

Martin Lovelace, Paul Smith, and J.D.A. Widdowson.
ed. *Folklore: An Emerging Discipline, Selected Essays of Herbert Halpert.*

W.F.H. Nicolaisen

Volume 23, Number 2, Fall 2008

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/nflds23_2rv06

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Faculty of Arts, Memorial University

ISSN

0823-1737 (print)

1715-1430 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Nicolaisen, W. (2008). Review of [Martin Lovelace, Paul Smith, and J.D.A. Widdowson. ed. *Folklore: An Emerging Discipline, Selected Essays of Herbert Halpert.*] *Newfoundland Studies*, 23(2), 258–261.

mutually cause two kids to lose consciousness, while her Inuit peers induct her into using a Vicks Inhaler to the eyeball. In addition, muddled sexuality pervades the landscape of childhood, which Tilley explores through the violation of personal boundaries with hickeys and the shock value these carry in the adult world of Teresa's father. Tilley incisively depicts the impending threat of sexual maturation upon the pre-adolescent psyche. The complex relationship between Teresa at age 12 and Willassie at age 17, for example, invokes the tumble of emotions surrounding sexual exploration and an evolving sense of one's self.

Perhaps most provocative is Tilley's depiction of a child's perception of Inuit culture. Tilley makes little attempt to contextualize her knowledge, except for instances when the adult Teresa briefly and intermittently muses about what white people may have done to the cultures of the peoples of the north, and nihilistically comments on the potential effects of the greenhouse effect on northern communities and landscapes. These asides provide little insight into adult experiences in Inuit communities. Cultural norms and beliefs are communicated through the lens of a particularly literate, but inexperienced small girl. It is left to the reader to either accept her first-person perceptions of difference, or challenge such mutations with further learning about the Inuit. In a way, Tilley avoids the controversy of appropriation of voice through such open-endedness. In another way, she runs the risk of recapitulating the newcomer in the north stories of other Euro-Canadian interlopers.

While such problematics face the reader of *Skin Room*, it is an admirable and engaging story. Teresa's characterization is nuanced and thought-provoking. The oscillating voices of the pre-teen Teresa and the twenty-something Teresa are beautifully distinct, yet inseparable. The story does not minimize her victimization in the hands of Willassie, nor does it condemn her complicity. Readers familiar with St. John's will enjoy Tilley's pointed use of common sites and settings, her sardonic and deflating attitude towards touristic heritage enterprises and her surprising and delightful meditations on the art world. This is a profound story of emergence from childhood trauma, and its avoidance of salaciousness, predictability and didacticism make it an engrossing read.

Shannon Fraser
Memorial University

Folklore: An Emerging Discipline, Selected Essays of Herbert Halpert. Edited by Martin Lovelace, Paul Smith, and J.D.A. Widdowson. St John's: Folklore and Language Publications, MUN, 2002, ISBN 0 88901 335 7.

SEVERAL YEARS AGO, I HAD the pleasure of reviewing Herbert Halpert's and J.D.A. Widdowson's *Folktales of Newfoundland* in this journal (*Newfoundland Studies* 13, 1 [Spring 1997], 93–97) declaring its two volumes to be “the best edition of a regional (or national, for that matter) corpus of folk-narrative that I have come across in almost fifty years of involvement in this field of study.” More recently, I re-

viewed, also in laudatory terms (*Newfoundland Studies* 18, 2 [Fall 2002], 323-24), *Little Jack and other Newfoundland Folktales*, containing 50 stories selected from those two volumes, and edited by John Widdowson, with the intention of presenting "these stories in an accessible way to readers," quite a few of whom would be the storytellers themselves or their families and neighbours. Thus, many of the tales collected from the Newfoundland narrative tradition have found their way back into, and reinforced that living tradition.

The initiator and guiding light of the collecting project and founder of the Folklore and Language Archive at Memorial University was the late Herbert Halpert (1911-2000) who, soon after his arrival at MUN from Murray State College in southwestern Kentucky in 1962, established a Folklore programme, as an integral part of which he, his students, and other fieldworkers went out to collect systematically, in the 1960s and 1970s, information on the language and tradition of the Newfoundlanders. The publication of *Folktales of Newfoundland* (1996) and *Little Jack* (2002) were the almost inevitable outcome of those activities in the field and in the archive, benefitting greatly from Halpert's long experience in recording oral traditions and from his expertise as a commentator and annotator.

The essays incorporated in the volume under review in part reflect his nascent and abiding interest in the collection of folk-cultural materials in the field and in the faithful transcription of the recordings, and their ascription to individual, creative tradition bearers in particular places and at particular times, a characteristic especially acknowledged by the editors in their section on "Performers" (69-106) but also implicit in several of the other papers. Naturally, this trait also shines through much of the 1992 autobiographical essay, "Coming into Folklore More Than Fifty Years Ago" which the editors have placed prominently at the beginning of the book (3-22); more than any other item does Halpert's informative, personal account of his early activities during the decade straddling the late 1930s and early 1940s illustrate and justify the validity of the title chosen for the anthology: *Folklore. An Emerging Discipline*. Linked to this period are at least ten of the papers selected by the editors for re-publication, a happy symbiosis of practical considerations and experiences, and their translation into scholarly results.

