

## Broken Rings : Folksong and Occupational Transitions in the Maritime Provinces

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Article abstract

The return of a disguised hero who tests the fidelity of his partner is one of the most commonly encountered themes in oral tradition. This paper seeks a localized interpretive frame for the motif by examining the "Broken Ring" ballads, with specific reference to their function in the fisher/lumbering communities of the Maritimes. It suggests that the two-dimensional imagery of the songs is a touchstone for a larger symbolic network, one which argues for sympathy where difficulties in human relationships are encountered due to occupational absences.

# BROKEN RINGS: FOLKSONG AND OCCUPATIONAL TRANSITIONS IN THE MARITIME PROVINCES<sup>1</sup>

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According to Edith Fowke, the most popular ballads in Canada are those belonging to the sub-genre commonly referred to as the "Broken Ring" or "Broken Token" cycle.<sup>2</sup> This group of over twenty types, mainly the output of the broadside press, derives its name from the central motif of a token, usually a ring, broken between two lovers, which serves as a vehicle for the recognition of the hero when he returns after a lengthy separation. The overall scenario is succinctly encapsulated by G. Malcolm Laws as follows:

No group of broadsides are more stereotyped than those in which the lover poses as a stranger and attempts to make love to the one who is waiting for him. She invariably spurns him, announces her loyalty to her absent lover, and describes him. This is the man's clue to report that her lover has been killed in battle or shipwreck. As the girl swoons, the youth reveals his identity, often producing his half of a ring once broken as a pledge of fidelity. All is now well and nothing is said either about the man's cruelty or the poor girl's eyesight.<sup>3</sup>

Songs of this type appear in a wide range of variants. In *American Ballads from British Broad-sides*, Laws cites no less than 16 types featuring this scenario under the category "Ballads of Lover's Disguises and Tricks," constituting fully one third of the songs under that heading. Still further analogues appear in "The Bold Fisherman" [Laws O24], "The Apprentice Boy" [Laws M12], in the native American ballads "The Banks of Brandywine" [Laws H28] and "The Bright Blooming Star of Belle Isle" [Laws H29], and in such classical types as "Hind Horn" [Child 17], "The Kitchie Boy" [Child 252] and "The New Slain Knight" [Child 263]. This story line has proven particularly resilient in

1. An earlier version of this paper was read at the 1990 meeting of the Folklore Studies Association of Canada in Moncton. Research has been generously funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada and by the Institute for Social and Economic Research at Memorial University. Their support is gratefully acknowledged.
2. Quoted in Bill Usher and Linda Page-Harpe, *"For What Time I am in this World": Stories from Mariposa*, Toronto, Peter Martin Associates, 1977, p. 37.
3. G. Malcolm Laws, *American Broad-sides from British Ballads*, Publications of the American Folklore Society, Bibliographic and Special Series, Vol. VIII, Philadelphia, American Folklore Society, 1957, p. 18.

the song traditions of the Maritime provinces; 17 of the 23 types above have been collected here.

A fair amount of attention has been devoted to this song cycle and its many variants. Some commentaries speculate on the origins of individual types, as in Lucy Broadwood's Gnostic interpretations of "The Bold Fisherman",<sup>4</sup> and Michael Gray's lengthy yet inconclusive quest for the source of the "Star of Belle Isle".<sup>5</sup> Roger Renwick uses "The Bold Fisherman" as a starting point for an exploration of imagery in the English broadside tradition in general, focusing specifically on how generic motifs tend to highlight the themes of love and death.<sup>6</sup> Yet, for the most part, comments begin and end with rather abstract statements about "timelessness" or idealised romance. Sandy Ives, for example, writes:

As old as *The Odyssey* and probably even older, [the narrative] is anything but realistic, and singer and listener alike certainly know this well. Yet the song gives us the ideal, the woman constant and waiting, the man returning after long wandering and dangers past. It is love as it should be, and the singing makes it real for a few fleeting moments.<sup>7</sup>

Such general comments are probably fitting if one is attempting to consider broadsides in the holistic sense of the entire Anglo-American tradition. However, contextually situated studies can advance our understanding of the genre by searching for deep-structure underpinnings that may illuminate the significance of this and other ballad tales within particular cultural milieux.

