

THE FOLKLORE OF "OLD FOOLISHNESS"

Newfoundland Media Legends

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THE TECHNOLOGICAL MEDIA which transmit popular culture have often been viewed by folklorists and other students of culture as "destroyers of folklore."¹ Folklore, however, is a dynamic component of culture which functions adaptively in situations of rapid cultural change; such adaptiveness is especially reflected in the generation of folkloric forms which make critical comments about new situations. For more than a century, rapidly developing technological media have been modifying the sensory experiences of the populations of Newfoundland and Labrador. The adaptive function of folklore will be illustrated in this discussion through an analysis of a cluster of media legends which reveal adjustments to new media technologies.

Mass Media and Popular Culture as Destroyers of Folklore

The study of contemporary folklore encompasses a vast array of old *and* modern expressive behaviours, texts, and contexts. Although the "media as destroyers" idea is not universally entertained, it is an important notion, which merits more than peripheral consideration. The destroyers argument is a deterministic value judgement whose tenets are: folklore is basically good; when popular culture, an inferior expressive form, and the technological media of its transmission are introduced into given cultural scenes, they either supplant or unfairly compete with folklore. It follows implicitly from such an argument that the responsibility of the folklorist is to save, nurture, and maintain folklore before it is entirely destroyed by pernicious forces. Dismissing these views by simply assigning them to the "devolutionary premise" in folklore theory, the idea that "the universe of folklore is running down," hardly addresses the real concerns of the destroyers argument.² In 1954 Canadian folklorist Edith Fowke, in her introduction to *The Folk Songs of Canada*, expressed these concerns with nationalistic pride:

Today the radio, movies, and television have largely displaced folk songs as a means of entertainment, and there is danger that the songs which our forefathers preserved through many generations of loneliness and hardship will die out. If they do, our country will be the poorer, for the old songs are vibrant with life, and many of them have a haunting beauty. It is our hope that this book may help a greater number of Canadians to know and love their native folk songs.³

Sixteen years later, in his study of Paul E. Hall, a Newfoundland songmaker, folklorist John F. Szwed articulated a similar "limited cultural space" interpretation:

It is not an accident that song makers such as Paul Hall have disappeared at the time when mass media have made their inroads into the life of all peoples of the world; cultural space is limited, and under the power and prestige of the new media, the local voices of creativity have less and less meaning. . . . There is a desperate importance in saving and understanding the processes of creativity, wherever they may be found.⁴

The Cooking-Stove and Folklore

It is undoubtedly true that technological media change can spell the demise of certain kinds of traditional artistic communication in small groups.⁵ Thus, James Moreira has reported that in the latter half of the nineteenth century the advent of "labour saving devices, such as halyard winches and small deck capstans" contributed to the decline of the sea shanty, a form of traditional naval work-song.⁶ However, new technologies may not *only* eliminate folklore. The shift from kitchen fireplace to cooking-stove in nineteenth-century Newfoundland is a complex case-in-point. The cooking-stove may have extinguished folkloric custom; it also altered and transformed traditional living patterns. Yet in affecting these patterns, a continuity of expressive behaviours was maintained. Folklore was still in evidence, albeit in considerable variation. Consider the 1934 diary account of Mrs. E. J. Froude as she reflects on the tradition of the Yule Log as it was practised in a community on Random Sound in 1870:

The Yule, commonly called the birch junk, was selected to last for the twelve days [of Christmas]. It was after a long search found in the woods where the biggest firs and birches grew and hauled home in such a spirit of triumph. It was then cut in three feet or thereabouts to fit the space on the hearth at the base of the chimney, which was first cleaned of soot by two men pulling up and down on a rope suspended in the flue with bristly spruce tops tied in the centre. The man on the roof pulled up and the man on the hearth pulled down. Before doing so, the hams and black pudding, big home made sausages, had to be removed.⁷

Obviously Yule Log festivities in this Newfoundland outpost, as in Great Britain and Europe, involved family and friends in a complex significant series of traditional behaviours.⁸ At another point in her diary Mrs. Froude not only cites the technological innovation which caused the decline of this custom, but she also

alludes to other dimensions of social and cultural impact that accompanied the acceptance of this change:

... sixty-four years ago [1870] the first stove began to come into use in the outport. Before this it was all open fireplaces and grates. These times much wood was required for the open fireplaces. The stove was at first regarded with disfavour by many people in spite of the fact that one-third of the wood made the kitchen warmer and more comfortable. The old people liked to see the whole fire blazing up the open chimney... When my father went to St. John's he was to bring the stove... All longed to see the stove when to our dismay father came, but no stove. I remember him say the stove wasn't landed when he left and we had to wait another year for the stove and when it came such a quantity of cooking utensils, everything, boilers, kettles, saucepans, etc., to suit the purpose. The Victory and the Waterloo looked nice when polished but *they did not show the fire*. They ["the old people"] soon got over the prejudice and came around to cut and haul home the wood.⁹

Many significant points are raised by this account: the change from the open fireplace to the free-standing cookstove met with resistance from elderly members of the community; the seniors objected to the loss of visual focus; younger members of the community viewed their criticism as a "prejudice." Given the practical advantages of the cook-stove, the acceptance of this device seems reasonable enough. In order to recognize the position of the elderly on this issue, however, it must be understood that heating mechanisms are important media of communication, which as Marshall McLuhan perceived, "shape and rearrange the patterns of human association and community."¹⁰ Like a television, the flickering colours of an open hearth can supply a dynamic, mesmerizing, visual centre to a room. The fireplace also appeals to the tactile and olfactory senses. Not only did the elderly lament the loss of sensory and social experiences associated with the hearth, but also they wondered what the social and cultural meanings of the Yule Log could be once it was cut down to the size of the Waterloo's iron firebox. Clearly, after the advent of the iron stove, the symbolic, iconic significance of the Yule Log could only be sustained if both a cooking-stove and an ornamental fireplace with a large hearth were in evidence, a luxury far beyond the practical necessities of working-class life.

