

Reviews

Books

Dale Jarvis. *Wonderful Strange: Ghosts, Faeries and Fabulous Beasties*. Flanker Press, P.O. Box 2522, Sta. C, St. John's, NL A1C 6K1; 1-866-739-4420; info@flankerpress.com; www.flankerpress.com

Have you heard the tale of the ghostly ballerinas who have haunted Gower Street in St. John's since the days of World War II, or that of the spectral slave ship seen in the Bay of Islands off Newfoundland's west coast, or the story of the vanishing hitchhiker that has been seen around Deer Lake for several decades, or the story of the 1918 appearance of the legendary *Flying Dutchman* off Cape Bauld on Newfoundland's Great Northern Peninsula? These are but a few of the countless other-worldly tales to be encountered within the pages of this second collection of ghostly tales from Newfoundland and Labrador compiled by Dale Jarvis, his first volume, *Haunted Shores*, having been published in 2004, also from Flanker Press.

In his introduction to this collection, author, folklorist, performer, researcher and storyteller Dale Jarvis tells us that, perhaps because of Newfoundland's very location, seemingly at the boundary beyond which there is the strange and unknown, it has been blessed, or cursed, depending on one's point of view, with having more phantom ships, giants, witches, old hags, goblins, weather lights, spectral horses and their headless riders, ghostly pirates, vanishing hitchhikers, faeries and sea monsters than any other location in Canada.

As if to accentuate the proximity of Newfoundland to the edge of the known world, Jarvis speculates on the case of Fogo Island's Brimstone Head, which is believed by those with a Flat Earth mentality to be the second of the so-called "five corners of the world". In the end, Jarvis puts his money on Fogo Island, which, considering the nature of his book, is more than a joyous coincidence.

Newfoundland and Labrador have had a love affair with the strange, the bizarre and the eldritch for centuries. In her 1994 book *Legends Told in Canada*, Edith Fowke relates the first European legend found in Canada, which tells how, in August of 1583, Sir Humphrey Gilbert encountered a sea serpent off the

shores of Newfoundland during his attempted return to England. The aquatic beastie apparently did not like being seen, for nine days later Gilbert's ship went down with all hands, and still further back in time, half a millennium before that, when Thorvald Eiriksson and his Vikings landed at L'Anse aux Meadows in Newfoundland, they reported a fatal encounter with a uniped, a strange human-like creature sporting only one leg, which is said to have mortally wounded Eiriksson and perhaps hastened the end of the short-lived settlement the Norsemen made on that part of the eastern coast of North America which they referred to as Vinland.

Jarvis has divided this wonderful Newfoundland bestiary into seven broad categories: mystical places; Faeries and their lore; ghostly figures; fabulous beasties; haunted streets, roads and highways; ships of mystery; and a final chapter he calls "Wonderful Strange", being a general potpourri of paranormal and other-worldly manifestations of miscellaneous sorts and varieties.

The array, diversity and scope of Jarvis's provincial bestiary is truly wide-ranging. From St. John's modern thoroughfares to the remote shores of Labrador, Newfoundland's other-worldly denizens appear in numerous shapes, sizes and manifestations. One might be the very spectral being who seems to reside in Dale Jarvis's own domicile on Fleming Street in St. John's. Then there is the spectre who haunts the Faulknir Flat Road outside Hampton, near White Bay. Still another might be the spectral forms of the cursed family from Portland Creek on Newfoundland's south shore, who once played cards with the Devil on a Sunday afternoon and who will pay for their transgression throughout eternity. And then there is Cressie, which rhymes with Nessie, perhaps the most famous sea monster in Newfoundland, who has lived in the waters of Crescent Lake in the community of Robert's Arm near Green Bay for decades. Then there is perhaps the most famous phantom ship in all of Newfoundland, the S.S. *Bluejacket*, which has been regularly seen in Conception Bay since its sinking in September 1863, and is still seen in modern times. The parade of the fantastic, the unexplained and the ghostly goes on: spectral pirates looking to keep their buried treasures safe from outsiders; faerie lights leading hapless mortals astray; tokens; fetches; premonitions warning of impending deaths of loved ones; the ghosts of murdered men returning to the scenes where they met their violent ends; and so much more besides.

Such is the supernatural nature of Newfoundland's landscape that these unexplained manifestations do not take account of location or setting, be it the numerous ghosts that have haunted Victoria Street in St. John's or some remote bay or cove off Newfoundland's Great Northern Peninsula, the Southern Shore, or the equally ghost-ridden west coast of the island. Even today one can easily imagine seeing the ghost trapper of Labrador skimming the nocturnal landscape in his komatik with his spectral dogs beside him, warning travelers of an approaching storm, or a corpse candle predicting the coming death of a sailor and his shipmates from St. Mary's Bay, and so it is with the realm of the supernatural and the other-worldly, the landscape of the Newfoundland experience as it has been for centuries and still remains to this very day.

