

Ballads and Sea Songs of Newfoundland

Ruth Perry

Volume 20, Number 2, Fall 2005

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/nflds20_2rv04

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Faculty of Arts, Memorial University

ISSN

0823-1737 (print)

1715-1430 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Perry, R. (2005). Review of [*Ballads and Sea Songs of Newfoundland*]. *Newfoundland Studies*, 20(2), 315–317.

No conflicts are resolved in this novel, though there are plenty moments of finality. These are a people in transition — a transition that will never be complete. An isolated and independent people, they still call everything they do not understand “the devil” (never *a* devil — *the* devil) and suffer under the ancient and exploitative credit system. The world outside is forcing its way into the community, leaving these people sometimes unhappy, sometimes uncertain, but always hopeful for a better life. Bartlett preserves these moments like a bottled turr in Ida’s pantry — and like the turr, it may not always be easy to consume, but you will never forget it.

Paul Chafe
Memorial University of Newfoundland

Ballads and Sea Songs of Newfoundland, collected and edited by Elisabeth Bristol Greenleaf and recorded by Grace Yarrow Mansfield. 1933; reprint, with a foreword by Neil V. Rosenberg and Anna Kearney Guigné. Memorial University of Newfoundland Folklore and Language Publications, 2004, ISBN 0-88901-337-3

THIS PIONEERING FOLK collection by Elisabeth Bristol Greenleaf and Grace Yarrow Mansfield, originally published in 1933 and now re-issued by Memorial University of Newfoundland Folklore and Language Publications, is a treasure for scholars and amateur historians as well as for musicians and singers. In addition to MacEdward Leach’s graceful Preface to an earlier reprint, which emphasizes the significance of Greenleaf and Mansfield’s contextually embedded collecting practices, this edition is further enriched by a Foreword by Neil V. Rosenberg and Anna Kearney Guigné which guides the reader through the publications about, and archival resources for folksongs in Newfoundland and Labrador, and what else is known about the wonderful women who put together this book in the first place. The bibliography to Rosenberg’s Foreword lists enough of the significant books and articles on the subject of folksong and folksong collecting in Newfoundland to orient any scholar with a desire to work further on the subject.

Elisabeth Bristol Greenleaf first visited Newfoundland in 1920 as a summer volunteer teacher for one of the Grenfell mission schools. As she recalls, someone in the family with whom she was staying offered to sing her a song, and “I listened without particular interest, until it suddenly dawned upon me that he was singing a real folk-song, one handed down by oral tradition” (xix). At Vassar College she had listened to ballads sung by the Fuller sisters and had heard lectures on the subject by John Lomax; now she recognized that this was a special experience. “From that night ... I spent my leisure time listening to the songs and writing them down. No pupil of mine worked harder learning to write than I to record the tunes they sang” (xix).

The historical moment was propitious. Olive Dame Campbell had discovered ballad singers in the Appalachians, and Cecil Sharp had ratified both her conviction that their ballads were precious and her efforts to collect them by following suit. F.J. Child, the ballad scholar at Harvard, had awakened the academic world to the significance of ballads — so much so that the president of Vassar (whose 1932 Preface is also included in this edition) as well as the college's professor of folklore, Dr. Martha Beckwith, encouraged Greenleaf to return the next summer to continue collecting this material. She writes beautifully in her Introduction of the place and the people she met as well as the story of her growing collection of songs. She tells about the local economy in Sally's Cove, on the west coast, where she first landed, and the kinds of work that men and women did to survive — hunting, trapping, fishing, canning, gardening, bringing in wood, keeping animals, milking cows, building, berrying, spinning and knitting, quilting, etc. And she describes the music that she found everywhere. She describes a square dance where there was "no one to play music even on a jews-harp" and so a man obliged with "chin-music," singing and tapping his heels and toes rhythmically for set after set.

