

The Culture of Place

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Volume 19, numéro 2, fall 2003

URI : https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/nflds19_2pre01

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Éditeur(s)

Faculty of Arts, Memorial University

ISSN

0823-1737 (imprimé)

1715-1430 (numérique)

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Citer ce document

Morgan, B. (2003). The Culture of Place. *Newfoundland Studies*, 19(2), 373–377.

TWO SYMPOSIUM PRESENTATIONS

THE TWO PERSONAL AND INFORMAL PAPERS which follow were presented at the Newfoundland Historical Society's "The Idea of Newfoundland" Symposium in March 2003. Two other papers, by Margaret Conrad and Jerry Bannister, were published in *Newfoundland Studies*, volume 18 no. 2.

The Culture of Place

BERNICE MORGAN

IT SEEMS TO ME in tracking my own relationship with this place — a lost and found story — I come near to tracking a story that is common to most Newfoundlanders of my generation.

The Australian writer David Malouf in his book *The Great World* suggests that our perception of the world is shaped by our childhood home. The houses in which we live as children, he says, are our initiation into reality, "not just through the shape of it, the architecture of it, but through the objects that were in it, the kind of mythology and history it contained."

I was born into a small, enclosed world, an outport world transported into St. John's, which itself was a small town, although it seemed large to me — as it did to my parents who had moved here from Cape Island in Bonavista North, and from Random Island in Trinity Bay.

As with most children, my initiation into reality took place in the kitchen of the house where I was born. Most of the talk in that kitchen concerned Cape Island and Random Island, those idyllic, beautiful outports my relatives had left behind forever. My Vincent uncles were merchant seamen, young men for whom Spain, Portugal, Boston and Barbados were familiar places. They knew every vessel in port, who their crews were, where each had sailed from, where each was headed. Conversations in the kitchen of my childhood were as much of the sea as of the land, conversations spoken in the accents of Trinity Bay and Bonavista North — not in the accents of townie St. John's.

The world of that kitchen had essentially vanished by the time I entered school. Radio had replaced storytelling. War was coming, people were moving away. My reality, like the reality of many Newfoundlanders, veered sharply from outport life and from the sea. For me, the voices of relatives were replaced by the written word. The first literature I remember consisted of Bible stories and wonderful English ballads and heroic poems, which my mother read to us from her old Royal Readers. At Christmas we were given children's annuals — also from England.

My first reader was about Jerry and Jane — a Canadian textbook, although we were not then part of Canada. There were no poems, and the stories were much duller than those in the Royal Readers. Jane never met an elephant, never clung to sea-swept rocks; Jerry never went to Africa, never stood on a burning deck. It occurs to me only now that Jerry and Jane are probably responsible for my perception that things are more bland, more pastel, in Canada.

When, at age six, I discovered Gosling Memorial Library, all the books in the children's section were from England. I read about English boarding schools, English villages, English explorers, English lords and English villains. The London of Dickens and Arthur Conan Doyle seemed much more real to me than St. John's, and much more interesting.

All through my childhood and adolescence I made weekly trips down over Long's Hill. I never encountered one piece of fiction about Newfoundland — Margaret Duley's books were out of print and I did not read them until much later. Neither was Newfoundland mentioned in our school readers. I still have my Grade Nine literature book, called *Our Heritage*, a Canadian textbook, used well into the 1960s in most Newfoundland schools. Nowhere in *Our Heritage* does the word Newfoundland appear. I don't recall being bothered by this lack. The fact is I grew up without it ever occurring to me that Newfoundland had a culture, without even thinking that the place I lived in could be the subject of novels, of art, drama or poetry. In school essays I used the word 'village' rather than 'outport.' Outports did not exist either in the printed word or in the world of my imagination.

The Newfoundland Museum had been closed during the Depression. There were no art galleries and I knew of no Newfoundland artists. No local plays were being written or performed. Anyone who walked on stage in St. John's — even

born and bred Newfoundlanders — spoke with English accents, as did radio announcers and almost everyone in authority.

There was of course the United States of America. During those years every child in St. John's went to the movies every Saturday afternoon to be indoctrinated into great American myths: the pilgrim and pioneer sagas, conquest of the plains, civil war, accumulation of wealth, building of great American cities, American music, American valour and American glamour. The fact that these movies bore no resemblance to life around me mattered not a bit. Then, as now, shadows on film became more real than any reality.

It was music that came first, I think — hearing Newfoundland singers, John White and Joan Morrissey and others, singing our own songs. Then, just as outports themselves began to vanish, people began writing community histories. A commercial art gallery appeared on Harvey Road, with watercolours of St. John's harbour in the window. Sadly, I cannot remember the artist's name, but I remember the pictures, remember staring at them — transfixed by an image I recognized. Reginald Shepherd and Helen Parsons Shepherd opened the Academy of Art on Cochrane Street, Memorial opened a small gallery where the work of Blackwood, Lapointe, the Pratts, Gerry Squires and a dozen others, would hang.

