

## Agnes Walsh. *Answer Me Home: Plays from Tramore Theatre.*

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[See table of contents](#)

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material in the texts that document the relations between the French and such ill-fated Native people as the Beothuk.

In general, this is an excellent compendium for the reader or scholar possessing a sound knowledge base of European and Newfoundland history. As such, the book would work perfectly in a senior French-language course on Newfoundland history or as a foundational text in a field of research that very much beckons its historian. Rompkey's work stands as a highly valuable and carefully edited contribution to this field.

## Note

<sup>1</sup>Source material can be found in Henri de La Chaume, *Terre-Neuve et les Terre-Neuviennes* (Paris: Librairie Plon et Hachette, 1886), esp. 95-106; Joseph Arthur de Gobineau, *Voyage à Terre-Neuve* (Paris: L. Hachette, 1861), 293-302.

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Agnes Walsh. *Answer Me Home: Plays from Tramore Theatre*. St. John's: Breakwater Books, 2011, ISBN 1-55081-348-X

TRAMORE THEATRE was created in 1999 to record and promote the oral history and cultural traditions of the Cape Shore of Placentia Bay, Newfoundland. To help do so, Agnes Walsh, co-founder of the company and its artistic director, wrote a number of plays incorporating these aims. *Answer Me Home* is a collection of seven of these plays, all but one produced at the home-base Cuslett Community Arts Centre.

The earlier plays are the most explicit in their adherence to the cultural agenda of Tramore Theatre. Slim plots are the framework for lectures about the history of the Cape Shore, its Irish past and present, its roll call of family names, and its stories and songs. *To the City of Point Lance* tells of a naive girl who moves from one small outport to another, disappointed initially, but who warms to her new town's ways and to a local man. The last half is a succession of storytelling, including one about the abuse of a man, Mr. Careen, at the hands of the law, evidently taken from life (and repeated in a later play); the others are princess tales. *A Man You Don't Meet Everyday*, about the life of Bride and Patsy Judge, Cape Shore singers, celebrated in the mid-twentieth century and subjects of folklorists, is naturally full of folk tunes. *Just Ask Rosie* centres on two lifelong friends who are being interviewed by a young folklorist, with resultant history, folk tunes, and recitation.

None of these plays has fully developed characters, primarily because these characters function as presenters of stories and songs rather than as people with independent lives and relationships. The brevity of the plays, all under 50 minutes,

also thwarts character development. Mary Elizabeth of *Point Lance* is the most satisfactory character because she fits the conventions of her world. This plucky rural princess who finds her small-town prince is the mirror of her tales and as lightly and predictably drawn as them. *Just Ask Rosie* hints at the self-denied desire of its major characters, but the complications of intimate friendship are otherwise avoided. More significantly, the Judges of *A Man You Don't Meet Everyday* are not developed with any tension or any sense of interior or exterior conflict. In essence, the play is an extension of traditional storytelling. An elderly Bride reminisces on her past with her husband, the characters telling stories of their life experiences, like that of Patsy being tricked into eating a horse turd, thinking it was a molasses bun, or of his mistaking his wife's bloomers for underwear. The trouble is that such party reminiscences don't complete a man. Nor does Bride Judge's division into her young and old selves become more than a theatrical diversion, an attempt at variety, because neither Bride reflects upon the other.

The later plays attempt to be more situational, more traditionally dramatic in structure. Yet these plays do not explore their potential, partly because of the formal adherence to cultural aims. In *First View of the Sea*, a mother in the earlier stages of dementia is being taken care of by her grown son; a daughter visits from town, suspicious of her brother's care. The grief of a woman lost within herself, of her son's limbo life, and of her daughter's confusion are expressed here, evoking some of the better language of the whole volume. "Why shouldn't I be mad? I am goddamned mad. I got nothing but time, and not much of that. Time. Time. Time. Great big gaping hole of time. A big, deep, black well of it. Grand stretch of sky of it. Time everywhere except ahead." However, the mother's mental wanderings are exploited as information about the past: sufferer becomes lecturer, listing various folk remedies and the history of family ties, dissipating human and dramatic immediacy. *Chasing Cripple*, the longest work at 90 minutes, has a folksong and its tale of Irish history. It, also, presents a number of topics, such as out-migration, hunting rights, Newfie jokes, fairies, even the extinction of the Beothuk, all briefly noted, like a checklist of provincial concern.

More fundamentally, the plays remain talks. The characters rarely become themselves. They remain notions, representations quite often of the Newfoundland Past, Future, and Present: the grandmother, either feisty or cranky, laments and recites days gone by; the granddaughter talks and dresses modern; the mother is unsure of her place in the changing world. Characters are given problems, but their dramatic potential is stifled. In *A Family of Strangers*, a grandmother reveals she has cancer; her daughter is really the child of her drunken husband's rape of a brain-damaged girl; the granddaughter is a lesbian whose girlfriend is pregnant by a politician. These confessions elicit shock, and then the family moves on, closer together than before. The unproduced *Solo the Peddler*, the only play with a central male character, has the requisite artifacts: the history of a group, the Newfoundland Lebanese, with its list of family names, songs, and tales of shipwrecks. The dra-

matic potential here is high. There is a clash of cultures, with Solo the Druze in a Catholic world. There are personal griefs, with Solo marrying one sister and impregnating two more, and the accidental death of his babies. Yet, the play remains old-fashioned chronicle, with incident and reportage, but without investigation of emotion, without illustration of family trials.

In a similar way, the language is unsatisfying. It is functional, but tries too hard. It attempts to be both conversational, seen in its repetitions and broken rhythms, and colourful, seen in its puns and metaphors. There is neither the nakedness of real language nor the poetry of Walsh's idol, John Millington Synge. Walsh's characters have not kissed the Blarney Stone, but only waved a hand at it. A fair illustration is provided in a brief excerpt from the grandmother's lengthy opening monologue in *A Family of Strangers*:

What's here? A fish plant on crutches. And I don't mean stilts like the wharves and sheds all use to be years ago. That was lovely, growing up. To go out on the wharf or to your father's shed on the water in the morning and hang your bare legs over the wharf. The seagulls would be screeching and the waves rolling and rolling. So peaceful.

In short, the plays are designed for community theatre and probably work more satisfactorily in that community. The local allusions and history would have greater resonance there. Additionally, the plays are brief, have songs and the occasional joke, and, with lively performance, would be an acceptable evening out. However, despite admirable aims, for an outsider, even a Newfoundlander, particularly one only reading these plays, *Answer Me Home* does not call.

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Alan F. Williams. *John Guy of Bristol and Newfoundland: His Life, Times and Legacy*, edited by W. Gordon Handcock, and Chesley W. Sanger. St. John's: Flanker Press, 2010, ISBN 978-1-897317-9-45

AS JOHN GUY was the driving force behind the first English colony in Newfoundland and its first governor, it is perhaps surprising that he is not a better-known historical figure. Guy's Cupers Cove colony was one of the earliest permanent European settlements in North America, founded in 1610, just three years after the first English New World colony in Virginia. Guy was, therefore, one of the pioneers of American colonization, and his efforts provided a lasting legacy for future Newfoundland settlers. This book represents the first full, modern biography of Guy, exploring his years in Newfoundland and his life as a merchant and political figure in his native Bristol. Unfortunately, when the author, Alan Williams, died in 2003, he left a manuscript that, while complete, required significant revision before it was ready for publication. Gordon Handcock and Chesley Sanger, former Ph.D.