

THE DICTIONARY OF NEWFOUNDLAND ENGLISH: AN EPISODE IN BOOK HISTORY

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IN THE FALL OF 1982 the *Dictionary of Newfoundland English (DNE)* arrived in bookshops. It was the culmination of about 30 years of effort on the part of George Story, William Kirwin and John Widdowson, and was the greatest single work of Newfoundland scholarship of the twentieth century. Elsewhere (Webb 2012) I have traced the origins and evolution of the lexicographic project that culminated in the *DNE*. In this essay, I highlight several little-known aspects of the history of this book during the period that Story, Kirwin and Widdowson prepared the manuscript for the publisher. Although they continued to collect data, by the mid 1970s most of their effort was devoted to editing the dictionary, negotiating the publication process, and preparing the introduction. The *DNE* was received with enthusiasm by academic reviewers and the public alike, something which the authors did not know would happen as they prepared their text.

Casual readers rely on dictionaries as authorities upon spelling and meaning, but give little thought to how they are compiled, or the history of dictionaries as artifacts. Indeed, many users rely on dictionaries as an authority which transcends authorship, and treat them as books which exist outside of history. All selections are acts of exclusion, and even something as seemingly benign as an alphabetical list of words with their meanings requires many judgements. The introduction to the *DNE* reveals many of those judgements and the criteria used by the editors; the back issues of *Regional Language Studies...Newfoundland (RLS)* show the authors considering their methods; and now this essay adds to what we know about the history of this book.

George Story had begun to collect words while still a student, and after about 1954 worked in a more disciplined way to produce a glossary of the Newfoundland lexicon. Although there was never a meeting in which they signed an agreement or divided tasks, in the early 1960s William Kirwin and, slightly later, John Widdowson joined Story in the tasks of combing through published material, questionnaires, and oral interviews. All of the work before 1969 was done without research grants, although the project always had the support of Memorial's senior administrators Raymond Gushue, M.O. Morgan and Leslie Harris. In the 1970s a Canada Council grant supported the hiring of an assistant, and many other people at Memorial helped, but most of the work was done by the three editors. "Time, rather than mere money, is what scholars really need," Story commented to Kirwin, suggesting that the granting agency

"should be aware of the very severe discipline we have imposed on ourselves to maintain momentum in spite of all the other ordinary demands on our time."¹

While it was a collaboration, Story was the public face of the dictionary. Over the years they had worked on collecting he had spoken for the project to the public, and in the 1970s negotiated for its publication. Widdowson lived in the UK, and Kirwin was happier to have Story take the lead in dealing with funding agencies, administrators and publishers. Story and Kirwin often worked silently side by side in "the dictionary room" (Story once joked that it was like Maxwell Smart's Cone of Silence) so they sometimes left notes for each other on editorial matters. These notes allow us to see some of what was going on in the minds of the editors.

Even though the data collection continued, by the mid 1970s the three authors knew how their work was to be presented – it would be similar to that of the *Dictionary of Jamaican English* (*DJE*; Cassidy and LePage 1967). They doubted, however, that any international publisher would take on the complexity of the publication given what they believed to be the small market for a book in Newfoundland scholarship. Story doubted a major international publisher would take on the Newfoundland Dictionary, or that any publisher would be willing to take the risk on what would be an expensive production with what he assumed would be a print run of about 5000 copies. (Story thought that the local market would take about 2000 copies). Fortunately Memorial University had its own publishing subvention program to subsidize important monographs about Newfoundland and Labrador which would otherwise stand little chance of being published, and the university entered into a co-publication agreement with the University of Toronto Press (UTP). Les Harris, the Chairman of the Publications Committee, agreed to a subvention on the proviso that it was approved by two readers, one external and one internal.² To work out some of the details of presentation of the two kinds of data (that collected from oral sources and that collected from texts) a draft version of the entries for the letter D was sent to readers. Frederic Cassidy, of *DJE* fame, then working on the *Dictionary of American Regional English*, approved of the design of the Newfoundland project.³ The reader "internal" to Memorial was E.R. Seary, the man who with Story had inaugurated the study of Newfoundland English.