In this country, Fowke accounts for the popularity of Broken Ring types by calling attention to several major events in Canadian history that necessitated extended absence:

Men would come over here and try to find work and get settled, and sometimes their wives and sweethearts were left at home in Britain. Or men would go west to California during the gold rush, or to the Yukon or the Prairies. This made the theme of lovers remaining faithful...very appealing.<sup>8</sup>

In the discussion that follows, I would like to build on Fowke's assessment by suggesting that the appeal of the Broken Ring songs lies not only in their relevance to large events in the North American experience. It also resides in their relevance to daily exigencies of life in rural industries that, in the Maritimes at least, have especially strong connections with folksong traditions, namely

4. Lucy E. Broadwood, "The Bold Fisherman", *Journal of the Folk Song Society* 5 (1915), p. 132-135; see also "The Bold Fisherman", *Journal of the Folk Song Society* 7 (1923), p. 36-40.

5. Michael Gray, "Grubbing for a Moderate Jewel: In Search of the Blooming Bright Star of Belle Isle", *Canadian Folklore canadien* 11 (1986), p. 43-85.

6. Roger DeV. Renwick, *English Folk Poetry: Structure & Meaning*, Philadelphia, American Folklore Society, 1980, p. 21-53.

7. Edward D. Ives, *Folksongs of New Brunswick*, Fredericton, Goose Lane Editions, 1989, p. 70.

8. Usher and Page-Harpa, p. 37.

seafaring and lumbering. Extended absence from home and family is an integral feature in both pursuits. In the case of deep-water sailors of the merchant marine, voyages abroad could take a man away for up to two years or more. Even in fishing and lumbering, where men had to leave home on a seasonal basis for periods lasting from two weeks to three months, absence is still a factor to be dealt with, though duration is probably less of a factor than frequency. In these industries, it is the repeated occupational cycle of departure and return that makes absence a perennial issue of cultural concern.

Through an examination of the scenario of the Broken Ring types in relation to anthropological writings regarding the effects of occupational absences on basic personal relationships, this paper asserts that the primary regional attraction for these songs is that they depict, in a stylised fashion, very human responses to the difficulties faced by both males and females during periods of separation. In coming to an understanding of these difficulties and how communities, families, and individuals characteristically react to them, we can suggest an ameliorative interpretation of what Laws dismisses as "the man's cruelty," that is, the hero's apparent indulgence in a patently chauvinist test of the woman's fidelity.

The following text of "Janie on the Moor" [Laws N34], collected by William Roy Mackenzie from Mrs. James Campbell, River John, Pictou Co., typifies the songs of this variety:

One morning for recreation as I roamed by the seaside  
The hills all were covered with flowers bedecked with pride.  
I spied a handsome fair maid as she roamed along the shore;  
Like roses blooming were the cheeks of Janie on the Moor.  
Said I, "My handsome fair maid, why thou so early rise?"  
"'Tis for to breathe the morning air while the larks are in the skies;  
I love to roam the beach alone where the loud billows roar  
That make the bosom of the deep," cried Janie on the Moor.  
We both sat down together on yon mossy side.  
Said I, "My handsome fair maid, I will make you my bride.  
I have both gold and silver brought from some foreign shore,  
And with me you may tarry, dear Janie on the Moor."  
"I have a true love of my own. Long since he's gone for me,  
But with pleasure I'll wait on him till he'll return from sea.  
I'll wait on him without a doubt til he'll return on shore.  
We'll join our hands in wedlock bands," cried Janie on the Moor.  
"If your true was a sailor pray tell to me your name."  
"His name was Dennis Ryan, from New York town he came;  
But with pleasure I'll wait on him till he returns on shore,  
And we'll join our hands in wedlock bands," cried Janie on the Moor.  
"If your true love was a sailor I know the young man well.  
He was in the battle at Vendons Town, by an angry ball he fell.  
Here is a token of true love which he on his finger wore."  
She fell a fainting in his arms, dear Janie on the Moor.