In 1952 the provincial government Arts and Letters Awards were initiated. Grace Butt wrote a play about Newfoundland and it went on tour in Ireland, Ted Russell and Ray Guy were writing stories and, in 1966, Harold Horwood's *Tomorrow Will be Sunday* was published. I was 31; it was the first Newfoundland novel to appear in my lifetime. Horwood's novel was followed in 1971 by Cassie Brown's *Death on The Ice* and Percy Janes's *House of Hate*. In 1973 a Newfoundland play by Michael Cook won seven awards in the Provincial Drama Festival. In 1974 Kevin Major edited *Doryloads*, an anthology of Newfoundland and Labrador writing for schools, and in 1975 Paul O'Neill's two-volume history of St. John's was published.

In 1976, while collecting material for an anthology called *From This Place*, I came upon a newspaper clipping of Lydia Campbell's writing (published as *Sketches of Labrador Life* by Killick Press in 2000). Her diary changed everything I saw; it occupied my imagination, rekindled memories of conversations in that kitchen.

Then of course Figgy Duff came along and the Wonderful Grand Band, the Mummers Troupe, CODCO and others — with those amazing plays — *Makin' Time With The Yanks*, *High Steel*, *Stars in the Sky Morning!* The first of these performances I saw was a CODCO comedy — I sat in the dark, laugh-filled auditorium with tears streaming down my face. I had never before heard my own accent coming from a stage.

Slowly a sense of place was being born — or reborn. The past was being found, gathered in. Newfoundland songs were being collected, printed and recorded. We began to hear of Rufus Guinchard and Emile Benoit, of Freeman Bennett, John

Devine and long-dead Johnny Burke. Memorial's Folklore Department began collecting stories. The Institute of Social and Economic Research at Memorial launched its blue book series — studies of power structures, economic conditions and the movement of people, by Cato Wadel, James Tuck, David Alexander and others. Harry Cuff started publishing community histories, including Walter Peddle's book on traditional outport furniture. Breakwater Books brought out a Folklore, Folklife series that included Helen Porter's *Below the Bridge*, Hilda Murray's *More Than Fifty Percent*, Gail Weir's *The Miners of Wabana* and Gary Saunders's *Gander River Man*. Breathtaking poets such as Tom Dawe, Gerry Rubia and Al Pittman began to be published. In 1979 George Story became the first chair of the Newfoundland and Labrador Arts Council. And in 1982, surely a milestone, *The Dictionary of Newfoundland English* appeared.

Layer by layer — layers of words, layers of paint, layers of music and dance, theater and film. Then, in the 1990s, an explosion of creativity — a melding of history and landscape, myth and music — that astonished not just us but people all across Canada. For me it was as if the voices I'd heard in that long-ago kitchen had broken through, been reborn, become public, *become place* — and the place was Newfoundland.

Writer Wallace Stegner says, "No place is a place until things that have happened in it are remembered in history, in songs, in yarns, in legends or monuments." In *The Big Rock Candy Mountain*, Stegner maintains that fiction serves as well as fact to create a sense of place. "Rip Van Winkle, through fiction, enriches the Catskills ... real life Mississippi spreads across unmarked boundaries into Tom Sawyer country" — just as fictional Sherlock Holmes and Oliver Twist still inhabit my London.

Of course Newfoundland and Labrador has always been here — and if a place exists and is inhabited, a culture must exist — but today it has been made visible. This explosion of creativity is not a thing that happens suddenly, not a thing that happens by chance. It happened here because thousands of people, whose names we will never know; teachers and historians, fishers and farmers, librarians, doctors, nurses and midwives, missionaries and miners — forgotten people — cared enough to write down our sayings, our songs and our stories. It happened because in a hundred outports a thousand volunteers work setting up their own museums, gathering in their own artifacts. It happened because of organizations such as the Newfoundland Historical Society and the Folk Arts Council, the Newfoundland and Labrador Arts Council. It happened because local publishers, directors, theater and gallery owners are willing to present the work of people living here. It happened because people from other places came here and showed us how to appreciate this place. Much of it happened because Memorial University once had a vibrant Extension Service that nourished a community of fledgling artists, musicians and writers. It happened because of Canada Council money, it happened because governments were far-sighted enough to fund public galleries and public

libraries. It happened because of individuals like Jessie Mifflin and Gerald S. Doyle, because of magazines like *The Newfoundland Quarterly*, *Decks Awash* and *TickleAce*. It happened because many, many artists, actors, writers and musicians believe so fiercely in what they were doing that they are willing to work for years without pay and without recognition.

All this, and more, had to come together to build the critical mass necessary to generate what we are calling our cultural renaissance. Just as much, and more, must continue if we are to maintain a place that will inhabit the imaginations of our children — or will they have to repeat the lost-and-found story of my generation?