" by the end of the first stanza. An elegiac second stanza follows immediately, a floral passage (like the one in Milton's *Lycidas*) built with grim economy on a pun: *flowers*, along that stretch of coast, reverberates with echoes of *fleur* in the place names of the old French Shore, meaning "a rock that is awash" — the grim *sunker* of other parts of Newfoundland. Then, in stanza three, we hear of the rescue of the vessel's crew and their kindly reception at the houses of the local inhabitants, as in a score of ballads and a hundred true stories of shipwrecks. At this point there is a shift of attention to the vessel's cargo of coal and its disappearance overnight; and then, like one of those sudden apparent digressions in the Old English poem *Beowulf* which as students we were asked to explain and relate to the main action, a different event is introduced — the near contemporaneous wreck of the British cruiser *Raleigh*, flagship of the North Atlantic and West India Squadron, at Point Amour on the nearby Labrador coast, August 9, 1922, ending with speculation on what might yet be found to loot on *that* vessel. The composition is, of course, a wrecking piece, not, apparently, a common genre in ballad literature — if, indeed,

the composition is a ballad — judging from the indexes and typologies I have seen.

The general subject of wrecking, commercial and otherwise, is familiar in history — and particularly in popular tradition and legend surrounding coastal communities. "Wrecking" is a shifting term, and much depends on what you mean by it, and just who you are — the monarch asserting the right to wreckage to be vested in the Crown, the lord of a coast-lying manor asserting extensive "royalties," a salvage entrepreneur of the kind described in Stevenson's novel *The Wrecker*, and so on. By the eighteenth century all this had been sorted out, to his own satisfaction and that of all property owners, by Blackstone in his *Commentaries on the Laws of England*, and formulated in the following passage of the great work:

> Wrecks, in their legal acceptation, are at present not very frequent; for if any goods come to land, it rarely happens, since the improvement of commerce, navigation, and correspondence, that the owner is not able to assert his property within the year and day limited by law. And in order to preserve this property entire for him, and if possible to prevent wrecks at all, our laws have made many very humane regulations, in a spirit quite opposite to those savage laws which formerly prevailed in all the northern regions of Europe, and a few years ago were still said to subsist on the coasts of the Baltic sea, permitting the inhabitants to seize on whatever they could get as lawful prize; or, as an author of their own expresses it, "in naufragorum miseria et calamitate tanquam vultures ad praedam currere."[5] For, by the statute 27 Edw. III. c. 13, if any ship be lost on the shore, and the goods come to land, they shall be presently delivered to the merchants, paying only a reasonable reward to those that saved and preserved them, which is entitled *salvage*. And by the common law, if any persons (other than the sheriff) take any goods so cast on shore, which are not legal wreck, the owners might have a commission to inquire and find them out, and compel them to make restitution (and) all persons that secrete any goods shall forfeit their treble value. (I, 292)

The point of view of coastal dwellers themselves is not exactly expressed in Blackstone's measured phrases, though it may, perhaps, have been presented by the Cornish Parson Troutbeck when he added to the liturgy of the Church of England his famous petition: "We pray Thee, O Lord, not that wrecks should happen, but that if wrecks do happen, Thou wilt guide them into the Scilly Isles, for the benefit of the poor inhabitants" (Jenkins 42ff.). These are the words which play counterpoint to Chapter XIII, section 122, of *The Consolidated Statutes of Newfoundland* (1892), magisterial guidance to which was provided by D.W. Prowse in *The Justices' Manual* (1898). Prowse himself, as a long-time Judge of the Circuit Court, had frequent occasion to investigate wrecking cases (Prowse, "An Old Colonial Judge's Stories"), including one, by the way, at Sandy Cove on the St. Barbe coast, where a leading despoiler of a wrecked vessel was the old Methodist lay reader, one Hezekiah Jones. For denominational balance, we should recall the earlier Church of England Rural Dean of the South Coast, whose splendid black broadcloth coat was eyed by his Anglican host for some time; then, laying his hand on the coat sleeve, smoothing it down, he said: "That's a mighty

fine piece of cloth, sir; never seed such a splendid bit of cloth in my life be-
fore. Get'ee out of a wrack, sir?'' But the telling anecdote is another of
Prowse's: his question to his hostess while on circuit as to how the winter
had gone with the community, and her reply: "Terrible winter, sir; Provi-
dence sent us nothing but an old Norwegian brig filled with rocks.''

