

“You don’t want to buy it, you want to borrow it” : humour in the Prince Edward Island auctioneer’s performance

Ranald Thurgood

Volume 16, Number 2, 1994

Mélanges
Special Articles

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1083374ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1083374ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Association Canadienne d’Ethnologie et de Folklore

ISSN

1481-5974 (print)

1708-0401 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Thurgood, R. (1994). “You don’t want to buy it, you want to borrow it” : humour in the Prince Edward Island auctioneer’s performance. *Ethnologies*, 16(2), 103–114. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1083374ar>

Article abstract

Auctioneers in eastern Prince County, Prince Edward Island are entertainers as well as salesmen. They continually interrupt their rhythmic speech to joke with their audiences. Though most of their wit is spontaneous, the auctioneer’s use of humour is quite conscious and has pragmatic functions - to sell goods and to achieve social control over their audiences. This paper examines the use of humour by auctioneers of farm and household goods and shows how their humour reflects the values of their society.

“YOU DON’T WANT TO BUY IT, YOU WANT TO BORROW IT”: HUMOUR IN THE PRINCE EDWARD ISLAND AUCTIONEER’S PERFORMANCE¹

Ranald THURGOOD

*Memorial University of Newfoundland
St. John’s, Newfoundland*

Attending auction sales is a favourite pastime for many Prince Edward Islanders, especially for residents of eastern Prince County. Islanders regard their auctioneers as entertainers and expect to have fun at an auction sale. Auctioneers are talkers, people who make their livings through their rhetorical abilities. Though Island auctioneers stress the importance of rhythmic speech, both to ease their own voices and to get bidders to respond rapidly, they continually break their rhythm to make jokes. They are quite conscious of the use of humour in their performances and, while most of the wit is spontaneous, many of the jokes have functions apart from their entertainment value. The Island auctioneers are traditional performers with a localized sense of humour but their jokes help to sell goods and to achieve social control over their audiences. By studying the role of the rural auctioneer and understanding his humour, the folklorist can gain insight into a rural community and its concept of acceptable public behaviour.

During the summer of 1986, I lived in eastern Prince County while conducting fieldwork for an M.A. thesis.² My mother grew up in eastern Prince and I have spent most of my summers there, so I am quite familiar with this area and its people. I attended twenty-one auction sales during 1986; all but three were in eastern Prince or the immediately bordering area of western Queens County. As well as interacting daily with the residents of eastern Prince, I spent a great deal of time talking with auctioneers and auction-goers. This paper is based on that fieldwork. All quotes are from numbered tapes in my personal collection or, if unnumbered, from my fieldnotes. I use masculine pronouns when referring to auctioneers as there were no women auctioneers on the Island at the time of my field-work.

¹ A version of this paper was presented at the North Eastern Anthropology Conference in Montreal on March 16, 1989. Parts of this essay were included in a paper presented at the FSAC Annual Meeting in Quebec City in May of 1989 and in my M.A. thesis. Thanks to the Island auctioneers, Melville Bell, Gerald Caseley, Everett Campbell, Robert Craswell, Robert Hogg, and Ralph MacDonald, and to the many auction-goers of Prince Edward Island who contributed to this study. Thanks also to Katherine Grier Thurgood and to my academic advisors, Malcolm Blicow, Carole Carpenter, and Joan Rayfield.

² “‘Sometimes I Wonder if I Spent Too Much’: Value and Values at Auction Sales in Eastern Prince County, Prince Edward Island,” M.A. Thesis, York University, 1990.

Eastern Prince County is the second most populous district of P.E.I., yet it hosted twenty-one of the Island's fifty-six auctions during the summer of 1986 — far more than the Charlottetown district. Eastern Prince and its bordering district of western Queens County held thirty-one sales, more than half the summer's auctions. This region contains many of the Island's most prosperous farms and is home to Summerside, P.E.I.'s second largest town, with a population of 8,020 and a metropolitan area of 15,614 people. Charlottetown, the capital, has a population of 15,776, with 53,868 people in its metropolitan area (Canadian Census, 1987). Both metropolitan areas contain a great deal of farmland.