A suitable tune soon comes to mind and he begins it, sometimes singing words, but more often vocables to carry the tune and mark the rhythm. The tunes are complicated with syncopations, rapid notes, slides, and turns, and the singer takes breath when he can. Their effect is mesmeric and of all the dance tunes I heard, I was able to record but one correctly. The pitch is always true, and the masters of dance-song can sing for every other dance all the evening, conclude by favoring the company with a long ballad, and show no sign of hoarseness at the finish. (xxiii)

Eventually, frustrated by her inability to notate properly the music she was hearing, Elisabeth Greenleaf returned with Grace Yarrow, a trained musician and music major, to collect the tunes of the songs she had been gathering. Her colleague "rallied to the task" of recording the old ballad style, with its "slides, trills, grace notes, unexpected accents, and other variations," and wrote down the music for tunes to about half of these songs — as well as a number of dance tunes. The words and music are printed here, with notes and cross references to other collections, interspersed with old photographs of the places and people of the time.

This collection is made up of what Greenleaf gathered in the summers of 1920 and 1921, and in 1929 when she returned with Grace Yarrow on the funded Vassar Folklore Collection Project; but the compilers also included some songs from Gerald S. Doyle's *Old-Time Songs and Poetry of Newfoundland*, and a few collected by Jane Quackenbush and Mary Evans, who also worked in these years for the Grenfell Mission. Most of the 185 songs in the collection were collected on the northern part of the island. Half of them have the music (with an additional 12 dance tunes). The volume was published originally by Harvard University Press with the encouragement of George Kittredge, F.J. Child's successor.

Elisabeth Greenleaf's Introduction describes the ethnic and historical mix of music that she found — English, Irish, American, Canadian, French songs and ballads from the seventeenth century down to contemporary compositions. She gives many anecdotes about her collecting experiences and tells where her singers got *their* songs. She describes the traditional performance style of old-timers, the unchanging volume and deadpan delivery coupled with elaborately ornamented turns, slurs, grace notes, quavers and syncopations; and how, in the middle of the last line, they stop singing and speak the end of the line, indicating “the conclusion of the song” and the “descent to earth from the heights of Parnassus” (xxxviii). Throughout, she beautifully and sympathetically evokes the appeal of the demanding lives she glimpsed in her several visits to this northern world.

Many a sailor lad, rebelling against ship's discipline, has preferred the bleak and forbidding coast of Newfoundland to further hell afloat. Many an Irish family has chosen the emigrants' trail in order to escape famine or political trouble in Ireland, or in hope of owning their own homestead in Newfoundland, where land is still free to any one who will fence and clear it.... Passing one day in a motor boat a little sea islet, a gray rock set like a gem in brilliant greens against the cold lead-colored ocean, we waved to some ragged children and a thin solitary figure of a woman. “There you are seeing the real Newfoundland,” remarked Dr. Parsons. Not in St. John's, not in the cosmopolitan lumber towns, but on a lonely rock where firewood and even drinking water present serious problems, can we sense their passion for independence, which seasons their monotonous food and wraps their bodies against the chill air. (xxvi)

It is a gift to have this book reissued in such a clear and readable format.

Ruth Perry
Massachusetts Institute of Technology

Ronald Rompkey. *Terre-Neuve Anthologie des voyageurs français 1814-1914*. Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2004, ISBN 2-86847-966-9

WELL-KNOWN BIOGRAPHER and editor Ronald Rompkey has produced a rich anthology of writings in French that is particularly welcome after a year of celebrations marking 500 years of French presence in Newfoundland — a year that has likely whet more than one appetite for this part of the province's history. The collection brings to light over 40 excerpts, up to several pages long, from texts about Newfoundland and its inhabitants written over the course of an important period in history — the final hundred years of the French Shore fishery. Few of the texts have been reprinted (and even fewer translated) since their original publication in France and virtually all have lain forgotten. Rompkey's intention — to provide high school and university students, along with the general public, with an idea of how New-