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Volume 13, Number 1, 1991

Frontières: interactions canado-américaines
Bridges and Boundaries: Canadian/U.S. Interactions

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1081699ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1081699ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Association Canadienne d’Ethnologie et de Folklore

ISSN

1481-5974 (print)

1708-0401 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Byrne, P. (1991). “Stage Irish” in “Britain’s Oldest Colony”: Introductory Remarks Towards an Analysis of the Influence of the McNulty Family on Newfoundland Music. *Ethnologies*, 13(1), 59–68.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1081699ar>

Article abstract

The McNulty Family, a New York based Irish-American trio, had a pervasive influence on Newfoundland music from the 1930s to the 1970s. The group’s music was introduced to the island by a St. John’s merchant who sold their records throughout the island and sponsored local radio programs for over thirty years. The group’s popularity and influence on the repertoires of local singers are directly related to Newfoundlanders’ search for musical autonomy during a period of political and social change — the change from a British Colony to a Canadian Province, and the emergence of a new middle class.

“STAGE IRISH” IN “BRITAIN’S OLDEST COLONY”: INTRODUCTORY REMARKS TOWARDS AN ANALYSIS OF THE INFLUENCE OF THE MCNULTY FAMILY ON NEWFOUNDLAND MUSIC*

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It is perhaps not surprising, given the fact that historical records attest to the presence of the Irish in Newfoundland as early as 1662,¹ and tradition would push the date back to the voyages of St. Brendan in the sixth century, that Irish music would be popular among the present-day inhabitants of the Island. What is surprising is that the researcher who seeks reasons for the current popularity of Irish music in the Province need look no further back than the 1940s and 1950s and the pervasive influence of a trio, not from Ireland, but from New York City—The McNulty Family. This paper is an examination of the reasons for the trio's popularity in Newfoundland, and of their influence on Newfoundland music in the light of political, social and economic changes which occurred there during the second quarter of the present century.

It is common, when referring to Newfoundland's population, to note that it is almost evenly divided between those whose ancestors were either English Protestants or Irish Catholics. Indeed, “the vast majority of contemporary Newfoundlanders are descended from immigrants who came originally from highly localized source areas in the southwest of England and the southeast of Ireland”.² This fact must be balanced, however, by the awareness that “throughout the eighteenth century the settled Irish population in Newfoundland

* An earlier version of this paper was read at the meetings of The American Folklore Society, Boston, October 28, 1988. I would like to thank the following people for their assistance: Monty Barfoot, Brendan Devine, Philip Hiscock, Eileen McNulty-Grogan, Peter Narváez, Roy O'Brien, Neil Rosenberg, and John White.

1. Michael J. McCarthy, *The Irish in Newfoundland, 1623-1800*, St. John's, Harry Cuff Publications, 1982, p. 1.
2. John J. Mannion, “Introduction”, to *The Peopling of Newfoundland: Essays in Historical Geography*, (ed.) John J. Mannion, Social and Economic Papers, no. 8, St. John's, Memorial University Institute for Social and Economic Research, 1977, p. 5.

was far less than the English''.³ The key word here is *settled*. The majority of the Irish were seasonal and temporary labourers, "youngsters"⁴ brought out each year to work at the fishing industry—an industry controlled for the most part by the English "fishing admirals"—and returned at the end of the season. The position of the Irish, during most of the eighteenth century, is illustrated by a consideration of orders proclaimed by Governor Palliser on October 31, 1764:

The better for preserving the peace, preventing robberies, tumultuous assemblies and other disorders of wicked and idle people remaining in the country during the winter, ordered:

1. That no Papist servants, man or woman, shall remain at any place where they do not fish or serve during the summer preceding.
2. That no more than two Papist men shall dwell in one house during the winter except such as have a Protestant master.
3. That no Papist shall keep a public house or vend liquor by retail.
4. That no person shall keep dyeters [fishing servants] during the winter.
5. That all idle and disorderly men and women be punished according to law and sent out of the country.⁵

The Irish found themselves in a harsh land where they were "alien in race and religion to those in power"⁶, a situation which was not dissimilar to conditions in their homeland; this state of affairs was to persist in Newfoundland until late into the nineteenth century.