When he saw she was tender-hearted, "Behold, my love," he cried,  
 This is your Dennis Ryan a standing by your side!  
 So come and we'll get married and be happy evermore.  
 We'll join our hands in wedlock bands, dear Janie on the Moor."<sup>9</sup>

As Renwick demonstrates, the stage on which the action unfolds contributes significantly to the overall meaning of ballads of this sort.<sup>10</sup> Virtually all types and versions within the sub-genre locate the narrative in a transitional setting: a garden [Laws N42] (transitional interval between home and village); in fields [Laws N35 & N39] (transitional space between natural and domestic space); or more commonly, as in the above text, by the sea shore or the banks of a river (point of transition between land and sea). To lead the actors onto this stage, the texts normally employ the customary broadside incipit of "roving out" or a similar construct, which Renwick interprets as motion toward a place where community rules do not apply, thereby paving the way for an extraordinary encounter. To "rove out," in his assessment, is to move toward "space" in Yi-Fu Tuan's sense of regions unknown.<sup>11</sup> In the present instance, however, the transitional locus of action reflects the liminal status of the relationship between hero and heroine during their separation and the change it is about to undergo. Like all transitions, it is a time of trial, figuratively and literally.

The aesthetic of the Broken Ring cycle, which hinges on the tension forced upon the dramatis personae by this liminal condition, becomes clear when the characters' emotions and motivations are considered from the cultural perspective of their real-world counterparts. The female character, for example, when we first encounter her, is normally off by herself, often weeping, lamenting, or appearing downhearted—as one text puts it, "Her countenance looked sad".<sup>12</sup> As such, her persona bears a striking resemblance to the ideal of the "grass widow" described by anthropologist Donna Lee Davis in a recent study of women's roles in Newfoundland fisher culture. She writes:

Grass widow formally describes a very passive female expressive role—the woman who sits on the grassy hills (actually mossy rocks) overlooking the shore, staring out to sea, wondering when and if her husband will come home from fishing.<sup>13</sup>

9. William Roy Mackenzie, *Ballads and Sea Songs from Nova Scotia*, 1928; rpt. Hatboro, PA, Folklore Associates, 1963, p. 175-176.
10. Renwick, p. 19. For other studies that evaluate the poetic function of the sets on which the ballad action occurs, see David Buchan, "The Affinities of Revenant and Wit-Combat Ballads", *Ballades et Chansons Folkloriques*, ed. Conrad Laforte, Actes de la 18<sup>e</sup> session de la Commission pour l'étude de la poésie de tradition orale de la S.I.E.F. Actes du Celat, no 4, Québec, Célat, Université Laval, 1989, p. 333-339, and Per Schelde Jacobsen and Barbara Fass Leavy, *Ibsen's Forsaken Merman: Folklore in the Late Plays*, New York, New York University Press, 1988, see particularly p. 66-67.
11. Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1977.
12. "Johnny German", MacKenzie, p. 173.
13. Donna Lee Davis, "'Shore Skippers' and 'Grass Widows': Active and Passive Women's Roles in a Newfoundland Fishery", *To Work and to Weep. Women in Fishing Economies*, Jane Nadel-

Despite the passivity of this folk version of the *French Lieutenant's Woman*, the notion holds a very positive value in the community studied by Davis. This is not because Newfoundland women subscribe to the image as a model of appropriate active behaviour; quite the contrary. Rather the image is important as a model of an understandable emotional reaction to the difficulties of being a mariner's wife. As Davis states, "The term grass widow expresses women's emotional involvement in the fishery". In its evocation of the emotional strain of separation, it speaks, by inversion, to the dynamic energy required to overcome that strain. Thus, on a semiotic level, the image of the grass widow gets channelled in two directions. On the one hand, there is the pragmatic side of the woman who must keep hearth and home in order without assistance from a spouse, "the woman who is both mother and father to her children. She represents the good woman, who keeps that family together and functioning through the good times and bad". On the other hand, there is a more romantic facet, idealised, but nonetheless significant. Davis's appraisal of this component of the imagery touches significantly on two themes central to the Broken Ring songs: the expectations of the return and the potential for the hero never to return:

