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Résumé de l'article

Cet article résume la carrière radiophonique de l'honorable Joseph R. Smallwood, carrière à laquelle celui-ci a attribué son plus grand succès politique : l'entrée de Terre-Neuve dans le Canada, ainsi que ses 24 ans comme premier ministre de la province. "The Barrelman" (La vigie) était une émission d'un quart d'heure, six jours par semaine, émise par la station VONF entre octobre 1937 et décembre 1943.

Smallwood faisait grand usage de folklore dans ses émissions qui avaient pour but de mieux faire connaître Terre-Neuve aux Terre-Neuviens. Le succès de l'émission devait assurer le succès de Smallwood au moment de la campagne électorale de 1948. L'auteur place l'émission dans son contexte socio-historique, en décrit le contenu, les sources, les fonctions, ainsi que le style de Smallwood lui-même.

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# Joseph R. Smallwood, «The Barrelman»: The Broadcaster as Folklorist

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Peter NARVÁEZ

In an age when television cable-subscribing Canadians employ various techniques of media-mockery in order to cope with the grade “C” movie re-runs of a President of the United States who used to share star-billing with higher simians, it is easy to forget that electronic media also launched the careers of prominent Canadian politicians. In particular, William Aberhart (1878–1943), the Premier of Alberta from 1935 to 1943 and founder of the Social Credit Movement, first gained a large public following through the popularity of his radio sermons. Likewise, the last living father of Confederation, the Honourable Joseph R. Smallwood, attributes his major political achievement of Newfoundland’s union with Canada, as well as his twenty-three year premiership of the province, to his success with a radio programme — *The Barrelman*. This presentation will discuss *The Barrelman* in terms of format and content with specific reference to the ways that it functioned for listeners. In addition, it will interpret the role of Joe “*Barrelman*” Smallwood as folklorist and folk performer in order to shed greater light on the value of existent *Barrelman* programme materials for the interpretation of Newfoundland culture.<sup>1</sup>

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1. This article is a revised version of a paper delivered at the annual meeting of the Association for the Study of Canadian Radio and Television, June 4, 1983, Learned Societies Conference, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, B.C., and the annual convention of the Popular Culture Association, April 1, 1984, University of Toronto, Ont. In the preparation of this article I have utilized the sound recordings of the CBC radio archives in St. John’s, as well as “*The Barrelman*” scripts housed in the Centre for Newfoundland Studies (CNS), Memorial University of Newfoundland. In particular I would like to thank the following persons for the valuable assistance they have provided: Joseph R. Smallwood, Anne Budgell, Leo Moakler, Herbert Halpert, Philip Hiscock, Anne Hart, Nancy Grenville, Greg Kealey, Judy

A one-man show dedicated to “making Newfoundland better known to Newfoundlanders” through the presentation of geographic and economic facts, historical information and folklore, *The Barrelman* was aired 6:45 to 7 p.m., six nights a week, eleven months a year, from October 1937 to December 1943, by government-owned radio station VONF from studios on the third floor of the Newfoundland Hotel in St. John’s. With the use of re-cycled scripts journalist Michael Harrington continued to announce the show through 1956, but the programme was never more popular than when the “original” *Barrelman* was in charge.

Prior to the radio programme, “*The Barrelman*” was Smallwood’s signature pseudonym for a newspaper column. Having completed his editorial tasks on the two volume *Book of Newfoundland* in the Spring of 1937, Smallwood approached the Honourable John S. Currie, the editor of the *Daily News*, and obtained a column entitled “From the Masthead” by “*The Barrelman*.” For Smallwood the title of the column and the signature were very appropriate. He explains :

The *Barrelman* is a man onboard a whaling ship or a sealing ship who goes up to the top of the mast in a barrel because at that altitude he can see farther and shout down directions to the skipper of passages through the ice or herds of seals or a whale or whatever they’re looking for and as the *Barrelman* he sees farther and he sees more you see than anyone. So “From the Masthead,” by “*The Barrelman*,” a pretty good caption for a column and that ran daily on the page opposite the editorial page, a very prominent place for it, and it very rapidly became an extremely popular column.<sup>2</sup>

In calling himself “*The Barrelman*” Smallwood was keeping in step with journalistic fashion, for catchy pseudonyms were the style of the day — Albert Perlin in *The Telegram* was known as “*The Wayfarer*” and A.A. Parsons employed a pun by signing his column “R.U. Wright.”

By Smallwood’s own account, “From the Masthead” was a feature which “consisted of anecdotes about Newfoundland, bits and pieces and scraps of information about the country and its people, and in general was devoted to a sort of glorification of Newfoundland and everything good within it.”<sup>3</sup>

The medium of print, however, could not compete with Smallwood’s fascination for radio. He has often expressed the view that

Adler, Ken Hill, John O’Mara, Roger Bill and Gerald Horwood. My interview with Joseph R. Smallwood, August 10, 1982, is deposited in the Memorial University of Newfoundland Folklore and Language Archive (MUNFLA), Tape, 82-185/C5844.

2. MUNFLA, Tape, 82-185/C5844.

3. SMALLWOOD, Joseph R. *I Chose Canada: The Memoirs of the Honourable Joseph R. “Joey” Smallwood*, Toronto, Macmillan of Canada, 205.

because of Newfoundland's great expanse and scattered population "God had Newfoundland particularly and specifically in mind when he brought about the invention of the radio."<sup>4</sup> Spurred on by the need for more lucrative employment as well as by the success of his friend Oliver L. Vardy, who was a popular radio news commentator, Smallwood submitted the idea of a Barrelman broadcast to VONF station manager and announcer William Finton Galgay who approved a brief pilot series. Smallwood then met with a potential sponsor, St. John's merchant Francis Martin O'Leary, who listened to the show for several nights and then agreed to back the broadcast by paying the Barrelman thirty dollars a week.