¹Story to Kirwin, 4 January 1975, *DNE* Files, English Language Research Centre (ELRC).

²Story to Kirwin, Sept 1976, *DNE* Files, ELRC.

³Cassidy to Story, 11 July 1977, *DNE* Files, ELRC.

Preparing the manuscript and designing the book took as much care and time as had the data collection. As Story wrote to the publisher:

We are still working out refinements in presentation with which we hope to astonish the world of lexicography! Our very fundamental challenge is (almost for the first time) to present a dictionary which is at once historical *and* descriptive; our combination of printed and oral sources poses fascinating problems of documentation and editorial treatment, and before reaching final decisions we want to feel fully assured of our rationale.⁴

Dictionaries are more than alphabetically arranged words with their definitions; they also provide descriptions of pronunciations. In the process of their work on the dictionary Story, Kirwin and Widdowson had realized that there was less variation within the lexicon and grammar than there was within pronunciation. As Story reminded his co-editors:

Somewhere [in the introduction] we should say that the compilation of the Dictionary has led us to fresh views about the language in Newfoundland – for example to a view of the homogeneity of the regional vocabulary which is at variance with received opinion, and to views about grammar and phonology. The evolution of these views may be traced in the series of papers, chips from our workshop, written by the editors over several decades, and which are cited in the notes to the Introduction.⁵

To take one, admittedly not typical, example, the *DNE* presented 25 spelling variations and five pronunciation variants in the International Phonetic Alphabet of the word *ballicater*. Presenting that variation required choices. Kirwin wanted phonetic variants arranged in ways that drew on their knowledge of language, in order of "high frequency of folk prestige." Widdowson disagreed, commenting:

I rarely look at the variant spellings for evidence of any kind, I deal with the phonetics "independently." We can't rely on guesswork (however well-informed) to guide us in the

⁴Story to Ron Schoeffel, UTP, 11 September 1975, *DNE* Files, ELRC.

⁵*DNE* Memo [Story], 26 July 1979, *DNE* Files, ELRC.

hierarchy of entries. These should be (as they have always been) in a fairly strict order: short vowel forms, long vowel forms, diphthongised forms, each group listed from front to back for central pronunciation positions.⁶

Kirwin was willing to go along with Widdowson's technical way of ordering the pronunciations, although he thought, "1) very few people will know what he is talking about; 2) some people relying on our phonetic data will be misled because they won't be able to search through variants to fix upon one important one. However, a serious point is that the selected entry form now assumes much greater importance. Its spelling will give readers more of a cue."⁷ A compromise emerged. While the examples in IPA were ordered according to Widdowson's schema, the spelling variants were arranged chronologically (Story, Kirwin and Widdowson 1990: 18-19).

By 1977 the book was coming together; Story was able to report to Kirwin that UTP was eager to publish the *DNE* as a joint imprint between the Press and Memorial University. The Press sent the sample of the letter D to readers whose reports were forwarded to Humanities and Social Science Research Council to secure a publication subvention. Both readers' reports recommend publication of *DNE* as "an important dictionary" for a broad international readership. As "Reader B" put it:

The project is excellent in conception, for the regional dialects of Newfoundland have long been recognized as linguistically remarkable in vocabulary as well as in pronunciation and grammar. ... In short, the *DNE* should be published for its intrinsic worth as a linguistic work of value – both academic and social. Moreover, the very attractiveness of the subject matter suggests that the publishing venture will be justified economically.⁸

The Press agreed that an initial press run of 5,000 copies would be appropriate.⁹

⁶Kirwin, editorial note, 1 June 1976, *DNE* Files, ELRC.

⁷Kirwin to Story, 5 July 1976, *DNE* Files, ELRC.

⁸UTP reader's confidential report. Reader B, *DNE* Files, ELRC.

⁹Story to Kirwin, 18 December 1977, *DNE* Files, ELRC.

