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Résumé de l'article

Cet article analyse comment un artefact (une chaise-baril) est lié à la mémoire, ce en considérant son contexte historique d'origine et l'ensemble des récits et commentaires des informateurs, lesquels comprennent une certaine part de biographie et d'autobiographie, provoqués par la chaise qui sert de support visuel à la mémoire. On voit comment la chaise évoque une époque ancienne chez les informateurs septuagénaires, qui manifestent une conscience générationelle ; elle sert également de support à la conversation à propos du présent et de l'avenir. Désormais, le simple artefact est mnémonique, contemporain et prophétique.

My Barrel Chair
Evoking the Past, Prophesying Armageddon

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"Nice to see it": my mnemonic barrel chair

Although it is arguably a rustic antique, my child-sized barrel chair has spent most of the last couple of decades in my family home in Torbay, Newfoundland, outside St. John's, as just another piece of furniture, albeit the only one that I owned. It has been a stool for children to reach the bathroom sink, a stand for large houseplants, and a storage bin for winter woollies and dust rags. It is now retired from such practical functions as I have grown older and the chair has become treasured as a souvenir of my early childhood and a narrator across generations. The chair's evolution from serviceable object to prized possession during my lifetime is both paralleled by and situated within the development of its original constructed form. It has moved from being a common, functional object, indispensable for Newfoundland's fish trade, historically used to meet innumerable everyday storage and transportation needs, to being a rarity, an object treasured for its intrinsic meaning and association.

Once I decided to make my chair the subject of research, I lugged it to the home of my maternal grandparents, Gen and Jimmy Tapper (Nan and Pop to me) of Torbay, who gave me the chair as a Christmas gift 22 years ago. I found them sitting together at the dining room table eating biscuits with jam and drinking milky tea. They had just arrived home themselves a little while ago, having been to a wake. They spend a lot of time at wakes and funerals these days. Pop's brother had died just a couple of weeks prior, and another family friend passed away as I was in the process of writing this paper. Later, during the interview, Pop would remark that there is hardly any of his circle of male friends and relatives left.

I had hoped that the chair's physical presence would help to jog my grandparent's memories, which it did, and more. That evening's conversation reviewed our lives, spanned decades, and contemplated the future. The sight of the chair reminded Pop of the day, two decades ago, when they bought it in neighbouring Flatrock, Nan's home community, from the man who identified himself as its maker. They had "a great time," he said, arguing the price with "poor" Ned Callaghan at his store, and they bought the chair for five or ten dollars. The adjective alerted me to the fact that Ned Callaghan is deceased. Indeed, he had died just a couple of months earlier.[1]

My grandparents launched into stories about "poor Ned," connecting the artifact on their dining room floor to a personality and to bits of biography and autobiography, and to the memories of their association with the chair's maker. (I have since learned from a relative of his that Ned had actually not made chairs, but was likely selling items from his family home.) One anecdote after another, portraying him in social settings and at work in his store, established Ned as something of a local character.[2] He was "a queer old fella" and "he wasn't right." Not only that, but "he was right full of himself;" as my grandmother put it, "He thought he was Gulliver, and he the size of Tom Thumb."

Nan supplied one "Ned story" set in the same store where she and my grandfather would buy a barrel chair for their first granddaughter thirty years later:

1. Ned Callaghan is a pseudonym. "Poor" is often used in Newfoundland as an adjective to suggest bemused sympathy or to indicate that a person referred to is dead.
2. For more on local characters see Tye 1989.

> He had a store down on the Line. And we went in. That was before we were getting married [1945]. We went in the store, Jimmy was buying something. [Ned] said, "I'm telling you now, I'm coming to your wedding. I'm going to give you your wedding present right now." He gave me two plastic egg cups and he gave Jimmy a package of razor blades. And he came to the wedding.

This story prompted another anecdote from Pop, also set in the store:

> When you'd go in through the door, see, right before you'd go in he had a little office [with a sign] "Keep Out." And I said, "Ned, b'y, I don't know, that's an awful thing to have there, isn't it? You want customers to come in. You don't want them to keep out."

