

Folklore, Folk Life

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REVIEW ARTICLES

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More Than Fifty Percent; Woman's Life in a Newfoundland Outport 1900-1950. Hilda Chaulk Murray. St. John's: Breakwater Books Limited, 1979. xiv, 160 p. Out of print. *Below The Bridge; Memories of the South Side of St. John's.* Helen Porter. St. John's: Breakwater, 1979. 126 p. \$7.95. *The Little Nord Easter: Reminiscences of a Placentia Bayman.* Victor Butler. Ed. Wilfred W. Wareham. St. John's: Breakwater, 1980. 160 p. \$7.95. *The Winds Softly Sigh.* R. F. Sparkes. Ed. Richard E. Buehler. [St. John's:] Breakwater Books, 1981. xvi, 197 p. \$7.95. *On Sloping Ground.* Aubrey M. Tizzard. Ed. J.D.A. Widdowson. St. John's: Breakwater, 1984. 228 p. \$7.95. *Labrador by Choice.* Ben Powell. St. John's: Jespersen Press, 1984. 200 p. \$10.95.

JAMES K. HILLER

THE DUST JACKETS of the earlier volumes, except for the last, all in "Canada's Atlantic Folklore-Folklife Series," state that the series was created "to record and help preserve a way of life peculiar to the Atlantic seaboard," and to allow authors to present material in such a way "that the integrity of expression reflects . . . honestly the culture which we are striving to preserve." These are laudable aims, though one might quibble that recording and preservation are not always the same thing. Nevertheless, the series does evoke a world that is either lost or fast disappearing, through the memories of those that knew it, and through their songs and stories. The collection of sealing songs and verse edited by Shannon Ryan and Larry Small, the first volume in the series, showed how valuable the latter func-

tion can be. The memoirs under review show both the strengths and weaknesses of the life history. At its best, such an account will not only inform; it will also illuminate in a unique way. The language, the style, the instinctive familiarity can provide a window on the past that allows the reader to connect in a personal and immediate way. But if nostalgia and self-justification are allowed to intrude too far, then the honesty promoted in the blurb is severely diminished, and with it the value of the account. All this is platitudinous; but it should not be forgotten by those responsible for the Breakwater series.

Happily, honesty is the striking characteristic of Victor Butler's writings. He lived his life (1896-1981) in Harbour Buffett, Placentia Bay, where he worked as a fisherman, trader, carpenter and mechanic. In *Little Nord Easter*—the nickname given Butler by his grandfather and taken from the part of the harbour where he was born—Wilfred Wareham has collected Butler's short account of his life, his history of Harbour Buffett, and four well-told stories. The written account is supplemented with extracts from taped interviews. Butler comes through as resourceful, tough, hardworking and intelligent. His style, as another Placentia Bayman, Leslie Harris, has noted, is to use the print medium to extend the dimensions of his kitchen, "so that one might imagine a larger crowd held spellbound by his yarns as they are slowly cooked by the heat from the 'Waterloo'" (45). It is an authentic voice, one which does not seek to exaggerate nor to preach, except within the conventions of the yarn. Butler wrote two later collections of reminiscences (see References), which, taken in connection with *Little Nord Easter*, give us a life history rich in atmosphere. Butler is proud to have survived without ever going on the dole, proud of his skill and resilience. He also allows himself a degree of bitterness as he describes the mercantile system, his isolation within the community (see the review by Clark), and finally the resettlement programme that beached him in old age at Arnold's Cove, denying him the satisfaction of a life cycle completed within his own environment.

Aubrey Tizzard, author of *On Sloping Ground*, was born at Hillgrade, New World Island, in 1919 and left there in 1947, when the United Church decked him out in a dog collar and sent him off, totally unprepared, to minister to the people of Englee—an experience chronicled with unconscious humour in his second book, *Down on the French Shore*. *On Sloping Ground* describes his years in Hillgrade with almost total recall. His focus is narrower than Butler's. He deals with a comparatively short period and is concerned almost entirely with the activities of himself and his fami-

ly. He is also a very different man. Butler had a streak of the adventurer, the daredevil, and had a wide-ranging curiosity. It is hard to imagine Tizzard yarning in the net-loft or sprinting around the bay in hard weather. This was an upright, solid, hardworking and virtuous family that commands respect, but not affection.

On Sloping Ground is a curious book. Tizzard assumes that the reader is equally interested in everything, and in as much detail as possible. The result is a book that mixes the tedious, the ludicrous, and the invaluable. What is one to make of a caption to a photo of one of Tizzard's sisters sitting on an admirer's knee that reads as follows: "This picture is put in not because of the friendship or courtship idea but because to the left and in line with their heads is our dung barrow. . . ." Surely Aubrey is having a laugh. But is he? Elsewhere he tells us that on the mantelshelf chez Tizzard, circa 1920, was an iron clock, patented in 1903, which measured 6" x 4" x 2" and weighed four pounds. On one end of the shelf were three flatirons, on the other two kerosene lamps. Underneath, until 1932, there was a mitt hanger made from an iron hoop. And so on. The detail is at once admirable and stupefying.

Tizzard's father was a cooper who also ran the local post office, did a little fishing, and after 1932 ran a small store. He kept livestock, gardened, built boats. A pillar of the United Church and the Orange Lodge, he was a leader in the small community, and ambitious for his children. Aubrey takes us through the seasonal round and his own upbringing, piling detail upon detail, building up a portrait of a family that worked hard to maintain a modestly comfortable standard of living. There was always enough to eat at the Tizzards', enough fuel, enough money to fix Aubrey's kidneys at Twillingate hospital. For all its naivety, *On Sloping Ground* is the best and most complete account we have of the life of a middle class outport family in the years immediately preceding Confederation—an account so rich that we must be grateful both to Tizzard and to his indefatigable editor, John Widdowson, who clearly stemmed a torrent of trivia.

