

***Little Jack and Other Newfoundland Folktales.* Edited by John Widdowson.**

W.F.H. Nicolaisen

Volume 18, numéro 2, fall 2002

The New Early Modern Newfoundland: Part One

URI : https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/nflds18_2rv06

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Faculty of Arts, Memorial University

ISSN

1198-8614 (imprimé)

1715-1430 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Nicolaisen, W. (2002). Compte rendu de [*Little Jack and Other Newfoundland Folktales*. Edited by John Widdowson.] *Newfoundland Studies*, 18(2), 323–325.

variant spellings), who arrived in the Bay of Islands from St. Malo c. 1866. Another name of French/Channel Island origin which is left out is Hawco, although an original form of it, Hacquoil, is listed with direction to look it up under 'Clement.'

However, in reviewing a very useful book like this, one should not carp about what is left out but praise what is there, while pointing out as gently as possible its shortcomings. There are some useful introductory essays about the origin and scope of the work, as well as the obligatory nodding towards the gods of the book's begetting. Many of the well-known French family names originating from Port-au-Port/Stephenville/St. George's/Codroy Valley are given just treatment. What shows up clearly is the quite diverse origins of this West Coast population: France, of course, but via Québec, Acadie, St. Pierre, Jersey. In this connection, it is interesting to look at the entry under Renouf where one finds that, like the Gouzou/Gushue, there are fascinating pathways by which the name arrived.

Because of the stealthiness by which many Frenchmen — and the odd Frenchwoman — came to Newfoundland, and the consequent paucity of records, much of what Gerald Thomas has to say remains speculative. Yet, as a famous Frenchman has said, "Chance favours the prepared mind," and chance did favour the author with some well-reasoned hypotheses of original forms for names which, as I said, have gone through a most peculiar sieve in Newfoundland. As I am sure the author would admit, this work is preliminary, and an update of the research, taking advantage of a lot of recent onomastic publication, would add valuable material to an enjoyable addition to Newfoundland family name lore and history.

Little Jack and Other Newfoundland Folktales. Edited by John Widdowson. St. John's, Folklore & Language Publications, Memorial University, xiii, 245 p., trade pbk., 2002, \$24.95, ISBN 0-88901-363-2.

W.F.H. NICOLAISEN

WHEN THE TWO-VOLUME COLLECTION of 150 *Folktales of Newfoundland*, edited by Herbert Halpert and John Widdowson, was published in 1996, reviewers and other commentators accorded it the highest praise, frequently adjudging it to be the best modern edition of traditional tales published anywhere. While recognizing the fact that the impeccable scholarship which had made both the collection and the publication of the two volumes a model for students of folk-narrative to follow, many of the critics also perceived a need for a parallel publication of many of the stories in what might be termed a "popular edition," unencumbered by the exten-

sive apparatus required in academe.¹ One of the chief purposes of such an edition would be to make the stories themselves available in printed form to the people of Newfoundland, and especially the storytellers and their families from whom they had been originally recorded, in a process which the late Hamish Henderson tended to call the "ploughing back" of materials which had originally come from the people. The volume under review is an appropriate response to this perceived need.

The corpus of 50 tales it contains were chosen by one of the original editors, John Widdowson, who also provided a brief account of their sources (240-45), including the name of the storyteller, the name(s) of the fieldworkers who made the recordings, the place and date of their recorded performance, a reference to where the stories are to be found in the original two-volume publication, and, if applicable, a reference to Stith Thompson's *The Types of the Folktale* and its international classification system, and some other relevant reference works. At the end of each story, a list of dialect words and idioms, and their translations have been added. This basic information places the Newfoundland versions in most instances in an international context. Thus we have a collection which should satisfy scholars and ordinary readers alike.

The story of "Little Jack," which has provided the title for the book, is actually printed as the last of the 50 (230-39), but ubiquitous Jack, whose name is the equivalent of qualified anonymity, also makes an appearance in 24 other tales. In many of these he is the youngest brother of three. The older ones, who are usually called Bill and Tom, fail in certain tasks in which Jack ultimately succeeds, chiefly for no other reason than being the youngest. His status as "Little Jack," or as the only son of an old couple, of a widow, or of being an orphan, makes him an unpromising hero who, sometimes through special skills, sometimes through kindness, sometimes through trickery, overcomes his adversaries, be they giants, the Devil or some other creature of superior power. As elsewhere in the tradition of the English-speaking world, Newfoundland Jack is the protagonist with whom tellers of, and listeners to, tales can most easily identify, probably because he develops the "self-assurance, persistency, resourcefulness and lack of fear" (x) which they themselves wish they possessed.

In some stories he is, of course, simply Jack the Sailor, while in tales of Irish provenance Pat and Mike take his place, and in yet others less stereotypical names make an appearance, or the "hero" is truly nameless. Whether named or unnamed, the protagonists of these stories invite the listeners' (or readers') sympathy, empathy, pity or admiration for the predicaments in which they find themselves, and the ways in which they extricate themselves from them. Princesses, even Newfoundland "princesses," seem to be just waiting to be rescued, courted and married by Jack, unable to resist him.

The stories which were tape-recorded mainly between 1964 and 1979, come from many different parts of Newfoundland. The fact that they were originally transmitted in oral tradition might have caused some apprehension with regard to

their transcription and transfer into written form, but such have been the sensitive skills of the transcribers that no apparent loss of immediacy or freshness is detectable, and their publication bears witness to the richness and variety of the folk-narrative inventory in the province. There is no doubt in this reviewer's mind that *Little Jack and Other Newfoundland Folktales* is more than the result of a rescue operation of a fading tradition, although it is that, too, but reflects and returns to the people of Newfoundland what were, and to some extent still are, important comments on their own narrative heritage. The volume is certain to meet fully the expectations of those who have been clamouring for a less academic presentation of the *Folktales of Newfoundland*. The attractive cover does its contents full justice.

Note

¹See for example, *Newfoundland Studies* 13.1 (Spring 1997): 93-97.

Amulree's Legacy: Truth, Lies and Consequences. Papers and Presentations. Edited by Garfield Fizzard. The Newfoundland Historical Society Symposium, St. John's, Newfoundland, 2001, softcover, 104 p., ISBN 0-968080340.

RAYMOND B. BLAKE

IN HIS NOVEL, *The Colony of Unrequited Dreams*, Wayne Johnston claims that when Sir William Warrender Mackenzie, first Baron Amulree, arrived in St. John's in 1933, he and his fellow royal commissioners were received "like parents in whose absence we had torn the house apart and to whom we were now relieved to unburden ourselves of our guilt, having lived with it so long." In Johnston's world, Joseph R. Smallwood travelled with the Amulree Commission to cover its hearings for his paper, and the future premier was embarrassed at the "contagion of self-debasement [that] swept the land" as he listened to what his fellow Newfoundlanders had to say. "We had admitted," Johnston had Smallwood saying, "neither for the first nor the last time, that nationhood was a luxury we could not afford ... I was choked with shame and anger ..." ¹ Those sentiments are clearly evident in *Amulree's Legacy: Truth, Lies and Consequences*.

Surprisingly, the Newfoundland Royal Commission of 1933, which led to the surrender of responsible government, has been the subject of limited scrutiny. Still, more than 30 years ago, in his *Politics in Newfoundland*, S.J.R. Noel noted that