The choice of Frank O'Leary as a sponsor was calculated. As a commission merchant, O'Leary had entered into a short-lived partnership with Gerald S. Doyle in 1922 and afterwards the two businessmen had become arch rivals.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, it was a productive competition which for three decades served the Newfoundland public well through the following significant commercial manifestations of popular culture: in the 1920's Doyle began distributing a free newspaper throughout the island, *The Family Fireside*, and O'Leary eventually countered in 1938 with the publication of Barrelman radio scripts in *The Barrelman*, a monthly tabloid newspaper which later changed its name to *The Newfoundlander*; Doyle began publishing and freely distributing paperback folksong collections in 1927 entitled *The Old Time Songs and Poetry of Newfoundland* and in 1939 O'Leary distributed "Barrelman Song Sheets" through Van Camp food products for a loose-leaf *The Barrelman Song Folio of Newfoundland Ballads and English, Irish and Scotch Folksongs*; beginning in 1932 on VONF Doyle sponsored the most popular radio programme in Newfoundland broadcasting history, the personal message-laden Doyle News, and then in 1937 O'Leary supported "The Barrelman"; in 1939 O'Leary briefly backed a radio programme organised by the Barrelman, The Van Campers, a musical group performing "Newfoundland songs and ballads" and in 1949 Doyle attempted a Christmas broadcast

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4. MUNFLA, Tape, 82-185/C5844. A similar comment is transcribed in Bill McNEIL and Morris WOLFE, *Signing On: The Birth of Radio in Canada*, Toronto, Doubleday Canada, 1982, 34.
  5. Paul O'NEILL, *A Seaport Legacy: The Story of St. John's, Newfoundland*, Vol. 2, Erin, Ontario, Press Porcepic, 1976, 911. For details about Gerald S. Doyle's folksong projects see Harold Paul MERCER, *A Bio-Bibliography of Newfoundland Songs in Printed Sources*, St. John's: M.A. Thesis, Department of Folklore, Memorial University of Newfoundland, 1978, 82-89. An account of Francis M. O'Leary's enterprises is available in A.B. PERLIN, *The Story of Newfoundland*, St. John's, 1959, 180-81.

of “Folksongs of old Newfoundland.” Joe Smallwood was always aware that in the contest of these enterprising spirits O’Leary was usually a step behind Doyle.

... you have to bear in mind the rivalry, the friendly but intense rivalry that existed between Frank O’Leary and his business competitor Gerald S. Doyle. They were both of approximately the same age, they were both in approximately the same kind of business, commission merchants, commission agents. They were both, I think, the son, each of them was the son of a sea captain, they both came up the hard way, but Gerald Doyle was a bit ahead of Frank, he got his start a bit earlier than Frank did but he was the one, he was the measuring yard, he was the yardstick by which Frank O’Leary would judge his own progress and his own success. So he always had a very keen eye. Well when Gerald S. Doyle had this news that everybody in Newfoundland is listening to, Frank perhaps would be a wee bit jealous...<sup>6</sup>

The format of The Barrelman radio programme was straightforward. Each show began with this opening formula :

[Bell sounds six times]

*Announcer* : F.M. O’Leary Ltd., presents, “The Barrelman”!

*Barrelman* : Ladies and gentlemen, good evening...

The unique aural feature here was the bell which sounded six times at the beginning and end of each programme and sounded once between each narrated item. Smallwood likens his use of the bell to the dashes in his column for the *Daily News* :

... well, there’s sort of a dash between items between items in print. I had a bell, it was a ship’s bell, in fact it came off a yacht and, I gave ding ding, ding ding, ding ding. I didn’t use the clapper, that wasn’t controllable, I had a glass rod and I’d attack the bell smartly ding ding, ding ding, ding ding, See! Six bells! Well that was the nearest you could get on a ship’s bell to that time which was quarter to seven every night.<sup>7</sup>

In the middle and at the conclusion of each programme one of O’Leary’s products such as *Pepsodent Tooth Paste*, *Gillette Blue Blades*, *Buckley’s Mixture* or *Palmolive Soap*, was advertised by an announcer or the Barrelman himself. The scripts for these advertisements were prepared by the manufacturers but sometimes the Barrelman enhanced them with his own sound effects as in the following example :

When you hear a man talk about shaving troubles now-a-days it’s quite certain he has not tried the “new improved” Gillette Blue Blades. They’re made of steel, hard enough to cut glass [long, loud scratching sound].<sup>8</sup>

6. MUNFLA, Tape, 82-185/C5844.

7. *Ibid.*

8. CBC soft-cut disc recording, 21A, September 10, 1943.

Smallwood's assistant Leo Moakler recalls that at one point during the programme's run Joe and Frank O'Leary decided to employ a female announcer for the sake of "extra variety." The Barrelman devised a public hiring process :

With his flair for the dramatic he didn't just go into the marketplace and hire an announcer. He made it a carnival event in which his public could participate. Through his programme he got applicants to audition at the VONF studios. Nine or ten were finally picked. Under assumed names one each week gave the O'Leary commercials. Listeners then voted for their choice. In came the votes in thousands, the winner being a St. John's girl, Miss Florence Mercer. She was to be known as "The Palmolive Girl," after Palmolive Soap.<sup>9</sup>

After the Palmolive Girl was selected, O'Leary and Smallwood argued over which closing tag the Palmolive girl should read, "this is the Palmolive Girl bidding you all goodnight" or "your announcer, the Palmolive Girl, bids you all goodnight." They allowed Moakler to make the final decision which he remembers as "a traumatic moment wondering which of them I would disappoint."<sup>10</sup> The final formula for each show from then on was :