Though eastern Prince has enough population and prosperity to support auctioneers, it is not as competitive a market as the capital area. Charlottetown offers a much larger retail district and a greater variety of entertainment to lure the consumer dollar. People in the Summerside area, lacking such variety, are attracted to auctions because they provide both a shopping alternative and live entertainment. Auctions are the only place where Islanders can see live comedy, geared toward their own tastes, on a regular basis.

Humour at auction sales is not unique to Prince Edward Island. My own observations in Ontario and Quebec, as well as ethnographic literature from the United States,³ indicate that humour is a standard element in auctions of farm and household goods throughout North America. People who have attended auctions in England and Norway have told me that humour was part of auction sales in these countries too. However, auctions of livestock, land, tobacco, and art, which draw high prices and more business-like audiences, are generally serious events with very little humour.⁴

Joking is very much a part of the farm and household auction tradition in Prince Edward Island. Mrs. Muriel MacKay, a ninety-one-year-old resident of Albany in 1986, remembered Hughie Morrison, an auctioneer from her youth, as being "a real joker." Mel Bell, a semi-retired auctioneer now in his seventies, recalled mainly humorous incidents when he reminisced about auction sales:

³ See, for example: Mac E. Barrick, "The Folklore Repertoire of a Pennsylvania Auctioneer," *Keystone Folklore Quarterly* 19:1 (1974), 27-42; Susanne Cox, "The Use of Speech at Two Auctions," *Pennsylvania Folklife* 24:1 (1974), 39-44; Armanda Dargan and Steve Zeitlan, "American Talkers: Expressive Styles and Occupational Choice," *Journal of American Folklore* 96:379 (1983), 3-33; Phyllis Harrison-Brose, "Community Business and Play: The Country Sale as Symbolic Interaction," Ann Arbor: University Microfilms International #8317164, 1983; and Daniel Steed Jr., "A Folkloric Perspective on Traditional Auctioneering," unpublished M.A. Thesis for Center for Intercultural and Folk Studies, Bowling Green, Kentucky, 1977.

⁴ I attended a sale of Middle Eastern rugs which was totally lacking in humour in Ottawa. See, also: George Albert Boeck, "The Market Report: A Folklife Ethnography of a Texas Livestock Auction," Ann Arbor, University Microfilms International #8315991, 1983, p.161; Susanne Cox, "The Use of Speech at Two Auctions," *Pennsylvania Folklife* 24:1 (1974), 39-44; and Koenraad Kuiper and Frederick Tillis, "The Chant of the Tobacco Auctioneer," *American Speech* 60:2 (1985), 141-149.

One time down at Bonshaw, at a sale [Jack "Axehandle" MacDonald] was selling a big wide-mouthed shovel, like the farmers used to have — in their stables — for cleaning out the stables — and he said to another fella there, he says, "Here Grainger, this'll be a" — Grainger McPhaley was standing there and he was pretty witty too— He said, "Grainger, here's a good big shovel for you. It'd be good for you to eat porridge," and Grainger says, "It may fit your mouth but it won't fit mine." (laughs)— Yeah — I was only a young fella then but I was listening to all them things.⁵

Humour is one of the auctioneer's most important verbal tools. Islanders respect a sharp wit and joking is so common in conversation that one has to be a master of humour to gain a reputation for being funny. The mainstays of Island humour are storytelling, usually in the form of personal experience narratives or anecdotes about local people, and spontaneous remarks. The delivery is often very droll so that it takes some experience to distinguish what Islanders call "talking nonsense" from serious conversation.

Auctioneers specialize in off-the-cuff remarks during their performances, as storytelling would waste too much time. They repeat a few clichéd jokes from auction to auction: an auctioneer always refers to a chamberpot as a hat, soup bowl or some such thing; the Borden auctioneer Ralph MacDonald always refers to pictures of George VI and Elizabeth, the Queen Mother, as "my parents" or "my grandparents." Yet, the auctioneer's humour is usually spontaneous, inspired by the immediate situation and dependent on ready wit rather than on a repertoire of memorized jokes.

