

# People and Place: The Academic Celebration of Outport Life

F. L. Jackson

Volume 7, numéro 2, fall 1991

URI : [https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/nflds7\\_2re01](https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/nflds7_2re01)

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Faculty of Arts, Memorial University

ISSN

1198-8614 (imprimé)

1715-1430 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer cet article

Jackson, F. L. (1991). People and Place: The Academic Celebration of Outport Life. *Newfoundland Studies*, 7(2), 202–210.

## REVIEW ARTICLE

### People and Place: The Academic Celebration of Outport Life

*Studies in Newfoundland Folklore: Community and Process.* Gerald Thomas and J.D.A. Widdowson, eds. St. John's: Breakwater Books, 1991. 331 p. \$24.95.

*A Place to Belong.* Gerald L. Pocius. Athens, Ga.: Univ. of Georgia Press; Kingston and Montreal: McGill-Queen's Univ. Press, 1991. 350 p. \$44.95.

F. L. JACKSON

Two very different celebratory volumes by local folklorists have appeared over the past year, one celebratory in the formal sense, the other an affectionately executed descriptive celebration of the community of Calvert on Newfoundland's Southern Shore.

*Studies in Newfoundland Folklore: Community and Process* is a retrospective of folklore research at Memorial University, a collection of sixteen articles chiefly by senior academics, marking twenty-one years since the founding of the Folklore Department by H.H. Halpert, to whom the volume is dedicated. Grouped under Belief, Song, Popular Culture, and Language and Literature, contributions range from brief reminiscences on the origins of the Department, to a description of its renowned archive, to empirical and even fanciful pieces, providing a sampler of the good work our folklorists have done over two decades in tracking down, interpreting and conserving the wealth of local linguistic and customary artifacts. The academically-correct title is the result of the editors' effort to identify an ordering principle defining the thrust and import of folklore research at Memorial. They come up with the revelation

that it focussed on oral and customary life in Newfoundland villages (Community) over time (Process) — rather a letdown after all the fuss. With Peggy Lee one wants to ask: "Is that all there is?" In any case, I always think "process" better describes a slice of cheese than a slice of life.

To a Newfoundland layman more familiar with local life in its first-order immediacy than its second-order description, it is awe-inspiring to encounter old stories, sea-shanties and customs scrutinized and catalogued within an inch of their lives and festooned with para-mathematical formulae, data-bases, graphs and all the other trappings of high science. A faint echo of Wordsworth sounds in one's inner ear: he wrote of the "meddling intellect" which "murder[s] to dissect." No doubt it is the great and ambiguous challenge of the folklorist's art, as much as the philosopher's, historian's or literary critic's, to try to keep beautiful cultural butterflies alive while impaling them on the pin-board of research. All of us in the culture-business know only too well that our objectifying efforts likely do as much to expedite the ossification of cultural organisms as to conserve them. "When [science] paints its grey on grey," said the great Hegel, "then has a form of life grown old." Conserving culture is like conserving jam; the living fruit ends up bottled on some archival pantry shelf.

I don't mean to argue as a cultural anti-vivisectionist; it must remain the ideal of humane inquiry to try to capture the actuality of our living subjects. Destructive extremes do exist, however. There is the hyper-empiricist methodology which first phenomenizes everything into an inarticulate rabble of raw data, then drags it before some doctrinal high court where crude and arbitrary judgements are imposed. There is the romantically inspired research which claims to have glimpsed a human wholeness once lived and still yearned for, a life fallen irretrievably into time, which it would resurrect at least in representation and sentiment as a history or folklore of "traditional culture."

One finds a mix of both attitudes in much recent local cultural research. The blitzkrieg of "scientific" analysis inflicted upon Newfoundland outport culture during the 1970s and '80s was largely inspired by a fatal romantic attraction for a highly idealized past. Notably, this neither reflected nor met with a coincident renaissance of traditionalism in the outports themselves. Quite the contrary — the outporters were busily "modernizing." It was primarily come-from-away academics who found in the still-extant residue of the older outport life what appeared as a mint specimen of pre-industrial, colonial North American life. They came not to bury it but to praise it. Rarely did they find much wanting in it. Its harsh, stolid, spiritual, often death-dealing reality, to the extent it was appreciated at all, tended to be blamed on the British, the merchant class, the evils of capital, the encroachments of modernity or whatever. The outport was a pristine paragon of vernacular community life, and Newfoundlanders a race of authentic, uncorrupted aboriginals.