Mrs. Froude's account reveals that another point of generational resistance must have concerned the new kitchen technology which had to be mastered ("such a quantity of utensils... to suit the purpose"). These new methods, like the microwave oven of today, affected the taste, texture, and appearance of prepared foods; they opened up new possibilities, but the core of the traditional repertoire could remain the same.

In addition, obvious spatial changes accompanied the movement of the heating source away from the chimney; Shane O'Dea has noted that many Newfoundland homes used to have "settle fireplaces," fireplaces with a bench or

benches within. He observes that with the acceptance of the stove, the settle endured, but that new roles and territoriality were assumed:

The settle, which once sat in the fireplace, now moved out to one of the walls where the man could take his rest while keeping an eye on his fish, his children, or his neighbours through the window beside him. In fact the settle, by this change, seems to have become predominantly a male preserve — the place where he slept after coming in from fishing and to which he retired in old age.¹¹

Time Bias / Space Bias

The adoption of the cooking-stove in Newfoundland exemplifies how changing technology can supplant, alter, or transform folkloric forms. But folklorists concerned about the destroyers issue do not cite winches and stoves as the prime foes of folklore — mass media are the bogeys. One useful approach to interpreting realistically the impact of mass media on Newfoundland folklore is to understand their shared “bias,” a concept which Harold Innis developed to describe the ways in which modes of communication function as shaping forces which affect our perceptions of space and time, and to compare this disposition with the bias of sensory media, the media most often associated with the transmission of folklore.¹² One might then examine contemporary folklore to see if these biases are in evidence, and if they are, scrutinize the extent to which these shaping pressures are influencing the “dynamics of folklore.”¹³ Cultural views of space and time are particularly relevant for an understanding of folklore because folklorists identify the subjects of their inquiries (oral folklore, customs, material culture) in terms of space (face-to-face, *small* group contexts) and time (*traditional* usage, *customary* example, *repeatable* forms).

Innis was primarily concerned with historic societies which exhibited “oral tradition” and he viewed oral communication as exhibiting a “time bias.”¹⁴ Memorizing conceptualized culture through speech involves arduous labour and *great amounts of time*. Mnemonic devices are vital not only for purposes of storage, but also for accuracy, since oral communication tends to vary content at short distances. Thus, as folklorists have shown, in an oral society verbal redundancy, formulaic structures, and rhyme are all strategies for the learning, accumulation, and maintenance of culture.¹⁵ Because of the time involved in learning, change is slow, and when recognized, is suspect; the elder members of society are revered for their vast amount of practical, and relevant wisdom. The past is conceived as similar to the present, and to the future. The past, the present, and the future are viewed holistically. *Time is continuous* in an oral culture. Conversely, Innis maintained that the spatially slow-moving, high distortion tendencies of spoken language foster a contractionist worldview which is geographically limited by “known places.” It is a world in which *space is discontinuous*.¹⁶

Despite the historical presence of writing and print, the "orality" of culture in Newfoundland and Labrador has often been stressed. Many folkloristic and social science studies in this century have interpreted the average, small coastal "outport" community as approximating the model of what Robert Redfield called a "folk society," an oral-aural, "nonliterate" community which among other characteristics is spatially "small" and "isolated," and where, "behavior is traditional."¹⁷ The remarkable amount of oral folklore, particularly folksong, that has been collected in Newfoundland during this period supports the view of the vitality of "nonliterate," oral traditions in Newfoundland outport cultures.¹⁸ This expressive data reveals continuity in time through multi-generational memorized content (ancient British ballads, ballads from British broadside tradition, international folktales), an appreciation of local history (native historical ballads, place name legends), and the maintenance of traditional verbal skills (narration, recitation, rhyming, singing, satirical and other songmaking). Traditional suspicions of the outside world as symbolized by strangers,¹⁹ as well as the humorous criticisms of dialect usage made by residents of one outport toward the inhabitants of a nearby community, reflected a sense of discontinuous space. With regard to the latter phenomenon, an archival survey of humour and misunderstanding in the province has prompted James G. Calder to conclude:

both history and relative community isolation gave rise to significant dialect variations. The archive [MUNFLA] contains more than one report of a classic cultural conflict between neighbouring communities based on dialect differences. It appears that such language differences often led the people of adjacent villages to consider one another "stupid," presumably due to the inevitable misunderstandings that would arise.²⁰

In contrast to disjunctive space, time was viewed as continuous. Thus, the practical importance of the past as communicated in the cumulative oral knowledge of the elderly used to be unquestioned. In his folk biography, *The Little Nord Easter*, Victor Butler states that his knowledge of the history of his home community, Harbour Buffet, stemmed from his early sense of tradition-directedness: "I, at the age of ten years, being of a sort of inquisitive nature, learned from my father and other aged men everything possible pertaining to the history of those early years."²¹