The situation with regard to settlement changed toward the end of the eighteenth and during the early decades of the nineteenth centuries. In fact, by 1828 "there were probably more catholic Irish in Newfoundland than in any other province or state in North America".⁷ By 1830 the Protestant/Catholic ratio was 53:47.⁸ It is worth noting, therefore, that most of the Irish who settled in Newfoundland emigrated before the Great Famine in Ireland; "the massive movement of Irish during the famine in the 1840s bypassed Newfoundland almost completely".⁹ Throughout the nineteenth century, despite bitter and violent politico-religious struggles, political and economic power (with few exceptions) remained in the hands of the English settlers.

3. John J. Mannion, "The Irish Migrations to Newfoundland", Unpublished MS, St. John's, Memorial University Centre for Newfoundland Studies, 1973, p. 1-2.

4. The term "youngster" referred to an unmarried Irish man or woman. See Thomas F. Nemec, "The Irish Emigration to Newfoundland: A Critical Review of the Secondary Sources", Unpublished MS, St. John's, Memorial University Centre for Newfoundland Studies, 1978.

5. As quoted in McCarthy, p. 28.

6. McCarthy, p. 27.

7. Mannion, "The Irish Migrations to Newfoundland", p. 1.

8. Mannion, *The Peopling of Newfoundland*, p. 7.

9. *Ibid.*

In the early decades of the present century, however, a new Catholic middle/merchant class began to emerge. Among these merchants were Gerald S. Doyle and John Martin (J. M.) Devine. Devine was born into a creative family of writers and song makers in 1876 in King's Cove, Bonavista Bay, a small centre of Irish Catholic settlement on the northeast coast of the Island.¹⁰ This community was Doyle's birthplace as well. In 1920 Devine moved his family to the United States, where he became a trade commissioner for Newfoundland with an office in New York. The family lived, however, in Richfield, New Jersey. During the middle '20s, as the result of changes in the political winds, Devine's role as trade commissioner was discontinued. He remained in New York, entered the private sector, and became involved in the import/export business. He was still engaged in this business at the beginning of the Depression. At that time he returned to Newfoundland and opened a small general store in St. John's, at number 6 Adelaide Street. In 1936 he moved to the heart of the business district and opened a store called "The Big 6" (at 339 Water Street)¹¹ which became a prominent part of the commercial life of Newfoundland. After the change of location he adopted the advertising slogan: "Once a number, now an institution". It remained an institution until 1974.

Devine's success in Newfoundland, even during the lean years of the '30s, is not to be disassociated from the time he had spent in New York City. Many of the business contacts he made during that period were to stand him in good stead in later years. But the Irish Catholic from King's Cove also developed cultural contacts with the Irish community in New York. These would eventually lead to his association with The McNulty Family and the latter's impact on Newfoundland music.

The matriarch of the McNulty Family was born in Roscommon and emigrated to the United States in 1910. In Boston, she met and married another Irish immigrant from County Leitrim.¹² Soon after the marriage the couple

10. The information on J. M. Devine and the relationship between the McNulty Family and Devine was provided in an interview with Brendan Devine (J. M.'s son) recorded on November 16, 1987. Information on the creativity of the ancestors of John Martin and Brendan can be found in J. W. McGrath, "The Devine Brothers of King's Cove—Writers and Balladeers", Unpublished MS. St. John's, Memorial University Centre for Newfoundland Studies, 1974.

11. Neill notes that the new store was called "The Big 6" to distinguish it from "The Little 6", on Adelaide Street, which remained open for some time. See Paul O'Neill, *A Seaport Legacy*, Erin, Ont., Press Porcupine, 1976, p. 865.

12. The information on the McNulty family history was gleaned from interviews given by Eileen McNulty-Grogan. Eileen married John Grogan, who was a labour organizer and later the mayor of Hoboken, New Jersey. I interviewed Eileen on June 5, 1975. She was also interviewed on CBC Radio's "Friends and Neighbours" programme on June 7, 1975. Both interviews were made possible by the fact that Eileen had been invited to Newfoundland to make a guest appearance on the Ryan's Fancy show on CBC television.