Nowadays one rubs one's eyes, awake to a suspicion that the soul of Newfoundland culture, if there is such, has been only imperfectly captured in the contrived ambience of the Duckworth Street pubs or in the documentation amassed in the Institute of Social and Economic Research (ISER) or the Memorial University of Newfoundland Folklore and Language Archive (MUNFLA). To say so is not at all to defect to the cynicism which says the '90s reality is no different here than elsewhere, though it can hardly be said that we have been entirely immune to the take-out, flash-frozen, commodity-culture of the global-electronic marketplace, epitomized more in the mass-media music featuring stylized, voluptuary street-gangs or the motel trysts of long-distance truckers, than in the wistfully redeemed repertoires of local old-time troubadours. One at least hopes the Newfoundland spirit will survive this culture-shock as it has survived others, but one knows there is no going back.

With the possible exception of Elke Detmer's contribution, *Studies in Newfoundland Folklore: Community and Process* does not address such philosophical questions about the fate of the older culture. It confines itself to an assortment of articles in the conventional style, drawing on the near and far Newfoundland past. They are individually interesting, though my limited professional feel for the genre prevents me from passing specific judgements beyond that. Still, I do feel some disappointment that a retrospective meant to summarize and celebrate the career of the great heyday of folklore research in Newfoundland can offer nothing more by way of synthetic overview of its accomplishments than what is expressed in its somewhat anthropo-babblish title.

Gerald Pocius' book, *A Place to Belong*, is quite another matter. Printed in Georgia, of all places, it has an attractively open, spacious format, replete with a multitude of photographs, maps, and charts, like a long *National Geographic* article in black and white. On first casually browsing it, one wonders why on earth one is looking at two men having a mug-up in the woods, someone called Aiden sitting on the hood of his car, a cow in a driveway, two prim gentlewomen on a settee, a detailed map of marshes around Calvert, a site-plan of the furnishings in Ida Sullivan's kitchen, a close-up of Maude Sullivan's paling fence, village routes followed by mummies, a very nondescript chest of drawers, a plastic whirligig on a fence, and an advertisement for a CMHC bungalow; in short, an avalanche of seemingly disconnected, and supremely inconsequential, vernacular bric-a-brac.

It makes sense only when one settles down to the text. Pocius is trying to do two things at once: argue a thesis about anthropological methodology and carry out a descriptive case study of Newfoundland village life. They don't mesh all that well. As description, it is a most comprehensive and engaging — one wants to say enormously *caring* — documentary about life, landscape and domesticity in an old and still vivacious Newfoundland community. As theory,

it is only partly successful; one soon ceases to care about that aspect of his argument, which is for the most part unclear and obtrusive. So faithful and fascinating in its own right is the descriptive account that the frequent theoretical asides only come across as distracting and forced.

A powerful sense of authenticity pervades the work, stemming in my view from two factors. Firstly, Pocius is writing about a community he intimately knows and to which he clearly has become personally attached over years of visiting and living there. The people he writes about are friends concerning whom he is impeccably respectful. He does not exploit them, their habits or habitat as mere anthropological data to be twisted to flatter his own notions; one thinks by way of contrast of the work of Gerald Sider. Pocius takes the people of Calvert to be real human beings living real human lives, and where there is conflict between what theory demands and what they themselves think, it is their opinion he trusts, just as if (God forbid!) these people were at least as wise about their own life and community as any outside observer is likely to be. This is a refreshingly civilized approach to social study, a departure from the sort of theory-constipated strip mining of Newfoundland outport culture we have known. This is, in short, a very un-Siderish work.