In contrast to these tendencies of continuous time and discontinuous space, however, the last one hundred and ten years have also witnessed a series of new *spatially biased* media technologies which have steadily contributed to the development of an expansionist worldview.²² A historical document such as Mrs. Froude's 1934 diary reveals the ambivalence which accompanied the rapid adoption of new technologies for transport and verbal communication, an ambivalence that reflects an altered perception of time and space, and the development of a sense of greater *spatial continuity*. While she lauds the fact

that her parents and earlier generations “had none of the modern inventions then to distract them — no radios, no gramophones, no daily telegraph bulletins, no railways, no weekly bay steamers to bring the news and the passengers to create gossip and political talk,” she laments the death of two young men from exposure in years past because “at that time, there were no telegraph lines and very few light houses and communications and intercourse was very slow and it then *took days to accomplish what is now done in hours.*”²³ Similarly, the not-so-fictional memoir of Claire Mowat cites the introduction of telephones in a Newfoundland outpost as a time when “the new technology cancelled the old rules.” Especially irksome to the Mowats were the new expansive habits of fishermen who had been “getting up at daybreak and going about their business for hundreds of years,” but who now had no qualms about electronically invading the private homes of persons on their party lines as they called up fishermen friends during “pre-dawn hours.”²⁴

By 1985, the spatially continuous conceptions of younger generations of Newfoundlanders are not basically any different from those of any of their North American contemporaries who share a world of roads, cars, jet transport, telephones, computers, and electronic media of all kinds. We all know, see, and hear what is happening in Vancouver, Ethiopia, and Jerusalem. While the spatial bias of modern technological media fosters expansionist involvement, however, it also encourages immersion in the present, and *discontinuity in time.*²⁵ A “now,” “space age” generation dismisses the past as irrelevant and is “future-oriented” to the extent that it is anxious and fantasizes about the unknowns that lie ahead.²⁶

Short Forms

One aesthetic consequence of the physical and psychic motion of spatially biased media is the tendency of “present-mindedness” to favour rapid-fire, quick, short, graspable genres like the gesture, the proverb, the superstition, the joke, photocopy lore, and the contemporary legend.²⁷ Some old Newfoundland ballads may be moribund, therefore, not only because of their historicity and their depictions of the past, but also because they are considered *too long*. Gordon S. A. Cox has described the audience response to an “elderly” man singing a lengthy ballad at a social function in New Harbour several years ago:

About half way through this lengthy ballad the audience started to become restless, the lights of the hall were turned on and off, there were catcalls and jers, and as a result the singer was unable to complete his song.²⁸

Cox further notes that one participant remarked, “it’s a hell of a length of a song.”²⁹ Content tailored to the spatial bias of electronic media, such as soap operas and shorter popular songs, has influenced this changing aesthetic. Gerald

Thomas has reported that some Francophone folklore narrators from the Port-au-Port Peninsula of Newfoundland, who are also soap opera fans, have come to dislike lengthy traditional stories because of their repetitive structure, and because they are "difficult" to remember. These narrators "referred to . . . soap operas as *contes*, the very word used to describe folktales."³⁰ Similarly, John F. Szwed quotes singer-songmaker Paul E. Hall's "limited psychological space" rationale for his acceptance of shorter songs:

You know, I think them old people had a lot on their minds remembering all of those long songs . . . They had an awful lot on their minds . . . I think that was why so many of them people used to become "mental" [mentally ill].³¹

Media Lore / Media Legends

Hall's reference to "old people" as being "mental" is telling, for elderly persons may be used to symbolize the past, and what better way to reject the past, and therefore to express a sense of temporal discontinuity, than to depict the occupants of those bygone days as acting "foolish," incorrigible, and incapable?³² The bulk of the narratives which will be presented here do just that. As a form of *media lore* these texts are communicative units in which technological media occur as significant elements of content.³³ As *media legends*, these narratives recount events which, from the narrator's point of view, are believed to have actually occurred. All of these legends have been collected from Newfoundland and Labrador students, friends, and colleagues, ages seventeen through fifty-five, who heard them from others, and thus they represent events which have intrigued young to middle-aged residents of the province. The informants, save one, all hail from small communities. Most of the texts were transcribed from memory by the informants themselves; others have been collected by the author through note-taking. While the reader may initially view these legends as being of little consequence, the fact that this body of oral narrative has fascinated my informants to the extent that they have maintained its oral circulation is not without significance, for values and attitudes are reinforced by this process. W. F. H. Nicolaisen has correctly observed that legends are "narrative transactions shared by teller and listener in the folk-cultural register, in response to certain behavioural stimuli and to certain negotiated motivations and interests."³⁴ These stories are critical folk commentaries about the impact of new media forms. In a milieu of rapid cultural change they function adaptively for believing narrators and audiences alike.