These early articles demonstrate already the shaping forces in Halpert's life-long scholarship — song and story, and four major, thematic subsections of the book are therefore devoted to "Folksong" (109-162), "Cante Fable" (143-202), "Legend" (203-238), and "Folktale" (239-376). Some of these deal with meticulously researched and narrowly focused topics ("The Devil and the Fiddle," "Legends of the Cursed Child," "Liars' Club Tales," "Tall Tales and Other Yarns from Calgary, Alberta," "Folktales and Jests from Delaware, Ohio," "The Cut-Off Head Frozen On") but even they, displaying a strong comparative element, do not treat their subjects in isolation. Others deal with more over-arching concerns ("American Regional Folklore," "Folklore: Breadth Versus Depth," "Folklore and Obscurity," "Truth in Folk-Songs," "Vitality of Tradition and Local Songs," "Definition

and Variation in Folk Legend”) but never lose themselves in mere theorizing. In this latter group, the paper on “American Regional Folklore,” first published in the *Journal of American Folklore* in 1947 astonishes not only through its detailed survey of work already done on this topic, but also through Halpert’s perceptive outline of the aims of collecting folklore in the regions and of the steps to be undertaken in the study of regional folklore. In many ways, it anticipates needs and concepts which did not receive professional attention until many years later.

If I single out for special attention the group of four papers devoted to the *Cante Fable*, this has two reasons: one, Halpert’s realization in 1941 and 1942, and later again in 1974 and 1976, that “the tale interspersed with song,” well known to, and much discussed by, literary scholars in connection with the thirteenth-century French narrative *Aucassin et Nicolette*, has, or at least had, echoes in American tradition in certain local folk rhymes, riddle tales, and humorous graces before meals, sometimes as the climax to a story. These articles happily combine the field-worker’s ability to “discover” neglected genres with his comparative instincts, thus presenting rounded pictures and satisfactory conclusions. The second reason for singling out the *Cante Fable* group of papers is that, when I read them in their original versions, they stimulated my curiosity and encouraged me to explore this fascinating genre in greater detail, an exercise which provided me with new insights into aspects of traditional and literary narrative which I had never considered before. This would not have happened without Halpert’s published research on the subject, and I am especially pleased that the four articles in question have found a place in the anthology.

From a personal point of view which may, I hope, be shared by others, the inclusion of Halpert’s “Bibliographical Essay on the Folktale in English” (315-376), first published in 1982, is particularly welcome as it combines the pleasures of the bibliophile with the desire to augment and balance previous incomplete work by other scholars. This reviewer particularly appreciates, in this respect, Halpert’s numerous additions (346-357) to Richard M. Dorson’s limited coverage of the Scottish scene in his *British Folklorists* (1968). Not only does his essay fill noticeable gaps, but it also reflects Halpert’s desire in making generous, practical use of his own extensive library in his field of scholarship.

The principles applied by the editors in their selection of papers from Halpert’s impressive list of publications has resulted in judicious, individual choices and a well-balanced overall indication of his scholarly areas of interest and the educational applications of that interest. Even the briefest of glances at the “Chronological Bibliography” of Halpert’s writings (379-388) makes one aware, however, how prolific he was as a publishing scholar. It is understandable that most of the shorter items, while often insightful and topical in their original contexts, were perhaps not suitable for an anthology such as the one under review. The same applies possibly to the several joint publications in which Halpert was a co-author, but it would have

been useful, for example, to have had at least one of his essays on mumming in Newfoundland included in the volume (although they are available elsewhere).

A review of *Folklore: An Emerging Discipline* should not end on such a critical note. Instead it should place on record sentiments of gratitude and appreciation, for this volume recalls and honours, on behalf of all of us who knew him — as colleague, friend, teacher, fellow scholar — or were influenced by him less directly, someone who left his indelible mark on the growth and shaping of a discipline in well over 60 years. Herbert Halpert's own writings bear eloquent, indisputable witness to who he was and to the legacy he has left behind, and the image which emerges from those writings blends subtly with the emergence of the field of study he served so well.

W.F.H. Nicolaisen
University of Aberdeen

Rosemary Ommer and the Coasts Under Stress Research Project Team, *Coasts Under Stress: Restructuring and Social-Ecological Health* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2007), ISBN (0773532250) 9780773532250; ISBN (077353203X) 9780773532038.

IN HER EXTRAORDINARY 1955 BOOK, *The Edge of the Sea*, Rachel Carson described coastlines as an "elusive and indefinable boundary" (11). While Carson's work was focused solely on the natural history of the littoral zone, her definition could equally be applied to the broad and complex social and ecological changes that Rosemary Ommer and the Coasts Under Stress Research Project Team describe in their massive study of Canada's Pacific and Atlantic coastal regions. With a supporting cast of over 50 co-investigators and innumerable research collaborators, *Coasts Under Stress* is in itself an exercise in crossing the intangible boundaries that encapsulate our understanding of Canada's coastal regions. Through careful and detailed study of the social and economic changes that underpin the history of ecological transformation in their study regions, the book's authors attempt a full interdisciplinary account of the crisis that has so severely impacted many rural communities along the shores of the Atlantic and the Pacific Oceans. By touching on a remarkable range of issues (not only the predictable discussion of fisheries, aquaculture, and offshore oil development, but also health care restructuring, rural education, nutrition, and substance abuse) and a diverse array perspectives including science, sociology, history, and geography (to name only a few of the disciplinary approaches in the volume), the authors attempt to synthesize the multiple lines of causation that have produced collapsed fisheries, depopulated communities, and social stress among rural families in coastal regions.

Of course, the great danger of such an ambitious project is that it might collapse under its expansive scope and complexity. For the most part, *Coasts Under Stress*