

NEWFOUNDLAND TOPONYMY: SOME LINKS WITH FOLKLORE

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MUCH OF WHAT WE KNOW about place names and associated legends in Newfoundland comes from the same kind of fieldwork that was required to compile the *Dictionary of Newfoundland English* (Story, Kirwin and Widdowson 1982). Indeed, in many cases the same researchers were involved. This essay explores some of the ties between toponymy, history and folklore in Newfoundland. In so doing, it draws on the rich resources of the Memorial University Folklore and Language Archive (MUNFLA).

In naming the places that surround us, we imbue aspects of an anonymous and potentially intimidating landscape with an individual and familiar identity. Though some place names are officially imposed, many others are simply the products of creative and anonymous minds that have gone before us. In this regard, E. R. Seary compares them to ballads (Seary 1958: 203). In Newfoundland, the originality and historical depth of this process have made place names a source of great pride. In the following, H. L. Keenleyside, an early island toponymist and enthusiast, muses about their varied and exciting nature:

In no other country with which I am acquainted is there so great a variety of unusual place names. Studying the map of the Island is a constant source of delight, surprise and entertainment. Even when the names are homely, or when, as in some cases, they verge of the repulsive, they are never common and are saved from vulgarity by an imaginative quality that gives them an essential element of propriety. And when, as so often happens, the name embodies an intrinsic beauty of sound or ideology, the result is close to perfection. (Quoted in Seary 1958: 193)

Early inhabitants, travellers and settlers named much of Newfoundland. Subsequent generations repeated this process, re-naming sites at will. The island now exhibits a rich tapestry of place names recalling different historical periods and ethnic communities from its development. By peeling back the layers, one by one, we can often reconstruct important episodes from its history. Clues about how people used the island are also revealed through this process. In a province with an early history often cloaked in the fog of time, toponyms can

thus provide important insights into the occupations, activities and settlement patterns of its early inhabitants. The pattern of seasonal migration, for example, in which people moved from the shore to the interior each year, is clearly recalled in place names like Winter Brook and Winterhouse. George Story (1990) points out that many island place names also reveal a sea-going perspective. Given the historic importance of the fisheries to island development, we should hardly be surprised. Indeed, European efforts to map the interior of the island were only begun in the early nineteenth century. As he walked across the island, W. E. Cormack named many lakes and mountains he encountered after "distinguished individuals and private friends" (Cormack 1823-24: 158).

Of course, such a way of looking at the world, and naming it, is not universal. Features of the natural and built environment are only rarely named after people in many aboriginal cultures. Unfortunately, the richness of the Beothuk, and later Mi'kmaq, place name tradition on the island has been largely lost for historical reasons that are all too clear. Compounding this situation, a widespread bias against the use of indigenous place names existed well into the twentieth century. Consider, for instance, the official response to a list of Inuit place names submitted to the Chief of the Topographical Division of the Geographical Board of Canada in 1932.

This is a list of the most outlandish and unpronounceable names that I have yet seen submitted to the Board. What good purpose can be served by perpetuating such names on Canadian maps? (LAC RG21 Vol 182 File 1386)

For obvious reasons, maps typically mark only major geographical sites, such as towns, villages, rivers and bays. Many other toponyms, however, are associated with sites of lesser importance; rocks, springs and small coves for example. Employed for generations, but relevant only within a limited geographic area, such names are common but rarely made official. Equally at home in large, urban centres and rural communities, place names like these are often maintained only within oral tradition. For the toponymist, this can be a source of both excitement and frustration; demonstrating their continued vitality but also making their development difficult to trace. George Story explains the situation:

One of the most difficult problems is that posed by the existence of local names unrecorded in print. They are two kinds: variant local forms of printed items, and places with

names of oral currency only. These latter are numerous. One has only to glance at a map of the Island to see how frequently hills, ponds, streams and coastal points are left nameless by the cartographer. (Story 1957: 49)

A problem for the toponymist can represent an opportunity for the folklorist. In the absence of an official record, stories often centre on place names. Etiological legends, for instance, purport to explain how a place came to be named. In this, and other ways, minor place names can underpin vital elements of the oral narrative corpus in their respective communities. Importantly, they can also foster a sense of belonging and continuity since their use represents insider knowledge and perpetuates family names and community traditions. Indeed, Barbara Johnstone (1990: 5) points out that, "A person is at home in a place when that place evokes stories and, conversely, stories can serve to create places."

Place name research can also unlock fascinating local legends. These tales frequently possess qualities that extend their interest far beyond the borders of their respective communities. A good example comes from Placentia Bay. According to local tradition, more than two centuries ago passengers on board a ship in the bay contracted black fever. Nearby residents, fearing a spread of the disease, chose not to board the vessel. In time, everyone on the ship died. The vessel floated aimlessly through the bay until a storm grounded it in shallow water. At that point, local residents elected to bury the entire ship and its contents in place. Boatload after boatload of gravel was brought over to the wreck and dumped on board. Eventually, the ship sank deep into the tidal muck and the growing pile of gravel reached far above the water line. In time, trees grew there and the artificial island became indistinguishable from its real counterparts in the bay. Today, it is known as Blackimore Island (MUNFLA Ms. 79-253).

