

THE UNWITTING ELEGIAC

Newfoundland folk-song

Paul West

The substance of this article will appear in somewhat different form as a chapter in Paul West's book on Newfoundland, to be published later in the year by the Macmillan Company of Canada whose permission to publish beforehand we wish to acknowledge.

THE VISITOR who is anxious not so much to see what is burgeoning in Newfoundland as to find what has fed it spiritually will not look in vain for signs of a special heritage. In the folk-songs, for instance, he will find a mixture of worlds: that of traditional English and Irish balladry, that of the sung lyric—ageless in certain of its tropes, and that of extempore local satire, yarn-spinning and drinking-song.

During more than three hundred years as a Cinderella colony, Newfoundland grew rich in song. In one sense such wealth is ineffable; in another 'ineffable' is, of course, quite the wrong word. Songs were brought across from England, Ireland and Scotland. Others found their way into Newfoundland from the mainland, thus adding some things exclusively Canadian and others which were variants on songs originally British. But many songs were created in Newfoundland itself, and it is no exaggeration to describe these as the pithiest, the most ingenious, and the most evocative of the island temper.

The best are by Johnny Burke, a man gifted in the yoking together by violence of heterogenous images. No one is quite as bizarrely ingenious as Burke; but other names usually noted are H. Le Mesurier (not prolific) and A. R. Scammell (author of *The Squid Jiggin' Ground*). It was customary for outport fishermen to record local events, especially misfortune at sea, in songs known as "Come All Ye's"; the first line usually ran, "Now come all ye jolly fishermen". But the

songs were not always jolly. Disaster, animosity and unlyrical candour keep showing a face alongside lullabies, satires and euphoric rants. In isolated fishing communities a new song was an event, whether composed locally or imported orally. Many songs were written down, and crudely printed songbooks exist. In 1929 the Vassar College Folklore Expedition collected almost two hundred which were later published as *Ballads and Sea Songs of Newfoundland* and about the same time Maude Karpeles gathered a similar number in *Folk Songs for Newfoundland*.

These songs are still sung and enjoyed; they do not always mean what visitors think they mean, and much in some of the most arresting songs is esoteric. But this is a way of binding together—in a community of consent and rhythm—that takes us back to the first ballads. The Newfoundland song has a defensive or reckless quality missing from most English songs; when matiness is suggested it is often of a provocative, provoked, baited, delirious kind. The native Newfoundland songs are rather lacking in repose; even the lyrics get restless at times. And a sheer love of naming objects produces songs that seem riotous, knobably catalogues offered to someone who does not believe in the external world. In fact, for most of Newfoundland's severe history, that world was not much worth believing in; so the songs have a resolute look at some of the better objects. The rest is imported keening, languishing and suspense.

Songs are still written in Newfoundland; each year many specimens are submitted for the Ballad section of the Provincial Arts and Letters Competition. But what will happen as the province becomes affluent? Perhaps the folk song will fade out until the external world drives people back to primal images. When men no longer need to sing while hauling a boat up the beach, straining at the capstan or floating a house across a bay, they will be utterly civilised—at peace to listen to the ticking of their synchronised gadgets. That day has not yet come in Newfoundland; the songs still have a *use* in addition to their charm. And, one is glad to say, while the people of the outports sing spontaneously (and with their own local variations), St. John's has a Glee Club with many fine recordings to its credit and will shortly see published a local collection of the songs of Johnny Burke.

