

# The Folktale and Children in the Tradition of French Newfoundlanders

Geraldine Barter

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## Article abstract

"Le conte populaire et les enfants dans la tradition des Franco-Terreneuviens"  
Jusqu'à une quinzaine d'années, la veillée à laquelle les adultes se rencontraient dans la maison d'un voisin pendant les longues soirées d'hiver pour raconter des contes merveilleux et d'autres genres de récits traditionnels, était la forme principale de distraction sociale. Le coutume a presque complètement disparu de la tradition française de Terre-Neuve, grâce surtout à l'influence de formes plus nouvelles et plus attrayantes de divertissement telles que la télévision, le cinéma, le bingo et les clubs. Il est encore possible de recueillir de longs récits traditionnels racontés par des personnes ayant dépassé la quarantaine, mais la plupart des conteurs donnent le nom de "folleries" à leurs contes, disant ainsi qu'ils n'ont plus de valeur et que raconter des contes est passé de mode.

Mon intérêt personnel dans les contes folkloriques et les enfants a été éveillé par des enregistrements faits par Gerald Thomas de contes racontés par des adolescents à Cap-St.-Georges au début des années 70. En interviewant ma mère, conteuse de talent, j'ai appris comment la transmission de contes d'adulte à enfant, souvent de façon indirecte, et d'enfant à enfant, était, il y a 35 ans, un moyen courant d'acquérir un répertoire.

Etant curieuse au sujet de la survivance possible de ce moyen de transmission, j'ai d'abord interviewé ma soeur de 12 ans, ensuite son jumeau. Ils avaient tous deux entendu et pouvaient raconter des contes que leur avait raconté ma mère. Elle leur raconta des contes alors qu'il n'y avait aucun autre enfant ou adulte présent. Mon frère raconta aussi des contes qu'il connaissait à des camarades de classe. Quoiqu'on puisse noter des différences de style et de contenu dans les contes racontés par la soeur et le frère, il est probable que l'art de conter des contes n'a pas disparu mais pourra survivre sous cette forme voilée. Les adultes ne considèrent pas vraiment leurs contes comme "folleries" et le fait de raconter des contes aux enfants a trois fonctions: cela sert d'abord au conteur de retrouver et de conter des contes qui lui sont chers; deuxièmement, les adultes trouvent au auditoire enthousiaste; et troisièmement, cela aide à maintenir vivante la tradition de conter.

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## The Folktale and Children in the Tradition of French Newfoundlanders\*

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GERALDINE BARTER

In the small community of La Grand'Terre, on the western shore of Newfoundland's Port-au-Port peninsula, storytelling, and especially the telling of *Märchen*, was a favourite winter pastime as recently as twenty years ago. Men and women would go house-visiting, to take part in a *veillée*, or evening's storytelling. The *veillées* would begin in the fall, once the fishing gear had been put away until the following spring, and would continue throughout the long winter nights. This social event would begin with a card-playing session, be followed by a lunch served by the hostess, and conclude with storytelling. In my own experience, no more than one or two couples would visit a house of an evening, and the host and hostess would be invited to the house of one of the visiting couples on a following night.

The traditional *veillée* was a custom practised during an era when the community was, to a great extent, cut off from the outside world. Means of transport were inadequate and education practically non-existent. Electricity was not brought to the community until the early sixties, and it is from that time that important changes began to occur in the traditional life-style. At the same time as electricity reached La Grand'Terre, an improved road allowed local children to be bussed to a nearby English community for their schooling; people could now visit friends outside the community with greater ease, or take advantage of alternative forms of entertainment elsewhere. Storytelling suffered as a consequence, but more than any other factor, it was television which had the most disastrous effect on the custom of storytelling. Stories could be seen as well as heard, and subtle pressures exerted by television drama, such as the concept of suspense as opposed to the obvious repetition of folktales, helped wean people away from the *veillée* and the *conte*.

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\* This paper was presented at the 2nd annual meeting of the Folklore Studies Association of Canada in Fredericton, June 1-3, 1977.

While these initial remarks suggest that the *veillée* and storytelling have disappeared, it should be stressed that there are still many older people who know folktales and who, when encouraged to do so, will tell them. It might well be argued that what one is witnessing is the last generation of storytellers, and in the context of the *veillée*, this is perhaps true. But there is another context, much less evident to the casual or outside observer, where stories are still told. It is a context which may explain why tales can still be collected today, amongst French Newfoundlanders or other groups of people, long after the imminent disappearance of *Märchen* from western tradition was first predicted. It is the context of parent and child to which I am referring, and I shall illustrate my argument with evidence drawn chiefly from my family tradition.

It is my conviction that people who have lived in a tradition of active storytelling still like to tell stories, despite evidence to the contrary. It is in part perhaps because of nostalgia, in part because new forms of entertainment have never fully ousted the old pleasures. The fact remains, however, that people no longer tell tales in public.

