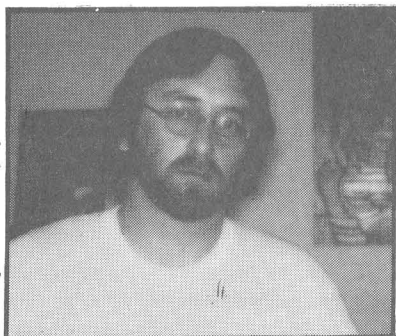


FOR A CANADIAN FOLKLORE ETHIC

photo courtesy of Gerald Thomas



Gerald Thomas

The author of our lead article this month is Dr. Gerald Thomas, Professor of French at Memorial University of Newfoundland. Dr. Thomas is a founding member and past president (1978-9) of the Folklore Studies Association of Canada, from whose Bulletin the article is reprinted, with minor changes. Dr. Thomas was born in Wales, and emigrated to Canada in 1964. He was the first M.A. in Folklore at Memorial (1970) and completed his PhD in Folklore in 1977. His research over the last ten years has been concentrated on the French minority of Newfoundland's Port-au-Port peninsula, and he has published widely both in Canada and abroad on this and other subjects. He is currently preparing a study on Mrs. Elizabeth Barter, a Franco-Newfoundland storyteller.

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Jon Bartlett

The subject of this article is both intensely personal but yet one which should perhaps be of concern to all Canadian folklorists. It has to do with what I would term professional responsibility towards one's informants. Before discussing the question, however, I feel I ought to describe the way in which I reached my present point of view. So I shall subject you for a little while to a biographical odyssey, examining the unique combination of circumstances which gave rise to it.

Before coming to Newfoundland in 1964, I had no knowledge of folklore other than an image of fancy-dressed yokels dancing around a maypole. For my B.A. degree in French I had specialized in dialect studies, and it was through my interest in French dialects that I began working with Herbert Halpert in 1966. This led to an M.A. thesis in Folklore, which was a study of the tall tale genre. As proud as I was that



St. John's, Newfoundland, taken from and including part of the Battery; this is a small fishing community within, but set apart from, St. John's.

the thesis should be published in book form, my pleasure was tempered by Halpert's comments to the effect that, while I had proven myself to be a good library folklorist, I still had to prove my competence in the field.

As the folklorist who effectively created the "contextual-functional" approach to folklore studies, Halpert was convinced that to become a 'compleat folklorist' it was essential to combine a thorough command of scholarly tools and methods available to folklorists with an equally thorough ability to apply one's book knowledge in the field. Indeed, rather than go into the field to test pre-conceived theories, Halpert felt one should work in it first and, assuming a thorough training beforehand, let the data speak for itself.

In 1970 I began research on the neglected traditions of the French minority of Newfoundland's Port-

au-Port peninsula. During my M.A. studies, Halpert had pointed out to me that I was the logical person to work in this area as, at the time, I was the only folklorist at Memorial who was also fluent in French. But there were other reasons prompting me to research the folklore of French Newfoundlanders. The French spoken there was disconcertingly different from the standard form that I knew, and I was, as noted earlier, interested in dialect studies. Further, French Newfoundlanders were an ethnic minority, and I was curious about the ways in which they reacted to this situation; I was myself Welsh and had had some first-hand experience of the minority position.

The immediate reason for my first visit to the Port-au-Port peninsula, however, was due to my professional work, that of a teacher of French at Memorial University, which had been the excuse for my appointment there in 1964. My then Head of the

Department of Romance Languages, Professor C.S. Barr, had asked me to investigate the teaching of French in one region. My report was duly produced and I shall illustrate my findings with one choice example.

At the school in Cape St. George, French was being taught by English-speaking teachers who were not fluent in French. They were teaching it frequently to native French speakers. Can those of you who are native English speakers imagine your children being taught English by people who do not speak the language? It's rather absurd. In our so-called advanced society, it is not only absurd, it is morally unforgivable. The problem was further compounded by the teachers trying to teach a standard form of French to dialect speakers. Comprehension in French was therefore doubly difficult. In other words, my first personal contacts with the French minority brought me also into direct awareness of one of the more obvious aspects of assimilation.

After a series of short exploratory visits to Cape St. George between 1970 and 1972, I spent eight months of a sabbatical leave in that community. I learned to speak the dialect and by sharing, over a lengthy period, the day-to-day life of my informants, was able to do far more than collect folklore data. Vast quantities of contextual information were garnered, and, more to the point, experienced and absorbed. I became, I suppose, as assimilated to the Newfoundland French as much as anyone might conceivably expect, short of moving to the area lock, stock and barrel, marrying a local

girl, and becoming a fisherman.

At the end of my sabbatical year, I kept up my visits to the region, making an average of three or four brief field trips a year to Cape St. George and neighbouring French communities such as La Grand'Terre and l'Anse-à-Canards. Parenthetically, such trips involve driving some 1100 miles there and back over what is arguably the most poorly surfaced section of the Trans-Canada Highway in Canada. Moreover, roads to two of the chief French-speaking communities are still unpaved, mere gravel tracks.

The first fruits of all this travelling and collecting was what the Dean of Graduate Studies at Memorial hoped would be the last of the dinosaurs. Cutting data to what I felt was the bare minimum to do justice to my informants, I laboriously compiled an 850-page dissertation on four French storytellers. My original intention had been to produce 'The Folklore of French Newfoundlanders'. In my archive there remains the stuff of another twenty-five or thirty theses.

Now I say this not to boast of any special talent. The point I am trying to make is that, from a folklorist point of view, a protracted and on-going bout of field-work has many rewards. The obvious one is indeed the quantity of data of all kinds of folklore. But the greatest reward is not to be measured in terms of quantity of information.