Secondly, it has the ring of authenticity because it is not hit-and-run research. Germinating in its author's mind over some years, it has all the earmarks of a labour of love as well as of intellect. The incredibly thorough on-site research is reinforced by copious background references indicative of a long-standing and energetic interest in Newfoundland issues. The fastidious documentation of the everyday physical, social and spiritual ambience in Calvert will be immediately recognized by local readers as utterly fond and familiar — little different from how it was and still is in St. Anywhere, Newfoundland. Such a boldly quotidian approach obviously runs the risk of banality, of becoming mesmerized by the trivial and obvious, and sometimes Pocius skirts perilously close to this precipice. But he manages somehow to avoid it and render a haphazard clutter of supremely mundane inconsequentialities and commonplaces luminous and absorbing, communicating a much stronger sense of the reality of communal wholeness, continuity and humanity than a bucket of theories could ever accomplish. One wonders, of course, how much subjective familiarity with the look and feel of these places contributes to this effect. I found myself craving to take up residence inside the head of a reader from Georgia or Fergus, Ont., for a moment, to see how it all looked from there.

It is partly because Pocius' impressionism works so well that one has trouble with his lapses into sociological postulation, as if he were bound by some affirmative action policy requiring him to hire on theories whether qualified or not. This introduces a laboured artificiality into the text, a tendency to treat the trivial as profound, the manifest as subtle, the ubiquitous as unique.

That Newfoundland outposts, as compact villages, are separated by stretches of wilderness, for example, is hardly geographically unusual (63). That gender roles differ sharply is true of all "traditional" communities which still rest on the ancient presumption of a division between public and domestic domains (ch. 3), and the insight that the "spaces" of the women are accordingly more "focussed" than those of the men hardly seems profound enough to merit four repetitions (94-100). Moreover, in Mexico, Bangladesh and the Yukon people also gather trees for firewood and do not neglect to cut them into small pieces before fitting them into stoves (137), and no abstruse concepts of "mediation of public and private spaces" are needed to account for the fact you can pretty much tell from people's front yards the kind of welcome to expect indoors (267 ff.). But in spite of Pocius' sometimes overwhelmingly tedious and prosaic tendency to construe the ordinary as exceptional, the empirical as conceptual, and the universal as idiosyncratic, he somehow manages to weld a vast litany of banal particulars into an engaging account of life in a contemporary Newfoundland outpost. On this ground alone, and chiefly, it is a Good Book, a book to belong.

This is not to say that Pocius' theoretical thesis, however mismanaged, is uninteresting. Far from it. The thesis is, that the integrity, continuity and quality of Newfoundland community life are not to be thought of primarily as embodied or divulged in "things," in artifacts, because Newfoundlanders (insight of insights!) traditionally have looked upon things as essentially ephemeral and unimportant. Rather, they are to be sought in those enduring "spaces" within which community life is sustained, the structures through which ordinary livyers daily and continually constitute their community as the "place they belong to." "Space" is thus the operative concept, though Pocius uses it in such an all-purpose way that it is never very clear what it means. Even where the meaning is used synonymously with geographical-historical place, the concept is intended more phenomenologically than physically, referring to a persisting "cognitive map" (if one must use that term) whereby even the surrounding hills, rocks and waters are endowed with a communal significance which they in turn serve to invoke.

Adopting such an indeterminate usage permits Pocius to generate all sorts of "spaces." "Producing" and "consuming spaces" become operational scholasticisms for workplace and home and so on, exemplifications of the enforced conceptuality I complain of. The description of life in these various "spaces" takes up most of the book. But jargon aside, the device allows him to address questions always in the back of one's mind but which one never quite knew how to ask. For example, with virtually no formal or law-driven distinction between public and private domains ("spaces"), how exactly are community resources shared? Why does the typical Newfoundland kitchen, sparse, antiseptic yet exuding a legendary warmth as the veritable epicentre of all domestic, social and celebratory life, look just ... like ... *that*? Why are

memory and its trappings relegated to the cluttered mausoleum of the parlour, there to be largely ignored? What is behind that characteristic disdain for things and embellishments, the indifference to the past and its artifacts which so frustrates research but seems not at all to limit the capacity for an enduring *Geheimshaft*? Fascinating questions.