Nan added one more story to the cluster about Ned and his store, telling how her neighbour once went there, only to find it closed, and so wrote above the door: "Ned, Ned, you little man, you should be open when you can." When Ned came back, he was so upset about the incident that he complained to the parish priest about it.

My grandparents and I also talked more specifically about my barrel chair during the interview. I asked how such an artifact was produced and used according to their knowledge, but these concerns quickly became secondary to me. To pare down the reported contents of the interview to those parts that deal directly with the artifact as object would be an unfortunate mistake, not only because my grandparents' narratives about Ned were treasures in their own right in my mind, but because by telling me about Ned Callaghan, my grandparents were communicating more about the artifact than if they had zeroed in on the grain of the wood or calculated the precise curve of the barrel staves. Their stories about Ned and their experiences with him contextualize my barrel chair in layers of biography, autobiography, and local and family history, and are as connected to it as its own chipped varnish.

Their string of stories about the barrel chair is typical of my grandparents' storytelling. At family gatherings and card games, one personal experience story leads to another, usually humorous, connected to the same topic, usually a particular person, and drawn from a seemingly endless store. Barbara Allen points out that the stories included in "such clusters of personal experience narratives are determined by participants' interactional competence and by context" (1989:237). My grandparents' stories about Ned Callaghan are entirely relevant in the context of being asked about the barrel chair that they purchased from him and believed he made, because for them, it is correlative of memory, connected with bygone days and people. Looking at such an artifact, which was once an everyday item and is now a curiosity piece, can turn everyday memories from the period with which the artifact is associated in a person's mind into precious and powerful connections with that period.

Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (1989) stresses the relationship between objects and individuals, recognising the links between objects and memory and particularly their ability to prompt a person to review his or her life. This is precisely what happened when my grandparents viewed my barrel chair. After they finished telling stories about Ned Callaghan, Pop looked at the barrel chair and said, "I thought that was gone years ago. But nice to see it, nice to see it. B'y, the fun we had buying that off of Ned." From this point, my grandparents branched into a range of personal experience stories set in the period of their lives during which barrel chairs were popular, liberally interspersed with observations about how the world has changed in terms of technology and social attitudes, thereby associating the evolution of material culture with social change. The chair was obviously a stimulus for memory for my grandparents, a kind of visual mnemonic device. It is a material object as capable of holding memories and narratives as it is of storing mittens and scarves under its seat.

Beyond memories of interactions with Ned Callaghan, talking about and looking at the chair prompted my grandparents' related memories of earlier decades. When we got onto the topic of the makers of the barrels, the original form of my chair, my grandmother brought up a belief that was once popular in Torbay. This was that coopers who had worked in Tapper's Cove, where Torbay fishermen operate, left their spirits there making barrels. She then explained that this belief was useful for keeping people who might steal fish during the night away from the cove.

While Pop agreed that "all that old crap" was "only old talk," he took advantage of the narrative possibilities that Nan's reference to Tapper's Cove opened to then tell a story involving that place, barrels, and the belief in cooper ghosts. Tapper's Cove is surrounded by steep cliffs on either side, and the road winding into the cove that comes between them is also quite steep.

> Us Tappers were coming up out of the Cove one night. Now us and the Whittens always worked together....We were down at fish, and I suppose it was two or three o'clock in the morning or something. But Clyde Whitten [since deceased] was a christer, b'y, like the Devil. Now I wasn't much better either. Well anyway, Walter [Tapper] was boiling [cod] liver and he had barrels down there where you used to turn to go down in the Cove. So Clyde said, "We'll bring up a barrel and let her go." And I said, "B'y, it's an awful thing to do if anyone's coming along." But we brought up the barrel...and put her up at the top of the hill and let her go....Next thing, Walter sees Jakey Crocker running up over the other side, never turned off a light or nothing. Jakey was down in the Cove the next morning telling the crowd about the coopers. The coopers drove him out of Tapper's Cove last night.[3]

Pop went on to tell another story about Jakey Crocker in Tapper's Cove, and concluded his reminiscing about that place in that time of his life by saying, "We had some fun down there." His next statement underscored his connection of my barrel chair with the part of his lifetime during which barrels were a common and necessary item, as opposed to more recent years: "You'd have some job to get a barrel now today." Barrels, then, can be regarded as markers of time, change and generational differences, their absence unnoticed by those who never experienced these objects as part of daily existence, but significant for those who connect them to an array of memories encompassing belief and the people and places of home and work.