Dale Jarvis has given story buffs and lovers of the supernatural world a book that is both entertaining and most informative as to ghosts and their kith and kin within the Newfoundland tradition. His skillful blending of local history, folklore and some very good storytelling results in a book worth more than just a casual reading. Perhaps the best way to sum up what this book is all about is through a local Newfoundland saying which is as follows:

If Candlemas Day be clear and fine,
The rest of winter is left behind;
If Candlemas Day be rough and grim,
There's more winter left to come.

Robert Rodriquez, New York, New York

Ted Russell (edited by Elizabeth Miller). *Chronicles of Uncle Mose*. Flanker Press, P.O. Box 2522, Sta. C, St. John's, NL A1C 6K1; 1-866-739-4420; info@flankerpress.com; www.flankerpress.com

When Jim Payne and Kelly Russell attended CDSS's Pinewoods Camp as members of staff in the summer of 1988, it was a real treat to be immersed, at least for one week, in the music, song, folklore, traditions and storytelling customs of Newfoundland. During one of these sessions, Kelly Russell introduced us all to the storytelling work of his father, the legendary CBC broadcaster Ted Russell, and thus we all became acquainted with the tales involving the folks and doings of the fictional community of Pigeon Inlet. We all sat spellbound as he related, in such stories as "Geese", "Stealin' the Holes", "Hockey", "Algebra Slippers" and "Smokerroom on the Kyle", tales of such beloved Pigeon Inlet characters as Grandpa Walcott, Sol

Noddy, and even the lovable, irreverent goat known as King David.

Thanks to the tireless efforts of Ted Russell's daughter, Elizabeth Miller, the world of Pigeon Inlet once again comes to full and wonderful life in this very impressive collection of 75 stories from Russell's repertoire of several hundred that he related in his eight years of weekly CBC broadcasts from 1953 to 1961. It is to Miller's credit that she has chosen stories that would not be too localized or specialized and would be appreciated by those outside the fishing milieu of the Newfoundland outports, which Russell knew with much more than a passing acquaintance.

In her introductory comments, Miller tells us that, although Pigeon Inlet was fictional, it nonetheless mirrored the countless communities up and down the Newfoundland coast, with which Russell was quite familiar in his travels as a teacher for four decades, locales such as Fogo, Harbour Breton, Pass Island and Coley's Point, among others. The same of course goes for other places mentioned in the tales, such as Hartley's Harbour and Muldoon's Cove, whose inhabitants were both friendly to and rivals with the good folks of Pigeon Inlet. And throughout all these tales, the stalwart figure of Uncle Mose stands tall as a master spinner of yarns filled with wry humour, wit, verbal jabs filled with satirical intent, and so much more. What comes across in all of these stories is the deep love and respect Russell had for the ways and traditions of the people residing in these communities, in the face of constant change and modernization that intruded into these areas in the first half of the Twentieth Century. These are not outsiders or strangers making fun of the locals in a disparaging manner, but the Pigeon Inleters themselves commenting on and often making sport of their own way of life, without ever denigrating their time-honoured customs and way of doing things. While these are not folk- or fairy-tales in the classic or literal sense of these terms, in all true particulars they are in fact stories of the folk of these often isolated and remote Newfoundland communities, and are as genuine as the very soil of Newfoundland and as deeply rooted in the culture and traditions of the island itself.

Pigeon Inleters know how to go that extra mile in telling a good yarn, and a number of these stories enter the realm of the tall tale or "blanket stretcher" where credibility is concerned, as certainly evidenced by such delightful yarns as "Geese", "Smokerroom on the Kyle", "Potatoes", or the story in which it is related how one winter it got so cold in Pigeon Inlet

that molasses froze, making it easier to convey it from one locale to another by someone intent on increasing his supply of the precious commodity in preparation for the oncoming winter. Grandpa Walcott's aerial misadventure with a flock of geese heading south to Florida, Jamaica, or wherever geese go for the winter, is a particularly hilarious example of this form of narrative fancy, and Russell is a master at this genre.

Another personal favourite is the previously-mentioned "Stealin' the Holes", in which the legal system is handled Pigeon Inlet style, to the delight of all involved. Every subject is grist for the storyteller's mill in Pigeon Inlet, whether it is the pros and cons of modern television, the value of a good education, elections and their outcomes, or whether rabbits or beavers are the more stupid of woodland creatures. History itself is not immune from local comment, as in the tale in which it is debated whether John Cabot did indeed discover Newfoundland. Even literary classics meet their match, as when we hear Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* or the biblical story of Jonah and the whale retold in Grandpa Walcott's own downhome manner.