TO HEAR AND READ Newfoundland folk-songs is to move, for part of the time, through a simplified and unreal landscape; obviously the words

are the merest pretexts, although none the less rich in associations and nostalgia for that. What is fascinating is to see the local ethos being grafted into the time-honoured catch, and the gradual incorporation of local names. And above all one gets the feel of a community where singing is important—as a principle of identification and membership as well as a celebration of the human and local lot. The folk-song is social, intended to elicit ready participants. Its art is assimilative; your own life is implicit in the song and might even be incorporated in stanzas of your own devising. Let us take, as an example, *The Badger Drive*, whose words were written by the Newfoundland folk-singer, John V. Devine.¹ This is a song about the fishermen who work in the lumber camps during the winter: a familiar pattern of local life. But the familiar is hammered home by the use of proper names; so that this song becomes not so much a chant as an anthem in which individuals, with all the backing of group unison, take utter possession of a part of the world. The song is all compact, all complicity, all apartness merged in community. At times there is just the merest touch of sycophancy —“Bill Dorothey, he is the manager / And he’s a good man at the trade.” But at other times there is also hero-worship:

And Ronald Kelly is in Command,
 For Ronald is boss on the river
 And he is one man that’s alive;
 He drove the wood off Victoria;
 Now he’s out on the main river drive.

The whole conception of the song is realistic: the life of the men who drive the logs downriver to the mills in the spring is presented in considerable detail:

There is one class of men in this country
 That never is mentioned in song,
 And now, since their trade is advancing,
 They’ll come out on top before long.
 They say that our sailors have danger
 And likewise our warriors bold,
 But there’s none know the life of a driver,
 When he suffers in hardships and cold.
With their pike-poles and pea-vies and bateaus and all,
And they’re sure to drive out in the spring, that’s the time,
With the caulks in their boots as they get on the logs,
And it’s hard to get over their time.

¹ Badger is west of Grand Falls, on the Exploits River.

Such a song is written to give men the means of celebrating their own daily lives; it adds a modicum of dignity, of self-expression, of communal pride. To understand its particular character, one can compare it with the hackneyed tropes of another Newfoundland song, which is fairly representative of its type:

One evening late as I rambled by
The banks of a fair pearly stream,
I sat on a bed of primroses
And soon I fell into a dream.

I dreamt that I saw a young virgin
Whose equals I ne'er saw before,
And she sighed for the songs of her country
As she wandered from Erin Green Shore.

Before long we reach eyes like diamonds, gold tresses, ivory teeth, green mantle, and shamrock: all very artificial although once it might have been fresh. This is the conventional lyric, devised more as an excuse to sing than to convey anything social in the song. It is like a thousand other folk-songs; it lacks the particularity of *The Badger Drive*, that song's lively sense of a distinct ethos. And the Newfoundland folk-song, I suggest, excels when it gets nearer to folk-lore and local history than to transatlantic models of shopworn vagueness. The folk-song is a kind of local signature, evocative and atavistic, an earnest of presence and vitality; it is also, to my mind, one of the most authentic introductions to an island people of considerable inventiveness.

The variety of these Newfoundland songs is immense: tragic, usually death at sea bringing in its wake penury and broken hearts; tragic-jocular, the hearty version of horror, so that true horror can for once be taken lightly; tales of misled maidens and duped sailors—the romantic ironic; the rollicking catalogue and the heroic affirmation. There are all kinds, and innumerable permutations. Here, however, my special concern is with songs distinctively regional.

Let me start, then, with the polemical *Anti-Confederation Song*, first in vogue during the election of 1869 when Newfoundland voted against joining the newly-founded Dominion. The sentiments were still valid in 1949, when Confederation became a fact; and they were still being chanted by students and muttered by taxidivers in 1959, the year in which Premier Smallwood, as a gesture to Ottawa, had all public buildings draped in black.

Hurrah for our own native isle, Newfoundland!
Not a stranger shall hold one inch of its strand!
Her face turns to Britain, her back to the Gulf.
Come near at your peril, Canadian Wolf!

Ye brave Newfoundlanders who plough the salt sea
With hearts like the eagle so bold and so free,
The time is at hand when you'll all have to say
If Confederation will carry the day.

In 1869 they said no. Notice the attribution there of the clichés to the oppressors! The coercive flattery rebukes itself; but the next stanza puts things in down-to-earth language, just to make Canadian penny-pinching and hypocrisy clear:

Cheap tea and molasses they say they will give,
All taxes take off that the poor man may live;
Cheap nails and cheap lumber our coffins to make,
And homespun to mend our old clothes when they break.