moved to Manhattan. Two children, Peter and Eileen, were born before 1915. The mother had performed some in Ireland, and by the time her children were in their teens they, along with their mother, were performing in the New York City area. The children were too young to allow the group to become part of the vaudeville circuit, but they were part of the New York Irish music scene which focused on such venues as Donovan's Hall on 59th Street and which featured such Irish immigrant performers as Paddy Killoran, James Morrison, The Flanagan Brothers, Shaun O'Nolan, and John McGettigan. This Irish-American revival has been described by Mick Moloney, who notes that the recording produced by these performers "had a profound influence on Irish traditional music both in America and back home in Ireland".¹³

By the time the husband/father died (in 1928) the McNultys were a well established part of this musical network. They had a radio show on WWRL (later WHN) in New York, and performed each season for some sixteen years at The Brooklyn Academy of Music and/or The Brooklyn Opera House. Although they did not tour widely, they did visit Chicago and the New England area. They cut their first record (for Decca) in 1936. Twenty-seven 78s and one LP by The McNulty Family are listed in Decca's 1951 catalogue. That same LP was released on the Coral label as well. Another Coral LP featured The McNulty Family on one side and Michael Coleman on the other. In addition, they recorded three LPs on the Copley label and one on Colonial. A examination of the extant LPs, and tapes of the 78s which are no longer available,¹⁴ has confirmed a total of 130 titles in The McNultys' recorded repertoire.¹⁵ It is perhaps misleading to characterize The McNulty Family strictly under the heading of "Stage Irish", although their repertoire contained elements of the stereotype, and their presentation was indeed "stagy"—with "Ma" in full evening dress and Peter and Eileen in top hat and tails. Their music was a "commerical hybrid" of Irish and Irish-American "with a large dose of the popular American music of the day thrown in".¹⁶

Unfortunately, my interest in the trio at that time was more casual than professional, and the interviews do not contain the details which I would have liked to have had. I do not, for example, know Eileen's mother's maiden name (her first name was Ann, but she was consistently referred to as Ma or Mother McNulty from the time the trio began to perform) or her father's first name. More recent attempts to reestablish contact with Eileen have, so far, proven unsuccessful.

13. Mick Moloney, "Irish Ethnic Recordings and the Irish-American Imagination," in *Ethnic Recordings in America: A Neglected Heritage*, Studies in American Folklife, no. 1, Washington, Library of Congress, 1982, p. 82.
14. I am grateful to Monty Barfoot and Roy O'Brien, who gave me access to their tapes of the McNulty repertoire. Mr. Barfoot's collection is especially valuable because it includes, in addition to the tapes, all the group's LPs.
15. This total may be closer to 150; I am still attempting to determine whether an additional 20 doubtful titles were, in fact, recorded by the trio.
16. Moloney, p. 93-94.

As noted above, during his sojourn in New York Devine had become familiar with this Irish music scene in which The McNultys were now involved. In the late '30s, as a result of his business trips to New York, he became acquainted with the trio's music. He began to sell the group's records from his store on Water Street, printed and distributed a catalogue listing the groups records (along with those of other performers, such as Connie Foley), and sold and shipped these records to all parts of Newfoundland and Labrador.¹⁷ At the same time, he sponsored radio programmes which featured The McNultys' music and caused it to be heard throughout the Island. These programmes continued uninterrupted on various Newfoundland radio stations for more than thirty years. In the meantime, Devine, in keeping with the creative tradition of his family, had written a poem—"When I Mowed Pat Murphy's Meadow"—which was based on his boyhood experiences in King's Cove. He arranged to meet the group, convinced them to write music for his poem and record it, and eventually sponsored their only visit to Newfoundland, in 1953.¹⁸

Some indication of the popularity which the group enjoyed in Newfoundland as a result of Devine's efforts can be gathered from the fact that when they arrived at St. John's harbour by steamship (*The H. M. S. Newfoundland*) in April 1953, a crowd of several hundred, complete with a brass band, was on hand to greet them. The hall where they were booked to perform (Pitts Memorial) was sold out for the original five nights and for an extra three which were hastily added. Despite this, people had to be turned away from each performance. They met with the same reception in the more remote communities, including the company mining town of Buchans in the interior of the Island. Their records, according to Roy O'Brien who runs a music store in St. John's which specializes in Irish and Newfoundland music, continued to sell briskly until well into the 1970s when they ceased to be available. He noted that he still gets requests for the trio's albums today.

