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Martin J. Lovelace

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Literary and Oral Styles in Newfoundland Autobiographies

MARTIN J. LOVELACE

IN HIS STUDY of writings about Newfoundland, *The Rock Observed*, Patrick O'Flaherty draws a distinction between books which are within the culture and those which are about it (153). The autobiographies I shall discuss are all written from within the culture. This means more than that they are written by native-born Newfoundlanders: left out of this discussion are such fine books of description as Greta Hussey's *Our Life on Lear's Room*, R.F. Sparkes's *The Winds Softly Sigh*, and Allen Evans's *The Splendour of St. Jacques*. All are autobiographical, describe outport life, and are by Newfoundlanders. What makes them about, rather than within, the culture is their greater awareness of other ways of life, other values, other assumptions. These authors are distanced from their material by a sense of time passed and society changed. They explain and describe things to their readers because they know we will not understand. The autobiographers I have been reading explain very little. They had not envisaged a reader like me at all. Rather they were writing to people, men for the most part, like themselves, who would be interested in record trips of fish and seals, and in knowing about sail changes, weather, quantities, and prices. Reading these books, in fact, places the outsider in the same position one of these writers found himself in when a boy, on board a vessel going to his first job, eager to learn:

I went in the steerage and saw a crowd of men sitting by a long table playing cards singing songs telling yarns and every thing in confusion I took my place among them and lessoned to their conversation but no information as every one wanted his own way and paid no attention to what the others would say. they were passengers unboard from most every place between St. Johns and notre dam day bound to the mines in search

of employment and as I sat and listened to the men each talking of the things they were mostly attached to in their own line of business such as bulley boats and cod traps salmon nets and fishing smacks. french shore and labradore tilt cove mines and copper ore. lumber woods and camps and bogs horses slids and old pine logs. building houses schools and halls and some out from the coblers stall. then I went to sleep. (Froude 5-6)

The writing of these men is no more geared to the outsider than their talk would be to a boy. In the situation of boy and neophyte reader, the main recourse is patient listening until patterns and themes begin to emerge. As a folklorist, what I am in search of is not items of folklore — though they are welcome — but rather the assumptive worlds inhabited by these autobiographers.

My discussion is of four autobiographies and one account of a voyage — Captain Job Barbour's *Forty-Eight Days Adrift*. The others are: Nicholas Smith's *Fifty-Two Years at the Labrador Fishery*; Joshua Stansford's *Fifty Years of My Life*; Captain J.M. Fudge's *His Life Story as a Fisherman and Businessman*; and *On the High Seas: The Diary of Capt. John W. Froude*. All concern the later nineteenth and earlier twentieth centuries.¹

The writing of autobiography was not a common act in Newfoundland; an author would have needed to feel justified in presenting his experience. Barbour had a remarkable adventure to relate — having drifted in a wrecked ship from Newfoundland to Scotland; Fudge and Smith had a record of personal achievement in the fishery; and Stansford was the unofficial community historian and bard. Stansford began his diary after witnessing a near shipwreck off Grates Cove, his home:

Then it suddenly occurred to me that I would write the story down . . . After that, I made a practice of writing every day after my day's work was done. (16-17)

He acted as secretary to local fraternal orders and unions, wrote patriotic songs in wartime, songs on local events, and obituary verses. His life story is as much a public act as a private confession, and fed his sense of self-importance.

The diary of the deepwater sailor, John Froude, is something rich and strange. It is partly a sailor's notebook of rules for navigation and procedures on shipboard, but is also a travel record, made so that those at home might have the educational benefit of his voyaging to far and historical places. It is in prose and rhyme; the making of verses was doubtless a pastime for him at sea, the equivalent of mat hooking, perhaps, and anyone interested in discovering the rhyme and metaphor stock held by a nineteenth century sailor's mind could find, bound together like strands in a rug, scraps of hymnody, sailors' songs, weather rhymes, proverbs, and kennings: thus "she gloyede along under the White wings that never grow weary" (173). He claims not to have intended his diary for publication, but he swaggers in the exoteric stereotype of the sailor.² Here he arrives in Brazil:

just sixty days from land to land across the ocean wide six thousand miles the distance run sence we leaved the other side so far away from home and friends and our own dear native land and now down hear in the sunny south on the shores of riogrand where at night I view the majellion clouds milk way and southern cross the south sea seal and water bear likewise the albertross and now as I ramble round about the streets in this old city and think of the time when I was a boy between twelve and sixteen I used to go unboard of the old english vessels that came in from distand lands I took a great delight in sitting around listening to the old sailours spinning long yarns and singing their qear old songs of mountains green and burning sands and the bonny brown girls of riogrand. (26)