F.M. O'Leary Ltd. will present the Barrelman tomorrow night at a quarter to seven in another program of making Newfoundland better known to Newfoundlanders. This is the Palmolive girl bidding you all goodnight. [Bell sounds six times].<sup>11</sup>

As is the case with all media-sensitive performers, Smallwood paid close attention to the sound of his broadcasting voice. Moakler recollects :

Joe was always concerned about his style of delivery over the air. His natural style was, as it is today, the declamatory. Every now and then he would decide, or maybe someone told him, that this was not suitable for his kind of programme. He would then adopt a modulated conversational delivery with not a histrionic in it. Next day, without fail, whether it was the declamatory or the conversational, I would be confronted with the inevitable question, "How was I last night?"<sup>12</sup>

Within a year of the initial Barrelman broadcast VONF purchased a wire recorder and the Barrelman finally heard his own voice. Smallwood's reaction to that experience as well as his immediate use

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9. LEO MOAKLER, "The Barrelman : Making Newfoundland Better Known to Newfoundlanders" in James R. Thoms, ed., *Just Call Me Joey*, St. John's, Creative Printers and Publishers, 1968, 18-27.

10. *Ibid.*

11. CBC soft-cut disc recording, 21A, September 10, 1943.

12. Moakler, pp. 20-1.

of pre-recording technique and its social consequences are revealed in this item of “medialore”<sup>13</sup>:

I was surprised as everyone is, everyone is surprised when he first hears his own voice on a record. But I didn't mind it. I liked it and I now was able to take advantage of that system because when I wanted to go out of town say for the week, which I wanted several times each year, I would make recordings of the missing nights you see and I've had funny experiences that way. I was so well known, my programme and my voice that, I remember being in a little outport on the Southern Shore in Newfoundland and they were all excited to see me because they all heard that I was the Barrelman, Mr. Smallwood, and I was at this house having dinner with them, a cup of tea and some cake and so on and suddenly the bell rang and I perked up and everybody perked up and they began listening to me. You should see the suspicious looks on their faces. Who was this imposter, who was coming pretending to be the Barrelman you know?<sup>14</sup>

The intended social consequences or manifest functions of *The Barrelman* were education, the validation of culture and amusement. The first two of these functions were inextricably linked to Smallwood's determination to rid Newfoundlanders of what he called “our inferiority complex.” Although Richard Gwyn has maintained that “politics rarely intruded” into *The Barrelman*, Smallwood argues that in attacking the concept of inferiority head-on, the programme bolstered the integrity and confidence of Newfoundlanders and, therefore, was political in the broadest sense of the term.<sup>15</sup>

... my programme was very political, every word that I uttered for those six years, six nights a week, eleven months a year for six years, that's sixty-six months is it? It was aimed at stirring and creating and fanning Newfoundland patriotism, a sort of Newfoundland nationalism, I was trying to destroy the horrible inferiority complex that our people had. The minute you crossed the Gulf, everything was better going away but coming back, the minute you crossed the Gulf everything was inferior. Nothing could be as good as it was upalong, upalong to the Boston States or upalong to Ontario or Nova Scotia or somewhere, there was a terrible inferiority complex and I, by giving countless, just countless you know many hundreds of examples of Newfoundlanders displaying marvelous skill, marvelous ingenuity, marvelous originality, actual genius and then great strength and great speed and great resourcefulness and so on and so on, and so on. You know I was building, I was glorifying, I was doing the American job you know glorifying the American girl, I was glorifying every Newfoundlander,

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13. By “medialore” I refer to communicative units in which technological media occur as significant elements of content.

14. MUNFLA, Tape, 82-185/C5844.

15. Richard Gwyn, *Smallwood: The Unlikely Revolutionary*, Toronto, McClelland and Stewart, 1972, 55.

trying to make them puff out their chest and be proud and abandon this cursed inferior complex. That was my purpose. Oh that was a very political purpose.<sup>16</sup>

The pervasive theme of *The Barrelman* was the validation of Newfoundland culture through a focus on successful Newfoundlanders. In order to make a successful Newfoundland better known to Newfoundlanders, Smallwood endlessly culled stories of fame, fortune and achievement from the St. John's Gosling Library. Moreover, he cautiously appealed directly to his listening audience for programme material concerning the accomplishments of Newfoundlanders.

You see, I am trying to show the world that Newfoundlanders are a smart people. I am trying to show that they always succeed, every time they get a decent chance. Help me to prove this, by sending me the cases you know about yourself.

Send me stories — true stories — showing how brave are the Newfoundlanders; how hardy they are; how strong they are; what hardships they endure.

There are some people, you know, who don't think very much of us Newfoundlanders. Let us prove to them that Newfoundlanders have courage, brains, strength, great powers of endurance.

Let us show them that Newfoundlanders are witty and smart.<sup>17</sup>

Thus, the *Barrelman* chronicled the achievements of such persons as: the Newfoundland ship-owner Edwin J. Duder; the heroic Captain James Dalton who fought for the Americans during the Spanish-American War; the wealthiest Newfoundland clergyman, Rev. Joseph J. Curling of Birch Cove; the oldest woman in Newfoundland, Mrs. Ellen Carroll of North River (b. 1827); Harry Watson who was a hockey star for the Toronto Granites; Captain Bob Bartlett the master mariner; and Captain George Whiteley who invented the codtrap.

Other success stories, however, featured contemporary working-class individuals such as this one about Edward Dinn:

I'm sure, ladies and gentlemen, you'll all be glad to hear that Edward Dinn, the man who walked seventy miles to town in his rubber boots, short coat and overalls to seek a berth to the ice, has landed a berth and will be going to the icefields tomorrow morning on the steamship *Imogene*. The broadcast hadn't finished two minutes last night before a telephone call came in, and there was his berth — I'd very much like to give the name of the gentleman who gave the berth, but I'm not permitted. And then a couple of minutes later the 'phone rang again, and there was a good overcoat for this hardy Newfoundlander. I didn't ask Mr. Wiseman, of Williams Street, if I might

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16. MUNFLA, Tape, 82-185/C5844.

