

Images of the Fisher Folk in Newfoundland, 1900-1930s

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Images of the Fisher Folk in Newfoundland, 1900-1930s

IAN MCKAY BEGINS *The Quest of the Folk* with a study of an early-20th-century photograph of a people in a fishing community in Nova Scotia. Labelled, "The Simple Life", the picture represented the way that some members of the urban middle class had come to see, describe and think about the rural inhabitants of their province. No longer simply people who lived outside urban areas and fished for a living, these romanticized, idealized fisher Folk came to represent the very essence of Nova Scotia itself. As McKay explains, interest in the Folk developed among the middle classes of Europe and North America in the 19th- and early-20th centuries, a response to modernity and class politics within an increasingly transforming world. The difficulty with this portrayal, McKay argues, is that it turns living people into static types, who live in a world devoid of class conflict, social complexity and ethnic, racial and religious diversity. As well, by defining the quintessential Nova Scotian as a fisher, these creators of the Folk excluded the majority of the province's people.

McKay's study offers an opportunity to start looking at the wider interest in the Folk and folklore and its uses in the Atlantic region. In the early-20th century, some urban, middle-class people in Newfoundland were also portraying fishing people as having Folk qualities.¹ The *Newfoundland Quarterly*, a literary and feature magazine founded in 1901, is filled with articles and poems celebrating "our fisher Folk". Frequent contributors included Henry LeMessurier, civil servant and politician, and P.K. Devine, journalist and clerk of the House of Assembly who published one of the first books on Newfoundland folklore.² Indeed, the actual representations of fisher Folk were quite similar in Nova Scotia and in Newfoundland, and both mixed romanticism, antimodernism and variants of nationalism. The differences, however, lie in the ways that these images were used in the interwar years and the way that these collections of folklore circulated amongst the rural people. I thought I would use this time to talk about the way the fisher Folk were being represented in Newfoundland in this period and give you a brief outline of the growth in the interest in folklore. My purpose is not to provide any definitive explanations for the similarities and differences in these experiences in Nova Scotia and Newfoundland, but to suggest that comparisons could enrich our understanding of the experiences of modernity in the Atlantic region.

Newfoundland's experience with industrialization was certainly small relative to Nova Scotia's in the early-20th century. A controversial railway, an iron ore mine on Bell Island, a pulp and paper mill in Corner Brook, and some light manufacturing in St. John's represented the bulk of the industrial projects. Despite this record, I would argue that there was an antimodernist element to the interest in the Folk in Newfoundland and that some members of the urban middle class had concerns about the consequences of modernity. In fact, the very decade that saw the emergence of the *Newfoundland Quarterly* was also a period of vigorous activity by both government

1 See Elke Dettmer, "Folklorism in Newfoundland", in Gerald Thomas and J.D.A. Widderson, eds., *Studies in Newfoundland Folklore: Community and Process* (St. John's, 1991), pp. 169-76.

2 P.K. Devine, *Devine's Folk Lore of Newfoundland in Old Words, Phrases and Expressions, their Origin and Meaning* (St. John's, 1937).

and entrepreneurs aimed at bringing further industrial development to Newfoundland. As historian William Reeves argues, the St. John's newspapers regularly reported on the latest American mining companies doing surveying work on the island and the growing number of technicians, capitalists and others arriving to find ways to make money in the resource sectors.³ Most of these endeavours, of course, never led to concrete projects, but they did help foster the sense that Newfoundland's economy and society were on the edge of a great transformation.

While many of those in the middle class saw industrial development and "progress" as positive for Newfoundland,⁴ those writing about the Folk expressed fears about its impact. For example, H.W. LeMessurier began an article published in 1902 with a lament about the intrusion of modernity on rural life.⁵ He argued that the "passing away of these old-timers leaves vacancies which are being filled by prosy people, who are void of imagination, look upon a fairy tale as childish nonsense, and will listen to nothing but lectures on electricity or some such dry fad which our forefathers never dreamed of".⁶ There is no romance or humour in "lectures on electricity", and the modern world, which they represent, poses a threat to the world of the fisher Folk.