Froude's work is remarkable: a journal which because of the amount of traditional poetry in it has the feel of a manuscript song collection. In thinking about it, it is tempting to make a comparison with the design aesthetic of various material artifacts: passages of straight prose description are bordered by ornamental verse.³ In places the analogy holds; elsewhere the verse simply breaks through exuberantly at random. His aesthetic is like that of a ballad-singer: the traditional phrase is preferred over an original one as being finer, truer than anything he feels able to make for himself.⁴

The other autobiographies are much more plain, and lack anything that might be called ornament. Their intention is to be simple, plain, and truthful. Smith characterized his work as "this little innocent, but truthful, Story" (81). Another phrase gives away his sense of "ideal self" for a skipper: "They examined our schooner, both being captains and good practical men" (94).

Almost certainly, log books and account books were drawn upon in composing these life stories, and this helps to explain one of their most striking characteristics: their fondness for lists and tallies. Stansford takes this to extremes, recording, with no sense of disparity, record times for voyages to St. John's and for knitting a net, the record numbers of quintals of fish, and even the number of hymns sung at a wake:

We sang forty-four hymns there the first night, and on the second evening we sang over fifty hymns. (30)

Froude lists and reckons up the places he has seen and miles he has sailed (164-5, 197); also things he has made:

. . . I have been the owner of thirty seven Schoners and boats and five of them I built myself About ten of them went unshore and became a total loss I have also made many panel doors window sash side boards Sheffeniars wash stands tables chairs and lots of other things. (166-7)

This account book style of dealing with one's life and works is very close to the manner of spiritual autobiography. The actual conditions of work and environment in Newfoundland accord perfectly with conventions of spiritual autobiography. Wayfaring, seafaring, and trade were the activities most frequently spiritualized by English Protestant autobiographers of the seventeenth and later centuries (Starr 23-6). The convention of comparing one's life to a voyage was well established and open to everyone through

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hymns and sermons as well as by reading. Froude is full of such references: his wife is his "old mate," their home "the old fregit," and they look toward death and beyond:

and now we have to stand by the old fregit alone and live in her cabin that we call our home as her sails are clewed up and her yards are sent down we have to reach under small canvas as we are still homeward bound but the sky looks dark and the glass is low . . . but we will reach our blissful port some day when the storms of life are passed away. (3-4)

The premise underlying spiritual autobiography was that it was an individual's duty to keep a record of his life, of his progress, material or spiritual, and of God's dealings with him in the form of signs and providences. In a valediction to his readers, Stansford observes:

It pays us all to live a square, honest and right life in this world; and if we do that, I am sure we will not have anything to fear hereafter . . . The Almighty God put men in this world to help Him, and it pays to have a record of his life straight. (210-13)

Stansford took an equal care that his account books agreed perfectly with his merchant's. One feels that, like many seventeenth century Protestant writers, he would have seen no incongruity in comparing his relationship to God to his relationship with the merchant.

Providential escapes, such as the one told of by Captain Fudge, are also typical matter in spiritual autobiography. His narrative follows a traditional pattern:

It was a starlit night, a light breeze but a heavy swell from the east. About 12 o'clock I was awakened by a strange voice, very quiet and close to me, saying, 'Captain, get up and prepare, something is going to happen.' (22-3)

He goes on to tell how, after hearing this supernatural voice, he cleared away the gear from the deck and sent the crew below, and thus all escaped death when the mainmast suddenly fell on the deck where they would have been standing.⁵ In reflecting upon this act of Providence, he makes an association with his mother, as he does elsewhere, and, also like Stansford, employs the metaphor of profit:

So after all God moves in so many mysterious ways that it pays us mortals at times to take notice, for here was an act of Providence of the greatest kind. Yet it was through my dear Mother, who taught me to live close to God. I quote 'In all thy works acknowledge Him and He shall direct thy paths.' (23)

The same association of God's Providence and Mother is found in Captain Barbour's *Forty-Eight Days Adrift*, where he credits his mother's prayers with saving his life and those of his passengers and crew. It is notable too that his crew expected his mother to have an influence over him; before a previous voyage they had gone to her and implored her not to let him ship a man known to be a jinker.

