

## Herbert Halpert and J.D.A. Widdowson, *Folktales of Newfoundland.*

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## W.F.H. NICOLAISEN

LET ME BE CONTRARY and start with my conclusion: Halpert's and Widdowson's *Folktales of Newfoundland* is 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. Everything else I have to say about these two volumes will be said, and will have to be read, with that premise in mind, and I hope that my descriptive and evaluative comments will convince others that I have not used the superlative lightly: It really is the best.

First of all: What does this weighty compendium of almost 1200 pages have to offer, in addition to almost 100 pages of introductory matter? At its heart are verbatim transcriptions of 150 full or relatively full versions (the editors prefer the term "recensions") and 15 fragments of folktales recorded, usually on tape, mostly between the years 1964 and 1972, from 65 individuals in 40 Newfoundland communities, mainly on the Great Northern Peninsula, Notre Dame Bay, Green Bay, and the South Coast. Some of these stories are variants of the same tale told by different storytellers; others are tellings of the same story by the same storyteller on different occasions. In their presentation, the editors follow each text with information about the precise duration of the telling, the source of the tale, the location of its performance (often a particular room in a house), the audience present at the time of the telling, the physical and social context of the telling, general and particular aspects of the specific storytelling style, notes on the linguistic features (phonology, lexis, grammar, syntax), comments by Julia Bishop

on the musical aspects if a narrative incorporates song, a list of types and motifs, and comparative references to international parallels, mainly in England, Scotland, Ireland and North America. Each text is preceded by the name of the storyteller, his or her address, the date of the performance, the name of the collector, the archival reference in the MUN Folklore and Language Archive (MUNFLA), and an indication of the relevant type number in Aarne-Thompson's *Types of the Folktale*. Following the transcribed stories and the editors' commentaries on them, there is a list of "Biographical Profiles" and indices of titles, types, motifs and storytellers (with a listing of the tale[s] told by them). In some instances photographs of the storytellers or of some traditional activity personalise and contextualise the storytelling events visually, providing in particular a sense of place.

As if this lavish, almost festive, scholarly apparatus were not enough, the extensive and detailed "Introduction" (xxi-xcv) also legitimately suggests undertones of both achievement and good fortune. Not only do the editors want us to be well-informed about the historical background of storytelling in the province and about the origins and nature of the telling of tales in Newfoundland, and of the tales themselves, they oblige with an account of the fieldwork undertaken to obtain the folk-narrative material in this book, with a thorough guide both to their approach to the thorny problem of transcription and to their method of presentation, and with an analysis of the linguistic features of individual story-telling performances, an analysis which complements previous investigations of the same material in the *Dictionary of Newfoundland English*. With John Widdowson as one of the co-authors, how could it be otherwise!

As one of the "general academic readership" for whom this compendium is primarily intended and as someone who has been involved in similar collecting activities, not in the outports of Newfoundland but in Beech Mountain, North Carolina, the Scottish Highlands and in the Hebrides, I particularly appreciate the editors' tacit invitation to accompany them on their field trips and to share their experiences, good or bad. I feel for them when fumblingly they have to change tapes in poor light, and I grieve with them when, because a tape has run out or the batteries in their tape recorder have gone dead, they irretrievably lose a big chunk of a story or possibly other items in the storyteller's repertoire. (When folklorists and technology collide, technology always wins!) I relish their detailed description, reconstructed from a recording and from manuscript notes, of the first meeting with one of their most prolific storytellers, Freeman Bennett and his wife Becky in St. Pauls in the late summer of 1966 and of the last recording session which follows, inviting us, the readers, to be right there with them on this auspicious occasion and to enjoy the sense of discovery in the interstices of so many mundane activities and in defiance of so many distractions. These are the kind of reminiscences that confirm the authenticity of what we collect and that stay in our memories forever.

More immediate and perhaps more frustrating is, however, the task of having to make visible something which has been recorded audibly and in time. The

process of transcribing texts from tape will never come up with a product that is entirely satisfactory and without blemish, and it is not surprising therefore that the editors take such great pains to explain to us the aims which they have in mind and the methods they used to achieve them. It is easy, as is fashionable in the profession today, to call for "verbatim" transcriptions, but as long as the sounds on a tape have to be reproduced within the restricted range of the English alphabet, the possibility of failure, or at least of inadequacies, looms large. One of the most instructive portions of the "Introduction" (lxv-lxix) compares three contrasting modes of transcription of tale no. 140, "The King Loses Patience" (AT2301A), which range from a "conventionally edited version" via a "verbatim edited version" to an "interlineated verbatim and phonetically transcribed version." There are possibly other gradations, but these three versions should be extremely helpful to those who have to struggle with similar problems. Naturally, the editors have chosen the middle road, and their "verbatim edited version" is therefore identical with the version of tale no. 140 as printed on 943-4 of Vol. II, as recorded from Mose Troke in 1964, and is also used in the transcription of the whole corpus of tape recorded tales. Within the limitations imposed upon them, the editors are quite successful in achieving their "primary aim to preserve actual speech and oral styles" but, of course, only those who made the recordings and/or listened to them later will be able to hear the actual voices behind the printed texts.