17. *The Barrelman*, 1: 1 (June, 1938), 3.



use his name, but I'm taking the chance — he's a real Newfoundlander, with a Newfoundlander's good heart. So Mr. Dinn goes off tomorrow morning with hundreds of other sturdy Newfoundland seal-hunters, and I'm sure it won't be his fault if he doesn't earn a good bill. Tonight the hearts and minds of all Newfoundlanders are with our brave and fearless seal-hunters, and there isn't one who doesn't wish them all quick voyages, bumper trips, good health and a good bill.<sup>18</sup>

In addition to success stories the Barrelman aired educational historical information which furthered the validation of Newfoundland culture through instilling a sense of regional pride in heritage. This example concerning Fogo is typical :

It's just about 237 or 238 years ago since the prosperous and important settlement of Fogo was founded. As early as 1738 Fogo had 215 inhabitants. Of these, 143 remained for the winter, the others returning to spend the winter at their homes in England. Fogo was fortified in those days, and 'twill be interesting to know if any of the old cannon are still to be found down there. A small contingent of soldiers used to be stationed in the settlement in the early days for defence, not only against the French, but American privateers around the middle of the 18th century. In 1750 Fogo was badly harassed by those privateers.<sup>19</sup>

One of the most celebrated social service features of The Barrelman was The Fish Appeal during World War II. As devised by The Newfoundland Patriotic Association, O'Leary and Smallwood, The Fish Appeal was an extremely successful campaign whereby "each fisherman would donate a salt-dried codfish, and all the fish would be sold to the highest bidder ; the proceeds would be used to buy cigarettes and comforts to be sent to our boys in the army, navy, and air force in Britain or wherever the were."<sup>20</sup> By prompting a show of solidarity in a noble cause, the Barrelman not only dramatically validated the beneficence of Newfoundlanders but also latently urged mass conformity to high ethical values. The manipulative powers of the Barrelman as salesman through his rhetorical technique of reiterative exposition are marvelously exemplified in this plea for Fish Appeal collectors :

"I personally don't believe there's a person in Newfoundland today who wouldn't cheerfully contribute to The Fish Appeal. The fund is the worthiest, the most deserving cause in this country today and nobody is going to refuse to contribute. But before anybody can respond to a collection there's got to be a collection. And before there can be a collection there's got to be a collector. And every settlement that has no

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18. CNS, Script, March 4, 1938.

19. CNS, Script, March 25, 1938.

20. Smallwood, pp. 207-8. See also Moakler, 25-6.

collector is deprived of the privilege of responding to this appeal for our boys. So it's supremely important to have at least one collector in every place in Newfoundland. We want to make this the banner year of all so let's get our shoulders to the wheel and get her rolling for those boys."<sup>21</sup>

The popularity of *The Barrelman*, however, did not rest simply on fish appeals and lectures about the great achievements of Newfoundlanders, for interlarded amongst such materials were items like this :

Here's a story that's been lying on my desk for three or four weeks, buried underneath a pile of unanswered letters. It's contained in a letter sent by Mr. G. Sooley, of Prescott street in the city, and tells about a sixteen-year-old lad named Bram Travers of Heart's Delight. I think Bram Travers must be the strongest young man in all the country. He can stand a full-sized puncheon of molasses on its head with a steady strain, and without jerking it. Two men can hold up a barrel head and he'll drive his first through it with one blow. He struck a bull on the forehead once, and knocked him flat on the ground. He can take a five-inch nail in his naked hand and drive it through a piece of three-inch plank. He can take a fifty-six and a twenty-eight tied together, hold it over his head with his little finger, and with a pencil held in his remaining fingers write his name on the wall. He's a great swimmer and diver, and on more than one occasion he dived under and was gone so long that someone jumped in clothes and all after him, only to be fooled as two or three minutes after diving Travers would pop up several hundred yards away. The peculiar thing about this lad is that when he was five years old he was pushed into a bonfire by another boy and was burned so badly that his own mother couldn't recognize him. It was William James Reid who hauled him out of the fire and took him to a brook about six hundred yards away. Today his body doesn't carry even one mark.<sup>22</sup>

Without labeling such materials "folklore", the *Barrelman* collected and broadcast an abundance of Newfoundland oral traditions and this folkloric content provided entertainment and grass roots interest for his listening audience. Indeed, the *Barrelman's* efforts in eliciting narratives from his listeners were not unlike those of the modern folklore collector who : 1) conceives of clear goals for a fieldwork project ; 2) makes calculated attempts to locate articulate informants, oftentimes, through seeking out the key gathering places of such persons ; 3) establishes rapport with informants and collects data utilizing various prompting techniques ; 4) organizes, edits and

21. CBC soft-cut disc recording, 21A, September 10, 1943.

22. CNS, Script, March 4, 1938. Pertinent motifs in Ernest W. BAUGHMAN, *Type and Motif-Index of the Folktales of England and North America*, The Hague, Mouton and Co., 1966, are : X941, "Remarkable lifter ;" X945, "Lie : Remarkable Lifter or Striker ;" X945(a) "Man kills animal with blow of hand ;" X964, "Lie : remarkable swimmer ;" D1841, "Invulnerability for certain things."

analyses his collected materials. The Barrelman's collecting objective was a broad one which involved an "open-net" approach to folk narrative. That is, his goal was to amass any interesting narratives pertaining to Newfoundland, particularly those concerning remarkable incidents or memorable achievements. With regard to securing informants in key gathering places, the Barrelman had a tremendous advantage over the modern folklorist in that his programme along with The Doyle News were themselves catalysts for social occasions in communities throughout Newfoundland. As Smallwood explains :

