

The Feller from Fortune



Oh,-- there's lots of fish in Bon-a-vist Har-bour, Lot's of fish right in a-round here; Boys and girls are



fish-in' to-geth-er, For-ty-five from Car-bon-ear. Oh,-- catch-a-hold this one, catch-a-hold that one,



Swing a-round this one, swing a-round she; Dance a-round this one, dance a-round that one, Did-dle dum this one, did-dle dum-dee.

The "Feller from Fortune" is a very popular song from Newfoundland. It has found its way into almost every major collection in that province. As it is a "jig" (in 6/8 time), and has a rollicking tune, it has been included on a large number of albums of children's songs lately. This is the more-or-less standard version:

The Feller from Fortune

* There's lots of fish in Bonavist' Harbour
Lots of fishermen in around here
Boys and girls all fishing together
Forty-five from Carbonear.

Chor: Oh, Catch-ahold this one, catch-ahold
that one
Swing-around this one, swing around she
Dance-around this one, dance-around that one
Diddle-dum this one, diddle-dum dee.

Sally goes to church every Sunday
Not to listen, nor for to sing
But to watch the Feller from Fortune
What was up here fishing last spring

Sally's got a bouncing new baby
Papa says that he doesn't care
Cause he liked the Feller from Fortune
What was up here fishing last year.

Uncle Bill got up in the morning
He got up in a hell of a tear
Ripped the arse right out of his britches
Now he's got ne'er pair to wear.

There are some aspects of this lyric that convey sexual connotations - in this most popular kids' song. First, in verse 1, the idea of 'boys and girls all fishing together' doesn't match with standard practice - as the men typically do all of the fishing. This begins to suggest some special meaning for "fishing" in this song. As well, Sally's apparent fascination with the feller, and her father's acceptance of her plight in verse 3, implies sexual content - even if it is a bit "after the fact". Another variant of the song makes this point even clearer. It is presented below as "Lots of Fish in Bonavist' Harbour".

Lots of Fish in Bonavist' Harbour

Lots of fish in Bonavist' Harbour,
Lots of fish are caught off the pier.
Boys and girls go fishin' together
Four or five months of the year.

Sally is the pride of that harbour,
She's the bonniest girl on the coast
And the girls are fond of the boys there,
Sally, I notice, is fonder than most.

Sally is young but skilled at the fishin',
She never waits very long for a bite.
Mother advised her--she'd carefully listen--
"The biggest and best ones are all caught at
night."

Sally's got a bouncing new baby,
Father says that he doesn't care.
Where did she get it? A fellow from Boston
Walked her down to the harbour last year.

Sally goes to church every Sunday
Not for to pray and not for to hear,
But to see that fellow from Boston
Who walked her down to the harbour last
year.

Lots of fish in Bonavist' Harbour,
We'll just wait for the pack-ice to clear.
I'll make sure my rod's in condition--
I'll be back in the spring of the year.

Lots of fish in Bonavist' Harbour,
Lots of fish are caught off the pier.
Somebody's fishing in Bonavist's Harbour
Twelve out of twelve months in the year.

This variant was collected by Edith Fowke from Angus Russell. He heard it from Edward Stewart in St. John's when hostelling in 1961-62. Starzas 1, 4, and 5 are roughly parallel to the usual version, but 2, 3, 6, and 7 add a new dimension, in which the meaning of "fishing" is made most clear. Notice that the feller is from Boston in this more explicit variant.

We wrote Neil Rosenberg at the Memorial University of Newfoundland Folklore and Language Archive (MUNFLA) asking if they had any "bawdy-esque" variants of "Feller from Fortune". The availability of bawdy parodies of other Newfoundland classics (e.g. I'se the B'y) was part of our motivation here. It is possible that the symbolism shown in the Russell variant was part of the original song, but that it became watered-down as the song gained in popularity.

Neil wrote back indicating that very little had turned up in a search of the MUNFLA song title file. He suspected that "Feller from Fortune" is one of those songs that most people don't bother to collect simply because it is so well known. He plans to conduct a more detailed search over the next while. We'll keep you posted if anything interesting shows up. For now, the original version, plus Russell's, suggest that the "Feller from Fortune" does represent a commentary on some aspects of sexual behaviour. Folksongs often allow for the expression of taboo content, and "The Feller from Fortune" appears to be a nice example of this.

Edith Fowke and

Tim Rogers