While folklorists do not privilege the historical accuracy of legends, they recognize their potential contribution to the historical record. In communities where such a record is lacking, oral narratives can prove especially valuable. In *Renews*, for example, Midnight Hill recalls a time when Catholics were prohibited from practising their faith in Newfoundland. Local faithful would thus gather around a rock on the hill to celebrate Mass under the cover of darkness (The Canadian Registry of Historic Places 2013). Likewise, Milkboy Cove, on Long Island, recalls the former occupations of two young stowaways who came ashore in the cove generations ago and thus escaped further punishment from the ship's captain (MUNFLA Ms. 87-120).

As it happens, the majority of the place-name legends found at MUNFLA purport to explain the origin of a particular place name. Most examples are found within written reports compiled by former students and listed under place names in the legends catalogue. They usually appear within a profile of the oral narrative corpus of a given community or tradition bearer. It seems likely many other examples are to be found within the bodies of other narratives and oral histories housed in the archive. Indeed, a number are contained in religious legends. An exciting example comes to us from the Cape Shore:

One night, Father Condon, who was stationed at St. Brides, was called to Big Barrisway. It was a very foggy night and while he was riding along on his horse he saw what he thought was a man walking along in front of him. He called out to him but received no answer. As he kept on going he noticed that the figure was keeping an equal distance in front of him.

Suddenly he came to this spring. The horse spooked and threw him off. The next morning some people found the priest dead. His hair had turned white and there was a horrible look on his face. People say that it was the devil that had killed Father Condon, but they don't know why.

By the spring they put up a sign and called it Father Condon's Well. Sometimes when passing the well people see the priest struggling with something, but when they approach it, it disappears. They also believe that if you drink from the well, whatever happened to the priest won't happen to you. (MUNLFA Ms. 66-004C)¹

In addition to historical settings, many place name legends contain references to the supernatural. Spirit Pond, located in the community of Merasheen, illustrates this point well. According to legend, a local man went missing there one evening. When he was found, he was extremely agitated and talking about spirits in a nearby pond. Friends and family calmed him down and

¹The inclusion of the last detail in this story, which implies an appeal to drink from the well, may represent a way in which this story maintained its currency over a long period of time. Certainly, it seems likely that those drinking from the well would remember the story and relate it to strangers and children when doing so.

soon escorted him home. Before long, however, the man disappeared once more. When he was found the second time, drowned in the pond, his face revealed a look of terror. Since that time, the pond has been called Spirit Pond (MUNFLA 69-008E). While the nature of these spirits is not revealed, we should not be surprised to learn stories about the devil figure prominently in place name legends linked to the supernatural in Newfoundland. Indeed, Tara Simmonds (2007) has drawn our attention to these tales. The following example is typical of this genre:

Devil's Cove is located in Green Bay about three miles from Robert's Arm. It got its name, quite a number of years ago by a man who was rowing past the cove after dark. This man looked into the cove and saw another man waving to him. After going into the cove to see what he was hailed for, the stranger asked to be given a ride to the other side of the bay. The fisherman who came into the cove to see what the man wanted was very willing to give him a ride. Now the next morning while the fisherman was out tending his nets, he went into the cove to see what that man was doing there. After getting out of the boat and walking around the shore, he saw the man's tracks. One print was that of a man but the other was a cloven hoof and the fisherman's story was believed and to this very day some people are still afraid to go out to Devil's Cove. (MUNFLA Ms. 74-158)

In exploring the place name legends housed at MUNFLA, it quickly becomes clear that many examples attempt to explain unusual natural phenomena. Evidence of the supernatural in the previous story, for instance, revolves around unusual depressions along the shoreline. On another level, however, the story suggests a general distrust of strangers. Within close-knit, isolated communities, where families and friends depended on each other for survival, the appearance of a stranger, with unknown motives, could be cause for concern.

Unfortunately, little contextual information is contained in most place name legends housed at MUNFLA. The majority were collected decades ago when the importance of collecting the tale often overshadowed the value of recording the context in which it was told. In addition, relatively few audio recordings were produced during this time. Most accounts were taken down by hand either in person or by memory. Only the most important details were preserved in this way. How these stories surfaced during interviews, whether

requested or proffered spontaneously, is left unclear. Likewise, what tradition bearers thought about their place name legends, and how they were received by their friends and neighbours, is also left for future folklorists to more fully explore.

As we have seen, place name legends provide a window on local history, beliefs and the close ties people have had with specific aspects of their natural and built environment. In many ways, that relationship has changed. Small brooks, hollows and hills are not as noticeable when travelling quickly through the countryside. Today, few people likely stop for a drink at Father Condon's Well. In many ways, a familiarity with a larger geographic area has sacrificed a depth of knowledge associated with smaller places like these. At the same time, legends like these continue to serve a role whenever and wherever they are told. As a portal between this world and the next, between the past and present, they ground people in place, time and belief and continue to serve as catalysts for stories, prompting discussions between friends and neighbours and commemorating the past.

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