This is due, I believe, to television, which has replaced with the notion of "suspense" the old criterion of the folktale, repetition. This is borne out by the kind of remarks made over and over again by narrators being interviewed by folklorists. They will say apologetically, "It all goes in threes, eh?", with a wry look on their faces. They will say with disdain that "Dat's all *folleries*," foolishness, because they feel that anyone with any education will look down on such repetitive tales. Hence, the narrator, prompted to tell stories by the collector, will begin by claiming not to know any *contes* (*Märchen*) at all, and if finally persuaded to narrate, will only give the bare bones of a tale, not detailing the normally thrice-repeated events.

It is my opinion that storytellers do not really think their tales are mere "*folleries*." To say so is a device to protect themselves from appearing old-fashioned and foolish since, in an isolated community such as La Grand' Terre, they expect outsiders to feel the tales are old-fashioned. But once a real rapport has been established the floodgates are opened, and a tide of tales may be the collector's good fortune.

Now if collectors can obtain long and well told tales of wonder, and if narrators no longer tell tales publicly, or, apparently, in private, how then do they remember them so well? I believe it is through telling tales to children, and this serves two functions. First, the storyteller-parent is able to narrate the tales he or she loves to an uncritical audience. Second, children love stories, especially when they are told orally. From their earliest age they hear and enjoy the simplest form of narrative, as when a mother will play "This little piggy went to the market" on their toes. They enjoy the repetition, and they enjoy precise repetition. Parents who claim to

feel “foolish” telling *Märchen* to other adults do not feel the same way about telling them to children. Children genuinely want to hear the tales, and do not tire of “re-runs” nor do they tire of repetitive structures within the tales. The evidence is that children learn such tales, and transmit them to other children.

My interest in children and storytelling was first aroused when I transcribed tape-recordings made at Cape St. George by Gerald Thomas. Amongst other tales, he had collected a version of Aarne-Thompson 480, *The Spinning Women by the Spring*, from a then twenty-year-old girl who had learned it as a child while some older girls were baby-sitting. Some three years later, I was present when he collected another folktale from a young man also from Cape St. George, and also twenty years old. At the same period, he also collected several fragments of folktales and one complete version of AT 563, *The Table, The Ass, and the Stick*, from my seventeen-year-old sister. On occasional visits home, I discovered that my mother still used to tell such stories to my younger brother and sisters. In late 1975, I discovered, much to my surprise, that one of my sisters knew a folktale learnt from my mother only two weeks before, and that she was willing to let me record her telling it. I was surprised because, although I remembered my mother telling stories to my older sisters and myself when I was a child, I never learned them myself and I had mistakenly thought my mother no longer told them to her children.

After I had recorded my sister telling a version of AT 303, *The Twins or Blood Brothers*, my mother, who had been listening to her daughter’s narration, corrected her version, adding and expanding where my sister had either forgotten or confused episodes. Parenthetically, both versions were recorded on the same tape, and will make for interesting comparisons. On my most recent return home, I was able to record my twelve-year-old brother, who told me a folktale and some fragments of two other humorous tales. Here then appeared to be a genuine line of folktale transmission, from mother to children. I decided to explore in more detail this apparently covert system.

The first details I acquired were through recordings I made of my mother, Mrs. Elizabeth Barter. I asked her how she first learned folktales. She answered in English because the younger children were present and their French is not fluent. She first heard and learned folktales as a child:

Well, the people was to come over dere, over to my mudder and fadder’s, we’ll say eh — well now they might sit down have a game of cards, eh? Well so long they was playin’ cards now, they didn’t mind too much us playin’ — but not screechin’ . . . now when dey was done ‘avin’ their game of cards they was to have a lunch . . . an’ then they would sit down. An’ den poor Dad was to say now, “No noise.” An’ that was *it*. Everyone of us was to lay down on the floor — on a hardwood floor.

Sometimes a coat or a piece of cotton under our head sometimes, an' sometimes more on our h'arms. An' then they was to start the tellin' — tellin' *contes*. An' sometimes we was to stay until two o'clock in the morning. We were allowed to stay as long as we didn't make no noise.<sup>1</sup>

Those were the conditions, some forty years ago, in which my mother heard folktales. Hard floors were no obstacle to children anxious to listen. The only warning was not to make any noise. Of course, when I was a child I was not allowed to stay up late as I had to go to school; but in my mother's day, as she notes, a quite different order reigned:

But now in my time to your time t'was different. . . . Now us we had no school eh, we say, we . . . we wasn't put to bed nine o'clock or ten o'clock we say, or half-past eight . . . when people was to come in the house, now we was to stay quite (= quiet) . . . well we was allowed to stay up until we'd fall asleep on the floor . . . oh, fall asleep with our arms like this on the floor. So long was no noise poor Dad didn't mind. . . . Da's how I, da's how come I learned dem *contes*.<sup>2</sup>

The tales my mother learned as a child were for an adult audience, but this did not prevent her or other children from telling them to each other:

It was for grown-ups, yes, grown-ups' stories y'know, that the youngsters, now well they was to tell them between them sometimes, the youngsters y'know . . . we was to get together now between kids when we was to tell stories now between us. The way it was now wit' us — if he knowed it was a child that knowed a story, well they was to gather to that 'ouse, we'll say eh? Well that child'd tell it to the other one.<sup>3</sup>

Forty years ago, then, children would learn tales during the *veillée* and then retell them to their peers.