Grass widow symbolizes the adaptation to cyclical patterns of male absence. Grass widow symbolizes the excitement of homecoming, intense companionship and the mutual admiration that traditionally characterized the husband/wife relationship. Grass widow denotes the shared emotions of husband and wife. For the older woman it brings back past memories of excitement for the returning hero after a long trip; an excitement intensified by the promise of sexual activity after long periods of abstinence. Women would bake homemade pies and gather on the cliffs to spot the boats coming in, to await proof that they had escaped widowhood this time.<sup>14</sup>

In Broken Ring songs, the heroine is cast in the mold of the "grass widow," and the symbology surrounding this character type, coupled with the social function of that symbology, must be held as central to meaning within the sub-genre. Her passivity can be regarded as "truth" only by one unacquainted with the acts of emotional strength required to endure long or repeated periods of separation and the effects they have on "normal" family existence. From a rhetorical

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Klein and Donna Lee Davis (eds.), *ISER, Social and Economic Papers*, No. 18, St. John's, Institute of Social and Economic Research, 1988, p. 220-221. It is perhaps worth noting, given the theme of fidelity in the songs under discussion, that Partridge's understanding of the term "grass widow", as Davis notes, is a woman whose husband is absent but not dead. Partridge, however, suggests that the term normally implies an *unfaithful* woman, often an unwed mother or the mother of an illegitimate child (Eric Partridge, *A Dictionary of Slang and Unconventional English*, 8th ed., (ed.), Paul Beale, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984). It is difficult to know what to make of this inversion of meaning, whether it is the result of region or gender. The term is not listed in *Dictionary of Newfoundland English*, 2nd ed., George Story, William Kirwin, and John Widdowson (eds.), St. John's, Breakwater, 1990.

14. Davis, p. 221.

perspective, the tension between the pragmatic and the emotional components of the grass widow probably helps to establish, in large measure, the cultural significance of the image. In effect, were an individual to subscribe to the actual model of the forlorn woman aimlessly staring out to sea, she would in all likelihood be unable to meet the responsibilities of maintaining house and home by herself. The symbol of the grass widow, however, acknowledges the fact that despite the socio-economic need for women to take on active roles, there are times when simply being human forces one to give into moments of loneliness, despair, concern for a partner's safety, and a longing for his return. The cultural acceptance of the symbol lays a communal foundation for such feelings — "everyone feels this way at sometime" — even if community mores would not sanction the public display of these sentiments every time they were encountered. As such, the image is a leveller through which the stress of fear and loneliness is borne by the community, rather than the individual. Through the symbol, the individual can tap into a larger emotional network and find empathy for concerns ever present, when in reality neither the concerns nor empathy for them find ready expression within the daily framework of living.<sup>15</sup>

Turning to the male character, we have at the outset of the song his return, unrecognized if not actually in disguise, to what one presumes will be homecoming in its most integrative sense, that is, not only a return to a place but to a reinstatement of his position within the cultural and familial complex that he left. A straight-forward interpretation of the narrative and the centrality of the test within it suggests that the issue of the heroine's fidelity is foremost in his mind. Certainly, the destabilization of conventional amatory relationships is perhaps to be expected (and worried about) where extended or frequent occupational absences are an inherent part of life. Events such as the following noted by Nova Scotian diarist Simeon Perkins were perhaps not at all uncommon. In his entry for March 26, 1778, he writes:

Mrs. Horton delivered of a son last night. Capt. Horton has been gone near one year 10 months. Jane Nickerson, single woman, was also delivered of a daughter. Several such instances have happened of late, to the great disgrace of the place...<sup>16</sup>

Anthropologists report that even in the modern fishing industry, where absences are relatively short, some fishermen express reluctance even to have their wives to work outside the home, since it would expose them to the company of other men.<sup>17</sup>

15. The socio-poetic function of the symbol envisioned here is analogous to the rhetorical process of "naming" discussed by Roger Abrahams in his article, "Introductory Remarks to a Rhetorical Theory of Folklore", *Journal of American Folklore* 81 (1968), p. 143-158.

