

Folktales of Newfoundland: The Resilience of the Oral Tradition. By Herbert Halpert and J. D. A. Widdowson, editors, with the assistance of Martin J. Lovelace and Eileen Collins; music transcription and commentary by Julia C. Bishop (New York: Garland, World Folktale Library vol. 3, Garland Reference Library vol. 1856, 1996.2 vols. Pp. xcv+ 1175, Indices, ISBN 0-8153-1736-0 cloth.) [Distributed in Canada through Breakwater, \$250.00, ISBN 1-55081- 029-4]

Michael Taft

Volume 22, Number 1, 2000

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1087859ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1087859ar>

[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 review

Taft, M. (2000). Review of [*Folktales of Newfoundland: The Resilience of the Oral Tradition*. By Herbert Halpert and J. D. A. Widdowson, editors, with the assistance of Martin J. Lovelace and Eileen Collins; music transcription and commentary by Julia C. Bishop (New York: Garland, World Folktale Library vol. 3, Garland Reference Library vol. 1856, 1996.2 vols. Pp. xcv+ 1175, Indices, ISBN 0-8153-1736-0 cloth.) [Distributed in Canada through Breakwater, \$250.00, ISBN 1-55081- 029-4]]. *Ethnologies*, 22(1), 291–296. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1087859ar>

book lacks both context for each account, and elaboration on the methods used in collecting the oral reminiscences. It is important to know if a questionnaire or specific themes were used for the interviews and the criteria for the selection, editing and arrangement of the entries. An index would add to the usefulness of the book.

Blackouts To Bright Lights is an interesting look at captivating war stories, which show the strength, courage, hardships, adaptability, and humour of these women. Those whose ancestors were war brides, and others interested in this topic should be fascinated by this collection.

G.J. Casey
Memorial University of Newfoundland
St. John's, Newfoundland

Folktales of Newfoundland: The Resilience of the Oral Tradition. By Herbert Halpert and J. D. A. Widdowson, editors, with the assistance of Martin J. Lovelace and Eileen Collins; music transcription and commentary by Julia C. Bishop (New York: Garland, World Folktale Library vol. 3, Garland Reference Library vol. 1856, 1996. 2 vols. Pp. xcv + 1175, Indices, ISBN 0-8153-1736-0 cloth.) [Distributed in Canada through Breakwater, \$250.00, ISBN 1-55081-029-4].

This two-volume work marks the culmination of three decades of research into Newfoundland narrative conducted by two of the pioneers of modern academic folklore in that province, Herbert Halpert and John D. A. Widdowson. But it marks a greater culmination as well: the third part of a trilogy of collaborative work growing out of the early years of the Memorial University of Newfoundland Folklore and Language Archive (MUNFLA). Together with *Christmas Mumming in Newfoundland: Essays in Anthropology, Folklore, and History* (edited by Halpert and G. M. Story, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1969) and *Dictionary of Newfoundland English* (edited by G. M. Story, W. J. Kirwin, and Widdowson, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1982, rev. 1990), the present work completes the plans of Halpert, Widdowson, the late George Story, William J. Kirwin and other scholars associated with MUNFLA in the 1960s to explore and document the linguistic and folkloristic

traditions of a pre-Confederation Newfoundland culture that was then still accessible through the memories of Newfoundlanders.

To this end, in 1962 Halpert and Widdowson began an extensive series of fieldwork expeditions in search of the older traditions of the Island. While they collected an enormous amount of information on many aspects of traditional Newfoundland culture, their own particular interests led to especially strong collections on Newfoundland dialect, mumming traditions, and narratives, subsequently reflected in the MUNFLA trilogy. *Folktales of Newfoundland*, then, presents many of the narratives collected on these field trips, supplemented by the fieldwork of others. In all, these volumes include 150 tales and 15 tale-fragments (137 recorded on tape and the rest reconstructed from written notes) representing 81 AT types. The collection includes 65 tellers from 40 communities, although a small number of tellers predominate (most notably the Bennetts from St. Pauls who contribute 61 tales, and Allan Oake of Beaumont who tells 20 tales). All the narratives presented are of the type found in the AT (Aarne-Thompson) index — Märchen, animal tales, formula tales, novellas, and some jokes — which the editors generally refer to as “long tales” and which have been the mainstay of other national and regional collections of folktales.