The editors now had to prepare a written response to the anonymous readers' reports, and as is often the case with such things, the assessments were mixed. "Reader A's report is useful but very general" Story told Kirwin, and "reader B's report is harder to handle because he mixes up some acute professional comments with a few personal arrows at me; the latter we have to ignore, but it is tricky to pick them out of some of the specifics of useful comment."¹⁰

In addition to the Canadian readers the press recruited, and the American, Cassidy, Story had the sample sent to a reader from the *Oxford English Dictionary* (*OED*). The British-based reader suggested a more formal tone should be adopted in the definitions. Story who, more than Kirwin or Widdowson, wrote most of the definitions, noted:

Here the commentator (rather stuffily) notes the contrast between the Auntie *OED* style and the more down-to-earth *DNE* approach. I much prefer the latter. *OED* is in danger of bulbitating itself into pomposity in an age when there's little patience with such po-facedness. Certainly we should guard against "looseness and hyperbole" but let's leave the *DNE* some individuality too! Otherwise, my son, 'twould be desparite.¹¹

Story conceded the substance of the criticism from the *OED* editor – that consistency in editorial practice had to be maintained. "I have found this a most stimulating critique, albeit a stuffy one. ... In ensuring consistency, though, we need to guard against monotony and too great a degree of predictability."¹² While the *OED* had set a gold standard as a tool for scholars and writers, the *DNE* editors strove to balance that against the fluid nature of language use and Story's view of the importance of capturing something of the Newfoundland flavour. "Some informality and individuality will be more than welcome" he added, "Our material is too *human* to be treated in an ethereally computerized fashion."¹³

While navigating the pre-publication process and wrangling the slips into a shape that could be sent to the printer, they increasingly turned their attention to those who would one day use the dictionary. For Kirwin, the

¹⁰Story to Kirwin, 18 December 1977, *DNE* Files, ELRC.

¹¹Story, 'Comments on *OED* staff critique of *D* in *DNE*,' *DNE* Files, ELRC.

¹²Story, 'Comments on *OED* staff critique of *D* in *DNE*,' *DNE* Files, ELRC.

¹³Story, 'Comments on *OED* staff critique of *D* in *DNE*,' *DNE* Files, ELRC.

principal audience for the *DNE* was to be scholars of language and devotees of Newfoundlandia. Like Story and Widdowson, he did not imagine a broad local audience as they were finishing the manuscript. Writing for serious scholars and for posterity was what mattered to him. He was aware, of course, that non-professional reviewers would have no appreciation for the finer points of lexicography:

I am not going to be concerned over popular commentators' comments on the *DNE* when it appears. They have to say something in their assigned reviews. But this may be a small reminder for our introduction that we emphasize in bold terms what we are not trying to provide. Then we won't deceive superficial reviewers, or customers in bookstores who are looking for something else. We *are* trying to provide the record for older, younger, and future Newfoundlanders, and we *are* presenting the evidence and our treatment of it for the world scholarly community. Some glib chatters won't find these aims suitable for their purposes.¹⁴

Kirwin felt that introductions – the authors' statements of methodologies and philosophies – were the most important part of dictionaries, and yet the part read the least often. Story, Kirwin and Widdowson had made many choices in handling the material, some of which they had discussed in *Regional Language Studies* and in conference papers, and the introduction was the principal opportunity for them to be explicit about their views on language and help the reader use the dictionary.

Kirwin believed it would be unfortunate if Newfoundlanders consulting the dictionary were to take the chauvinistic lesson that their speech was unique and without connections to the speech of other countries. Story agreed that the introduction needed to "avoid a reader response to *DNE* as 'quaint, ethnic corpus', and to present readily and clearly a statement on the scope of *DNE*."¹⁵ He wondered if a map displaying the common lexicon in the west of England, Ireland, and the New England coast would show how Newfoundland English was part of the family of Englishes. Newfoundlanders commonly saw the linguistic roots in England and Ireland, but Story suggested:

¹⁴Kirwin 'Inconsequential Memo: Popular reviewers,' [1977] *DNE* Files, ELRC.

¹⁵Story to Kirwin, ed memo, August 1977, *DNE* Files, ELRC.