Spiritual autobiography was not the model for all these books; Smith's is almost devoid of religious reference, beyond a care not to work on Sundays, if it could be helped. His attitude is rather that it behooves a captain to be prudent and not tempt Providence: "this was my first time leaving port on a Sunday, and my last," he says, launching into an account of a disastrous voyage (57). Later, however, they work on into Sunday morning in order to finish splitting a large catch of fish:

this was against every man's wish, but it would be a greater sin to let our beautiful fish spoil for want of being salted. So we took our chance, and I think that the Man above will agree with us. (126)

Smith's position would seem to be that it is a captain's responsibility to take his chance: to push his luck, and divine forbearance, as far as they will go for the sake of making a good voyage for himself and his crew.

The fundamental pattern these autobiographies follow is that set by men's talk about their occupations. Within this intrinsically competitive domain their stories are of their successes, wise decisions, and clever contrivances, and of other men's mistakes. The unpractised writer from an oral society draws on his repertoire of oral personal narrative in order to construct his life story.

This occupational focus has profound effects on structure and content. With regard to the presentation of time, it is voyages and fishing seasons that count. Nicholas Smith is typical in structuring his life story as a series of voyages to Labrador. What happens ashore in the winter season is presented offhandedly, as of no great moment:

After spending our Christmas holidays and enjoying ourselves until Old Twelfth Day, we went to work on the store loft repairing the cod traps, etc., for another season, and we worked at that job until near the first of March. (28)

The same dismissive tone occurs in Fudge's *Life Story*:

We passed the long winter with nothing to do except the usual village frolic of dancing and local enjoyment. (17)

What Smith did in the winter can be pieced together from scattered remarks: he played cards, mummered and danced quadrilles and hornpipes, followed the brass band, played billiards, and drank and feasted at the Jubilee Club to which he and all the prominent men of Brigus belonged. It was understood that no real work would be done towards next year's fishery until after the Christmas season, even when, as in one exceptional year, he was "free from the summer's work" by October 20th (99).

Another shared characteristic of these autobiographies is their concern with weather and the technical details of seafaring. This is to be expected, yet it still occasionally surprises the modern, urban reader whose livelihood does not depend on such things. The wind and consequent sail changes are specified for even the first voyage a man can recall. Stansford was a young

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boy when he was taken fishing for the first time, yet he remembers, or feels perhaps that he should pretend to remember, the weather on that first voyage:

the only wind was a fine still breeze from the West, but later on we met heavy wind crossing the tickle. (7)

He also remembers the names for the fishing grounds he was shown that day. Nicholas Smith tells what sails were hoisted and how they were trimmed on his first trip to St. John's:

When the order was given to sheet home the two topsails, how glad was I lending a hand with the halyards; the next command was to loosen the two top gallant sails, and it wasn't long before Skipper Job, as he was commonly called, had every tatter on her, and she began to make ginger beer with her bows. (12)

These authors have an assumed audience of other sailors who will understand such things and, more importantly, will be able to judge and approve how well they handled their vessel in dangerous situations. Their written stories doubtless began with oral versions that had been part of the stock of interesting and useful narrative that had been retailed in twine lofts to all who would listen. One of the justifications or apologies for writing autobiography was that it might be useful to others. As Captain Barbour remarks, fictional sea stories are popular but the real are better:

the real conveys a lesson and submits an experience that instructs, increases one's knowledge and gives an asset which may be helpful to those who may in the future encounter a similar experience. (xi)

To be useful and to waste nothing is one of the cultural themes which emerges in these writings. Sparkes and Hussey, as essayists, point this out explicitly; in the autobiographies it is implicit. Nicholas Smith's mother dies after what he calls a "long and useful life" (147). Froude hopes that his descriptions of his travels in foreign lands will be "of some use" and "of some value" to his sons (140).