"I would have had a dozen": my barrel chair's past lives

Over the centuries, barrels have been used to store and transport a myriad list of items including apples, water, jam, meat, clothes, flour, fish, molasses, raisins, wine, and china. At some point in the great expanse of time, someone apparently had the novel idea of converting a wooden barrel into a piece of seating furniture. But as Robert Blair St. George points out, "Material life devours novelty and reproduces it as domesticated commonality" (1988:4).

3. Jakey Crocker is a pseudonym.

Indeed, such containers have been modified throughout history to provide furniture, particularly in poorer homes. A Flemish calendar for the year 1500 shows a woman sitting in a barrel that has been converted into an armchair (Kilby 1971:132-133). Barrel chairs have also existed in more distinguished circles as English round-backed easy chairs based on the French *gondole* in Louis XV style, and certainly constructed of material other than the common barrel. The American barrel chair, dating circa 1850, is based on the shape of a barrel or actually made from one, then stuffed and upholstered (Pope-Hennessy 1973:49). The humble barrel chair, likely inspired by economic necessity, has had more prestigious, though apparently derivative, cousins in wealthier homes.

In Newfoundland the more modest version of the chair has been associated with regions of early Irish settlement (Mannion 1974:153). A student paper in the collection at Memorial University of Newfoundland Folklore and Language Archive (MUNFLA)[4] written about two Newfoundland coopers suggests that a taste for "the quaint" encouraged making and consumption of such *bricolage*, barrel-derived items around that time:

> The barrel has regained respectability and its form has been rejuvenated in a series of *objets d'art* for which patrons are willing to pay large sums of money. Of course, the barrel's function has changed drastically. When coopering was a common trade, barrels were regarded as necessary, useful vessels for storage. Every home had several and they were, more or less, just a part of everyday life. They provided a source of income for those who possessed the skill and they were often used for barter. The barrel had been laid to rest, but was soon resuscitated by the taste of the modern consumer for the old, the quaint. Barrel food bins, bread baskets, chairs, rockers, tables, are all in demand as the market calls once again to its coopers. A formerly inconspicuous item is now avidly sought as decoration, as art (Phillips 1972:6).

The rustic appeal of barrels has endured, so they now grace groomed lawns as flower planters or are bored with holes into which strawberry plants are poked to dangle prettily. Decorative uses are even found for the wooden barrel's descendant, the steel drum, which can be painted and used for such things as gate posts, or, more practically, reused as a wood stove.[5]

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4. This and other quotations used with permission from MUNFLA.
5. For enthusiastically delivered instructions on how to turn a "tundra daisy" (an abandoned oil barrel in Alaska) into a wood stove, see Wik (1976). He also notes the conversion of these 55-gallon steel drums into sleds, fish smokers, rain-water

In preparing to do research for this article, I hypothesized that my grandparents gave me the barrel chair as a gift of history. Having talked to them about it, I recognise that some qualification of that idea is called for. My original premise included the notion of history as the completed past. I was thinking of my barrel chair as an artifact harking back to another time, the sort of thing in which an antiquarian might delight. While that might be my own impression in the 1990s, I had to realise that when my grandparents bought the chair 22 years ago, barrel chairs would have been slightly more common than they are today. The chair was indeed a gift of history, but not exactly in the sense that I first thought.

In 1976 it was a gift *connecting* me to the time of my grandparents' youth rather than *making a distinction* between my time and the past. The chair was a piece of material culture from the world of their youths to me in my childhood, but my grandparents did not foresee that the chair would become a curiosity item in the years to follow. Barrel chairs were common during their youth, and sat in their parental homes. At the time that they purchased mine, my grandparents did not realise that barrel chairs, or barrels themselves, would become so scarce. "If we had known that," says Nan, "I would have had a dozen." Essentially, then, at the time, my barrel chair was not a gift of a survival, but one of continuity, passing on a familiar domestic piece of material culture.