It is impossible to be as positive about Sparkes' volume, since his aim is not so much to tell it as it was as to correct what he considers to be an overemphasis on "the dark days of Newfoundland"; a good deal of writing on the subject, he claims, has been "much overdone and grossly exaggerated." The good old days, to read Sparkes, were literally that, and the winds of his memory "softly sigh for the days that have gone." Specifically, he is concerned with his childhood in Jackson's Arm, White Bay, where he was born in 1906, and which he left sometime in his teens. The son of the

local teacher and Anglican lay reader, he was one of the lucky ones. The family was not materially rich, but he does not seem to have experienced the poverty, disease, endless toil and missed opportunities that were the lot of many Newfoundland families, and which are so graphically described by, for example, Victor Butler. This secure background influences his representation of a village in which a God-fearing, upright, hardworking people lived in peace, harmony and reasonable prosperity. Illiterate and unsophisticated, perhaps, but ingenious, wise, and able to live life to the full. This idealised picture is accompanied by an indignant defense of the past. We are treated, for instance, to a lengthy disquisition on the virtues of the Royal Readers, and the strengths of the education system before the modern specialists intruded. For all its faults, *The Winds Softly Sigh* is a pleasant and often amusing memoir; but its concern with what was clearly positive about outport life to the exclusion of all else makes it overly biased. The reader wallows in nostalgia for a world whose only reality is in Sparkes' recollection.

The demands of an academic thesis probably helped Hilda Chaulk Murray produce a more balanced work. She was born in Elliston, Trinity Bay, in 1934 and left in 1950. Twenty years later as a graduate student she returned to undertake fieldwork for a study of women's life in traditional outport society. Thus *More Than Fifty Percent* is the work of an insider working as an outsider: a member of the community who is also the objective observer and researcher. Drawing on interviews with the older people of Elliston, Murray has produced a sympathetic, detailed description of the work attending each season and each stage of life. She does not allow nostalgia to intrude, and avoids laments for the past. Here we have recorded in a definitive manner the central and vital role of woman in traditional Newfoundland society. "She worked hard, but she was not a slave," Murray concludes. "She was her husband's partner, more than fifty percent—the mainstay of the family" (144).

Much of Helen Porter's memoir is also concerned with the lives of girls and women, but in an urban setting. A near contemporary of Hilda Murray, she was born on the South Side of St. John's, and in *Below the Bridge* remembers both her childhood and a community that was destroyed in the 1950s to make way for harbour developments. Like Sparkes, Porter is concerned that the virtues of her world be recorded, and she speaks eloquently of the sterling human values that enriched her circle—unselfishness, hospitality, strict morality, and a deep sense of community. At the same time, however, she gives due space to hardship, poverty, dirt and inconven-

ience. She concentrates on her family and friends, births, deaths, clothes, games and meals. But one also gains a sense of St. John's in the 1940s—its neighbourhoods and class structures, for instance—and of a field waiting to be more completely researched. Folklorists and social scientists active in Newfoundland have for the most part gravitated to outports—the smaller and more remote, the better—at the expense of urban studies. It is high time that the rural bias of such research was corrected, though one has to admit that there is far less romance in a field trip to the Higher Levels than to the fastnesses of Bay d'Espoir. Porter is a professional writer, not an academic, and she has produced a book of considerable literary merit. It deserves to be read not only for its intrinsic worth, but because it is one of very few accounts of life in St. John's.

Ben Powell would not have been happy on the South Side. Born in Carbonear in 1921, he left in 1936 to join his mother's family in southern Labrador, and stayed there. He became a trapper and fisherman and then, in 1950, started a sawmill at what was to become the village of Charlottetown. Now the village storekeeper and patriarch, Powell has written his autobiography, encouraged and guided, one suspects, by a local schoolteacher. While some passages are contrived, Powell for the most part tells his story simply and without pretension. He provides very little ethnographic description, and does not dwell on the details of the seasonal round. This is a record of the vicissitudes of life on the trap line and in the boat, a record which vividly illustrates the isolation of these small northern settlements from each other and from the island of Newfoundland. Powell is justifiably proud of his achievements, and his book is a valuable addition to the sparse literature on south Labrador.

None of the authors under review have been concerned to analyse closely the experience recounted. It was sufficient for each to record his or her life history—in Murray's case the collective life of women—and this is not uncharacteristic either of autobiography or of ethnographic studies. However, it is a commonplace of historical study that facts do not speak for themselves: they achieve meaning only in context. The same applies to works such as these. The individual experience needs to be related to a larger whole, so that one can judge how typical or exceptional each was. Newfoundlanders can probably do this by instinct, but those of us not born into the tribe may have problems. We need context and background. Wilfred Wareham and John Widdowson went a long way in this direction in their work with Butler and Tizzard. But Hilda Murray's historical chapter is the weakest part of *More Than Fifty Percent*, and the other books lack

useful introductions. We certainly need more accounts of the kind under review—and even more, perhaps, oral histories of individual settlements on the lines of Ronald Blythe's *Akenfield*—but publishers should be urged to provide introductions that will give the historical context. In this way the accessible past can be brought more sharply into focus.

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