

Family Names of the Island of Newfoundland. E.R. Seary.

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Family Names of the Island of Newfoundland. E.R. Seary with the assistance of Sheila M.P. Lynch; Corrected Edition ed. by William J. Kirwin. St. John's, Montreal and Kingston, J. R. Smallwood Centre for Newfoundland Studies, M.U.N., McGill-Queen's University Press, liv, 580 p., bibliog., 22x28.5 cm., cloth, acid-free paper, 1998, \$49.95, ISBN 0-7735-1782-0.

CYRIL J. BYRNE

IN ATTEMPTING TO REVIEW *Family Names of the Island of Newfoundland*, Dr. Ronald Seary's great compendium of sources and information on the surname heritage of Newfoundland, I thought it would be useful to approach the review from the point of view of my own interest in the subject and also to view it in the context of Newfoundland's indigenous custom of nicknaming. Hopefully this will place the work in its cultural context and make sense of my own suggestions for revision and possible reformatting of the Seary text.

My fascination with Newfoundland surnames has been with me as long as I can remember and most likely resulted from long summer visits with my grandparents at Kitchuses in Conception Bay and with my cousins in Holyrood. Coming there from a modernized town such as Corner Brook, I felt warped back into a strange and wonderful place where sheep tucked in under the schoolhouse to get in out of both rain and sun, and where goats, horses and cows grazed unattended on what seemed one large "commons," or simply wandered the road. Whose cattle they were was a mystery to outsiders, but they were clearly in the ken of their owners. Another aspect of the area's culture was the bewildering and complex set of nicknames by which the families of the area were known. There was not a single family I can recall which did not have its own special name which was of more importance than its "official" surname. It was this that piqued my interest. For one surname alone, Costello, there were at least twenty sobriquets including other

surnames given to distinguish branches of that family. Two of these sobriquets which were actual surnames were Norcott and Harvey. This feature of giving family or surnames as nicknames, I was to find out later, was not unique to that area, nor indeed to Newfoundland, where the giving of nicknames was general in pre-Confederation days.

But while the array of family and personal appellation was fascinating, it bore the potential for my making a serious social gaff. In my grandfather's presence I addressed a man by his family's nickname without realizing that this was not done, even though the name was known by the family and everyone else as the one by which they were identified. I escaped with an admonition from my grandfather, who explained many of the nicknames to me and how these were to be used.

Distinguishing branches of families bearing the same surname had its comic aspect as well. One of the communities on the Southern Shore where the surname Power was prevalent had a special problem to deal with. It was quite common in Newfoundland where many families sprang from a common male ancestor for that male ancestor's first name to be given to his descendants. In this instance there were numerous progeny of an Edward Power bearing his name and to distinguish them they were given their wives' Christian names, as "Annie's Ned," "Tess's Ned" and so on. In ordinary use the "Ned" was suppressed as well as the surname. Thus an Edward Power would simply be known as "Annie's," "Tess's," etc. A "blow in" telegraph operator from St. John's who was also named Edward Power arrived unmarried in the community. He was quickly assimilated into the naming system as "Nobody's."

"Gudgers," "Peaks," "Tomcods," "Slaveys," "Gulls," and "Jorums" — the last also the name given one of the islands near Splitin Knife, Labrador where "the Jorums" and others dried their fish — were some of the generic nicknames of specific families. There were also nicknames applied to individuals: "The old key," "the young key," "the Earl of Cork," "Kinchela," "Snow on the mountain," and "The foggy dew." These sobriquets are far more useful to the genealogist than they are to an onomatologist working with documented sources. However, as Dr. Seary's excellent introductory essay on surnames shows, nicknaming was the primary source whence hundreds of conventionally used surnames were drawn.

The social history of Newfoundland and Labrador is largely circumscribed by and contained within its surnames and the lore associated with them. They turn up in our folksongs: the Ryans and the Pittmans, Ronald Kelly of the Badger Drive, the Menchions of the Petty Harbour Bait Skiff and on they go. The number of place names which derive from or contain family names is in the hundreds on official maps alone, not to mention the number of fishing grounds, ledges, marshes and rocks which once abounded in the traditional lore of the country and which bore defining family names such as Fisher's Pasture, Chevelier's Cove, McCarthy's Cove, Riley's Rock (a fishing ledge) or Joey Welch's Head. It may be that some of these are being collected for what the Irish call *Dinnseanachas* or lore of place

names; however, it may be we have arrived at the situation dramatized in Brian Friel's play *Translations* wherein only one person remembers the origin and meaning of the local name Tobair Vree without caring overmuch that it is remembered. He is knowledgeable but feckless about traditional lore and ironically the name and its special meaning is only retained by a topographical surveyor from England who cares very much! The social dislocation since Confederation has been one of inevitable loss of much traditional lore retained in that fragile entity, the "folk memory," of a relatively stable, settled population. I felt rather ancient recently in talking to my cousin, John Byrne of Holyrood, about the possibility of going to one of the "old timers" to enquire about a local family. "Bi, what are ye talking about? 'Old timers?' We're the old timers now!"

The current dislocation in Newfoundland brought on by the collapse of the cod stocks is primarily a family and personal trauma but it is also part of a complex process of cultural change with what I might call "psycho-cultural" loss. How often nowadays does one hear the once frequently used formulation "Where does he/she belong?" to inquire about someone's community of origin, which carried with it something of great profundity about the rooted sense of place connected with a fundamental personal identity. Just as the phrase has lost currency so, also, fundamental connections which it implied have become unraveled. Some descendant years hence, attempting to reconnect with a piece of ground or ocean floor, will be unable to do so. One has, I suppose, to deal with another proposition from Friel's play, that "To remember everything is a form of madness." Nonetheless there are a lot of people who are possessed of this form of mania, if mania, indeed, is what one calls the attempt to record the lore associated with names, surnames, names of place.