Gerald Caseley: How much for the shovel? Now, how much for the shovel? put a two, now three. Go three. At two, do ya hear three dollars? Means work, boys, don't bid (laughter). At two dollars, do ya hear three? Three, now four. Four. Now five. Five, now six. Six, now seven. Now eight. Now nine — Right back there for eight dollars. I didn't know anyone was that anxious to work any more.⁶

Ralph MacDonald: Here's a coffee maker for making coffee in your car, but if you're going from Borden to Kensington along the back roads, you won't make any coffee. You'll spill it all over the car.⁷

⁵ Interview, July 16, 1986: Tape RT86-1.

⁶ Wilmot Valley, August 6, 1986.

⁷ Crapaud, August 20, 1986.

Bob Hogg, selling a poor quality chair to an audience standing on concrete: Anyone want it? It's worth a dollar just to sit down.⁸

The auctioneers are all aware of the role of humour in their speech and use it quite consciously. Ralph MacDonald explained:

... people like to be amused, you know, and — I find that I play with them a little bit, not too long — I don't drag it out. Don't do a song and dance. But they like to be amused and [have] a little bit of fun — I think Bob Hogg said one time, he never talks about religion or politics and I guess I go along with that also — but people like to be — to let small pokes of fun at, you know, and especially at me — I find that [if I] make fun of myself, they like it and — it goes along with an auction sale. And if you don't have that in an auction sale, I think you're missing something.⁹

They are also aware that they are not entertaining people just to make them happy.

Ranald Thurgood: *... When we had the tape recorder off, you said that it helped loosen the people up.*

Ralph MacDonald: *Oh yes, like I said, "warm them up." Because people need to open their pocketbooks, as it were. They need to be amused to make them pay top dollar and then — if you're going to give them some extra amusement, as it were, you can be quite sure that they're going home with a good taste in their mouth. They say, "Hey, I enjoyed that evening. I don't mind paying what I paid for whatever I bought".¹⁰*

This sales philosophy is not limited to Island auctioneers. Clyde "Kingfish" Smith, a South Carolina peanut vendor, made a comment similar to MacDonald's, saying that he used funny cries to get people laughing and that laughing "loosens the pocketbook."¹¹

Humour at eastern Prince County auctions is usually gentle and kept within local standards. The only exception I heard to the ban on jokes involving religion and politics, both contentious issues on the Island, was an inoffensive remark made by Ralph MacDonald. He had announced, "They're selling

⁸ Central Bedeque, August 21, 1986.

⁹ Interview, July 15, 1986: Tape RT86-4B.

¹⁰ As above, RT86-4B.

¹¹ Armanda Dargan and Steve Zeitlan, "American Talkers: Expressive Styles and Occupational Choice," *Journal of American Folklore* 96:379 (1983), 7.

refreshments — sandwiches, home-made sweets, coffee, pop — over there." Someone shouted, "You don't have any beer, do you? A Scotch would go nice." Ralph replied, "Elsie's a Baptist. She doesn't sell much beer."¹² His joke acknowledged that the many Baptists in the area are strict teetotallers and let the audience know that Elsie would probably not be amused by requests for beer.

At another auction, a boy of ten or twelve who was assisting Bob Hogg put a horsecollar around his neck and Bob announced, "Here we have a collar — and a jackass." He then patted the boy's head affectionately and remarked, "And a nice one." Bob reached over and hugged the boy with one arm. The boy smiled and the audience knew that Bob's behaviour was friendly teasing, which is quite acceptable. At the same sale, Bob commented, "Here's a table and only two chairs. If you have friends over, you won't have to invite them for dinner. You'll save lots of money — won't be very neighbourly though."¹³ Though his joke alluded to selfishness, he was able to emphasize the Island virtue of neighbourliness, showing that he shared the values of his audience.