... without electricity they had to use battery sets and you'd see wind chargers all around the island, people revving up their batteries. But you also had an interesting practice that people would flock to each other's homes and take turns so as to save the battery you see. There'd be eight or ten or twelve or fifteen or twenty people crowded into the kitchens of a neighbour's house and then the next night they'd crowd into the kitchen of another neighbour and so on, and in this way they could all manage to hear the particular, not sit down all night with the radio turned on, they couldn't afford that, not with battery sets, but the things that appealed to them, that interested them. My programme did The Barrelman, The Gerald S. Doyle News Bulletin. Every last living soul in Newfoundland listened to that, to the news, to the Doyle News, which wasn't permitted soon after Confederation came because news on the C.B.C. was not permitted to be sponsored you see. And that was a sponsored newscast to which the entire population listened to. Well there were not many fewer that listened to The Barrelman. That too was an enormously popular programme.<sup>23</sup>

The Barrelman easily gained rapport with his listening public. Not only were his amiable voice and genial manner a winning combination on the intimate medium of radio, but prospective informants were also prompted into action by material inducements, i.e., free samples of Frank O'Leary's products for writing in "any story or unusual incident likely to prove interesting to other listeners."<sup>24</sup> When coaxing his listeners to write in their stories, Smallwood was always encouraging and never condescending. He was especially sensitive to allaying any insecurities his listeners might have had regarding their writing deficiencies :

Don't worry about how your letter is written. I'll fix it up to suit. That's my job, and I'm only too delighted to get your letters and fix them up.<sup>25</sup>

Smallwood's collecting efforts yielded a great harvest. At one point in his second year of broadcasting he reported fifteen hundred

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23. MUNFLA, Tape, 82-185/C5844.

24. CNS, Script, October 26, 1938.

25. *The Barrelman*, 1 : 1 (June, 1938), 3.

letters from two hundred communities in a four month period, half of which told “a story or anecdote.”<sup>26</sup> The folklore form which prevailed in this response was the tall tale. It was also the only genre of folk narrative which Smallwood directly appealed for through illustration. He remembers :

The first tall tale I told in my programme were three or four that I had heard from my grandfather David, and he had brought them with him from Prince Edward Island. Then an avalanche descended upon me. Newfoundlanders, especially outport people, loved tall tales, and they wrote me hundreds of tales to tell.<sup>27</sup>

The Barrelman's collection of tall tales exemplified virtually every major subdivision of the genre. There were tales regarding extraordinary hunting and fishing incidents, strong men and amazing physical feats, remarkable vegetables, unusual domestic pets and livestock, sea serpents, and incredible stupidity. Many of these stories exhibit well-known folk motifs and some are complete international tale-types, as the one about “the man who bent his rifle barrel in a semi-circle to kill a large number of birds grouped around the edge of a well.” Whether international or native to Newfoundland, however, all of the Barrelman's tales reflected a strong regional flavour as this narrative about a fisherman who straddled a horse mackerel :<sup>28</sup>

Mr. Richard T. Cook of Cartyville says that back in 1888 a few years before the railway was put through out there, only a very little agriculture was carried on out that way — most of the people made their living at the fishery. One spring somebody reported that the caplin had struck in at the Highlands, about eight miles away. About ten o'clock that night all the fishermen took their boats and started off to get caplin for bait. Mr. Cook, then a boy of fourteen, was taken along with his father. When they got there they found it was a false alarm — there were no caplin. It was a lovely calm morning the water as smooth as glass. They were just getting ready to turn back again when somebody shouted : “Look ! horse-mackerel — look at them jumping !” Of course horse-mackerel is the Newfoundland fishermen's name for tuna fish. A short distance from the shore there they were — a big school of the tuna fish, diving and sporting in the water. Hurriedly the men loaded their boats with fairly large stones from the beach and pulled for dear life on the oars. They rowed out fan-wise, to get outside of

26. *The Barrelman*, 1 : 9 (February, 1939), 14.

27. Smallwood, 207.

28. *The Barrelman*, 1 : 12 (May, 1939), 20 ; Antti Aarne and Stith Thompson, *The Types of the Folktale*, Helsinki, Suomalainen Tiedekatemia Academia Scientiarum Fennica, 1961, Type 1890E, “Gun Barrel Bent to make spectacular Shot.” Another Canadian variant of this popular North American tale may be found in Michael Taft, *Tall Tales of British Columbia*, Sound Heritage Series, No. 39, Victoria, Provincial Archives of British Columbia, Sound and Moving Image Division, 1983, 51.

the school of fish and to form a sort of flank on both sides of them. Then they began throwing the stones for all their worth at the tuna fish — the idea was to frighten the fish and make them stampede toward the beach. And that's exactly what happened — by flinging the rocks, splashing the water with their oars and shouting they kicked up a fearful din, and the tuna fish were forces in toward the shoal water off the beach. Squeezed in tight against each other, the big fish began to splash and jump and dive themselves — if you've ever been present when a salmon-trap was dried up with eighty or a hundred fighting salmon, you'll have some idea of what a racket those big tuna fish would make under those circumstances. One of the fishermen in the boats was a Scotman named John Rory Gillis perhaps it was John MacRory Gillis — he was in a boat with his brother Alex Gillis. John Gillis was poised up on the stem of the boat, and in the excitement, as one big tuna came up out of the water Gillis leaped clear into his back, sitting astride and holding for dear life to the fish's fins, one in each hand. The startled tuna immediately began to dive and jump, and then dived clear under the water, just long enough for both fish and man to take a deep breath, and dived again. The fishermen in the surrounding boats were at first paralysed with astonishment at the unheard-of daring and recklessness of John Gillis, but when they recovered they closed in upon the tuna and began striking it with their oars and boat-hooks till they had him out of commission. Mr. Cook doesn't say how long or heavy the tuna was, but adds the information that he was at least three if not four times as big as the man. John Gillis is still living — he's out in British Columbia. His brother Alex is still living at the Highlands in the Codroy Valley. Mr. Cook concludes by asking if anybody knows of any other man that ever rode astride on a live tuna — well, I think I can answer that for Mr. Cook: I don't think there's another man alive in the world today who can truthfully lay claim to such an astonishing achievement of sheer recklessness and daring.<sup>29</sup>