According to my grandparents, barrel chairs were once a common sight in Torbay and neighbouring communities, often used by the woman of the house and kept in the kitchen. Wool socks and mitts or vegetables were stored in the space under the seat, which was hinged so that it could be lifted. John Mannion states that a rocking chair fashioned out of a puncheon[6] with runners underneath was common on the Avalon Peninsula of Newfoundland and especially along the Cape Shore (1974:153). And Hilda Murray describes a typical kitchen in Elliston, Trinity Bay during the first half of the twentieth century as "simply furnished, often with home-made pieces," among which "some housewives liked to have one or two 'barrel chairs'":

> These were made from a barrel with a section cut out, the remaining section forming a back. A hinged seat was in place about halfways up the barrel, so

catchers, gutter pipes, dog food cookers and laundry tubs (Wik 1976:3).

6. "The largest of the wooden casks used as containers in the fisheries; a molasses cask with a capacity of 44-140 gallons" (Story, et.al. 1990:395).

> that there was a space for storage under the seat. Perhaps a bit of colourful cotton and cushion might add to the comfort of the barrel chair, but in poorer homes it stood naked except for paint (1972:190).

While I have located two instances in poetry by Newfoundlanders describing men sitting in barrel chairs,[7] and have learned through casual conversation of instances where men owned such chairs, they are more often associated with women through their use for storing domestic items including clothes and food and their typical location in the kitchen. Hilda Murray's thesis supports this observation (1972: 190-191), as do my grandparents' experience and several responses to questionnaires distributed by the *Dictionary of Newfoundland English* staff in 1971 which mention barrel chairs. For instance, one respondent relayed that chairs made from flour barrels were common in Conception Harbour, Conception Bay until around 1930 and were usually used by an older woman of the house (Moore 1971).

Several literary examples also associate barrel chairs with women. In 1864, John Francis Campbell visited Newfoundland and wrote about how he stopped at a "half-way house" on his way to the community of Colinet. Inside, he danced with "a pretty wild-looking girl." He writes, "The old landlady, who looked like a bolster tied in the middle, sat in an arm-chair made of an old herring-barrel, and applauded" (1865:133). And author M.T. Dohaney, who is originally from Point Verde on the Avalon Peninsula of Newfoundland, includes an "old woman...sitting in the barrel chair by the stove, all hunched over in a black shawl" in her novel *The Corrigan Women* (1988:15).

This association of barrel chairs with women in my grandparents' experience seemed to make it a fitting gift for their grandaughter and they say that they thought of me as soon as they saw it in Ned Callaghan's store that day. The chair became one of few things that I thought of as mine "for keeps" in childhood. Toys get broken or given away and clothes are worn out or handed down. But my five dollar keg-sized barrel chair is sturdy, and has remained mine over the years, long after I have physically outgrown it. I do not expect to ever outgrow it emotionally. Just as my grandparents associate the chair with Ned Callaghan and other memories, I associate it with them.

However, the memories that I associate with the chair have a very narrow scope compared to those of my grandparents. I link memories of them and

7. L. G. Fitzgerald's "The Ballad of Dog Hood Daly" (1949) and Jack Russell's "Grandfather's Barrel Rocking Chair" (c.1997).

my family to the chair, and have a vague consciousness of it as having emerged out of a time quite different from my own in many ways. Nan and Pop, on the other hand, remember not only the time when barrel chairs were a common household item, but also the time when barrels themselves were essential to the storage and transportation of everyday goods. And they are very conscious of the changes that have occurred over their lifetimes, changes to which the present scarcity of functional wooden barrels and barrel chairs attest.

They remember the layers of flies gathering on puncheons full of molasses in stores on Water Street in St. John's. My grandfather recalls:

> You'd have to go out and get a gallon of molasses and you'd get about a quart tally of fly drools around the gallon. And that old gallon would be put there with the rats. The rats were Devil-deep then. Rats and mice and flies.