Auctioneers often use humour when describing objects for sale but stop joking when bids are coming rapidly. Sometimes bidding starts quickly but slows down as the item becomes more expensive. The auctioneer may then play with the bidders, gesturing to them to increase their bids or joking with them as they decide whether to bid higher. This clowning entertains the audience and often gets a laugh from the bidders themselves. As Ralph MacDonald explained, if people are having fun, they don't mind spending money.

Auctioneers' humour is often self-deprecating, as Ralph MacDonald pointed out. His partner, Everett Campbell, often sets Ralph up to be the butt of jokes, much to the delight of their audiences.

Ralph MacDonald, *sitting in a Lay-Z-Boy (pronounced "lazy boy") reclining chair: Ev, I have a beautiful Lay-Z-Boy.*

Everett Campbell: *Beautiful Lay-Z-Boy. A real nice one.*

Woman in audience: *And he's going to get lazy in it.*

Ralph: *Right.*

Everett: *Getting lazy in it, just to demonstrate. A beautiful chair in excellent condition. How about a two-hundred-dollar bid on that real nice chair? Get out of it Ralph, so it'll look better.*¹⁴

¹² Kensington, July 6, 1986.

¹³ Central Bedeque, August 21, 1986.

¹⁴ Kensington, July 19, 1986: Tape RT86-8.

Even teasing between auctioneers and their assistants is subject to public scrutiny. One Island-born flea market dealer, who lives in Ottawa but comes "home from away" for the summer, had an intense dislike for a particular auctioneer. The dealer had a few reasons for his opinions but twice he explained his feelings by telling me that the auctioneer once wanted the crowd to move away from his assistant so she could see what was being sold, so he said, "Stay away from Judy (pseudonym), she's got AIDS." The dealer felt that this remark was extremely degrading to the woman concerned and would not attend any more of the auctioneer's sales.

It would be misleading to suggest that there is only one standard of humour for Prince Edward Island, or even for eastern Prince County, and that no one enjoys a lewd joke. However, one young Roman Catholic woman from Albany described the southeastern section of Prince County, where she lives, as the "Bible district of P.E.I.," referring to its deeply religious Protestant population. Many people, even if they are inclined toward bawdy humour themselves, do not like seeing the more conservative members of their community offended, so humour at public events must be kept clean. American scholars comment on the conservative humour of country auctions but then quote jokes which are quite risqué by the standards of eastern Prince, in which virtually all comments referring to sex, sexual organs, and processes of elimination are considered inappropriate for a public forum by a great many people.

An auctioneer from another county auctioned farm equipment at a sale in eastern Prince which was attended almost entirely by men. He used very rough language by the standards of the local auctioneers, punctuating his speech with many "God damns" and "hells." No one seemed to take offense, so it appears that this talk is acceptable among males, even though many would not use such language themselves. I assumed that the auctioneer was relaxing his standards within the male group but his speech was quite similar at a sale attended by both men and women in his home district, where he is quite a popular auctioneer. It appears that eastern Prince has more rigid standards than other parts of the Island.

An ethnic slur by the same auctioneer, "At \$775, she's a Jew," was greeted with laughter, although Islanders were outraged when a Member of the Legislative Assembly referred to the premier, who was of Lebanese extraction, as a "black boy" during the same summer. With virtually no Jewish population in Prince Edward Island, residents are not highly sensitized to the offensiveness of anti-semitic remarks. Some Islanders thoughtlessly use "jew" as a verb just as many North Americans use the word "gyp" which Rom people (Gypsies) find offensive. However, it was not one of the Prince County auctioneers who made the remark, "she's a Jew". Perhaps the laughter was in part because the comment was inappropriate rather than acceptable humour.

A male used-furniture dealer stated very clearly that an auctioneer's crude remark to a woman was totally unacceptable. Two women had been arguing over

who had made the higher bid on an item. The auctioneer sided with one and the other demanded, "Give it to me." The auctioneer replied, "Pull your dress down and I'll give it to you." Although the auctioneer has been dead for many years, the dealer still uses this story to illustrate improper behaviour on the part of an Island auctioneer.

