

# Murder Ballads in Newfoundland

by Laurel Doucette

A search of Newfoundland publications and Memorial University of Newfoundland Folklore and Language Archive holdings has produced a grand total of five murder ballads, four native to Newfoundland and one other native to the Atlantic region. Two of these, "The Murder of Alfreda Pike" and "The Murder of Dennis Somers," have been published in Peacock (*Songs of the Newfoundland Outports*,

pp. 821 and 823 respectively). A third ballad, "The Murder of Lilian Jewer, A Newfoundland Girl, in Boston," was composed by Johnny Burke and appeared in his 1912 publication, *Burke's Newfoundland Ballads*. This song has been reprinted in *The Ballads of Johnny Burke: A Short Anthology*, edited by Paul Mercer (St. John's: Newfoundland Historical Society, 1974). The fourth Newfoundland ballad, "McCanning's Hanging," refers to a crime committed in St. John's in 1899. The final ballad, "Carl Anderson," relates the story of a murder committed in Sydney, Nova Scotia. It probably originated in that province, although it is also known here. These two latter ballads, which have been collected in the Placentia Bay area within the last few years by Eric West, will be the subject of an article by Janet McNaughton which will appear in the next issue of *CFMJ*.

Although the MUNFLA song index is at present complete only to the end of the 1972 collections, it is substantial enough to give some indication of the relative popularity and distribution of collected songs. Only two of these five ballads appear in the index. "The Murder of Alfreda Pike" has been collected once in a fragmentary version from Carbonear. Peacock had recorded it in Rocky Harbour on the west coast of the province. Two versions of "Carl Anderson" have been collected in Placentia Bay; one of these is from a singer later interviewed by Eric West. It is possible, of course, that there are other versions of these ballads, and indeed other murder ballads, yet unindexed in the more recent MUNFLA collections. But I would guess that these would be few in number. Until very recently, murder has been practically unknown in this province, which has consistently had one of the lowest homicide rates in all of North America. Death is a prominent feature in many native Newfoundland songs, and many imported ballads have long been popular here, especially songs of love murders. But given the thousands of songs that have been recorded in oral circulation in Newfoundland, native murder ballads form a tiny percentage of the total.

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