16. Simeon Perkins, *The Diary of Simeon Perkins*, (ed.) Harold A. Innis Toronto, The Champlain Society, 1948, p. 187.

17. Jeremy Tunstall, *The Fishermen*, London, MacGibbon and Key, 1962, p. 161.

But concern for fidelity only partly explains the test in the Broken Ring scenario, and two factors, one generic, the other ethnographic, can be presented which might help to place the rather unheroic test in a more culturally meaningful light. As has long been recognized by folklorists, the poetic function of a traditional motif extends beyond the individual text in which it is found and the significance of a given image appears to be determined at a generic rather than a textual level.<sup>18</sup> Thus, interpretation of the folklore text cannot be conducted effectively on a premise of text closure. The characters in this ballad stand not only in relation to the immediate narrative environment, but also in relation to other presentations of sailors' encounters with women in other scenarios. Songs of the sea are customarily inhabited by women of a meretricious nature, but who frequently dress themselves in a very moral, upstanding cloak,<sup>19</sup> or whose primary interest in the sailor is his hard earned cash.<sup>20</sup> By the conventions of the genre, then, the heroine must be shown to be of stalwart character in order to be believed.

From a more sympathetic angle, we can also approach the test as a reflection of insecurities within the protagonist which are often cited by anthropologists as culturally inherent among males where occupational absences are a way of life. In such environments, men often live an existence that is peripheral to the inner family structure and their relationship to that structure is constantly in doubt. Michael Orbach writes at length of the many difficulties fishermen encounter in their familial relationships resulting directly from extended absences.<sup>21</sup> For single fishermen, long trips at sea followed by short periods

18. See for example, Barre Toelken, "An Oral Canon for the Child Ballads: Construction and Application", *Journal of the Folklore Institute* 4 (1967), p. 75-101; Roger Renwick, esp. Chapter 1, "The Bold Fisherman", and Flemming G. Andersen, *Commonplace and Creativity: The Role of Formulaic Diction in Anglo-Scottish Traditional Balladry*, Odense University Studies from the Medieval Centre, Vol. 1, Odense, Odense University Press, 1984, esp. p. 31-37 & 102-283.
19. See for example "The Shirt and Apron" [Laws K42]. Though not cited by Laws, this song is contained in the local repertoire under the title, "Barrack Street" in Helen Creighton, *Songs and Ballads from Nova Scotia*, 1933, rpt. New York, Dover, 1966, p. 226. It is also commonly reported as the narrative line to the shanty, "Can't You Dance the Polka". For texts see Stan Hugill, *Shanties from the Seven Seas*, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1961, p. 372-377, or William Doerflinger, *Shantymen and Shantyboys: Songs of the Sailor and Lumberman*, New York, Macmillan, 1951, p. 58-59.
20. See for example Laws K36 to K39.
21. Michael K. Orbach, *Hunters, Seamen and Entrepreneurs: The Tuna Seimen of San Diego*, Berkeley, CA, University of California Press, 1977, see especially chapter 11, "Community and Self-Image". Comparable comments can be found in Tunstall's seventh chapter, "Fisherman's Domestic Life". Although much of what they write relates specifically to contemporary, urban based fisheries, the absence-related problems are easily transferable to the traditional, rural context. In fact, the situation for Nova Scotian fishermen and more particularly for deep-water sailors in the last century would have been more acute, given that the period



at home mean that relationships with members of the opposite sex are difficult to establish and even more difficult to sustain.<sup>22</sup> For the married man, the situation is more complex. At sea, he lives in ignorance of the day to day changes and emotional fluxes within the family, and when he returns he is perceptibly outside the tensions and affiliations generated by such occurrences. Fishermen also tend to yield the traditionally male role of head-of-household to their wives, and when at home, their behaviour tends to be at odds with the conventional images of "husband" and "father". Orbach concludes that,

The fisherman's absence breeds a certain amount of guilt and fear of rejection in his own mind. Because the cultural expectations of his role dictate behaviors he cannot perform at sea and perhaps will not even perform while he is at home, a dissonance is created between his prescribed role and his actual behavior. The fishermen feel bad about this dissonance, and guilty about being in an occupation which creates it.

At the same time they feel unsure about behaving as their role dictates for fear of being rejected by their wives and children. When you see someone only a few times a year you tend to grow unsure of their feelings toward you, especially if you notice other aspects of their thought and behavior changing from visit to visit...<sup>23</sup>

The consequence of the fisherman's uncertainty with respect to his relationship with family members ashore is, in Orbach's view, "an exaggerated need to feel control".