"Let's bear in mind [Widdowson]'s advice of some years ago: not to allow our interest in UK/Ir connection to overweight *DNE* at the expense of US affiliation, esp in a field such as this one [fisheries] which really does not seem to have been adequately handled by the dictionaries."¹⁶

Aiding future scholars in reconstructing the relationships among all the other varieties of English was one of the ways that Story, Kirwin and Widdowson wanted the dictionary to contribute to knowledge. The *DNE* included words which first entered English in Newfoundland, had a particular meaning in Newfoundland, or persisted on the island. As one of the editorial memos between Story and Kirwin noted:

Some of our entries are being offered to readers not as "special" or "unique" or "earliest," but as Newfoundland's contribution to the common language. An example may be *plantation* sense 1. Apart from the specialization of the early Nfld plantation on a fishing economy – critical for the development of the other senses, and unlike, say, the Irish and Virginia agricultural senses – the evidence offered goes to complement and supplement *OED*, *DAE*, *DJE*: the term is being used in and of Nfld just at the same time it gains currency in these other areas and we are filling out the evidence and enabling students of the whole language to follow the fortunes of critically important processes and organizations.¹⁷

The *DNE* achieved its goal of raising the profile of Newfoundland English among international lexicographers. In 1984 Story was invited to join the editorial board of the *New Oxford English Dictionary* (one of only 35 members; *NOED*). The editor of the *NOED* wrote Story of their intention to create a database of all the world's Englishes, including Newfoundland English.¹⁸

Many dozen people had contributed to the *DNE*, but it was, of course, principally the work of Story, Kirwin and Widdowson. Many years before finishing it they had agreed that they did not "wish to cash in on royalties" from

¹⁶Story to Kirwin, 12 January 1979, *DNE* Files, ELRC.

¹⁷Ed Memo for use in introduction 19 July 1977, *DNE* Files, ELRC.

¹⁸R.W. Burchfield to Story, 31 October 1984; 27 November 1984, G.M. Story Papers, ELRC.

its publication. They handed the royalties, which were more substantial than they could have anticipated before its publication, to Memorial to fund future scholarly enterprises. But Story worried about unintended legal consequences of doing so. As he reminded Kirwin and Widdowson:

Royalties are an expression of ownership, or shared ownership of copyright or legal property. While we don't express much interest in the receipt of royalty payments, I take it that we would have opinions, perhaps strong opinions, on the use(s) to which copyright owners might put the book; we might even wish to retain some kind of shared authority in the matter. Suppose, for example, on the exhaustion of the first edition, the publisher(s) wished to sell the rights to the book? Or, suppose the publisher(s) wished to commission a revision, or a popular abridgement? Would we wish to be consulted?¹⁹

That the language was the common property of Newfoundlanders was something which the authors would have taken for granted, and the institutional support for the dictionary was acknowledged in the form of remitting royalties to support further Newfoundland scholarship. But the three did want to assert their moral rights over the product of their years of labour.

It did not end with the publication of the first edition. Kirwin knew that dictionaries had little effect on how people spoke, but served more as a tool for readers and writers. Story was aware of the possibility that collecting for a second edition would be affected by the existence of the first – that Newfoundland authors since 1982 had been able to consult the first edition. Just as the original collaboration between the three editors had arisen spontaneously, so too they started work on a second edition without ever formally deciding to do so. "I suppose that some such enterprise was long implicit in our minds as we wrote the work," wrote Story, "constantly finding, as we revised the drafts, earlier evidence, or later, to insert; evidence for finer discrimination of senses; parallels from other parts of the English-speaking world; and new entries...The slave grows to love his chains," he quipped.²⁰ A supplementary edition was published in 1990, and Kirwin and Story continued to collect lexical data after that.

Further work remains to be done to be more precise about the role that the *DNE* played in Newfoundland culture both before it was published and since

¹⁹Memo on *DNE* Copyright, 24 July 1979, *DNE* Files, ELRC.

²⁰Story to Kirwin and Widdowson, 2 February 1988, G.M. Story Papers, ELRC.

then, and indeed another essay could be written upon the differences between the first and second editions. Much in the history of this important book can yet be described.

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