Pocius wants to argue it all comes down to the persistence of these "spaces," forming underlying constants able to tolerate change and decay in the externals of culture without affecting the continuity of communal life. He is speaking generally, one supposes, of "relationships" — physical, familial, occupational, domestic, architectural, social, psychological — understood as functional categories of community. But would "relationships" make anything clearer or less abstract? Perhaps referring to a hard, physical word like "spaces" satisfies the social-scientific compulsion to appear to deduce cultural realities from material immediacies, thus avoiding the nefarious habit of philosophers and others who speak of people as if they were self-conscious, ethical beings, moved by their own images of their world as much as by anything else. Not that Pocius would dream of denying as much of the denizens of Calvert, whom he treats on the contrary with great sensitivity as real thinking people. But the price of eschewing "unscientific" language is terminological overload, a tendency to render ordinary realities metaphysical by imposing upon them categories of such indefinite meaning they lose all capacity to comprehend. I thought this aspect of Pocius' book gratuitous and annoying.

It is in the last chapter, "The Spaces [yet again] Between Tradition and Modernity," that Pocius drops his blockbuster and where we find stated at last what is really on his mind. One wishes one had read it first. "Calvert space is so constructed that socializing takes precedence over most everything else," he tells us (272). He wants to argue that approaches which would bare the soul of the outpost by appealing to artifacts, to things from the past, are inherently limited. He would root the continuity of the community rather in attitudes and perceptions persisting into the present and thus capable of a future, not in a past life disclosing itself through a residue of artifacts. So he takes the actual, the extant community as his guide and explains the past and present environment from that vantage point. Good for him.

So I do grasp the spirit, if not the letter, of Pocius' appeal to "determining spaces" as an explanatory device, however vague the concept may be. It drives home the limitedness of that restrictive romanticism which characterizes outpost society as a survival of something past, rooted in some uncanny natural instinct for community that Newfoundlanders are alleged to possess, predisposing them to a more earthy, authentic manner of life, a life now seen to be threatened by an alienating modernity. Unfortunately, this does describe the earnestly perceived mission of some of our scientists of culture who devote their efforts to fostering and celebrating "traditional Newfoundland culture," hoping

somehow to conserve it against the ravaging inroads of the culture of television, Woolco and all the rest of it.

But the Newfoundland cultural landscape and outlook Pocius describes is no such corpse. In places like Calvert one finds no open revolt against modernity, no romantic enthusiasm for the things of the past. Though respecting their past, most outporters have little yearning to hang on to it or repeat it. The utility of things they all too acutely recognize, but there is no passion to own or conserve them to no purpose. If well-meaning researchers are puzzled by the surprising paucity of artifacts, the cavalier nonchalance with which outporters cashier charming old houses, the ease with which they blithely affront the aesthetics of their own villages, then that only betrays their lack of insight into the essence of the Newfoundland mentality, which shares little affinity with a bourgeois-academic fascination with the antique, the artifactual, the historical; in short, with "culture" in that sense. If anything can be identified as primary in the outport mentality, indeed, it is precisely that cheerful asceticism which disdains the whole thing-y side of life as "fullishness." Hence the readiness to discard what is no longer serviceable, to accommodate readily to whatever a changing world has to offer. The ever-present life is what matters, not a dream of the past.

I think Pocius is dead on in emphasizing the fact that contemporary Newfoundland outporters see nothing exceptional or contradictory in the juxtaposition of woodstove and microwave, or mummers stomping about in CMHC kitchens. The reason is that they are not nearly so metaphysically attached to the image of the ideal, "unspoiled" community as are intellectuals or nationalists who, for reasons sentimental or ideological, cannot bear to see it pass into the modernity they themselves fully inhabit, and which Newfoundlanders in fact would inhabit too. After all, the vision of the undefiled authenticity of vernacular life does not have its roots so much in so-called traditional cultures themselves as in conflicts and attitudes peculiar to bourgeois modernity, which nowadays typically rebels against its own hopeful traditions, damning them as inherently evil and ruinous, destructive of a paradigm of harmonious nature-life it imagines still exists on its periphery. For this wholly bourgeois anxiety, it is a matter of indifference whether this paradigm be peopled by whales, aboriginal peoples, or Newfoundland outporters.