In Newfoundland, as in Nova Scotia, this interest in the Folk and folklore coincided with a growing nationalism in the early-20th century. In these depictions, fishing people appear as embodying the Newfoundland "character". As Elke Dettmer and, more recently, Jerry Bannister have argued, discussions of the Newfoundland "character" accompanied a particular representation of history found in D.W. Prowse's *History of Newfoundland*.⁷ According to this version, the people of Newfoundland were descendants of survivors, people who had overcome great hardships, from the harsh North Atlantic environment to British colonial regimes supposedly unfriendly to settlement. Over the past number of decades, historians of Newfoundland have challenged that particular interpretation of the past, but the survivor motif has continued to be a part of representations of the Newfoundland identity.

In the *Newfoundland Quarterly*, stories and poems celebrating the Folk tended to take the form of a romantic tribute to fishing people or humorous stories recounting the wit and resourcefulness of rural inhabitants. An early example of the former is a short feature called "The Old Fisher-Folk", written by Isaac C. Morris, a St. John's business man and municipal councillor.⁸ His description of a visit to the home of a fishing family in Fortune Bay reveals a strong criticism of modernity and particularly the materialism and selfishness that he associates with it. In this story, the fishing

3 W.G. Reeves, "Alexander's Conundrum Reconsidered: The American Dimension in Newfoundland Resource Development, 1898-1910", *Newfoundland Studies* 5, 1 (Spring 1989), pp. 1-37.

4 For example, journalist P.T. McGrath, author of *Newfoundland in 1911* (London, 1911), used elements of the Folk motif in his descriptions of the Newfoundland people, but also insisted that they were also skilled and adaptable (and *white*), making them an ideal workforce.

5 H.W. LeMessurier, "The Good Old Times", *Newfoundland Quarterly*, 2, 3 (December 1902), pp. 17-18.

6 LeMessurier, "The Good Old Times", p. 17.

7 Dettmer, "Folklorism in Newfoundland", pp. 170-1; Jerry Bannister, "Whigs and Nationalists: The Legacy of Judge Prowse's *History of Newfoundland*", *Acadiensis*, XXII, 1 (Autumn 2002), pp. 84-109.

8 Isaac C. Morris, "The Old Fisher-Folk", *Newfoundland Quarterly* 1, 3 (December 1901), pp. 19-20.

people are simple, happy, honest, generous and unpretentious folk who enjoy hard work. While he notes that the home and furniture was plain and old-fashioned, “like the owner”, he insists that the family memories the items held made them more valuable than more expensive furnishings. Indeed, the author positions himself as the interpreter of the family, their house and what it offers to the outside world. He states: “It is from the humbler walks of life that its inwardness is clearly seen, and its true meaning really learned”.⁹ Indeed, it is the author’s voice that we hear in this piece; he never reports any direct conversation or remarks made by the family members. Perhaps they would have gladly traded the homemade sideboard that Morris praises for a new one ordered from the Eaton’s catalogue.

Although Morris insisted that it was important to tell the stories of the fisher Folk, we learn very little about their lives beyond the author’s brief impressions. We do not hear about issues or events that do not fit the image of the Folk. Morris never mentions concerns such as the price of fish, relations with the local merchants, debates about fishing technologies – all of which would have been critical in the lives of fishing people in that period. Likewise, we see nothing of religious or ethnic divisions that certainly existed in rural Newfoundland. Finally, in Morris’ depiction and others, the fishery itself is decidedly masculine, without reference to work that Newfoundland women did in producing fish for market. Harmony and contentment – not conflict, poverty and change – reflect the lives of the Folk.

In a later essay written by P.K. Devine, tellingly entitled, “They Learned in Nature’s Book”, romanticism and antimodernism is mixed with more explicit nationalism.¹⁰ Appearing during the Great Depression, when Newfoundland’s economy and existence as a political entity was threatened, the article portrays the fishing people as strong, hardy, resilient and masculine. They had gained these qualities, however, not through their abilities to manoeuvre their way through the complex local and international fishing economies, but because they were unsullied by “modern” education and worldliness. Devine asserts: “Their teachers were the winds and the waves, and the firm enduring rocks that the sea beat against in a vain struggle every day”.¹¹ Yet, these challenges had helped create what he claimed were finer human beings – survivors whose traditions “preserve the spirit of nationality, and perpetuated bravery, hardihood and patriotism for their descendants, and keep virile manhood from becoming decadent”.¹² It was these children of nature and bearers of the “true” spirit of Newfoundland who offered a role model for the modern world.