Occasionally the Barrelman indicated that a listener's account was a tall tale through comments such as “take this with a grain of salt,” “'tis a fairly tall story.” In rare instances a letter contained sufficient information to enable Smallwood not only to identify a tall tale but to present it in its performance context. This story about Newfoundland weather illustrates what one student of folk narrative has called “the best documented function of the tall tale... its use as a means of mocking the greenhorn.”<sup>30</sup>

I imagine that all Newfoundlanders who have been disgusted by the peculiar ideas so many people outside Newfoundland have about this country will get a kick out of a story that one of the soldiers in our Newfoundland Regiment told an English visitor at a camp in England during

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29. CNS, Script, November 7, 1938; Baughman, X1153, “Lie: person catches fish by remarkable trick;” X1004.1, “Lie: man rides unusual riding animal.”

30. Gerald THOMAS, *The Tall Tale and Philippe d'Alcricpe*, St. John's, Department of Folklore, Memorial University of Newfoundland for the American Folklore Society, 1977, 8.

the Great War. This visitor was quite curious, not only about the Regiment itself, but the country from which the Regiment came. "You have a lot of ice and snow out there, don't you?" he asked. The soldier's first instinct was to correct the impression by a simple denial — but as he thought swiftly, he figured there was a better way. So he agreed, and said yes, there was lots of ice in Newfoundland — and proceeded to tell him all about the ice. He said that the people built their homes of ice. Each family would begin building their house from the ground up, toward the sky, until the house would be 30 stories high. Then, said he, when the warm weather comes in the summer the sun melts the house from the top storey down. In some cases, he explained, the summer was over and the melting stopped by the time it got down around the ninth or tenth storey from the ground — which meant that instead of having to build another 30 stories they had only to build about 20 of so on top of what was left standing. By the time he got through, the visitor, at least, began to get the idea that his impression of Newfoundland's climate was a little bit astray.<sup>31</sup>

Another example of the Barrelman reporting a tall tale with contextual data involves the depiction of a "lying competition." Moreover, it is the first recorded public usage of the slur "Newfy" :<sup>32</sup>

And Mr. Arthur B. Walker, of Charlton street, sends another story to illustrate the wit of the Newfoundlander — I'm afraid it's a bit rusty by now but anyway here it is : It happened in New York, where a group of men who happened to be of different nationalities were congregated one day, a Newfoundlander being one of them. They were boasting of their respective countries, and the topic turned to feats of fast workmanship, especially in the building line. After they'd all had their say the American turned to the Newfoundlander, and remarked : "Nothing like that in your country, eh, Newfy?" "Why, that's where we have you Americans beaten to a standstill," retorted the Newfoundlander, and then, as the American demanded to know what he meant, he explained : "On my way to work at quarter to seven one morning down in St. John's I saw a crowd of workmen excavating for the foundation of a big new apartment building. At quarter past six that same evening I was returning the same way from work, and saw the tenants of that new building being turned out for failing to pay back rent!"<sup>33</sup>

While the analysis of tall tales was beyond the purview of the Barrelman broadcast, Smallwood did make some interesting observa-

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31. CNS, Script, October 29, 1937. Stith THOMPSON, *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature*, 6 vols., Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1955-58, X1030, "Lie : Remarkable buildings."
  32. For discussions of the "liars' contest" see Thomas, 10-11, 26-27, and Taft, 11. The earliest reference to "Newfie" or "Newfy" in G.M. Story, W.J. Kirwin and J.D.A. Widdowson, eds., *Dictionary of Newfoundland English*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1982 is cited from a dictionary of slang published in the United States — Lester V. Berrey and Melvin Van den Bark, comps., *The American Thesaurus of Slang*, New York, Thomas Y. Crowell, 1943.
  33. CNS, Script, March 10, 1938. Baughman, X1796.0.1, "Liars' contest concerning speed in skills."

tions regarding the genre. For instance, he believed that he had made the discovery that “if there is a distinctive type of humour that is liked more generally in Newfoundland than any other, it’s the tall tale.”<sup>34</sup> Although he never used the term “cuffer”, which has been reported in some parts of Newfoundland as meaning tall tale, the Barrelman was adamant in his attempts to clarify what he considered to be the confused and erroneous usage of those listeners who referred to “tall tales” and “lies” synonymously.<sup>35</sup> The distinguishing features of these terms were that a lie “is meant to deceive” and a tall tale is told to be enjoyed.<sup>36</sup> Like all fiction, the tall tale was a form of creative literature:<sup>37</sup>

If a tall tale is a lie simply because it is something that never happened, then all novels, all plays, all Shakespeare’s works, Dante’s “Inferno,” Milton’s “Paradise Lost” and most other famous works of literature are lies too — which of course is absurd.<sup>38</sup>

Similarly, Smallwood emphasized that the differentiation of tall tales from historical truth was a simple exercise:

... a tall story is in a class to itself — there’s no chance of mistaking it for anything else, whereas a true story, no matter how strange or unusual it may be, should be recognized instantly for what it is.<sup>39</sup>

In actuality, however, it was difficult to ascertain the degree of truthfulness of many of the narratives that the Barrelman read on the air. Often he did not corroborate his facts or cite his sources and not infrequently he even expressed doubts about the veracity of his materials with asides such as “is this true?” or “can we believe this?”<sup>40</sup> A few listeners warned the Barrelman that “if I go on telling

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34. *The Barrelman*, 1: 12 (May, 1938), 21.