The touch about the coffins gives a suitably morbid frame for the next complaint:

If they take off the taxes how then will they meet
The heavy expense of the country's up-keep?
Just give them the chance to get us in the scrape
And they'll chain us as slaves with pen, ink and red tape.

Would you barter the right that your fathers have won,
Your freedom transmitted from father to son?
For a few thousand dollars of Canadian gold
Don't let it be said that your birthright was sold.

The song is to be sung "fervently". No wonder! Similar sentiments can be found in Cyprus, Man and Sardinia; island people are strong in the sense of domain. On the one hand, there is a pride always three parts of the way towards taking offence; on the other, there is an understandably extreme form of the human urge to cherish a clearly-bounded area. And, of course, there is too a bit of the old Adam of arrogance; not pride but disdain.

The reflex is harmless. It is an essential item in the epic story that takes us from the days when Cassie Higgins tore her flannel petticoat to make mittens for a sailor to stories of the recent present: I was told how two brothers found

themselves together on a sinking icefloe; one of them jumped calmly into the deep water, taking his knife with him. Such stories abounded in codfishing centres like Indian Harbour around 1900; some of them were true, and some of them were tall. In *Jack Was Every Inch a Sailor*, a Newfoundland version of the Jonah story, the hero is born with the black portents usual in the songs based on these tales:

Now, 'twas twenty-five or thirty years since Jack first saw the light;
He came into this world of woe one dark and stormy night.
He was born on board his father's ship as she was lying to
'Bout twenty-five or thirty miles south-east of Bacalhao.²

There is surely something ominous in the identical numbers for years and miles; a sailor's coincidence reinforcing the odd circumstances of birth. Jack was cut out for what might be called a great reverse:

When Jack grew up to be a man he went to Labrador;
He fished in Indian Harbour where his father fished before;
On his returning in the fog, he met a heavy gale,
And Jack was swept into the sea and swallowed by a whale.

But note the song's title; Jack sets every inch to work:

The whale went straight for Baffin's Bay 'bout ninety knots an hour,
And ev'ry time he blowed a spray, he'd send it in a shower.
"Oh, now," says Jack unto himself, "I must see what he's about."
He caught the whale all by the tail and turned him inside out.

And that is that; take it or leave it.

THE MYSTIQUE of the Newfoundland song comes from hardship and hard pleasure. There is a rioting vigour, an archetypal joy in oneself and one's abilities in the stamping rhythms of *I'se the B'y That Builds the Boat*:

I'se the b'y that builds the boat,
And I'se the b'y that sails her!
I'se the b'y that catches the fish
And takes 'em home to Lizer.

Sods and rinds to cover yer flake,
Cake and tea for supper,
Codfish in the spring of the year
Fried in maggoty butter.

² Bacalhao (pronounced Backaloo) is an island off the east coast of Newfoundland.

This percussive hymn of praise, at once vaunting and ironical, concrete and suggestive, reveals the spring of vitality. There is pride in simple achievement as well as a stated formula for the simple, hard life. It takes nothing much to construct a flake on which to dry your fish—except energy and heavy materials. Notice the diet on which work is to be done. Notice too the tone: nothing whining, but a plangent gusto. When sung, the verse's fourth line assumes the form of a triumphant clincher as well as the dénouement line. Essentially this is the pattern of a dance, each line pushing audacity a little further until the fourth line thumps down into common-sense again. The refrain is almost a magic formula:

*Hip yer partner, Sally Tibbo! Hip yer partner, Sally Brown!
Fogo, Twinningate, Morton's Harbour, All around the circle!*

The robust invocations are to things utterly familiar, but to things here capable of being catalytic, merely on being mentioned, in an orgiastic frivolity. The song goes on into an intriguing mixture of complacency and the preposterous:

I don't want your maggoty fish,
That's no good for winter;
I could buy as good as that
Down in Bonavista.