From the narrator's point of view, the intentions of this group of short legends are surprise and laughter. The protagonist of each of these "humorous" legends is a "fool" in the folk narrative sense because he is the butt or dupe of a circumstance which he does not fully comprehend; nor does he understand the meaning of his own response to that circumstance. Folktale scholar Stith Thompson

described the fool as engaging in “inappropriate and absurd actions” because of misunderstandings such as mistaking the identity of objects, ascribing human characteristics to non-human entities, and being literal-minded.³⁵ One of Thompson’s international examples of the numbskull jest involves a “modern invention,” and qualifies as media lore:

The fool’s son, who is living in a distant city, writes his father requesting a pair of boots. A rascal persuades him that he can save time by sending them by telegraph. The father leaves them hanging on a telegraph pole, but they come into the hands of the trickster rather than the son.³⁶

Another jest hinging on procedural misconceptions was collected in Indiana by Herbert Halpert in 1943 as part of the “little moron” joke cycle: “The little moron was waiting for a ’phone call and couldn’t wait any longer; so he took the receiver off the hook and left a note.”³⁷

Jokes are fictional communicative units; however, legends are not. Since the narrator of legend believes his story, and in performance attempts to use rhetorical strategies to convince listeners of the veracity of his account, the identity of the fool protagonist in a legend has more serious social implications than in a joke. The fictional “little moron” is an abstract figure who cannot be socially identified, but the following media legends allegedly refer to real people and actual circumstances. They are classified here according to the protagonist’s response to a given situation involving a technological medium.

ANTAGONISM AND VIOLENCE TOWARD THE MEDIUM³⁸

Legend #1

When the first radios came to Fortune Bay, some people didn’t quite understand them. The housewife finally got her set in operation and when she turned it on the announcer was calling a fight — Joe Louis. She listened and when it was over she went out in the porch, took an axe in her hand and beat the radio to pieces. She exclaimed, “That’s the last fight in this house!”

Legend #2

This story was told to me by my father. One night Dad and Pop [grandfather] and all the family were gathered around about to watch TV for the first time. They were all so excited! They were going to watch hockey. When the game came on everybody was so interested that their team would score that they would all scream and shout, and when the other team would score they would boo. All of a sudden the referee made an awful call against Pop’s team which later cost them the game. Pop jumped up and kicked the TV, screaming and shouting at the referee. “That’s it for this shit box!” Pop exclaimed. “We got to get another one,” he said, “I don’t like the referee on this one.”

Legend #3

Well when television first came to Carbonear in the fifties the men and the boys on Friday nights would go over to the house of the merchant who sold them and they'd watch wrestling. The place would be blocked and there were wrestlers like Whipper Billy Watson and Little Beaver. Anyway, one night this guy, who sold the TVs, got so involved in one of the matches that he kicked his foot through the picture tube!³⁹

Legend #4

There was an old man in Long Harbour who was a bit senile and had never seen a television before. So he was getting set to go hunting and he went over next door where they had just gotten a new television. The woman turned on the television and there was a picture of a live moose. Upon seeing this the old man got so excited that he cocked his gun, took aim, and shot the television!

Legend #5

When the TV was first brought out to the Cape Shore, there was one man watching it one evening when a flock of ducks were shown on a wilderness program. Right away, the man grabbed his shotgun and blew up the TV set trying to kill the ducks!

Legend #6

George is an elderly man living in who is sort of a comic within the town and through some incident that occurred on a rabbit-snaring expedition, he was nicknamed "Rabbit." He would become incensed when called by this nickname in person, as some of the young fellows in Roddickton can attest. George purchased a television one year, at about the time when they first appeared, and he was quite happy with it. One Saturday evening he was sitting in front of his new TV watching Bugs Bunny. An episode which featured Elmer Fudd was in progress in which Elmer, as usual, was "twacking the wabbit to its hole." Approaching the hole, Elmer peered in and said "I'm going to get you wabbit!" Elmer's face and eyes seemed to be pointing directly at George, or so he thought, and with that he jumped up, proceeded to his wood box in the porch, picked up his axe, came back in and pounded the living transistors [*sic*] out of his new TV!

IMPROPER USE AND MAINTENANCE OF THE MEDIUM

Legend #7

In the town of St. Brides at this time there was no such thing as electricity. In Pt. Verde, however, they did have electricity. There was one house in Pt. Verde that had a boarder from St. Brides. The woman who owned the house said to the boarder before going to bed, "make sure you put out the light." The woman went to bed but about two hours later woke up to the sound of someone blowing at something. She got up and went over to the boarder's room. He was standing on a chair trying to blow the light bulb out!⁴⁰

Legend #8

An old lady from Knights Cove was on a party line with another family. This family couldn't get their phone to work because the old lady's phone was busy all the time. Someone told this family that the old lady had gone away for awhile and this made the family curious, so they got in contact with the old lady and she sent them a key to her house. When they went into the house, they found the receiver and the rest of the phone, each carefully wrapped up in a cloth towel. When the family finally asked the old lady what the idea of it was, she said, "I didn't want the phone to freeze up while I was away!"

LITERAL RESPONSE TERMINATES COMMUNICATION

Legend #9

A Newfoundlander living in Boston bought her old mother a telephone so that she could call her. One day the phone rang and the operator said, "long distance from Boston." The old lady replied, "that it is," and hung up!

Legend #10

There was a young woman working in Labrador City who got her parents a phone so that she could call them and keep in touch. One day she called and her father, who was an older man, answered. So she asked him if she could speak to her Mom. Her father said, "I'll get her," and so he did, but he had to walk a half-mile to where she worked at the hospital! I don't think she waited!

AUDIO-VISUAL CAPABILITY ATTRIBUTED TO AUDIO MEDIUM

Legend #11

A friend of mine from Gander told me about an old lady in Stock Cove who just got a phone installed. One day the phone rang and the old lady ran out to the bathroom saying, "George answer that will you, 'cause I haven't got my hair combed."