35. On “cuffer” see Story, et al., pp. 128-9 and James C. FARIS, *Cat Harbour: A Newfoundland Fishing Settlement*, Newfoundland Social and Economic Studies, No. 3, St. John’s, Institute of Social and Economic Research, Memorial University of Newfoundland, 1972, 148-9.

36. *The Barrelman*, 1: 9 (February, 1939), 14-5.

37. Essentially the same distinction has been made by Chandra Mukerji in a dramaturgic interpretation of road lore tall tales, “Bullshitting: Road Lore Among Hitchhikers,” *Social Problems*, 25: 3 (February, 1978), 242: “When people bullshit or gossip, they do not so much tell lies as create situations where events can be elaborated in non-ordinary ways. Just as a stage play is not a lie though it takes events from life and heightens their drama to make good theater, so bullshitting takes events and heightens their story-telling possibilities.”

38. *The Barrelman*, 1: 12 (May, 1939), 21.

39. *Ibid.*, 19.

40. *The Barrelman*, 1: 10 (March, 1939), 14 and 1: 4 (September, 1938), 11.

tall tales people won't believe the true stories.”<sup>41</sup> In his introductory remarks to a narrative concerning a steamship, which was elevated and lowered by an iceberg without incurring damage, he admitted to a disturbing side of his public image:

I can't help it if you refuse to believe the story I'm going to tell you now. I'm told as a matter of fact, that I'm acquiring a frightful reputation as a liar.<sup>42</sup>

This reputation at one point was concretely expressed in an honorary full membership in the *Association of Colossal Liars, and Exaggerators Amalgamated Union* which was sent to the Barrelman by the Secretary of that organization, Mr. X. Aggerator of Bay Roberts.<sup>43</sup>

In order to understand how the Newfoundland public perception of the Barrelman as “liar” or narrator of tall tales evolved, it is necessary to view this circumstance as a combination of factors, namely, the folk view of the status and style of the tall tale teller in traditional contexts, the performance style of the Barrelman himself, and the characteristics of the radio medium in the context of the Newfoundland home during the period of The Barrelman broadcasts.

With regard to group status, folk narrative analyst Gustav Henningsen has maintained that tall tales are usually narrated by men whose occupational activities take place in settings which are sufficiently removed from their prospective audiences so as to disallow any possibility of their facts being checked upon. For this reason such groups as fishermen, hunters and soldiers possess tall tale traditions “while sedentary people who live in a community where everyone knows everything about everyone else are cut off from similar fictions.”<sup>44</sup> The work of James C. Faris supports this thesis for Newfoundland outports where women are said to “gossip” while fishermen prod lagging conversation through the technique of the “cuffer” whereby mundane experiences are exaggerated in order to start arguments and other forms of verbal interaction.<sup>45</sup> Henningsen also maintains that the accomplished and highly esteemed folk narrator of tall tales has achieved his individual status through years of displaying verbal skills at various social events. Such a narrator tells his story in the first person as a reminiscence and staunchly maintains

41. *The Barrelman*, 1: 12 (May, 1939), 20.

42. *The Barrelman*, 1: 3 (August, 1938), 18.

43. *The Barrelman*, 1: 12 (May, 1939), 19. For a discussion of similar associations and societies see Thomas, p. 11.

44. Gustav HENNINGSEN, “The Art of Perpendicular Lying — Concerning a Commercial Collecting of Norwegian Sailors’ Tall Tales,” *Journal of the Folklore Institute*, 2: 2 (1965), 180–219.

45. Faris, 144, 148.



an attitude of seriousness and veracity. His posture is reinforced through the use of legend telling devices, such as the listing of circumstantial details, which lend credence to the performance. In addition, there is often a group of initiated participants in the audience who in a “cooperative tall tale telling” assist in mocking the uninitiated through a sympathetic listening.<sup>46</sup> It is the sustained contrast between narrative content and the histrionics of the narrator’s delivery which provides the humorous dissonance of the tall tale experience.

Given these generalizations regarding tall tale performance traditions let us imagine an outpost kitchen one evening in the late 1930’s in which a small group of men and women are listening to The Barrelman. The locus of the family kitchen — the room of friends and relations — and the intimate nature of the radio medium give a warm ambience to the social gathering. Everyone knows that the Barrelman is Joe Smallwood but like most media personalities he is only recognized through his public presentation of self in a few publications and on the radio. Except for the possibility of writing to the Barrelman, the listeners accept the Barrelman’s communication as a serious unidirectional aural flow from far away St. John’s. He is articulate, armed with facts that no one could ever check, and he seems omniscient. In fact the Barrelman is so knowledgeable that during this particular show he announces a contest whereby he will award a pound of *Lyons Tea* to anyone who can ask him a question of general Newfoundland interest that he cannot correctly answer. He then proceeds to narrate this story :

I wonder how many of my listeners ever knew Lemuel Rodgers, of Red Island, Placentia Bay? Back in 1907 Mr. Rodgers was on a visit to St. John’s. He was in Slater’s dry good store one day, and in full view of all the clerks and a number of customers he took several three-inch cut iron nails and bit them off one by one with his teeth. And if you think I’m romancing write up to Red Island and prove it for yourself.<sup>47</sup>

The men in the room know a cuffer when they hear one and recognize the Barrelman as one of their own. They enjoy it and laugh. The levelling effect of the radio mosaic makes the cuffer about Lem Rodgers’ teeth seem just as significant as the Barrelman’s apparently serious ramblings about Governor John Holloway’s treatment of the Beothuk Indians in 1805. The fact that the radio medium prevents dialogue with the Barrelman does not prevent one male

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46. Henningsen, 213–5.