In my view, this depiction of the "real" Newfoundland in terms of a former untainted completeness of outport life brought to grief by capitalism, resettlement or whatever, is not particularly relevant to the actual contemporary situation. Shoving reality back into the irretrievable past, it leaves the present to fend for itself. As an interpretative model, it is clearly attractive to scholarly idealist, Marxist historian and "Placentia Bay rebel" alike. But as Pocius points out, when exactly are we to date this alleged golden age of outport culture? In the mid-19th century? In Robert Bond's time? In Coaker's? Surely not the



1930s. The halcyon days of Ray Guy's juvenile out harbour delights, then?

I take as the chief merit of Pocius' book that it clearly sees that the reigning mythology of the outport needs rethinking. The Newfoundland spirit is not an exotic relic but alive and well and living in Calvert. If his text keeps reverting (I thought rather self-consciously) to the jargon of his trade as if it was all a matter structuralist methodology, the sentiment of his insights transcends the limits of doctrine. For Pocius frankly recognizes that the old parlour organ is but the stereo-system of another day, that you can still make butter while watching "General Hospital," that a lot of old things are simply old, and that there is much in modernity that can make outport life more possible and agreeable, not less so.

Still surviving in the Newfoundland character, and to my mind of far greater significance than maudlin-moralistic appeals to any mystic talent for community, is the persistence of what Americans used to call the "pioneer spirit." Turning their backs on Europe, the settlers brought with them little else but grit and ingenuity, a staunch Christian ethic, and an indomitable optimism born of a New World sense of freedom uncluttered by mere history and culture. Occupying one of the continent's most forbidding regions, Newfoundlanders learned to dominate a cold-ocean resource and environment requiring of them a routine exhibition of simple courage and stoicism beyond that demanded by most occupations. Severity, sparseness and sheer instability of circumstance demanded of them an almost militant frugality, a *detachment* from nature and things which, paradoxically, fuels an exceptional *attachment* to locale, home, vocation and community. Such conditions fostered a personality quite characteristic of early North America, peculiar to people sure of their freedom and resolved to enhance and maintain it no matter what the unfriendly elements might hurl at them. This is the real source of the Newfoundland character: a practiced respect for a hostile but magnificent nature, a cheerful camaraderie that comes of common hardship, a spartan proclivity to outward plainness and roughness concealing within a countervailing richness and warmth, all contributing to the typical ambiguous amalgam of intense pride and intense modesty. What else explains the ambience of the outport kitchen and stagehead?

Remarkably — perhaps owing to the way the stark landscape mirrors itself in the soul, perhaps the relentless persistence of hard times or the habituation to inherited values — a kind of 17th-century North American pioneer spirit managed to survive in this place long after it has been diluted or reduced to caricature elsewhere. The old Newfoundland settlements were, as all true communities are, *ethically* grounded, rooted in the same vision of an essentially non-materialistic mode of existence, founded upon individualism, solidarity and hard work, the spirit that produced the New World. In no way did they, or do they, fulfil the romantic image of the happy nature-community. In

earlier times they stood as lonely sparks of spiritual courage, civility and security, illuminating a bleak surrounding wildness. It is the same spirit of the historic settlements that persists, and insists on persisting, as the world changes. It will not be satisfied with the role of a vestigial paradise holding out against North America and modernity. As Pocius points out, most ordinary Newfoundlanders know this, even if those who misrepresent their culture often do not.

In my view, it is to this *ethically* determined “space,” not to some physical cove or literal community, that Newfoundlanders, wherever they actually reside, are ever drawn back as to “a place to belong.” I am grateful to Gerald Pocius for documenting this otherwise “soft” view in hard empirical terms of maps and charts, rocks and marshes, woods and blueberry grounds, lanes and fences, parlors and kitchens — and most of all, real people.