

Review

Best, Anita, Martin Lovelace, and Pauline Greenhill, eds, *Clever Maids, Fearless Jacks, and a Cat: Fairy Tales from a Living Oral Tradition*, Logan, Utah, Utah State University Press, 2019, \$29.95.

Traditional stories, known variously as Märchen, folktales, and wonder tales, or popularly and in the literary sphere as fairy tales, are ubiquitous across cultures worldwide. Typically featuring an unpromising hero or heroine who overcomes obstacles to succeed in their quests, the stories have similar basic structures and are characterised by their supernatural and magical settings. In requiring a willing suspension of disbelief they invite us into a parallel universe, which nevertheless has an enduring significance for life in the real world. They have been transmitted orally from generation to generation, and although this mode of transmission has radically declined in Western cultures over the past two centuries, it is still surprisingly evident, for example, in some English-speaking areas, as demonstrated by this new collection of narratives from a region of North America.

The Canadian province of Newfoundland and Labrador has uniquely preserved many of the older traditions of the original settlers from England, Ireland, Scotland, and France, including dialects, customs, stories, songs, dances, and plays. Newfoundland was Britain's first overseas colony, and its settlement dates back to the sixteenth century, as does the documentation of its history and heritage. The 1930s saw the publication of two collections of Newfoundland folksongs, and a third in the 1960s.¹ In addition to the study of its history and geography, the 1960s and 1970s saw a concerted effort by linguists, anthropologists, and folklorists at the Memorial University of Newfoundland to explore and document the language, culture, and traditions of the province, which resulted in a series of publications and the founding of the University's Department of Folklore and Language Archive (MUNFLA) in 1968.² The first of these publications, a collaborative work by colleagues in the humanities and social sciences, drew international attention to the custom of Christmas mumming in the province and the texts of its associated traditional drama.³ This was followed more than a decade later by the definitive work on the distinctive forms of language in Newfoundland and Labrador,⁴ and in 1996 by an annotated collection of folktales, mostly transcribed from oral tradition.⁵ Although this included a number of Märchen or wonder tales and their variants, none of these were particularly lengthy, and most were told by men. Fortunately, these shortcomings are amply remedied by the tales in this new collection, which presents fifteen examples, one of which, "The White King of Europe", was recorded twice, offering opportunities for comparison between their venues, texts, and contexts. Several of these examples are emblematic of the telling of longer traditional tales in full, taperecorded in the field from performances by two of Newfoundland's foremost storytellers, Alice (McCarthy) Lannon (1927-2013) and Philip Pius Power (1912-1993), who contributed six and nine tales respectively between 1979 and 2001 – dates which are the living proof of the survival of the storytelling tradition in the province up to the end of the twentieth century and beyond, as noted in the subtitle of the book. None of these tales feature in the 1996 collection, although one of Pius Power's stories, "Peg Bearskin", shares a title and some motifs with two versions told by

Elizabeth Brewer in the earlier publication, though these versions differ markedly from that recorded from Pius Power and are classified as different tale Types. As Elizabeth Brewer was a relative of Pius Power, the commentary in the present volume notes that it is likely, despite the contrasts between the versions, that the two tellers may have heard the story from the same oral source, opening up the possibility of comparative analysis of all three variants.

Following a succinct and informative Introduction which sets the tales in their local and international context, the biographies of the two contributors are presented, including a photograph of each of them, which allows readers to put a face to the voices we hear in their stories. Biographies of the editors and the illustrator, Graham Blair, are also provided, revealing their backstories, their relationships with the tellers, and their individual roles in the genesis of the work. One of the editors, Anita Best, is wellknown as a storyteller and singer in her own right, who not only as a child heard Pius Power singing and telling stories, but later recorded him in the performance of nine of the narratives presented here, including the one told twice, as part of her mission to collect and pass on traditional Newfoundland songs and tales, for which she has been awarded honours both locally and nationally. The six tales told by Alice Lannon were recorded by Martin Lovelace and Barbara Rieti.