Let me say in all modesty that the most pleasing praise I received for my dissertation came from the only Newfoundlander on my examining board, Professor George Story. He

expressed the view that I had shown great sensitivity towards and understanding of my informants. Newfoundlanders are notoriously shy of outsiders, especially when outsiders try to tell them where they are, what they are, and who they are. In other words, the constant contact with my informants had led me to identify with them, to understand their hopes and fears, to enter their spiritual as well as their physical world. I would argue that a true folklorist's perception can only be honed by in-depth living and study with one's subjects.

I am going to anticipate, I think, a possible criticism one may now wish to raise. Am I not guilty, through my identifying with my informants, of losing my objectivity, my scientific detachment? It is certainly true that cold objectivity must suffer. One cannot become involved in the lives of people over a long period of time and not care about them as human beings. But I think any loss of objectivity is more than balanced by the greater understanding of one's data that comes with long familiarity with the folklore, its physical and its human context.

Now I must make an apparent digression before coming to the crux of this piece. I must go back to my undergraduate days at the University of Wales, Aberystwyth. I have already said that I was predisposed to study French Newfoundlanders for reasons to do with their being an ethnic minority. Until I went to Aberystwyth, I had not been particularly aware that being Welsh made me in any significant way different from the English. Although I had lost my mother tongue at an early age, that

was no great bother in south Wales where even if you did not speak Welsh, you almost certainly had a strong Welsh accent.

But on reaching Aberystwyth I encountered two hitherto unknown phenomena: the rampant, idealistic, nationalistic and, he would have you believe, monoglot Welshman; and the superior Englishman who subscribed to the view that the English were a race of self-made men, which thereby relieved the Almighty of a tremendous responsibility. He also considered the Welsh fit generally only to hew coal, play rugby and sing hymns; and that they prayed on their knees, which was natural, and on their neighbours, which was not.

The views of the former, the Welsh Nationalist, kindled my soul and appealed to me if only because they provided me with some measure of defensive repartee when subjected to the views of the latter—the numerous English who had come, paradoxically, it seemed to me, to put the Welsh in their place and yet be taught by them. My classical background put me in mind of the Romans and the Greeks, but I will not pursue the analogy.

Let me impress upon you, however, that beneath my apparent levity lies an icy realism. One cannot ever appreciate what it means to be subtly and insidiously humiliated because of one's race, creed, colour, sex, language or religion, unless one has belonged to a distinctive minority which has so suffered. Majorities everywhere, by whatever token they constitute majorities, seem never able to understand why smaller and

perhaps historically less fortunate groups seem reluctant to be absorbed and assimilated, and wish to retain a cultural distinctiveness of little conceivable utility other than to cause bureaucratic distemper. Nationalism, in whatever form it takes, is a gut feeling, a conviction that your people are different and that they wish to preserve and foster the constituents of their culture.

It is not my intention to lecture on nationalism. I wish only to emphasize that I have understanding of those with nationalistic tendencies. I can go on record as saying that I support Canadian unity and deplore *séparatisme*. But I sympathize with it—I have known its causes from my own personal experience in Wales.

It is within this large context I now approach the *dénouement*. I must return briefly to French Newfoundlanders, since they were the catalyst in provoking my particular focus of professional self-discovery. My digression on nationalism is meant not to confirm its God-given validity, but to suggest ways in which maintaining cultural identity can preserve political unity. For to be deprived of education in one's mother tongue, to have one's cultural baggage belittled, as has been the lot of the French Newfoundlanders, can eventually lead to more than purely cultural reactions.

As a folklorist particularly interested in one minority group, I ask myself what I could do—using my specific skills and knowledge—to that group's advantage. An obvious answer is to return, in forms in this case already anticipated, the folktales, legends, songs, riddles and

so on, with fair and appreciative comments on their performers and their life-style, to those who provided them. And I wish to do this in a language they understand, not loaded down with jargon and other highfalutin phraseology. Yet I still wish to be appropriately scholarly, and I do not think that the two aims are incompatible. Beyond this immediate, folkloristic aim should be the desire to put one's knowledge to broader use—by indicating ways in which folklore can be used in education, for example, or by serving as a political spokesman on issues where one is competent.

But to carry these arguments and suggestions to their logical conclusion, I must go beyond the particular group with which I have identified. They must lead to a general ethic of behaviour, applicable everywhere. Now it is easy for some scholars to say that they have not the time to devote so completely to a specific group, or that their interests are genre-oriented or theoretical, or the like. I do not agree that the different approaches are incompatible, and would argue that whatever special interest one has, it will be furthered by the kind of approach I have myself adopted. Following Herbert Halpert's lead, what is of prime concern is neither a vaguely defined 'folk' nor the dehumanized 'lore'—it is the people who have the 'lore' as people, with our scholarly interests exploring the ways they use it.

All this should be tempered by genuine and sincere efforts to serve those we study. I would maintain most strongly that words such as 'respect', 'compassion' and 'love' should not be eschewed from the



At the 1977 "Good Entertainment" festival in St. John's, Nfld.

folklorist's vocabulary, if we want to study the folklore of a group of people, live with them long, to understand them, to identify with them. Folklorists, more than any other scholars in the Humanities or Social Sciences, should respond to the needs of those they study. We should not be afraid of letting them read what we write about them.

What I am advocating, then, is an ethic of social responsibility and commitment. It should be married to worthwhile scholarly aims, but we have a discipline which, more than any other, can contribute to the

strengthening of personal and group values, to the restoring of pride when it has been bludgeoned away. Perhaps, through our awareness of universality of folklore, we can help do away with some of the divisive and contentious issues of our age.

Gerald Thomas