PRIVATE PROGRAMMABILITY ATTRIBUTED TO PUBLIC PROGRAMMING MEDIUM

Legend #12

One of my friends has an Aunt from Grand le Pierre who was listening to the radio one day while her husband was in the backyard chopping wood. As she was listening, a song came on that she knew her husband liked, so she decided to turn the radio off until her husband was finished chopping wood so that he could enjoy the song!

Legend #13

There were lots of stories about this woman in the community who did some crazy things that were really funny. One thing was that she used to listen to the radio and whenever she heard a good song she'd turn it off right away so that when her husband would come back from the woods he could hear it too!

Legend # 14

A friend of mine told me that there were some friends of her parents from out around the bay who came over to watch TV for the first time. And when they got tired they said "good night" and the set was turned off. The next day they came over to the house again and they thought that they could watch the end of the show that they had been watching the night before just by turning the set back on!

BIDIRECTIONAL CAPABILITY ATTRIBUTED TO UNIDIRECTIONAL MEDIUM⁴¹*Legend # 15*

There was this old man in Branch who couldn't believe the invention of the radio. He would sit down every night and listen to it by himself when he first bought one. Back then, when the announcer was signing off he would always say, "Good-night." This old bachelor would also say "goodnight!"

Legend # 16

An old man was watching TV when it first came out, and Don Jamieson was on. After he was through talking, Jamieson waved goodbye and the old man waved back saying, "Look, he knows me already!"

Legend # 17

There was some old folks who purchased a new TV when they first came out. Before they'd turn the set on, they would dress up in their Sunday best because they thought the people on the TV could see *them*. More than that, they wouldn't say a word while the set was on because they thought that the people on the TV could hear them too.

RETURN OR EXCHANGE OF AN ALIEN MEDIUM

Legend # 18

A woman purchased a radio. When she turned it on, the program was in French. The next morning she promptly returned the radio, demanded that the merchant return her money, and gently reminded him that she spoke English and not French!

Legend # 19

A man from Hearts Content purchased an "R.C.A." radio and he turned it on just after he got it and heard music on it like it was in church. He took it back to the store and told them he didn't want an "R.C." (Roman Catholic) radio!

Legend # 20

While visiting the French island of St. Pierre, a friend of my father's decided to buy his first radio. After returning to his hotel room, he tried out the radio. Being on a French island he was only able to pick up French stations. Not understand-

ing this, he was sure that he had been given a "French" radio. He then attempted to exchange this "French" radio for an "English" radio!

MEDIUM UNDERSTOOD AS HUMAN VIVARIUM⁴²*Legend #21*

My uncle told me that there was an old guy who came over once and had never seen a TV and he watched it for hours and never said anything. Finally, he said, "Jesus, I can't understand how they do it without me seein' 'em get in!"

Legend #22

In the first years of television, a young man from Point Verde bought a new television. Now his mother, who was sitting in the living room at the time when the TV was brought in, decided to turn it on. When she did, Don Jamieson, who was running in an election at the time, was on the screen. The woman became completely bewildered for she couldn't understand how a big man like Don Jamieson could fit inside the set.

Temporal Discontinuity

By pointing out the "foolish" actions of others, both narrators and agreeing audiences assume their own superiority and sophistication. The tacit assumption of those who circulate these stories is that, unlike the fools depicted, but like the observer-persona in some of the narratives, they are young and adaptable to new technologies; they understand the operation of the technological media in question; and they possess the skills for their proper use. In contrast to the Newfoundland "townie-bayman" joke cycle, a group of jests which pits the city slicker against the country bumpkin, *both* the fool protagonists and the observer-persona of these legends, with one exception, are from outport communities, the loci of the actions.⁴³ The majority of these legends, then, are intragroup outport expressions which make a case against the past, and reveal temporal discontinuity through their portrayal of incapable and disoriented elderly persons. An ancillary sentiment for narratives which do not allude to the age of the main character may be that *anyone* who cannot deal with the media in question is mentally deficient, behind the times, or "old-fashioned." The proverb "there's no fool like an old fool" certainly captures the nature of the surprise contained in these stories — in someone from whom we would *traditionally* expect wisdom, we perceive irrelevance and incompetence. It is important to qualify these remarks, however, by noting that in their folk semantics none of my informants would refer to the elderly protagonists of the foregoing media legends as "fools." Rather, informants describe the inappropriate behaviour of these persons as "acting foolish," a phrase which implies more of a temporary lapse of decorum than a permanent disability.

Spatial Continuity

However qualified, the incompetence of the aged in most of these legends is striking because it is *spatial* incompetence. The sophisticated observer, narrator, listener understands the new technologies as *media* which provide spatial continuity, that is, as sensory extensions into new spaces. In contrast, the elderly actors in these stories view these mechanisms as *self-contained, non-media*. Thus one individual, thinking of a flame, does not understand that the extinguishing mechanism for a light bulb is physically separate from the light itself. Other protagonists mistakingly personify inanimate media and physically abuse them (#1 through #6), or reject them for being French or Roman Catholic. Some characters erroneously assume that as self-contained worlds these machines may be privately programmed (#13 through #15). Similarly, the reverent and anxious responses of the oldsters in legends #9 and #10 imply that they are reacting to their telephones as magical, personified talking objects rather than as means for long distance communication. The idea reflected in the last two narratives (#21, #22), that the visible actors on a television screen are in fact *within* the television chassis, may indicate that the classifications of “bidirectional capability” is incorrect, since that category assumes some spatial understanding. Whatever the particular case, it is generally clear that through many of these media legends “outport sophisticates” criticize elders for their traditional sense of discontinuous space, an orientation derived from a past world of orality and physical isolation.