17. Brendan Devine informed me that the firm hired a carpenter to make special wooden shipping crates to protect the delicate 78s during shipment.

18. *The Evening Telegram*, April 25, 1953, p. 16 carries a half-page ad announcing the arrival of the trio aboard *H. M. S. Newfoundland*; indicates that they will be performing at Pitts Memorial Hall, beginning on April 27; and carries a list of the trio's records which are available at "The Big 6 Limited". A picture of the trio appears in the April 28 edition (p. 2) and there are further stories on May 7 (p. 18) and May 28 (p. 18) commenting on performances on Bell Island and in Harbour Grace, respectively. There is also mention made in Peter Narváez, *The Protest Songs of a Labor Union*, p. 169-172, regarding the trio's performance at Buchans, and the later use of a song from the McNulty repertoire, "Kelly, The Boy from Killane", as a model for the strike song, "Our Leader, Our President, Don Head". It appears that the group toured the Province for six to eight weeks.

A survey of the titles recorded by native Newfoundland performers during the past twenty-five years¹⁹ reveals that 40 titles out of the 130 which I have positively identified as belonging to the McNulty's recorded repertoire have been recorded by seventeen of these performers. Furthermore, numerous McNulty titles, such as "Far Away in Australia", "Haste to the Wedding", "The Hat My Father Wore", "The Golden Jubilee", and "Shall My Soul Pass Through Old Ireland", are still popular favourites at kitchen "times" and other gatherings in Newfoundland. In addition, the style of accordion playing which was "Ma" McNulty's trademark is still discernible among contemporary Newfoundland accordionists.

The foregoing comments go some distance towards explaining the fact of The McNulty Family's popularity in Newfoundland and towards indicating the extent of their influence on the music of the Island. Devine's crusading efforts to introduce the trio's music and to foster their exposure through record sales and radio programmes explain how the group's music came to be heard in Newfoundland. But these facts do not explain *why* The McNulty Family's music found such widespread and lasting acceptance among Newfoundlanders. Neither do these facts explain what led Newfoundlanders to adopt and to adapt as their own this particular form of popular Irish-American music. The answers to these questions are directly tied to Newfoundland's political history and, specifically, to the major political upheavals which occurred between 1931 and 1949.

Despite its long history as a point of contact for Europeans in the New World, the history of Newfoundland as a recognized political entity is a relatively recent phenomenon:

...as nothing more than an outpost for European fishing monopolies, Newfoundland was prevented from establishing itself as a legitimate colony until the early 19th century. Before that, literally burned and shelled off the rocks, legally disallowed the ownership of facilities or land, forced to inhabit the most temporary dwellings in what were essentially seasonal settlements [early Newfoundlanders] somehow managed to survive under a succession of indifferent admirals and governors, under whose repressive regimes no economic foundation was laid, no society developed, no institution of education, fiscal management, general welfare or public law and order took root. The few who settled remained locked in a losing struggle to gain the barest requirements of subsistence. Existence was, as the philosopher Hobbes describes life in the stateless society, mean, nasty, brutish and short.²⁰

Newfoundland was not officially recognized as a British colony until 1824;²¹ a people's assembly finally came into being in 1832. Despite this, the latter half of the nineteenth century saw Newfoundland caught up in the progressive spirit. Those in power contemplated Newfoundland's future as an industrial

19. The survey discounts records by transplanted Irish groups and individuals such as Ryan's Fancy, The Sons of Erin, and Anna McGoldrick.

20. F. L. Jackson, *Surviving Confederation*, St. John's, Harry Cuff Publications, 1986, p. 66.

21. George Casey, "Irish Culture in Newfoundland", in *Talamh An Eisc: Canadian and Irish Essays*, (eds.) Cyril J. Byrne and Margaret Harry, Halifax, Nimbus Publishing, 1986, p. 206.