I took Liza to a dance,
And faith, but she could travel!
And every step that she did take
Was up to her knees in gravel.

The conclusion of the song is one of provocative irrelevance:

Susan White, she's out of sight,
Her petticoat wants a border;
Old Sam Oliver, in the dark,
He kissed her in the corner.

Perhaps inevitably, many of the Newfoundland songs record economic plight. *A Great Big Sea Hove in Long Beach*, for example, treats of the Depression; the fishermen, getting poor prices for their catch, had to pay highly for imported flour. The hardship is decorated with folk humour of a traditional, filling-in-the-space kind:

“Me boot is broke, me frock is tore”,
Right fol-or-al taddle diddle I-do.
 “Me boot is broke, me frock is tore,
 But Georgie Snooks I do adore”,
To me right fol-diddy fol-dee.
 “Oh, fish is low and flour is high”,
Right fol-or-al taddle diddle I-do.
 “Oh, fish is low and flour is high,
 So Georgie Snooks he can’t have I”,
To me right fol-diddy fol-dee.

This is one way of making the facts, as well as expensive flour, palatable. Things are not usually so muffled; the Newfoundland folk-muse is more often pithy, robust and concrete.

These are the qualities of a jovial end-of-the-season blues called *Squarin’ Up Time*; the fishermen have been paid for their summer catch, and they now have to pay off accumulated bills. The song puts us thoroughly in the picture:

Oh, the fish are all caught and the squids are all jigged,
 And the traps are caught up and the schooners unriggered;
 All hands round the cutters are driving the smoke,
 While Jacob is splicin’ some left-handed rope.

’Tis the squarin’ up time inside the big shop;
 The clerks are kept busy and right on the hop.
 “Look sharp, now then, sonny, and ’tend to my needs:
 A pack of those raisins without any seeds”.

All arrive: Skipper John Wilkins, inquiring about his credit, gets a shock; all he wanted was “a few slips of twine”; Uncle Dick Nicholls takes his balance in Indian Root Pills, borrows Tommy Hayes’s pipe and sets his whiskers on fire. Business and pranks are going full swing when the Parson walks in. Changes of heart, against the grain, suddenly take place:

“There’s five dollars comin’ to you, Mr. Knee.”
 “I don’t want it, sir; that’s no good to me.
 Share it up ’tween the parson and Dr. Carew
 For I wants to keep on the good side of them two.

If I’ve got to niggle on six cents a day,
 I’ll be wantin’ the doctor by the end of next May,

And maybe the parson will have to come round
To help me square up 'fore I go underground."

These stanzas remind me of the poetry of Crabbe: precise, dry, folksy, expert at making the simple astonishing. Life is made to show its true nature; it is very much an affair of commodities, prices, scarcities, debts and reckonings. Something of the merchandising attitude rubs off into the personal relationships.

Basically these songs are much concerned with *amour-propre*; pride, dignity and face count for a great deal. But, as often as not, for every gallant triumph over the elements there is an ignominy at the hands of a woman—as if Nature were resolved to be recalcitrant in one way or another, and to prevail. So it is that in an epic context men of stature are felled by a winning female eye, directed upon them or someone else. And the whole business fascinates them. They have to get it out, have to marvel at it, in song—and in the unison of company. Perhaps these songs, among other functions, offer the singers a chance of coming to terms publicly with life's minor defeats. But not every song presents an account as frankly autobiographical as that of Harry Russell in *The Gallant Brigantine*:

My name is Harry Russell,
And I am a married man.
Three weeks before I left the shore
My trouble first began;
It started when a girl I wed
Brought forth to me a son.

That is the end of the song; the rest is unspeakable grief, and we have to imagine.

Misadventure recurs in the songs—suggestive, perhaps, of a dominantly tragic view of life; heaven knows, in the old days, life on potatoes, hard tack and fish stew was hard enough. Sometimes it is all in the tone of stilted melodrama, curiously mingling sentimentality with irony:

I said: "My good woman, were you ever married,
Or have you a father for these children small?
Have you a house, a place, or a dwelling?
Were you ever wealthy? What caused your downfall?"