The Wise “Old Skipper”

Some contemporary middle-class Newfoundland writers, artists, performers, and educators, who either assume a “neo-nationalistic” posture or simply appreciate the distinctive cultural identity of the province in face of North American homogeneity, advance a contrasting image of the elderly in oral narrative — the revered and sagacious man of the sea, the “old skipper.”⁴⁴ Such skippers were popularized by well-known Newfoundland humorist Ted Russell in his series of fictional monologues entitled, “The Chronicles of Uncle Mose” which were aired on CBC radio, St. John’s, as part of the “Fishermen’s Broadcast” between 1953 and 1962. Note the positive portrayal of “Grampa Walcott” in the following excerpt from “New Fashioned Things” as he analyzes a baseball radio broadcast with an awareness of cultural conflict, comparative knowledge, and *continuous time*:

“Of course,” said Grampa [Walcott], “tis not only in Newfoundland we carry on with this nonsense about old fashions and new fashions. Why,” said he, “only last week I turned on the radio and there I heard a crowd playin’ rounders, and another bawlin’ at ’em. Now,” said Grampa, “when we played rounders 70 years

ago, we soon had a crowd bawlin' at us — drivin' us home to bring water, or cut splits, or bale out the punt. But this crowd on the radio instead of bawlin' at this fellows to stop it and go and do some work, were bawlin' at 'em to keep playin'. Eggin' 'em on! Of course," he said, "like everything else, they had a new-fashioned name for it. They don't call it rounders any more."⁴⁵

In "retirement," Canon George H. Earle is a sometime actor on CBC television adaptations of "Uncle Mose" stories, "Tales from Pigeon Inlet," and he has a reputation as being one of the most popular after-dinner speakers in the province today. His humorous monologues often depict the subtle sagacity of a "skipper" figure. In the following story, which is one that "they really like," the "old-timer" pokes fun at radio content through a play on words based on traditional usage and local meanings. Although he may have a discontinuous sense of space, the skipper's traditional knowledge within the space that he knows gives him powerful tools to mock external affairs:

My brother Fred, he took the radio out on this isolated island off Fogo. This is in the early forties, during the war, and they got used to the radio and could differentiate between news and adverts. But by and by they put on "Romeo and Juliet," when Laurence Olivier and Vivian Leigh came to New York and this was broadcast. And an announcer said that Laurence Olivier and Vivian Leigh had just entered the "stage." This old timer was rocking back and forth on his rocking chair and not saying much. Anyway, the thing worked up and Romeo was telling Juliet that he loved her and it looked like twas a bit of passion there, one thing and another. And this old feller says, "Fred, if he keeps this up much longer, next thing he's gonna have she up on the splittin' table!"⁴⁶

My last example of the wise old skipper image is virtually "state of the art" media lore, since it describes an incident involving a videocassette recorder, a relatively new medium. This narrative was collected from Tony Williamson, an educator who tells fascinating stories about the many years he worked with Memorial University of Newfoundland Extension Services in Labrador. Old Uncle John may be the victim of spatial disorientation, but his useful knowledge outweighs the disability, and it is he who puts the sophisticated observer off-balance:

We had made some video tapes as part of our [MUN Extension Services] development work on the southern coast of Labrador. We did the shooting in the summer of '69 and then in the winter and the following summer I brought these videos around for our meetings and to show them to people. And I went to a place called Seal Island where there are only about six families. If they had ever seen moving pictures they were certainly never any of anyone they knew. And never on video. So we set up our own generator and we were in a twineloft and everybody was sitting around and old Uncle John sat leaning on his knees just a foot in front of the TV set. And the first tape I put on was put on for fun, just to break the ice, called "Uncle Saul Curl Telling Stories." The stories were about caribou hunting and dancing all night and walking home over the hills after the

Sheppard, Heather Wareham, Wilfred Wareham, Mary White. In addition, I am indebted to: Heather Wareham, Archivist, Maritime History Group Archive for historic primary source materials, and Philip Hiscock, Archivist, Memorial University of Newfoundland Folklore and Language Archive (MUNFLA), for references to narrative variants in MUNFLA.