Within this framework, it is fairly simple to recognize the pattern and function of the ballad hero's actions, actions that reflect both his uncertainty of the heroine's feelings toward him and of his "need to feel control". The test is not merely an insensitive probing for indications of the woman's sexual fidelity, but is as much a sensitive acknowledgment of his own outsideness. It is a test of love, of the heroine's continued interest in the relationship, and a search for an indication of his place within that relationship. One need only consider the ramifications of a negative outcome of the test to realize that the hero is in a subordinate, not a superior, position.

In the final analysis, one can perhaps say that the Broken Ring scenario awkwardly portrays a difficult reality. The pivotal act of the test is self-centred and devious, and neither of the central characters taken at their face value — a moping woman and a jealous lover — is particularly heroic in any conventional sense of the term. They are, however, very human characters, and it is perhaps the humanity represented in their actions that the songs elucidate. Interestingly, while the narrative symbolically displays tensions surrounding transitional points in the occupational cycle, it offers no easy solution to the difficulties; it simply acknowledges that they exist, which is probably an important function in and

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of separation tended to be much longer and the possibility for communication virtually non-existent.

22. Orbach, p. 281-282.

23. Orbach, p. 280.

of itself in a culture where interpersonal relationships are not commonly open for discussion. Perhaps an appeal for sympathy is the best the narrative can hope to achieve, a function, according to Roger Abrahams, for which folklore is well-adapted:

The essence of sympathy seems to reside in the paradox of culture: that social cohesion is most fully sensed in terms of the antagonisms felt within the groups. Community is achieved through a balance of dissociative as well as associative forces. ...Sympathy, in life as well as art, is essentially a mediating force, a recognition of the universality of strife through the ability to imagine oneself 'in the shoes of another'. And folklore as a sympathetic activity functions mediational as an imaginative projection, creating a world of conflict which for each individual is both a negation and an affirmation of community... It can do this mediating because it is a 'play' phenomenon, a projection of conflict in an impersonal and harmless milieu.<sup>24</sup>

Specifically, the Broken Ring songs appeal for sympathy at the very difficult, transitional point of return, when the insecurities of each partner are perhaps at their peak. Through the dramatic depiction of characters that have highly visible real-world counterparts, the trials of separation are given voice, and then, with the safe return of the hero to the faithful lover, the ring as a love token made whole again, and the occupational cycle of departure and return is rendered successfully complete.

By way of conclusion, I would like to point out Louise Manny's comments regarding the role of the song "Round Her Mantle so Green" [Laws N39] in the family tradition of Marie Whitney Hare of Strathadam, New Brunswick. She writes:

The Whitney's all sang this ballad which they learned from their parents, Neville and Janey (Jones) Whitney. When they were in their eighties, Neville and Janey often sang it as a duet. Probably it had a very special meaning for this elderly couple, for it reminded them of Neville's absences in the lumber woods, when he went logging from New Brunswick to Oregon, and came home again to Strathadam. Our folksingers like to connect the theme of the song with some incident in their own lives.<sup>25</sup>

The performance of the song as a duet is particularly striking, for joint performances of this nature are quite rare in the regional song tradition. Sandy Ives writes that in the Maritimes the general tendency is for the male and female traditions to remain separate,<sup>26</sup> while Gerald Pocius states that in Newfoundland, at least in public performances, female singers are normally silent and in the background while their husbands sing.<sup>27</sup> Manny's observation suggests that in the Maritime

24. Abrahams, p. 147-148.

25. Louise Manny and James Wilson, *Songs of the Miramichi*, Fredericton, Brunswick Press, 1968, p. 286.

26. Edward D. Ives, "Lumbercamp Singing and the Two Traditions", *Canadian Folk Music Journal* 5 (1977), p. 18-23.

27. Gerald L. Pocius, "'The First Day that I Thought of It Since I Got Wed': Role Expectations and Singer Status in a Newfoundland Outport", *Western Folklore* 35 (1976), p. 109-122.

tradition, the Broken Ring songs appeal for mutual understanding and sympathy both poetically and in performance.