That comes from *The Poor Distressed Woman*. A rather subtler presentation appears in the pathetically titled *All Gone Now*:

Said he: "By gosh
 One day I owned a watch,
 A diamond ring and a necktie pin;
 And it's all gone now.
 It's all gone now, and I got so I have a wonderful cold
 For drinking odd glasses. It's all gone now."

The mock-naive wonderfully illuminates the dying fall of the last few words.

An altogether different and extremely extravagant mood is that of *The Kelligrews Soiree*, a garrulous and high-spirited account of escapades at an island get-together. The form and the model of the song come from Ireland; the content and the spirit are pure Newfoundland.

You may talk of Clara Nolan's Ball or anything you choose,
 But it couldn't hold a snuff-box to the spree at Kelligrews.
 If you want your eyeballs straightened, just come out next week
 with me,
 And you'll have to wear your glasses at the Kelligrews Soiree.

 There was birch rine, tar twine, cherry wine and turpentine,
 Jowls and cavalances, ginger beer and tea,
 Pigs' feet, cats' meat, dumplings boiled in a sheet,
 Dandelion and crackies' teeth at the Kelligrews Soiree.

Oh, I borrowed Cluney's beaver as I squared my yards to sail,
 And a swallow-tail from Hogan that was foxy on the tail;
 Billy Cuddahie's old working pants and Patsy Nolan's shoes,
 And an old white vest from Fogarty to sport at Kelligrews.

 There was Dan Milley, Joe Lilly, Tantan and Mrs. Tilley
 Dancing like a little filly, 'twould raise your heart to see.
 Jim Brine, Din Ryan, Flipper Smith and Caroline;
 I'll tell you, boys, we had a time at the Kelligrews Soiree.

The song's method, invigorated and given a repetitive spin by the internal rhymes, is to let the end-rhymes have their head as far as is possible within the dictates of the simple intention to say what is going on. This mixture of irrelevance and almost over-explicit cataloguing works admirably. The people are crowded in by the eatables. The mock-sophistication in the choice of 'soiree' supplies an essential touch of irony, and thus gives edge to what might have seemed a merely lumpish catalogue. The tone is impetuous and importunate, and

carries with it—well beyond the scrutinies of commonsense—the contradictions. This is a rich song, crammed with matter; it makes exuberantly free with the language, and the strain one notices as the singer (or speaker) pushes towards the end-rhyme gives the whole thing an added, rather costive tension.

Similarly percussive in rhythm but by no means as concrete in variety is *We'll Rant and We'll Roar*, a well-known near-anthem. But the whole song is staid, tame and conventional after *Kelligrews*; the bizarre inventiveness is missing in such lines as these:

If the voyage is good, this fall I will do it;
I wants two pound ten for a ring and the priest,
A couple o' dollars for clean shirt and collars,
And a handful o' coppers to make up a feast.

This song forces no special atmosphere upon us, and evokes many similar pieces from the repertoire of generalised elegiac ballad. It might even, for some ears, share something with *The Blooming Bright Star of Belle Isle*:

One evening I rambled
To view the fair fields all alone,
Down by the banks of Loch Erin
Where beauty and pleasure were known.

We do not have to attend as minutely to this as to *Kelligrews*. And it quite misses the almost Elizabethan flavour, the slightly stilted simplicity of *Summer and Winter's* opening lines:

Flora beautiful and fair
To winter now give room;
He will rob you of your finery
And from your sweetest bloom.
It's with his eyes
His face comes in . . .

The sudden image in those last two lines gains considerable force from the seemingly guileless opening; the image blurs into the stereotyped, although melodic invocation. For the Newfoundland song is a mode of art that will carry sudden contrasts; it documents more thoroughly than most types of folk-song, and its dignity is never too precarious to admit a flash of realism. That, surely, is why it survives with the minimum of incongruity.