Each of the named stories is preceded by a brief introductory note about the context of performance, the names of those present and, with one exception, the catalogue number of the recording in MUNFLA. Each tale is followed by a listing of the relevant tale Type and Motif numbers, drawing on Martin Lovelace's unique knowledge and experience in analysing the structure of Newfoundland traditional narratives, and by an incisive and revealing commentary on the tale, its variants, its interpretation, and its relationships with the wider world of folktales and fairy tales. The stories vary significantly in length – from the twenty pages of “Johnson and the Fellow Traveller” and the thirty seven pages of “Pretty Rover/The Copper Castle of the Lowlands” by Pius Power, which open and close the collection, to such miniature gems as Alice Lannon's “Jack and the Cat”, “The Clever Girls”, and “The Gifts of the Little People” which occupy just one or two pages, although her story “The Ship That Sailed over Land and Water” is much more expansive, demonstrating that lengthy Märchen were very much a part of the repertoire of women who were storytellers. The ubiquitous hero Jack appears in nine of the stories in the collection – seven told by Pius Power and two by Alice Lannon, although the hero is inexplicably transmogrified into Johnson in Pius Power's first tale, even though it begins with this opening formula which is typical of a Märchen:

“Well, there was one time
in olden times
in farmers' times
'twasn't in my time
or your time
but 'twas in times ago
there was a man and a woman got married
They had one son and they called him Johnson.”

This also offers a glimpse of the mode of transcription used in presenting these tales, which is based on that so successfully deployed by Pauline Greenhill in her *Lots of Stories: Maritime Narratives from the Creighton Collection*.⁶ This ethnopoetic approach not only frees the texts from the trammels and artificialities attendant on rendering speech on paper within the normal restrictive conventions of prose, but at the same time requires close scrutiny of the performance itself in order to produce the most detailed and accurate representation of what is said, and how it is being said. A central aim is to try to capture as much as possible of the style and flow of the narration. Anyone who has attempted even a straightforward orthographic transcription of taperecorded speech knows all too well how challenging, exacting, and time-consuming this process is, let alone the major additional demands of representing the characteristics and nuances of the speaker's performance and delivery within a coherent, consistent, and accessible ethnopoetic system. Overcoming these challenges to produce convincing and compelling narrative texts through which we hear the individual voices of the storytellers is one of the greatest achievements of the editors, who also include an Appendix which offers insights into the ethnopoetic system and its application. Three further Appendixes provide maps of the localities where the tales were told, and listings of all the tale Types and Motifs, followed by a bibliography and index.

In the Afterword which follows the tales, the editors speculate on the future of traditional storytelling in the province, and more generally. They comment on the decline and disappearance of venues and occasions where storytelling flourished in the past. However, they end on a positive note by observing that, although the contexts and modes of transmission of tales such as these will change, their themes will live on.

This groundbreaking book not only adds substantially to knowledge of stories and storytelling in Newfoundland and Labrador, but also makes an important contribution to the canon of traditional narratives in the English-speaking world, especially with regard to the longer examples presented, and the hitherto under-representation of female narrators. Above all, it provides conclusive evidence of the continuity and resilience of oral storytelling, maintained in families and communities into the twenty first century, and illustrates the typical modes of spoken performance. It will certainly be of interest to scholars and researchers in the fields of traditional narrative and a wide range of related studies, as well as the general reader. It should also inspire current and future generations of Newfoundlanders to rediscover, celebrate, and continue this vibrant tradition.

Notes

1. E. B. Greenleaf, coll. and ed., *Ballads and Sea Songs of Newfoundland*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, Harvard University Press, 1933; M. Karpeles, coll. and ed., *Folk Songs from Newfoundland*, 2 vols, London, Oxford University Press, n.d. [Preface 1934]; K. Peacock, coll. and ed., *Songs of the Newfoundland Outports*, NMC Bulletin, no. 197, Anthropological Series, no. 65, 3 vols, Ottawa, National Museum of Canada, 1965.

2. See: <https://www.mun.ca/folklore/research/munfla/>.

3. H. Halpert, and G. M. Story, eds, *Christmas Mumming in Newfoundland: Essays in Anthropology, Folklore, and History*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, for Memorial University of Newfoundland, 1982.
4. G. M. Story, W. J. Kirwin, and J. D. A. Widdowson, eds, *Dictionary of Newfoundland English*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1982.
5. H. Halpert, and J. D. A. Widdowson, *Folktales of Newfoundland: The Resilience of the Oral Tradition*, 2 vols, New York and London, Garland Publishing, 1996.
6. P. Greenhill, *Lots of Stories: Maritime Narratives from the Creighton Collection*, Ottawa, National Museums of Canada, 1985.

J. D. A. Widdowson