- ¹ Donald Allport Bird, "A Theory for Folklore in Mass Media: Traditional Patterns in Mass Media," *Southern Folklore Quarterly*, 40 (1976), 287-89. Two articles which assess the influence of mass media on Newfoundland folklore are: Philip Hiscock, "The Mass Media in the Folk Culture of Newfoundland: A Survey of the Material in the MUN Folklore and Language Archive," *Culture and Tradition*, 8 (1984), 20-38; Michael Taft, "The Itinerant Movie-Man and His Impact on the Folk Culture of the Outports of Newfoundland" in his *Traveling the Outports: Two Studies in Newfoundland Itinerant Culture* (St. John's: Memorial Univ. of Newfoundland, Department of Folklore, 1981), pp. 29-39.
- ² Alan Dundes, "The Devolutionary Premise in Folklore Theory," *Journal of the Folklore Institute*, 3, no. 3 (1966), 226-49.
- ³ Edith Fowke and Richard Johnston, *Folk Songs of Canada* (Waterloo: Waterloo Music, 1954), p. 12.
- ⁴ John F. Szwed, "Paul E. Hall: A Newfoundland Song-Maker and His Community of Song" in Henry Glassie, Edward D. Ives, and John F. Szwed, *Folksongs and Their Makers* (Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green Univ. Popular Press, 1970), p. 167.
- ⁵ The phrase "artistic communication in small groups" is the definition of folklore coined by Dan Ben-Amos, "Toward a Definition of Folklore in Context," *Journal of American Folklore*, 84 (1971), 3-15.
- ⁶ James Henry Moreira, "The Songs of the Shantymen: Composition and Performance in a Nineteenth Century Tradition" (unpublished Master's thesis, Department of Folklore, Memorial Univ. of Newfoundland, 1984), pp. 148-49.
- ⁷ E. J. Froude, "Day Book; Resident of Random Sound, 1930s," (Maritime History Group Archive, Memorial Univ. of Newfoundland), Accession B-5-10, entry April 16, 1934.
- ⁸ Christina Hole, *A Dictionary of British Folk Customs* (London: Paladin, 1978), pp. 333-36.
- ⁹ Froude. My emphasis.
- ¹⁰ Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York: Signet, 1964), p. 121.
- ¹¹ Shane O'Dea, "The Development of Cooking and Heating Technology in the Newfoundland House," *Material History Bulletin*, 15 (1982), 17.
- ¹² See Harold Adams Innis, *Empire and Communications* (1950; rpt. Toronto: Univ. of Toronto, 1972) and *The Bias of Communication* (1951; rpt. Toronto: Univ. of Toronto, 1973). Two illuminating interpretive essays contrasting the media ideas of Innis and McLuhan are: James W. Carey, "Harold Adams Innis and Marshall McLuhan" in Raymond Rosenthal, ed., *McLuhan: Pro and Con* (Baltimore: Penguin, 1969) and Daniel J. Czitrom, "Metahistory, Mythology, and the Media: The American Thought of Harold Innis and Marshall McLuhan," in his *Media and the American Mind* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1982). On folklore and sensory media see Paul S. Smith, "Tradition — A Perspective. Part II, Transmission," *Lore and Language*, 2, no. 3 (1975), 5-14.

- ¹³ See Barre Toelken, *The Dynamics of Folklore* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1979), pp. 49-91.
- ¹⁴ Innis, *Empire*, pp. 53-84. The time-binding qualities of the spoken word are also discussed by Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy* (London: Methuen, 1982), pp. 31-77.
- ¹⁵ For example see Albert B. Lord, *The Singer of Tales* (New York: Atheneum, 1965); Roger D. Abrahams, *Deep Down in the Jungle: Negro Narrative Folklore from the Streets of Philadelphia* (Chicago: Aldine, 1970); David Buchan, *The Ballad and the Folk* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1972).
- ¹⁶ Innis, *Empire*, pp. 7-11.
- ¹⁷ Robert Redfield, "The Folk Society," *American Journal of Sociology*, 52 (1947), 293-308. See references to this model in: George Casey, Neil V. Rosenberg, and Wilfred Wareham, "Repertoire Categorization and Performer-Audience Relationships: Some Newfoundland Folksong Examples," *Ethnomusicology*, 16 (1972), 397-403; John Szwed, *Private Cultures and Public Imagery: Interpersonal Relations in a Newfoundland Peasant Society*, Newfoundland Social and Economic Studies No. 2 (St. John's: Memorial Univ. of Newfoundland, Institute of Social and Economic Research, 1966).
- ¹⁸ See the bibliographies of the articles under "Folklore" in *Encyclopedia of Newfoundland*, vol. 2, Joseph R. Smallwood, ed. (St. John's: Newfoundland Book Publishers, 1984), pp. 243-71.
- ¹⁹ James C. Faris, *Cat Harbour: A Newfoundland Fishing Settlement*, Newfoundland Social and Economic Studies No. 3 (St. John's: Memorial Univ. of Newfoundland, Institute of Social and Economic Research, 1972), p. 101.
- ²⁰ James G. Calder, "Humour and Misunderstanding in Newfoundland Culture," *Culture and Tradition*, 4 (1979), p. 50.
- ²¹ Victor Butler, *The Little Nord Easter: Reminiscences of a Placentia Bayman*, Wilfred Wareham, ed., Memorial Univ. of Newfoundland Folklore and Language Publications, Community Series No. 1 (St. John's: Memorial Univ. of Newfoundland, 1975), p. 50.
- ²² See J. T. Meaney "Communication in Newfoundland," in *The Book of Newfoundland*, vol. 1, J. R. Smallwood, ed. (1937; rpt. St. John's: Newfoundland Book Publishers, 1968), pp. 328-38.
- ²³ Froude. My emphasis.
- ²⁴ Claire Mowat, *The Outport People* (Toronto: Seal, 1984), p. 119.
- ²⁵ See Carey's interpolation of Innis, pp. 297-99.
- ²⁶ See Alan Dundes, "Thinking Ahead: A Folkloristic Reflection of the Future Orientation in American Worldview" in his *Interpreting Folklore* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1980), pp. 69-85.
- ²⁷ On photocopy lore see Alan Dundes and Carl R. Pagter, *Work Hard and You Shall Be Rewarded: Urban Folklore from the Paperwork Empire* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1978). A good sampling of contemporary legend scholarship is Paul Smith, ed., *Perspectives on Contemporary Legend*. CECTAL Conference Papers Series No. 4. (Sheffield: Univ. of Sheffield, Centre for English Cultural Tradition and Language, 1984).
- ²⁸ Gordon S. A. Cox, *Folk Music in a Newfoundland Outport*, Canadian Centre for Folk Cultural Studies, Mercury Series, Paper No. 32 (Ottawa: National Museum of Man, 1980), p. 66.