Such a person was Ronald Seary, whose great work, *Family Names of the Island of Newfoundland*, has just recently reappeared, having been last reissued in 1988. Using the 1955 voters' list as a base, the book gives a brief survey of pertinent information from a variety of sources on each Newfoundland surname in its historical and geographical context with a brief résumé of the name's meaning and place of origin outside Newfoundland. Seary's work and that of a large number of students who did the footwork compiling the entries is the most important single source for data on Newfoundland island family names and deserves the kind of treatment this recent re-issue has received. Books do not appear by magic and the original research and text was laboured upon by Sheila M.P. Lynch and Marion Kelly, whose work deserves the credit given it by Dr. Seary in his remarks made when the book first appeared. The 1998 reissue's smart-looking dust cover, the acid free paper on which the book has been printed in 10/12 Times Roman script are a vast improvement on earlier versions, which were photocopied from a typescript. McGill-Queen's Press is to be complimented on this well turned out book. This impressive new version of Seary's work was edited by William Kirwin who is

careful to point out that his work was largely one of correcting minor errors in the original and that the present work was not to be considered a wholesale revision.

One wonders why the original work of Seary and his colleagues was not given a wholesale revision, because a great deal of useful research has been done over the last thirty years which could have been included but regrettably was not. As well, the kind of detailed material it contains — “a catalogue of Newfoundlanders” as Ray Guy has called it — is fraught with the potential for errors of all sorts and requires careful combing almost constantly. The rigour of academic tradition would surely require that a book published first nearly twenty-five years ago and re-issued four times since without revision should have been revised before being reissued again, and so well dressed! It well may be that the amount of work to be done was considered overwhelming and nobody was willing to take on what surely is a daunting task. However, such a task may not be so daunting nowadays, when one considers the publishing context in which this unchangeable hard copy text has been reissued. The revolution or revolutions in the technology of making available information that have occurred since this book was first published in 1978 present the possibility of correcting existing text and of continually adding newly available material. And the matter of *Family Names* is clearly the sort which is ideal for a site on the internet and for which the technology exists to exact a fee from potential users. One would hope plans are afoot to do something like this by the J.R. Smallwood Centre for Newfoundland Studies who hold the copyright to the work.

That having been said, there is much that could have been done to present a revised version of the earlier text. Thankfully, Dr. Kirwin has included some additional information, most notably that provided by Dr. Gerald Thomas for some of the French family names on the Port-au-Port Peninsula wherein the original text had some real *canards*. In the sheer volume of pieces of paper, cards, etc., on which the original data was gathered, it is very easy to see where mistakes and omissions could have occurred. If one may be allowed a small venality, under the surname Byrne there is no reference to the family's existence in Holyrood, even though the name does occur for that community in the Electors List of 1955 and in other sources cited. And this *lapsus* was not exceptional. The entry for the surname Gushue contains no reference to the numerous persons of that name who must surely have appeared on the official List of Electors 1955 in the Corner Brook area. Not having access to the Electors List of 1955 I could not ascertain whether the surnames Lavin, Gordon and Corbage were simply not on the electoral rolls for Corner Brook and Grand Falls or fell on the cutting floor when the editing was done. Using a base such as the Electors List for 1955 was clearly Dr. Seary's choice and a reasonable one; however, he made exclusions of persons such as members of the RCMP, doctors and nurses or names which had become extinct by death or migration where contemporary, presumably 1977, telephone directories showed no evidence of the name's existence after 1955. Again there are problems with both inclusions and exclusions on this basis.

Quite a number of family names which had a continued existence on the Island for over fifty years but which died out in the male line prior to 1955 were missed by the Official List of Electors 1955 cut-off date but perhaps should have been included in an appendix to indicate the name's prior existence in Newfoundland, especially to benefit those who are now involved in genealogical or family history research both in Newfoundland and abroad and who may make too simply the assumption that if the name does not occur in the Seary "bible," it never existed on the Island. As examples, one could cite the surnames "Kelson," "McGahey" and "Sanchez," which occurred in three scattered areas of the island from three distinct ethnic groups but which, although extinct in the male line, have an amazing progeny through descent in the female line. This is said by way of suggestion rather than as a criticism because it was not Dr. Seary's intention to write a work of genealogy; however, one of the book's implicit and explicit intentions is genealogical and an appendix such as a listing of all surnames occurring in baptismal and marriage records would be valuable, indeed, if the names, places of occurrence and date of earliest record in church registers were listed.

To have attempted the monumental task of collecting this kind of data, organizing it for publication and finally publishing is worthy of praise in itself. That so much of it reached the published format with so few errors and omissions turns a work such as *Family Names of the Island of Newfoundland* into a monument to its major and minor begetters. It should spur on further research and study into the other aspects of Newfoundland and Labrador families and result in an enrichment of the record available to posterity of those who created the "Secret Nation."

Monuments like this occur when what is being memorialized is passing or passed and I cannot help thinking in this context of Ortega y Gasset's lament about modern Spain: "Spain no longer exists but floats above the dust where once a great nation existed." Ronald Seary's tome is a worthy holder of the dust of a great nation.