While the actual depictions of fisher Folk are similar, tourist promoters in Nova Scotia used these images more extensively than their counterparts in Newfoundland in the interwar years. Nova Scotia’s tourism industry was more developed in this period, whereas few tourists travelled as far as Newfoundland.¹³ Lack of roads also limited possibilities for touring, so promotion tended to focus on rail travel and the trains’ primarily interior rather than coastal destinations. The tourist literature thus

9 Morris, “The Old Fisher Folk”, p. 20.

10 Devine, *Devine’s Folk Lore of Newfoundland*, pp. 79-80.

11 Devine, *Devine’s Folk Lore of Newfoundland*, p. 79.

12 Devine, *Devine’s Folk Lore of Newfoundland*, p. 79.

13 James Overton, “Promoting ‘The Real Newfoundland’: Culture as Tourist Commodity”, *Studies in Political Economy*, 4 (Autumn 1980), pp. 115-37.

emphasizes the island's salmon rivers and hunting lodges more than picturesque coastal communities and fisher Folk.¹⁴ While it is antimodernist, this approach did not usually involve selling Newfoundland as a Folk community until after the Second World War.

Another difference in the use of the Folk in Nova Scotia and Newfoundland is that rural people in Newfoundland were more often the recipients of the "products" of folklore than outsiders. In the 1920s and 1930s, books of songs, stories and studies of Newfoundland dialects collected by urban, middle-class Folk enthusiasts circulated through rural communities. One of the most avid collectors of folklore was St. John's businessman Gerald S. Doyle, whose patent-medicine distributing firm had him travelling around the island. He gathered songs and stories from people he met, then published them in booklet form and gave them to his customers. Doyle was a cousin of P.K. Devine, and he helped finance the printing of Devine's book on Newfoundland folklore by filling it with ads for Listerine, soap and patent medicines. Doyle also gave copies of Devine's book to his customers. These folklore "products", therefore, cheaply printed and handed out free with cases of cod liver oil, came to the people of Newfoundland in a different way than Helen Creighton's song collections came to the people of Nova Scotia, which, in turn, raises questions about whether or not differences in the collection, form and distribution of folklore have an impact on the way people receive it.

Radio, in the 1930s, was another way that the people of Newfoundland experienced the uses of folklore. Doyle had a regular program on a commercial radio station where he relayed the stories, songs and poems he had gathered. Before Joseph Smallwood became a politician, he had already established himself as a collector and promoter of Newfoundland folklore as host of the show "The Barrelman".¹⁵ Using the celebration of stories and songs to foster nationalism and identity during the Great Depression, Smallwood was connecting to people who were already beginning to think of themselves as having a collective culture.

In taking part in this forum, I wanted to suggest that we can enrich and add complexity to our understanding of the creation of the Folk, responses to modernity and the emergence of nationalism by looking at the regional variations within Atlantic Canada. With just a brief look at the similarities and differences in the image of the fisher Folk and uses of folklore in Nova Scotia and Newfoundland, I can think of a number of questions about these processes in the two areas. For example, how did the different degrees of industrialization in Nova Scotia and Newfoundland affect responses to modernity and the creation of the Folk? What is the significance of the different ways that folklore was used and received in Newfoundland? How does it affect our analysis of power relations within these societies? These and other questions will help us not only to "move beyond the Folk", but also to foster a more integrative way of thinking about Atlantic Canada.

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14 Examples of this literature include *Newfoundland: Where Sport is at its Finest* and *Newfoundland Invites You*, both published by the Newfoundland Tourist and Publicity Commission, c. 1930s.

15 Philip Hiscock, "'The Barrelman' radio programme, 1937-1943: the mediation and use of folklore in Newfoundland", Ph.D. thesis, Memorial University of Newfoundland, 1994.