Auctioneers often use humour as a form of social control to teach their audiences the rules of behaviour at sales.

Bob Hogg: *Don't rub your nose, Roy, it'll cost you money.*¹⁵

Gerald Caseley: *Don't slap the flies, I think you're bidding.*¹⁶

Actually, people are rarely pressured to buy items on which they claim not to have bid. But the auctioneer wants as little distraction as possible while he is taking bids. It serves his interest to reinforce the idea that "if you wave to your friend, it'll cost you \$200," but not to the point that it scares people away from his sales. A joke makes the point in an inoffensive way.

The auctioneer will often tease someone who has offered a low bid.

Bob Hogg, *after a one-dollar bid: You don't want to buy it. You want to borrow it.*¹⁷

Gerald Caseley, *after a two-dollar bid on a set of tires: Two dollars? I imagine! You can't even buy the whitewalls for that.*¹⁸

The auctioneer is telling his audience that the item is worth far more than the bid offered and instructing the bidder not to waste the auctioneer's or the audience's time by offering unrealistically low bids. In an essay entitled "Beyond Ethnography: A Conversational Analysis of Auctions," Lindsay Churchill and Susan Grey explain that goods at an auction have a "range of worth" rather than a definite value.¹⁹ The auctioneer attempts to establish the lower end of this range, which sometimes puts him in conflict with the bidders. Teasing remarks at Island sales help establish the range without direct confrontation.

The auctioneer, besides trying to earn a commission, is also an agent for the seller and wants to see him or her get a fair price for the goods being sold.

¹⁵ Central Bedeque, July 10, 1986.

¹⁶ Wilmot Valley, August 6, 1986.

¹⁷ Central Bedeque, August 21, 1989.

¹⁸ Wilmot Valley, August 6, 1986.

¹⁹ Churchill, Lindsay and Susan Gray. "Beyond Ethnography: A Conversational Analysis of Auctions." Ralph W. Fasold and Roger W. Shury (Eds.), *Studies in Language Variation: Semantics, Syntax, Phonology, Pragmatics, Social Situations, Ethnographic Approaches*, Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1974: 209-225.

Our main objective is to help elderly people and I don't make no bones about that. If they have to move, now we've had stuff on hand for a month, but when people call and say, "Bob, I've sold my house," or "I'm moving to an apartment," or "I'm moving to the senior citizens' [home]," and they maybe only have a few day's notice, we look after them.²⁰

Though teasing about low bids sometimes offends auction-goers, a joke is less offensive than a scolding to an Islander. Islanders are often indirect and auctioneers use jokes to call for other sorts of action from members of their audiences. I was moving a car with speakers on the roof for auctioneer Mel Bell at an outdoor sale. Rather than telling people to get out of the way, Mel told me, "Go ahead till you hit that fella." Everyone laughed and cleared the path. Mel accomplished his goal without having to tell other people how to behave.²¹ At another sale, a boy was pushing a cardboard box across a concrete floor, creating a racket. Bob Hogg stopped auctioning, whistled, and shouted, "Hey, hold up there, boy!" His actions and vernacular speech amused everyone, including the child, who ended his noise.²²

Besides wanting to treat their customers fairly, auctioneers must weigh their long-term interests against immediate profit. Getting a high price at one sale is not worth losing a regular customer. If a husband and wife are bidding against each other, the auctioneer will usually tell them, often using humour, but perhaps not until they have raised the price a few dollars.

Bob Craswell: *Are you two together? There's liable to be one hell of a row when you get home.*²³

Humour also decreases the social distance between the auctioneer and his audience. The auctioneer is obviously in charge of the sale but by interacting personally with members of the audience, he plays down his role as a salesman and reminds people that he is their friend and neighbour. Members of the audience occasionally tease or joke with the auctioneer during a sale. One of the incidents which got the most laughs during the summer of 1986 was an exchange between Ralph MacDonald and a flea market dealer. Both auctioneers and dealers must have provincial licences to conduct business.