- ²⁹ *Ibid.*
- ³⁰ Gerald Thomas, "Other Worlds: Folktale and Soap Opera in Newfoundland's French Tradition," in Kenneth S. Goldstein and Neil V. Rosenberg, eds., *Folklore Studies in Honour of Herbert Halpert: A Festschrift* (St. John's: Memorial Univ. of Newfoundland, 1980), p. 343.
- ³¹ Szwed, "Hall," p. 167.
- ³² See Calder's remarks on the rejection of "old people" in Newfoundland folk narratives, p. 57. On "foolish" see G. M. Story, W. J. Kirwin, and J. D. A. Widowson, *Dictionary of Newfoundland English* (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto, 1982), p. 196.
- ³³ I have defined "media lore" in my article "Joseph R. Smallwood, 'The Barrelman': The Broadcaster as Folklorist," *Canadian Folklore canadien*, 5, nos. 1-2 (1983), 60-78.
- ³⁴ W. F. H. Nicolaisen, "Legends as Narrative Response," in Paul Smith, *Perspectives*, p. 177.
- ³⁵ Stith Thompson, *The Folktale* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1946), pp. 190-96.
- ³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 192. This narrative is Type 1710 *Boots Sent by Telegraph* in Antti Aarne and Stith Thompson, *The Types of the Folktale: A Classification and Bibliography* (Helsinki: Academia Scientiarum Fennica, 1961). Newfoundland variants include: H. J. Reader, *Newfoundland Wit, Humor and Folklore: A Book of Newfoundland Stories Compiled by the Author After Fifty Years of Experience With Newfoundland Business Life* (Corner Brook: H. J. Reader, 1967), p. 42; MUNFLA, Ms. 76-99/pp. 24-25.
- ³⁷ Herbert Halpert, "More About the Little Moron," *Hoosier Folklore Bulletin*, 2, no. 2 (1943), 50. This narrative is motif J1935(a) in Ernest W. Baughman, *Type and Motif-Index of the Folktales of England and North America* (The Hague: Mouton and Co., 1966).
- ³⁸ Newfoundland humourist and narrative collector Al Clouston has published a story which fits this category; see *We Rant and We Roar* (St. John's: the author, 1980), p. 25.
- ³⁹ New technological media are status symbols and the destruction of a television by a merchant-owner might well be interpreted as being a classic case of what economist Thorstein Veblen called "conspicuous waste." For recollections of the importance of radio purchase in Newfoundland see Aubrey M. Tizzard, *On Sloping Ground: Reminiscences of Outport Life in Notre Dame Bay, Newfoundland*, Memorial University of Newfoundland Folklore and Language Publications, Community Studies No. 2 (St. John's: Memorial Univ. of Newfoundland, 1979), pp. 337-39.
- ⁴⁰ Also MUNFLA, Folklore Survey Card (unnumbered), 80-265.
- ⁴¹ Also MUNFLA, Tape, 69-25/C573.
- ⁴² Also MUNFLA, Q 68-470/ pp. 3-4.
- ⁴³ On the "townie-bayman" conflict see Martin Laba, "The Bayman Food Market is in the Townie Dump': Identity and the Townie Newfoundlander," *Culture and Tradition*, 3 (1978), 7-16.
- ⁴⁴ For Newfoundland cultural neo-nationalism see James Overton, "Towards a Critical Analysis of Neo-Nationalism in Newfoundland," in Robert J. Brym and

R. James Sacouman, eds., *Underdevelopment and Social Movements in Canada* (Toronto: New Hogtown, 1979), pp. 229-30. See the citations for "skipper" in Story, *et al.*, pp. 487-88.

- ⁴⁵ Ted Russell, *Stories From Uncle Mose (The Best of Ted Russell, No. 2)*, selected and edited by Elizabeth Russell Miller (St. John's: Harry Cuff, 1984), p. 51.
- ⁴⁶ Story, *et al.* define "stage" as "an elevated platform on the shore with working tables, sheds, etc, where fish are landed and processed for salting and drying, and fishing gear and supplies are stored," p. 525. They define "splitting table" as "table in a fishing stage where cod or salmon are processed before salting and drying," p. 525. This narrative was collected by the author 10 October 1985.
- ⁴⁷ The name of the protagonist in this narrative has been changed. Collected 14 October 1985, Office of International Programmes, Memorial University of Newfoundland.
- ⁴⁸ On "Newfie jokes" see Gerald Thomas, "Newfie Jokes," in *Folklore of Canada*, Edith Fowke, ed. (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1976), pp. 142-53.

THE MAN

Libby Scheier

Jacob's been calling himself a man all day.
 I admit he's evoking my hostility!
 I the man, he says, and I throw out the garbage
 (at McDonald's for dinner).
 I realize I want to shout at him,
 women can throw out garbage too.
 What on earth is wrong with me?
 And where in god's name did he get the idea
 that only men throw out the garbage?
 I make a mental note to inquire at the day care.