The comparison to other folktale collections, however, ends with the type of narratives presented. This work is of a different and higher order, and I doubt that there is another collection like it in English. Its aim is not simply to present some folktales from a region, but to change the nature and purpose of such compilations. The editing, transcription, commentaries, comparative notes, type- and motif-indexing, and musical notation (for the cante fables) are of an exacting, painstaking nature that has not been previously achieved for a North American collection. At every stage of its production, the editors have pondered the most fundamental questions of how such an anthology should be presented, and their 74 page introduction, wherein they explain their philosophy of presentation (as well as giving a short but useful essay on storytelling in Newfoundland), is an important statement in its own right.

This work is not fashionable. Some of the historic-geographic questions it asks about Newfoundland narrative mark it as a work of the 1960s, and many of its references are to scholarship of an earlier era. As well, the editors approach some current folkloristic issues (gender, political economy, postmodernism) obliquely, showing their allegiance to the approaches of an earlier generation. But this work as a *document* places it beyond contemporary criticism; it is for

the ages. Its theoretical strength lies in its presentation of the texts, rather than in its commentaries (as thorough and as interesting as these commentaries are) and that is the place to begin a critical look at this work.

Any performance collected by a folklorist is a representation of what would be performed in a “natural” or traditional context. In other words, the collection of a text becomes its own context with its own dynamic, and the resulting text is shaped not only by the effect of being observed, but by the performer’s knowledge of the fact that he/she is being observed. Likewise, the printed manifestation of a collected performance is a representation — always an eviscerated representation of the original performance. All folklore anthologies, therefore, are inadequate “representations of representations” of what the folklorist seeks: a performance in its fullest social context, a performance experienced by the performer and audience as members of a community. Such a text can never be reproduced. The editors understand the impossibility of presentation, but their approach is nevertheless to “present a text as close to the original speech as is both possible and practicable” (lix) to “a general academic readership” (lx). The resulting transcriptions are detailed recreations, including false starts, misencodings, pauses, asides and all of the other aspects of the spoken word that are usually absent in printed representations of oral performances. Short of presenting the texts in the International Phonetic Alphabet (which they deem both impracticable and ultimately subjective), the editors have attempted the most precise rendering of oral performance possible on the printed page.

Have they succeeded as far as the print medium allows? Have they given the essence of Newfoundland oral storytelling while keeping the texts readable to “a general academic readership?” Perhaps I am the wrong reader to judge their success, as I have some familiarity with Newfoundland dialect and have, in fact, on one occasion been present at a storytelling performance by Freeman Benett, one of the major informants in this collection. Therefore, unlike a reader with no experience of Newfoundland dialect, I know the way these transcriptions “sound.” The editors’ precise conventions of transcription (as outlined in the introduction), however, would seem to allow an uninitiated reader to capture some of the flavour of these oral performances. Certainly, these transcriptions give a better sense of orality than ethnopoetic transcriptions, whose unconventional design distracts, rather than helps, the reader. In fact, the editors’ use of well-understood conventions of orthography, punctuation, and prose allow the reader to apply his/her own traditions of reading to these Newfoundland tales.

The resulting transcriptions are not easy to read, but as the editors point out, the intimate linguistic understanding between speaker and auditor (“subtle features of oral style” [lx]) smooths over false starts, misencodings, and other speech-acts that bedevil transcribers. The “intended meaning” of a seemingly garbled sentence becomes clear to the auditor, while remaining difficult for the decontextualized reader. Have the editors succeeded in their transcriptions? No, if the aim were the easy reading of texts; but the aim of *Folktales of Newfoundland* is the difficult reading of texts. The reader must work hard, sacrificing entertainment for insight. These transcriptions are a lesson in orality, and the price of that lesson is a slow and careful reading of the texts.

Of course this work is not primarily intended as a study in transcription. It is a major collection of folktales from an area of North America that has fascinated scholars for at least the last century. This work documents a tradition of storytelling that flourished in the pre-Confederation outport communities of Newfoundland; a time before the influence of radio and television (although not before that of print and recordings). The subtitle of this collection, “The Resilience of the Oral Tradition,” is somewhat deceptive, given the moribund nature of this kind of storytelling in today’s Newfoundland. By the 1960s, most of those contacted by Halpert and Widdowson were well past their storytelling prime, and most had long lost their audience of fellow fishers, loggers, or even family and neighbours. Many had not told or thought of their stories in years. Thus, the editors were engaged in what amounted to the salvage archaeology of these tales, coaxing fragments and half-remembered stories from out-of-practice tellers. In most cases, the editors were the sole audience for these performances, although on occasion they were able to “induce natural contexts” — to borrow Goldstein’s phrase — wherein tellers were surrounded by family and friends. The results range from marvelously long and complete tales to brief narrative outlines. But the archaeological nature of these texts is evident in the fact that the longest tale in the collection took 32 minutes to tell, whereas the tellers often spoke of how they could tell (or listen to) performances that lasted hours.