Ralph MacDonald, *auctioning a box of pots and pans: ...seven-fifty, go ten. Seven-fifty, go ten. You'll get twenty-five dollars at a flea market for it.*

²⁰ Interview with R.P.Hogg, Aug. 29, 1986: Tape RT86-14.

²¹ Tryon, July 18, 1986.

²² Central Bedeque, July 4, 1986.

²³ Mt. Stewart, August 23, 1986.

Dealer: *Like hell you will. (laughter)*

Ralph: *Once, twice — You done at seven-fifty? Sold at seven-fifty, number one-zero-eight (bidder's registration number).*

Dealer: *You might — You have a licence but I haven't. (laughter)*

Ralph: *That's right and you shouldn't be operating. I'm going to tell the premier about you (teasing).*

Dealer: *I mean a liar's licence. (laughter)*²⁴

Ralph enjoyed this joke as much as anyone. This sort of humour shows the audience that the auctioneer is one of them and can take a joke as well as give one.

However, the auctioneer must maintain control of the sale and occasionally has to defuse a conflict between himself and a member of his audience. At one sale, the auctioneer called, "Sold!" after a three-dollar bid. A man at the back of the hall kept yelling "four dollars" until the auctioneer finally said, "Sorry, someone said 'four'," and offered the item for sale again. Tom — whose wife, Marjory (pseudonyms), had made the three-dollar bid — called out, "You said 'sold'!" The auctioneer replied, "I know I did — I heard him but I didn't see him." He started auctioning the item again. Tom called out, "You said 'sold'!" The auctioneer responded, "I know I did. I'll give you something some time, I'll buy you a cup of coffee, Marjory — at McDonald's." The audience laughed and the sale resumed without further interruption.

The auctioneer was in a difficult position. Customers get very irritated if their bid is missed, so it was logical for him to reopen the bidding. But public opinion has it that when an auctioneer says "sold," he cannot reopen the bidding. In this case, the auctioneer had reopened the bidding at the encouragement of one customer. If he were to close it at the insistence of another, he would be showing his audience that he was not in control of the sale. The complaining couple were dealers who regularly attend the auctioneer's sales and probably spend a few thousand dollars in the course of a year.

In his comments, the auctioneer acknowledged the bidder personally, using her name, and let her know that she was not just a face in the crowd to him; he implied to her that he was in the wrong without saying it directly in front of the whole audience; he offered to make up for his error (it is unclear how — perhaps he could really give her something or could ignore a competing bid at another

²⁴ Kensington, July 16, 1986: Tape RT86-6.

time); and he made a joke on himself by offering to buy coffee at a fast-food restaurant, implying that he was a cheapskate. The laughter relieved the tension and allowed the auctioneer to regain control of the sale. The couple were not happy but they did not leave the sale. They continued to give the auctioneer their patronage at other sales, so his response succeeded.

Many P.E.I. auction-goers resent tourists and antique dealers. They feel that tourists are buying up the Island's heritage and antique dealers are selling it off. A British film-maker, Jack Winters, felt that a farm auction provided an appropriate symbol for the selling out of Prince Edward Island to foreign interests. In his movie, "Selling Out," an old man's sorrow over the sale of his farm is compared to the Islanders' sense of loss as people from away buy up their land.²⁵

Interestingly, auction-goers seldom resent the auctioneer for his role in this process. He is seen instead as someone just doing his job and acting as an agent for the owner of the goods. The auctioneer's appeal to Island values, including his teasing and home-grown humour, endears him to his audiences and removes the pathos which potentially exists at many auctions. If the auctioneer were to wear a three-piece suit and socialize only with the well-to-do, he would probably be identified with forces acting against the Islanders' interests. Instead, the auctioneer establishes his identity as an average Islander with values similar to the everyone else's — even if he does sell whatever comes his way.

Often the division between Islanders and non-Islanders at auctions becomes apparent and occasionally an auctioneer must acknowledge it. When Ralph MacDonald was holding drapes in front of him, his partner Everett Campbell commented, "It looks good on you." A man from the audience called out, "Hold it a few inches higher (i.e., in front of Ralph's face) and it'll look even better."