The concept of Providence is too large a subject to dwell on here, most
of us, perhaps, thinking it to survive only in the debased usage found in
Samuel Butler, one of whose heroes exclaims: "As luck would have it, provi-
dence was on my side" (Langford 4). But there is in Prowse's anecdote some-
thing of the notion of a God who provides for, and is actively involved in,
the workings of nature; and in looking through the large literature on wreck-
ing as it is perceived by remote coastal people around the rim of the North
Atlantic, it is remarkable to find it spoken of in identical terms: in Corn-
wall, in the Shetlands, and most memorably by Tomas O Crohan, "the is-
landman" of Great Blasket off the Dingle Peninsula on the west coast of
Ireland, whose wonderful autobiography has frequent unselfconscious refer-
ences to the bad years when nobody would have survived on the island but
for the providential wrecks that brought ashore a few poor lumps of palm-
oil or brass ringbolts to sell at the Dingle market (4-6, 49 ff., 190 ff.).

This function of ballads, as the material for communal recollection, is
equally illustrated by another composition, this one recorded by Leach and
entitled *"The Mariposa."* Leach recorded several versions along the lower
Labrador coast, and he noted that as local songs they were the favourites
in these small, close communities. Though sometimes crude in metre, form,
and style, and the tunes often pedestrian and halting, the listeners immedi-
ately identified with the song, and lived in it. This is a version from Lance
au Clair, recorded in 1960 (Leach 206):

On the twenty-fourth of September in the year of ninety-five,
'Twill be a memorial day for us as long as we're alive.
Early on that morning, a steamer ran on shore;
There's a place called Grassy Point on gloomy Labrador.

She steamed along at half speed, the tide being running fast;
We'd turned her bow far from her course, the course that was her last.
She was heard to strike — once, twice, and thrice, and then they knew no more,
Until the rocks burst through her bow, the rocks of Labrador.

Her name was the *Mariposa*; she steamed from old Quebec,
With a large and general cargo and sheep all on her deck.
Her trip was uneventful like many a trip before,
Until she was plunging through the fogs on pitiless Labrador.

The people crowded to the wreck, her cargo tried to save,
And many in that brave attempt there met with a watery grave.
A portion of her cargo is gone up and down the shore,
Honestly and hardly earned by the people of Labrador.

With the precision of the old Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, this composition, like so many of the native Newfoundland songs and ballads, opens with an exact historical date of an event sixty-five years earlier. It is, indeed, history of a kind; not, of course, history as a device for arranging a store of events and for reducing the accumulations of past ages to literary order; and not history as a method of registration, whereby each event is put into its chronological place. It is chronicle-form in a more primitive use: to characterize the receding series of years, each by a mark and sign of its own, so that the years might not be confused in the retrospect of those who had lived and acted in them (Plummer xix). It is related to that other practice in Newfoundland (and, no doubt, elsewhere), the naming of years: thus the Winter of the Rals (1817-18), The Spring of the Cats (1832), The Spring of the Wadhams (1852), The (Labrador) Year of Starvation (1890-91), and even The Year of the Relief of Ladysmith. What fascinated Leach was less the song than what followed its performance: when it was over, every omitted detail was brought forth and reminisced over by the audience of old men and their younger listeners.

> One evening in Lance au Loup all the gaffers in the room engaged in spirited debate over what had happened to the timbers salvaged from the wrecked "Mariposa." The talk after such a song is concrete and dramatic and more interesting than the song itself, which is likely to be bare generalities. The song may be just a stimulus prompting memory and leading the listeners to re-live the event. (9-10)

That is a splendid fieldnote by a great collector. How one wishes that, like his student, Henry Glassie (*Passing the Time in Ballymenone*), Leach had recorded in rich detail this context of passing the time in Lance au Clair! For it is Glassie who has reminded us that "the meaning of an artwork, its presence as a sign, is not to be found only in the thing itself, nor only in infinite personal association. Meaning vibrates between these realities, between properties in the thing and ideas in the minds of its performers and audiences" (*All Silver and No Brass* 95).