While the chosen mode of transcription is an acceptable compromise which is likely to satisfy most students of folk-narrative, it might well put off conventional readers and, regretfully, is bound to fall short of a phonetically transcribed version. The transcriber is here in what modern parlance calls a "no-win situation," as a conventional transcription would fail to reflect faithfully many of the elements of performance, and use of the phonetic alphabet restricts the number of potential users considerably. I often wonder what the tellers themselves make of a so-called "verbatim" transcription, with its hints of hesitation, incomplete sentences, false starts and unproductive repetitions. These must look to them, as well as to others, like signals of linguistic and narrative incompetence when, of course, they are nothing of the kind, as our expectations of an oral performance are very different from those we have of a literary text. Unless such characteristics become overwhelming, they certainly do not spoil the enjoyment of an orally delivered story. The Grimms may well have looked aghast at them, but for the modern folk-narrative scholars they are the honest marks of genuine storytelling.

The editors have gone out of their way to ensure that the published "recensions" of the stories selected are to be regarded as the products of unique and unrepeatable storying events, of singular performances by individual storytellers in a specific place, at a specific time, before a specific audience, i.e., on a specific occasion. The inclusion of different variants of a story told by the same storyteller on different occasions provides major supporting evidence for this observation as do, to a somewhat lesser degree, the variants told by other storytellers (see, for

instance, the six or seven tellings of tales nos. 7-13 which are mostly versions of AT 313C and, together with their respective commentaries, take up almost 100 pages of the compendium [78-173]). And yet, the actual presentation of a tale on a printed page gives it a kind of definitiveness which freezes the fleeting occasion on which it was told into semi-permanence and makes something unique eminently repeatable, as does, of course, the corresponding tape recording. That the printed version of a tale, even if it is "verbatim" and not conventionally transcribed, should have this seductive power is probably unavoidable, but it might not come amiss if this danger were highlighted from time to time. This reviewer has nothing better to offer than the "verbatim" edited version, anyhow.

The editors do not claim to reflect in this collection anything like the complete range of folk-narrative genres actively told in Newfoundland. As the title of the publication indicates, they are concentrating on folktales, and they also make us aware of the fact that, as a result of this restriction, most of the tales included are to be found within numbers 130 and 2301A in the Aarne-Thompson Index, according to which they are arranged in the book. Halpert and Widdowson frequently stress that, while it was obviously still possible to obtain such tales from oral tradition in the sixties and early seventies, the situation has changed considerably in the province since then, due to rapid cultural changes following Confederation, the building of roads and the arrival of electricity, radio, television and so on. Even at the time the recordings were made, most of the informants were over 60, ranging from 40-90 years of age. They therefore represented even then a generation no longer actively employed and perpetuating story-telling traditions inherited from previous generations. The folk-narrative heritage enshrined in the two volumes of *Folktales of Newfoundland* is, for these reasons, the legacy of conventions and life styles of earlier generations, not least in their orientation towards adult male audiences. In many respects, they have become exhibits in a folk-narrative museum. While their collection and preservation is to be greatly applauded, the need is even greater for recalling that they are unique products of unique occasions told and enjoyed by unique human beings, and that there is no definitiveness to them.

Having said that, I must return to my initial judgement and repeat my undiminished admiration for the outstanding achievement that *Folktales of Newfoundland* represents. The problems of transcription and proof-reading alone must have looked insurmountable at times, but they have been overcome, thanks to the commitment and tenacity of the authors. The embeddedness of these tales in the world of international folk-narrative is ample proof that the stories told in oral tradition in Newfoundland, as included in this compendium, are by no means "provincial" although they, at the same time, reflect regional or even local conventions, habits, life styles, cultural peculiarities, speech, etc. The editors deserve our applause for the published result of many years of research and dedication to a very difficult task. This team of two has achieved what could hardly have been done

single-handedly, and it is also to be remembered that more than one third of the tales here published were recorded by other collectors, thus enlarging the team even further. We can only be grateful that the initial impetus to what has now become this marvellous contribution to folk-narrative studies came when it did (obviously not unrelated to Herbert Halpert's appointment at MUN in 1962, at a time when he was already a leading scholar in the field), otherwise our disappointment of what has nevertheless been lost would have been even greater. The task of collecting folk-narratives and other kinds of folklore will, of course, have to be continued, but if another publication results from it at some time in the future its contents will, undoubtedly, look very different. In the meantime, Newfoundland can celebrate, together with the authors and with the Departments of Folklore and English at MUN a significant milestone in the evolution of folk-narrative research.

One final, timid but nudging question: Would the suggestion that a wider, non-academic readership would benefit from the additional publication of a slimmer, more affordable edition of the same corpus of tales in "conventionally edited versions" be regarded as heresy?