47. CNS, Script, October 29, 1937. Baughman, X916(c), “Remarkable jaws and teeth.”

participant from asserting that the Rodgers story is true. An argument amongst the men ensues after the programme. Needless to say, the Barrelman that day accrues more prestige for his verbal ability to tell a cuffer and to explicate what some outport Newfoundlanders have deemed to be the real “news”, i.e., “anything strange.”<sup>48</sup>

Exaggeration, remarkable events and amazing facts were so much a part of the Barrelman that there is little doubt why Smallwood’s listeners regarded him as a great raconteur of the extraordinary. Even F.M. O’Leary’s products were advertised by the Barrelman in a manner which sometimes smacked of the tall tale. This point was personally dramatized for me by the Barrelman himself when immediately after re-enacting an advertisement for *Buckley’s Mixture* he exclaimed “you see, *Buckley’s Mixture* could cure anything!”

The importance of The Barrelman scripts and correspondence for folklorists and students of Newfoundland culture is that they represent the results of a five year folklore and oral history project by a broadcaster who amassed a tremendous amount of primary documentation which deserves scholarly analysis. Furthermore, an understanding of the folkloric content of The Barrelman would enable folklorists to assess the degree to which the programme’s transmission of folklore in Newfoundland modified, revived or created new oral traditions.

In the latter regard I am reminded of a folklore survey card which was deposited by a Memorial University student in the folklore archive in 1966. The card recorded a children’s expression from Grand Bank and contained an explanatory note which plainly illustrates the extent to which the legacy of The Barrelman is a part of contemporary Newfoundland folklore :

“You tells more lies than the Barrelman.” This means that a person tells a good many lies, more than is usual. I have not been able to find out what or who the “Barrelman” is.<sup>49</sup>

The significance of The Barrelman for Joseph R. Smallwood has always been eminently clear — it made his voice familiar to Newfoundlanders and through the Confederation debates of the National Convention that familiar voice carried the day to union with Canada and his appointment as Premier. Yet, if one of the major points of this discussion is correct — that the public image of the Barrelman was that of an entertaining raconteur and tall tale narrator

48. Faris, 148-9.

49. MUNFLA, Survey Card, 66-13/53. I am grateful to Philip Hiscock, Assistant Archivist, MUNFLA, for originally bringing this item to my attention.

— it would appear in the worst interests of the Newfoundland public of the time to follow the lead of a person with a reputation as a “liar” no matter how amusing he was. Beyond being a good teller of cuffers, however, the Barrelman represented stability and consistent benevolence. Unlike problem-oriented open-line radio shows which feed on conflict, The Barrelman was perpetually informative, humorous and success-oriented.

Moreover, in tradition-directed oral cultures, such as that of Newfoundland during the period in question, individuals who exhibit great verbal ability often command high esteem and respect. Similarly, but with specific reference to narrators of tall tales, Gerald Thomas has noted :

“It has become increasingly clear that the tall tale is frequently linked with the names of individual tale-tellers... These storytellers often become legendary characters in their own lifetime, acquiring impressive reputations as the protagonists and narrators of their own remarkable deeds.”<sup>50</sup>

On the order of Abraham “Oregon” Smith and Gib Morgan of the United States and Larry Gorman of Prince Edward Island, the Barrelman’s oral skills and traditional folklore repertoire launched a career of heroic proportions.<sup>51</sup> Unlike Smith, Morgan or Gorman, however, Joe Smallwood’s verbal performances were transmitted by a new, awe-inspiring and intimate electronic medium into the personal lives of a widely scattered population. With the genius of a true showman who is sensitive to the desires of his public, the Barrelman created a winning formula which was well tailored to the medium of radio. Many listeners were correctly convinced that there was no one quite like the Barrelman. Perhaps a Barrelman fan, Mrs. Nath Brian of St. John’s, summed up the Barrelman’s appeal better than anyone :

Dear Barrelman I send to you  
This letter that you see,  
To say we like your broadcasts,  
We hear just after tea.  
They are so very grand indeed  
To us who like to hear  
Of Terra Nova’s heroes

50. Thomas, 3.

51. William Hugh JANSEN, *Abraham “Oregon” Smith, Pioneer, Folk Hero and Tale-Teller*, New York, Arno Press, 1977 ; Mody C. BOATRIGHT, *Gib Morgan : Minstrel of the Oil Fields*, Dallas, Southern Methodist University Press, 1965 ; Edward D. IVES, *Larry Gorman : The Man Who Made the Songs*, Indiana University Folklore Monograph Series, No. 19, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1964.

Come floating through the air.  
 As for your advertisements,  
 We think they're wise enough ;  
 As Buckley's Mixture for a cold  
 Is for me the only stuff.  
 Now may I say in closing,  
 Of Newfoundlanders great or small  
 Our most noted Barrelman  
 Is unique among them all.<sup>52</sup>

*Memorial University of Newfoundland  
 St. John's, Newfoundland*

### **Résumé**

*Cet article résume la carrière radiophonique de l'honorable Joseph R. Smallwood, carrière à laquelle celui-ci a attribué son plus grand succès politique : l'entrée de Terre-Neuve dans le Canada, ainsi que ses 24 ans comme premier ministre de la province. "The Barrelman" (La vigie) était une émission d'un quart d'heure, six jours par semaine, émise par la station VONF entre octobre 1937 et décembre 1943.*

*Smallwood faisait grand usage de folklore dans ses émissions qui avaient pour but de mieux faire connaître Terre-Neuve aux Terre-Neuviens. Le succès de l'émission devait assurer le succès de Smallwood au moment de la campagne électorale de 1948. L'auteur place l'émission dans son contexte socio-historique, en décrit le contenu, les sources, les fonctions, ainsi que le style de Smallwood lui-même.*

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52. The Barrelman, 1 : 9 (February, 1939), 7.