When my mother had her own children, she told them the tales she had learned as a child or as a young adult:

Well, when I start gettin' my family, then you know well I start tellin' dem stories eh? An' dey used to come back to me, eh, de more I was to tell dem to dem — well I used to start from Vene, when Vene start big enough, she was big enough to understand — well I start from her an' then I come right down to dem, eh?<sup>4</sup>

As the older children left the house and started families of their own, some of them would retell my mother's tales to their children. But where as my mother originally told tales in French, my sisters' children and my

<sup>1</sup>Barter collection, Memorial University of Newfoundland Folklore and Language Archive, FS022/75-239, p. 8.

<sup>2</sup>Barter collection, M U N F L A., F2022/75-239, pp. 6-7

<sup>3</sup>Barter collection, M U N F L A., F2022/75-239, pp. 9-10

<sup>4</sup>Barter collection, M U N F L A., F2022/75-239, p. 7

younger siblings tend to hear them in English, and to hear versions which are, moreover, less complete than those told by my mother.

These differences are naturally apparent in the tales I recorded from my brother Tony and his twin sister Tillie. They narrate in English, and their tales tend to be incomplete. But there are other differences which set apart Tony from Tillie as narrators, and which may foreshadow their future repertoires. Tillie's narrations lacked bawdy elements of any kind and emphasized the romance and magic of true *Märchen*, but the three tales my brother told had not been told to him directly by my mother. He had picked them up while she was narrating them in French to Gerald Thomas. When I asked him which stories he liked best, he answered: "The dirty stuff an' the tricks dey plays."<sup>5</sup> He prefers trickster tales, and his favourite was a version of the French chapbook tale, "Roquelore."

Reflecting a milieu in which formal education is still seen as a necessary evil rather than a desirable acquisition, my brother told me, in relation to oral or written stories: "I don't like reading them out de books. I rather somebody tellin' them. I know more of it then."<sup>6</sup> The oral tale still has more appeal than the written form in my tradition. He also commented that he was sorry our mother did not tell stories more often, but limited herself to times when the older children were not at home. Further, he only rarely has the chance to hear her telling tales to Gerald Thomas or me, as my mother usually tells us tales when the younger children are in bed.

Just as I have argued that older people take their tales more seriously than one might think, so do children seem to take them seriously. This can be seen from a brief examination of the twins' narrative style. Although Tony spoke at first in a somewhat stilted manner, as if he were reading from a book — perhaps because of nervousness at being recorded, or because he was concentrating on remembering the tale the way he heard it — he did narrate using a number of features typical, at least, of my mother's style. He retained the characteristic closing formula in its English version, "If they're not dead, they're livin' yet"; he used typical body movements likely to evoke the actions of his tales and provoke an appropriate response from his friends; and he told his stories seriously and without much self-consciousness.

Tillie's narration was more calm and thoughtful, with little physical agitation, but greater attention to detail. She too told her story with much seriousness. Both could be criticized for not reproducing the tales just as

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<sup>5</sup>Barter collection, M.U.N.F.L.A., F2429/77-34.

<sup>6</sup>Barter collection, M.U.N.F.L.A., F2429/77-34.

our mother told them, but it must be remembered that neither hears tales frequently, in the way my mother did as a child.

I noted earlier that my elder sisters tell tales to their children, that the twelve-year-old twins know tales, and that Tony actively tells them to his friends. This must be seen as evidence that storytelling, in particular the telling of *Märchen*, is still a living tradition, although transmission is done in a covert fashion. Although the tradition has suffered radical change in the last twenty years, going “underground” as it were, it is still alive, not only in the minds of older people, but also with young children. The art of storytelling may well last a good deal longer in Franco-Newfoundland tradition and elsewhere, despite the pessimistic predictions of scholars. As a product of the tradition I have described, I can only add that many more tales could be collected in Franco-Newfoundland tradition if the bearers of the tradition were not ashamed to tell the tales which seem so dear to them. Contemporary children may lose their taste for folktales under the pressure of television, formal education or snobbery. I have attempted to show that this does not have to happen, and it is possible that what is true for Newfoundland’s French tradition may well be true for other parts of Canada where storytelling is believed to have disappeared.

Geraldine Barter  
Centre d’Etudes Franco-Terreneuviennes,  
Memorial University of Newfoundland

### Extrait

*“Le conte populaire et les enfants dans la tradition des Franco-Terreneuviens”*

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