The archaeological analogy extends to the collecting methodology generally employed in the 1960s. Whether for the sake of saving batteries or because of the text-orientation of the editors, Halpert and Widdowson tended to shut off their recorders in between performances of tales. Intervening conversation, questions by the collectors and other such contextual information is largely missing from the tapes, and may or may not be supplied by accompanying

field notes. Despite the editors' best efforts to include as much contextual data as they can for each narrative (and their commentaries in this respect are quite good, considering), the tapes themselves are shards rather than complete vessels.

For each tale, the editors have included the name of the teller, the collector(s), place and date of recording, and MUNFLA accession number. In addition, they list the duration of telling, the teller's source for the tale (if known), the location of the telling (e.g., kitchen, garden shed, etc.), the audience for the telling, notes on the context, style and language of the performance, music notation for *cante fables*, types and motif analysis, and international parallels. The editors have included all versions of every tale collected, whether told by the same teller on different occasions, or by different tellers (for example, 8 versions of AT611 told by 5 tellers). All of the accompanying data to these texts is of the highest quality, revealing near-obsessive detail. On occasion the commentary is repetitive, sometimes including excessively long summaries of tales, sometimes restating the same aspects of Newfoundland dialect several times; but there is a great comparative tradition at work here that demands such treatment.

Widdowson, the linguist, includes detailed analyses of the language of these tellers that is a virtual dissertation on Newfoundland English. I can think of no better way of understanding this fascinating dialect — short of spending time in Newfoundland — than reading these transcriptions together with Widdowson's linguistic notes. Halpert's comparative notes are Germanic in the best sense of the term. For each tale, he leads the reader on an historic-geographic tour that places the text within the greater narrative tradition, first comparing the different recensions within the collection, and then spiraling out from North American, English and Irish connections to European, Asian and African parallels. Most of Halpert's notes are longer than their accompanying tales and each is a beautiful micro-study. His analyses revive the wonder of narrative transmission, and no student of the folktale can now call his/her education complete without having read Halpert's notes. At the end of the Twentieth Century, Halpert and Widdowson have engaged in a kind of comparative scholarship, however unfashionable, that breathes life into a nineteenth-century methodology.

It would be easy to criticize these comparativists for what they do not do. For example, a Proppian analysis would have helped Halpert to explain some of the variations between recensions or related tales. As well, despite the editor's attempts to place these tales in their social contexts, this is not one of the

strengths of the work. The editors discuss the role of women in Newfoundland storytelling (few of their tellers are women), relationships of narrative to class and occupation, performative aspects, among other more "modern" topics, but this work is not a major source for Newfoundland scholarship on these subjects. But such matters seem beside the point in a work of this magnitude. *Folktales of Newfoundland* is a monument to the text, and thus stands as a counterstatement to other folkloristic approaches.

Garland should be thanked for publishing this book. Few publishers would have attempted such a difficult collection of tales, and it is doubtful that we will see its like again. This book, as the editors state, is meant for a "general academic readership" and thus it will not find its way into the hands of most who enjoy folktales. This collection would, however, seem to be a good candidate for publication as a multi-media CD or web site. Hearing these tales, while reading the transcriptions, or even while reading edited, easy-to-read versions, accompanied by photographs of the tellers (the printed volume includes 16 photographs of tellers), contextual information on Newfoundland, bibliographic references and other information — such a repackaging would make this work accessible to a wider public. For now, however, we are lucky to have the third in a trilogy of great works on Newfoundland folklore and language.

Michael Taft

University of Northern British Columbia
Prince George, British Columbia

Mass Culture in Soviet Russia. Tales, Poems, Songs, Movies, Plays, and Folklore, 1917-1953. By James von Geldern and Richard Stites, editors. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995. Pp. xxix + 489, bibliography, \$49.95 US, ISBN 0-253-32893-4, cloth, 0-253-20969-2, pbk., \$24.95 US, and 0-253-32911-6, cassette, \$9.95 US).

This anthology of documents, short fiction, poems, songs, plays, movie scripts, comic routines, and folklore provides a close look at the mass culture consumed by millions in Soviet Russia between 1917 and 1953. The authors represent a time-line study of both the changing sponsored cultural forms and the unofficial culture that flourished beneath the surface from the beginning