And now to conclude and to finish. It has been one of my principal purposes to suggest that the corpus of traditional songs and ballads, perhaps especially the native compositions of a region — Newfoundland, or anywhere else — "contains," as Szwed remarks, "some of the least redundant and most information-laden texts we have" (151). The few I have chosen to use as illustrations (there are many others) are not always among the most widely-known of such compositions, but within their particular small communities, or (as with "Croppy Winton") within even smaller groups in such communities, they may have a complexity of content, of allusion, and particularly of context which commands attention. As the corpus of Newfoundland songs and ballads continues to be collected, and to grow while being collected, we need intensive concurrent studies such as are only now being undertaken of, for example, media legends (Narváez, "The Folklore of 'Old Foolishness' "),

the transformation of the figure of the Christmas mummer (Pocius), and the songs of the Buchans miners (Narváez, "The Protest Songs of a Labor Union" — one splendid chapter of which presents an illuminating treatment of a tradition of the community of balladry and song which connects the flyting compositions of John Quigley, the "bard of Erin," with Angus Lane and the protest songs of 1973). For the processes of creativity are not so common that we can afford not to understand them wherever they may be found, including this region's, and this world's, little traditions. "Fine art," observed T.S. Eliot, "is the *refinement,* not the antithesis, of popular art," as we do well to remember when a local singer invites us "to come hearken to my song."

Notes

[1]"A tune beyond us as we are" (the title is from a poem by Wallace Stevens) was composed not as a reading text but as a lecture occasion, being the W.S. McNutt Lecture at the University of New Brunswick, delivered at Saint John and Fredericton November 6 and 7, 1985; and I have to thank my hosts there, especially Murray and Mary Young, for their warm hospitality.

[2]In *Wild Wales* (1862), Chapter 25, George Borrow records an encounter with an itinerant Irish fiddler who entertains him with the tunes "Croppies Lie Down" and "Croppies Get Up" and a rich description of their Catholic and Orange occasions — a splendid fieldnote which I have not seen cited in the folklore literature. The encounter also led to much talk of Daniel O'Connell, Granny Whale, and the like. *Granny Whale* is a variant form of *Graunuail* found in several of the Newfoundland fragments of "Croppy Winton" referred to in note 3 below. See also Porter 51.

[3]The earliest is a version collected by the late Dr. James McGrath in Harbour Grace in the 1940s, closely similar to one, also of Harbour Grace provenance, collected for Patrick O'Flaherty and printed above. There is also a variant Carbonear version, also collected for O'Flaherty; and there are some fragmentary versions: one in the Henry Winton file of The Newfoundland Historical Society, collected in Conception Harbour, another printed in the St. John's *Daily News* (5 December 1966) by the columnist Paul Sparkes, and a third (from Harbour Grace) given to me by a colleague.

[4]The whole subject will be treated in a forthcoming paper by Dr. Kenneth Goldstein, to whom I am indebted for a draft of his essay and field recordings of some examples from his rich collection made in the summer of 1987.

[5]Blackstone's Scandinavian Latin was given a vivid Newfoundland parallel in the account contained in J.P. Howley's unpublished "Reminiscences," when on July 20, 1868, at Placentia, he described what happened to an abandoned vessel drifting silently towards the bottom of the bay: "When the vessel came up the bay on Thursday last all the fishing boats on the ground hauled up their anchors and followed her in, just like a flock of vultures after a wounded horse. In ten hours after she struck there was not a rope or a piece of timber left on her." Compare the account by the gloomy Anglican, Archdeacon Edward Wix, of his travels along the south coast of Newfoundland in 1835 (79, 131-2, 143-6).

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