Ralph: *You Summerside people, I can't take you anywhere.*

Man in audience: *Ontario.*

Ralph: *Ontario, that's even worse.*

Man: *Barrie, Ontario.*

Ralph: *Ontario! Where's that?*²⁶

²⁵ The film, "Selling Out" (Encyclopaedia Britannica Productions, director — Thadeusz Jaworski, text — Jack Winter, 1971), features the auctioneer Bob Hogg playing himself. The auction is fairly authentic except that the auction in the film is outdoors whereas Hogg usually holds sales indoors and Hogg describes the origins and history of items in much more detail than he would in real life. Auctioneers are very careful to qualify unverifiable information so as not to mislead customers and to protect themselves legally.

²⁶ Crapaud, August 20, 1986.

The whole exchange was done in a jovial manner and Ralph was able to make the visitor feel welcome by including him in the teasing which usually goes on among familiars. Yet, he was also making a joke at the other man's expense, aligning himself with the Islanders, who resent supposedly rich Ontarians coming to buy up a "have-not" province. Joan Rayfield, in an unpublished paper, showed how a south Ontario auctioneer played down his own role in a similar manner.²⁷ He teased a well-to-do professional customer, a newcomer to the area, using humour with which he identified himself with the less affluent farmers.

The Island auctioneer has a complex profession. His role as a performer cannot be separated from his role as an entrepreneur. All his techniques for entertaining his audience have the underlying purpose of selling goods. He must compete with the retail and entertainment industries by offering something which neither of the others can — free localized entertainment. He must fulfill the audience's expectation of the traditional auctioneer as "a real joker." He must maintain a regular clientele whose members are in competition with each other. He has to understand what is acceptable and unacceptable humour in the area in which he works. He must be in control of the sales while encouraging a warm friendly atmosphere. Though many enter the auction business on Prince Edward Island, few are successful. Only four Islanders, of whom two are business partners, supported themselves completely by auctioneering in 1986.

All the successful auctioneers on Prince Edward Island are very funny people who use humour to deal with complex situations. Every auction is peppered with jokes and a sale by McDonald and Campbell or Gerald Caseley can sometimes resemble an extended comedy routine. Yet a truly sophisticated use of humour at auctions involves knowing when and when not to make a joke. Bob Hogg, one of the most experienced and successful auctioneers operating in 1986, exercises control over his humour. Though he has a reputation for being funny, he does not joke at every opportunity. As he reaches the latter part of his sales when he has sold the most expensive items and his audience is diminishing, Bob stops joking almost completely and concentrates on selling the remaining goods as rapidly as possible to the few remaining dealers and serious auction buffs.

Auctions, country fairs, sports activities, and church-related functions are some of the most popular forms of public entertainment in rural Canada. Of these, auctions cross class, age, sex, ethnic, and religious boundaries more than other activity and provide forums in which the conflicting and complementary values of the rural populace can be expressed publicly. The country auctioneer has the difficult task of making a profit and entertaining his customers but not offending them. The successful auctioneer is an expert on his own culture and gears his public behaviour toward its values and expectations.

²⁷ Rayfield, Joan R. "Storytelling and Social Structure or What's so Special About the Ancient Mariner?" Unpublished paper, York University, Department of Anthropology, 1972: p.41.

By examining the auctioneers' use of humour and their audiences' response to it, we can draw some conclusions about the people of eastern Prince County, P.E.I. They expect humour in public gatherings and like public figures to be witty. They are conservative and feel that rough language and scatological jokes are unacceptable in the public forum. They are fairly egalitarian and although they are willing to let the auctioneer run his show, they let him know, through teasing, that he is not above them. They are often indirect and non-confrontational; joking by auctioneers replaces assertive statements; and controversial topics, such as religion and politics, are avoided in public. Personal contacts are very important to Islanders and they value recognition by business people and public figures. My own experience of the people of eastern Prince in many other circumstances supports these conclusions. In their use of humour, the auctioneers show a deep understanding of their own culture.