

The Ghost Whaler of Gimli

Unplug your ears and I'll unfold a tale
Of a boy from the prairie who hunted the whale.
Bjornson was he from a long line of sailors:
His father himself was a son of a whaler.

From Iceland they fared until they did stop
By Lake Winnipeg's shores where Johan grew up.
Far from the Atlantic these mariners roamed,
But at last in Gimli they made their new home.

So Johan grew up on sea-faring tales
Of the men who had followed those magnificent whales.
Spending the summers with his pa in the boat,
Johan's mind took to running and started to dote
On the dream of a day when he would set sail
And get underway for to hunt him a whale.

Johan grew tall and his pa he grew old;
The old fisherman felt that the boat should be sold.
His days they were done in pursuit of the fish.
To retire to the city was now his chief wish.

But Johan he begged, he went down on his knees,
To be let keep the boat, he sent up these pleas;
"Oh Pa, I can manage, just leave her to me
So I can keep fishing on this inland sea."

Johan acquired his pa's fishing gear
And kept up the business for many's the year.
Although below in the cabin, near the bunk where he slept,
Just in case he might need it, a harpoon he kept.

Fresh is the water that runs in the lake;
While salt is the sort to which the whales take,
But Johan believed (and perhaps it is so)
The belugas near Churchill might chance the fresh flow.

And thus Johan reasoned that some of the beasts
Swam south up the river on a sightseeing feast,
And travelled so far they had come to the lake.
Then, seeing its expanses, had made the mistake
Of taking their chances in what looked like an ocean
To settle in promptly with homeowner's devotion.

Other fishermen scoffed and said how unsound
Was this theory of Johan—"Whales in the Big Brown!"

But Johan he knew his moment would come
When he would take up his harpoon and gun
To do for himself what none of them dared
On sighting whales spouting their plumes in the air.

Now when a man sits for weeks on his own,
Surrounded by water and completely alone,
His wandering mind may take some strange twists,
And who knows what he sees in the late evening mists?

It grew dark one fall night, so utterly pitch
He could not see the lamp that he had just lit.
He was out on the deck and having a nip
Of his evening rum tot, and was on the twelfth sip
When just off his bow, a huge spray arose
And drenched him amidships, quite soaking his clothes.

"Yumpin' Yesus!" yelled Johan, "It's finally come!
A whale from the lake has diluted my rum!"
So he spliced his mainbrace and hoisted his sail,
Jubilant now he was facing his whale.

So black was that night, so dark was the sky,
That what he was chasing he could not even spy.
Then at last the storm broke, with great churning waves,
Tossing his vessel all over the place.

But Johan hung on to continue the chase,
Lashed down the steering, to his cabin did race
To fetch the harpoon from where it sat ready
And hoped that his aim would be true and steady.

In the flare of the lightning, he caught a quick glimpse
Of a shape to the starboard near the size of a blimp.
He hurled his harpoon through the tempest to sink
Into the whale's hide (or so he did think).

But what he did strike was the dinghy he towed:
The harpoon went right through it, so it couldn't be towed.
With a yank as it sank, it dragged on the stern
And snagged the rudder so his boat couldn't turn.

Johan knew that to free it, depended his life,
So he stumbled astern with a grip on his knife.
Just then, a swell hit his craft dead broadside
And flung Johan overboard, in the tormented tide.

Like many a sailor who spends life afloat,
Johan was no swimmer, though he worked on a boat.
So, many weeks later, when the boat was found
Folks all concluded that Johan had drowned.

But sometimes, out on the lake on a late night in fall,
You may hear in the wind a high mournful call,
And as the clouds scud in the shadows might find
A whale floating over, a harpoonist behind.
But don't tell a local, or he'll only say grimly,
"Tonight you saw Johan, the Ghost Whaler of Gimli."

By Brian Richardson, copyright 1980.

This poem is part of a play, "The Great Plain Voice of Conrad Dzak", a musical comedy concerning the travels of a people's poet during the 'thirties. It is one of several plays written, produced and performed by Brian Richardson. The setting of his earlier plays was Ireland where Brian was born and raised. "Conrad Dzak" represents a complete break with Ireland and is an exploration of themes from the Prairies where Brian now lives and works.

"The Ghost Whaler of Gimli" is set in the Icelandic community of

Gimli on the shores of Lake Winnipeg. Icelanders immigrated to this area because of the fishing and have prospered. The largest community of Icelanders is Gimli which, I believe, means "paradise". For all their attachment to their new home, the Icelanders along Lake Winnipeg keep their language, culture and folkways very much alive. Every year in August they hold the *Islendingadagurinn*. This Icelandic festival has for some years included a free evening concert where local and other Manitoba musicians

are brought in to entertain. I have played at this concert a couple of times with Brian and with some members from the casts of various of his plays. I believe these contacts with the Icelandic community and the town of Gimli were partially responsible for the creation of “Ghost Whaler”. Brian’s love of sea shanties—which he and I have sung together over the years—also played a role.

Brian and I share a fascination with the geographic area in which we

live as well as a consternation at its lack of visible culture. This is why Brian chose to write “The Ghost Whaler” and why I choose to perform it. Add to these influences Brian’s fertile imagination, his fine way with words and a lot of hard work and you end up with a good poem.

In this version of the poem, I have made several additions, deletions and changes to suit my idea of how it should be performed.

John Wiznuk