centre. The completion of a trans-island railway and the establishment of thriving industries (in addition to fishing) in various communities contributed to the dream. A hundred years ago St. John's, the capital, was a cosmopolitan city. Newfoundland's participation in World War I has been parlayed into one of the proudest aspects in its history. This euphoria culminated in 1931 when, "through the Statute of Westminster, the same decree whereby the Dominions of Canada, New Zealand, Australia and others came into being"²², Newfoundland was granted the status of an independent country. The Island's proud participation in World War I turned sour, however, and eventually contributed to political disaster. Newfoundland's war debt, combined with the effects of the Depression and disaster in the fishery, led the new country to the brink of financial ruin. As a result, in February 1934, burdened by impending bankruptcy the new national government legislated itself out of existence: "The Legislature closed its doors; the people forfeited their right to participate in public decisions; the whole country became a ward of the crown"²³. This collapse of independence was "followed by fifteen years of dictatorship by government commission"²⁴, after which, in 1949, the people of Newfoundland reluctantly—and possibly as a result of secret and less than ethical collusion between the British and Canadian governments of the day—entered into Confederation with Canada.²⁵

Newfoundland's traditional position *vis-à-vis* Britain and Canada is best exemplified in the lines of a popular song which circulated in 1869 during the first push to have the Island join the Canadian Confederation:

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!²⁶

Now, however, "the Mother Country" had turned its back and Newfoundlanders found themselves forced into an uneasy partnership with this same Canadian Wolf. Concurrent with these events, the British, proving to be ever-indifferent masters, "typically without consultation and too absorbed in the emergency mentality of war to give much thought to Newfoundland's

22. Jackson, p. 64.

23. *Ibid.*, p. 60.

24. *Ibid.*, p. 61. See also Thomas Lodge, *Dictatorship in Newfoundland*, London, Cassell, 1939.

25. See Bren Walsh, *More Than a Poor Majority: The Story of Newfoundland's Confederation with Canada*, St. John's, Breakwater Books, 1985, p. 299-302. See also Peter Neary, "Newfoundland's Union with Canada, 1949: Conspiracy or Choice", *Acadiensis*, 12:2 (1983), p. 110-119.

26. Edith Fowke (ed.), *The Penguin Book of Canadian Folk Songs*, Harmondsworth, Penguin Books, 1973, p. 28-29.

tomorrow, gave the Americans *carte blanche* to use the island as a military base for as long as they needed it, up to 99 years in fact".²⁷

All of these events caused a severe identity crisis for the inhabitants of the island. No longer able to bask in the claim of the dubious distinction of being Britain's Oldest Colony, "living on the western limits, as it were, of a British Atlantic"²⁸, they were forced to turn their faces toward North America. "For most Newfoundlanders", however, "Canada meant as much and as little as did Australia or some other equally ill-defined, colourless Commonwealth region. It had a bad record of interfering in Newfoundland affairs. Traditional competition with Maritime fishermen had meant relations that were sometimes friendly but often fractious. The constitutional atrocity of the French shore and the fuss over the Labrador boundary did not generate the best of feelings toward French-Canadians in particular".²⁹ In the midst of this confusion, the influx of thousands of American military personnel offered a virtual breath of fresh air. The impact of the American military presence on Newfoundland was sudden, dramatic and profound, but it is beyond the scope of the present discussion.³⁰ "It is usually said that the arrival of the American forces provided a much-needed economic shot in the arm: relief of unemployment and a hefty influx of American dollars. But they brought with them much more than that; something intangible but far more valuable and potent. They brought the gift of renewed hope and renewed self-respect".³¹ The Americans were perceived by ordinary Newfoundlanders to have taken no part in the recent struggles with Britain and Canada, although history suggests that this was probably a naive misconception on their part; the American government of the day had, in fact, been involved in decisions that determined Newfoundland's future.³² Traditionally, however, many Newfoundlanders had closer ties with the New England area, "the Boston States", than with Canada—especially Ontario and Quebec. They felt that, if they were being forced to become full-fledged North Americans, the U.S. provided the best example to emulate.

It is against this backdrop that Newfoundlander's embracing of the particular brand of Irish-American music offered by The McNulty Family must be viewed. It gave Newfoundlanders of Irish descent a means of asserting their

27. Jackson, 'p.' 70.

28. *Ibid.*

29. *Ibid.*, p. 72. On the French Shore question see F. F. Thompson, *The French Shore Question in Newfoundland: An Imperial Study*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1962; on the Labrador boundary, see John Parsons, "The Labrador Boundary Dispute", in his *Labrador: Land of the North*, New York, Vantage Press, 1970, p. 208-219.