Pausing to think about this, Pop laughed and added that somehow there were less germs around during those years. Even though his observation was delivered somewhat facetiously, it continued to draw attention to the barrel as a marker of a past time when more goods were sold in bulk quantities and were not wrapped in plastic displaying "best before" dates. This thought, again connected to everyday memories of barrels, is yet another example of how objects can demarcate time and experience.

My grandparents also remember the enduring smell of salting puncheons, used for salting fish, and how it would seep into the skin of the hands. They witnessed the era when the *Consolidated Statutes of Newfoundland* dedicated an entire chapter to the "Inspection of Pickled Fish and Fish Oils," a time when, according to law, all exported fish was to be:

> [...] properly packed in good, tight, and substantial casks, which shall be made of the materials and in the manner following: tierces, barrels and half-barrels shall be made of sound, well seasoned, split or sawn staves, free from sap, and in no case to be of hemlock, and the heading shall be pine, fir or spruce, free from sap, and planed on the outside, and shall be at least three quarters of an inch in thickness [...] (1919: Vol. III, Chap. 161, II.4).

...and so forth. This was a time when barrels were so essential to everyday life that their quality and construction were carefully regulated down to the thickness of the staves. At the present time they are associated with little besides fine wine and whisky, which have no great presence in the daily lives of the general populace.

"Things don't look good": my barrel chair on the future

According to Gerald Pocius, the barrel was "a symbol to the world of Newfoundland's primary export" at the turn of the century (1988:6), and more St. John's men worked as coopers during that period than at almost any trade. This was the economy that my grandparents were born into in the early part of the twentieth century, and it was a world that my grandfather contrasts with the one he knows today. He says that he could not have foreseen the virtual obsolescence of functional wooden barrels and the way of life to which they were connected. Contemplating the changes, he does not think that things look promising for the future.

The thoughts that my grandfather communicates seem to be in the same vein as one expressed in 1973 by Bert Harvey of St. John's, a master cooper who counted the introduction of the steel drum, the forklift, and plastics among the reasons for dwindling cooperage. He said that if cooperage dies, "it will be another victim of the search for better ways of doing things at lower and lower costs" (Snow 1973:27-28).

My grandfather points out that some people lust for money, while others are starving, and singles out the multi-million dollar salaries that professional athletes demand. He thinks about what soldiers, and especially Newfoundlanders who have been prisoners of war, have sacrificed in the past. He talks about how "tough" the "old fellas" working on schooners had to be, and even how tough "old horses" were to travel in the conditions that they did. He points out that there are hardly any of his "crowd" left, those who remember the "hard times then." And he ponders the biblically-derived apocalyptic prophesy that the world will end in the millennium, perhaps by atomic bomb, by fire. Nan submits that, if anything, ozone depletion will do the job, and the earth will indeed be burned. In any case, Pop says, "It doesn't look good now."

"Now" is a barrel-less time, a different time, a later time. If the barrel was once a symbol of Newfoundland to the world, then my barrel chair is now a symbol to my grandparents of a Newfoundland from the past. By relating my barrel chair to their own personal experiences, their autobiographies and the biographies of people who shared their lives in the early decades of this century, they express a sense of what Kirshenblatt-Gimblett calls "cohort awareness." She writes: "Members of a cohort derive a sense of enlarged time and significance through forging links between their individual lives and a larger whole, in this

case, a lost way of life" (1989:332). The world as my grandparents and my barrel chair once knew it is gone, but out of memories and narratives such as those that they can cluster around the chair, that world and the lives of their contemporaries in it can be perceived as sufficiently eminent to contrast with the present time, which is moving towards Armageddon.

It was this cohort awareness that allowed my grandfather to move from the subject of Ned Callaghan and barrel chairs to barrels in general and the time of his life with which these memories are associated, and to branch from there to contrasting that time with the present. My barrel chair is indeed an object linked with memory, and powerfully so. This is the case for my grandparents, for whom it is now an emblem of a time gone by, and for me, for whom the chair is an emotionally-charged reminder of my connection to them. My barrel chair can prompt thoughts, conversations and emotions about the past, present, and future, as when my grandparents recall bygone days and people, contemplate modern society, and muse about the end of the world. It is not only mnemonic, but also prophetic — and maybe apocalyptic.

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