An inescapable conclusion from reading these autobiographies is that this was an intensely competitive society. Though my small sample is biased in containing the lives of two high-lining skippers, the same individualism is apparent in all. The most direct statement of this spirit is in Allen Evans's memoir of the community of St. Jacques, where he describes the fierce competition between dory crews on banking schooners:

I've heard my father, as well as others, say that if a man was chopping bait for his trawl and another crew member's fingers came under his chopper, he wouldn't stop long enough for the other to remove them. (10)

October 20th was "settling day" at Harbour Breton, as Fudge describes it. Not only were accounts then settled with merchants at the end of the fishing season, but "Many a boxing match was put over" in which men settled grudges with each other that had built up over the year (Fudge 2; Evans 28-9).

Fudge recognizes, wryly, that the high-liner captain was expected to drive men hard. In a rare moment of self description, he refers to his “grim looks and sour face, which is attributed to a successful fishing captain” (45). Describing one of his record fishing trips, he recalls:

It was wonderful fishing and every morning my men, weary with work, slept in their dories on the stern, and as I dropped them each day, I woke them with fishes heads and sound bones, for we fished twelve straight days. (26)

The competitive spirit is ubiquitous. In the seal fishery “competition ran high as to who could get the most seals from the patch” (Smith 140); it figures in the astuteness of a captain’s decisions about where to fish, how much to pay for bait — “Those who lingered over the price lost their chance of a baiting” (Fudge 19) — and what risks to run with the weather. Even the game of checkers is fierce. Stansford, aboard a vessel full of Bonavista and Green Bay men, “famous Checkers players,” is persuaded to play, beats a man who had beaten Captain Abram Kean, and thus is cheered by all on board as “the leading Checker player in Newfoundland” (50).

This is not to say that there was not cooperation also. Captain Fudge remarks that he always tried to help his brothers, who were also captains, “when the opportunity offered” (24), and Nicholas Smith lends a spare cod trap to another crew as he has all the fish he can handle and is pleased that “my third trap did some poor fellow creature some good” (108). The pious ring to this, however, suggests that it was ideal rather than actual behaviour.

Possibly those who wrote autobiographies were more individualistic and egotistic than others. I doubt this. Fudge seems to have seen himself as quintessentially alone in his working life — “I had not a friend in the world to help me . . . I had done what a good many had told me I couldn’t, and I did it with God’s help” (17) — and Froude makes verses on the same theme:

in the struggle for power or the scramble for pelf
let this be your motto rely on yourself
for whether the prize be a ribbon or throne
the victor is he who can go it alone. (183)

Both would have expected their individualistic sentiments to be fully endorsed by their communities and anticipated audiences.

These autobiographies do not make for easy or even pleasurable reading. They are too knotted, too cryptic; their authors are in an imagined discourse with men of another generation and the modern reader can only catch scraps of this talk. They do repay the effort of a close reading, however, which evaluates not only what is said but also tries to comprehend what is left out as being unthinkable, unsayable, or just too commonplace to be worth mentioning. By a patient reading of these personal documents, we may be able to see something of the world as it appeared to their authors and thereby understand more about the context for their actions and beliefs.

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Notes

¹A version of this essay was read at the annual meeting of the Folklore Studies Association of Canada, Montreal, 1985. For a reading list of Newfoundland autobiographies and some stimulating remarks on them I am indebted to Dr. G.M. Story.

²The concept of the exoteric stereotype — broadly the image outsiders to a group create to depict it — was developed by Jansen.

³Henry Glassie identifies the imposition of borders, and the limited use of ornament, as two of the characteristics of Western folk decoration; see Dorson 253-80.

⁴On this principle in folk balladry, see Halpert ix-xiv.

⁵Parallels to this experience of forewarning can easily be multiplied from folklorists' collections from mariners; see Beck 125-30; Creighton 133-4.

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