30. See Malcolm MacLeod, *Peace of the Continent: The Impact of Second World War Canadian and American Bases in Newfoundland*, St. John's, Harry Cuff Publications, 1986.

31. Jackson, p. 70-71.

32. See David MacKenzie, "Economic Union and the 1948 Referendum Campaigns: The View from Washington", *The Newfoundland Quarterly*, 83:3 (1988), p. 24-31.

identity in a way which had not been available to them at any other time in their history, and it permitted them to assert their Irishness in an acceptable North American manner. But it offered more than this. The sense of loss which is a common theme in the Irish ballads and songs of emigration, and the "body of nostalgic sentimental song that painted a rosy, romantic scenario of a little green haven nestling in a corner of paradise"³³, struck a responsive chord in the hearts of a population which had seen its homeland move, in less than three decades, from the status of a colony, to an independent country, to a powerless ward of the English crown, to the reluctant province of still another country.

Even Newfoundlanders of English descent, with the exception of a body of staunch loyalists whose attachment to England may well have rested on an "invented tradition"³⁴, could not help but feel a sense of something between bewilderment and betrayal. At the very least it was difficult to defend the actions of "the Mother County" who had just disowned her offspring. Their stunned silence allowed the Irish sentiment full sway.

More importantly, The McNulty Family's repertoire and style³⁵ gave a legitimacy and respectability to a type of music which had been performed in Newfoundland for generations.³⁶ The mere fact that the radio, itself a new medium and part of Newfoundland's emerging North American consciousness, was playing music which had a greater affinity than any other readily available musical form to that which had been traditionally performed in Newfoundland added to this effect. Something akin to the music of the unofficial culture, which had persisted among the lower classes in the outports and towns, but which had remained unrecognized or been ignored during the period of English dominance represented by the traditional St. John's merchant class was now being broadcast publicly around the Island. All of this permitted the newly dispossessed Newfoundlanders to focus on an identifiable aspect of their own history and heritage in the midst of the identity crisis caused by the changes outlined above.

33. Moloney, p. 100.

34. It has recently been argued that "much of what today is regarded as immemorial Newfoundland tradition, enshrined in institutions, rituals and attitudes", can be dated to the period between 1932-1955 when "the British government intervened, [in Newfoundland politics] not only instituting constitutional reform but also 'inventing tradition' by sponsoring and encouraging organizations and rituals which attempted to inculcate imperial sentiment on the basis of a 'patriotic' and nativistic outlook". See Phillip McCann, "Culture, State Formation and the Invention of Tradition: Newfoundland 1832-1855", *Journal of Canadian Studies*, 23:1-2 (1988), p. 86-103.

35. It must be remembered that many more Newfoundlanders heard the trio over the radio and from records than saw them in live performance during their one visit to the Island.

36. Several of the texts printed in *Irish Emigrant Ballads and Songs*, (ed.) Robert L. Wright, Bowling Green, OH, Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1975, are taken from published collections of Newfoundland folksongs.

Indeed, this focus was so strong that it has remained and intensified to become very much a part of Newfoundlanders' sense of themselves to the present day. By the mid-1970s Newfoundland experienced a second Irish music revival, spearheaded by several transplanted Irish nationals who performed regularly in the Province, or took up permanent residence there. Among the most influential were groups such as: Sullivan's Gypsies; Ryan's Fancy³⁷; The Sons of Erin; and, The Carlton Showband.³⁸ The impact of these and other Irish performers was so pervasive that not only did a plethora of local imitators appear on the Newfoundland music scene, but, in the popular media at least, any distinction between Newfoundland and Irish "folk music" was virtually erased. As a result, present-day audiences in Newfoundland exhibit a marked preference for what might be termed "middle-of-the-road Irish/Newfoundland music" over the more traditional forms which have become more accessible in recent years. This preference is part of the McNulty legacy as well, but a thorough analysis of its ramifications requires further study.

37. See Pat Byrne (ed.), *The Ryan's Fancy Song (and other stuff) Book*, St. John's, Breakwater Books, 1977.

38. See Pat Byrne, "The Three Sisters: An Ethnography of Three 'Carlton Showband' Fans", *Culture and Tradition*, n° 11 (1987), p. 58-68.