Reading this wonderful collection of Pigeon Inlet tales indeed took me back to that summer of 1988 when Kelly Russell brought the world of the Newfoundland outports to wondrous life in his own retellings of his father's stories. I once said, in another context, that Newfoundlanders sure know how to spin a good yarn, and need not take a back seat to anyone where this art is concerned. Story lovers owe Elizabeth Miller a great deal of thanks for keeping her father's narrative legacy very much alive and introducing the world of Pigeon Inlet to those previously unfamiliar with this fictional community. This volume of Newfoundland stories comes very highly recommended.

Robert Rodriguez, New York, New York

Recordings

The Cottars. *On Fire*. 41716. 2004 Warner Music Canada Co., 3381 Steeles Ave. E, Suite 100, Toronto, Ont. M2H 3S7; The Cottars, Box 6222, Marion Bridge, N.S. B1K 3T8; thecottars@thecottars.com; www.thecottars.com

The Cottars. *Forerunner*. Rounder Records Group Canada, 2450 Victoria Park Ave., Suite 1, Toronto, Ont. M2J 5H3; info@rounder.com; www.rounder.com

They started out as cute, talented, musical kids whose rise on the roots music scene was aided by industry stalwart John McDermott. But anyone who thinks The Cottars' early flash was just luck and good positioning would be wrong. They're the real thing, and on these two recordings, they continue to flex their maturing musical muscles.

The Cottars is made up of two sets of siblings, the MacGillivrays and the MacKenzies, children of parents who know their way around Cape Breton music. In fact, dad Allister MacGillivray (songwriter and performer) assists with the arrangements on both recordings. His kids, Fiona (vocals, harp, whistle, bodhran) and Ciaran (everything), create much of the vocal texture of the band. But the MacKenzie kids hold up their end of things too, with masterful fiddling from Roseanne and some impressive guitar, bodhran and tenor banjo from Jimmy.

This band knows how to vary its sound, despite the distinctive voice of Fiona, which could dominate, if allowed to. *On Fire* includes a wonderful version of Dougie MacLean's "Ready for the Storm", and her take on "Byker Hill" (on *Forerunner*) belies the fact that she's still a teenager. The arrangements give each member of the group a chance to shine, all within the context of the song or tune. Roseanne's fiddling rivals any of her Cape Breton contemporaries, and Ciaran's piano accompaniments – well, they rock. Jimmy, who hasn't joined in the singing yet, provides steady and sometimes spectacular guitar and bodhran licks.

The choice of material is beginning to mature too. The traditional numbers dominate the repertoire, but on the most recent recording, *Forerunner*, the group tackles more contemporary songs such as Tom Waits' "Georgia Lee" and Ron Hynes' "Atlantic Blue". Still, their bread and butter is the traditional tune and song, and these kids really know how to play and sing (and dance) the tradition they grew up with.

Back-up musicians round out the sound, and part of me wishes that the bass and drums were left behind at home. Nevertheless, there's no denying that The Cottars play not only skillfully, but also from the heart. These two CDs deserve attention.

Jean Mills, Guelph, Ontario

[Unfortunately the past tense must now be used, as word has reached us that The Cottars are no longer extant as a group – JL]

Brian Pickell. *Fresh Canadian Fiddle Tunes*. 30 Ball St., Paris, Ont. N3L 1X1 (no mailing address on packaging); brian.pickell@sympatico.ca; www.brianpickell.com

Brian Pickell should be no stranger to traditional music enthusiasts in Canada; he has been composing and performing (guitar, mandolin, singing) for over 25 years. This, his first recording to feature exclusively his own compositions, contains 31 tunes and 2 songs, performed by 18 experienced and accomplished musicians. The ten fiddlers, particularly, easily rank as some of the top contemporary Ontario players. I like the accompanying liner notes, which explain the titles and/or inspirations for all the tunes, making the listeners familiar with Brian and his fellow musicians, friends and family.

The title of the CD is apt: these are *fresh* tunes. Never boring, seldom predictable, the melodies are interesting, but not so bizarre that they are not also singable. That Brian can write good tunes is evident in the fact that musicians like to play them. Tunes such as “Burnt River Jig”, “Chasing Squirrels” and “Waiting for Emilie”, among others, have quickly become standards in the Ontario fiddle repertoire and far beyond. A tune book, *51 Fresh Canadian Fiddle Tunes*, includes the notation for all the tunes on the album, plus many others.

I appreciate the careful arrangements on this recording; juxtapositions of texture and timbre are particularly interesting and tasteful. The ten fiddlers, for the most part each playing on different tracks, interpret the tunes in their own unique styles. Their differences in tone and style contrast nicely with the overall unity of Pickell’s compositional style and arrangements.

At first I dismissed the two songs as unwelcome intrusions to the instrumental tracks; the lyrics seemed forced and the melodies didn’t appeal to me. The more I listen to the lyrics, and the sentiments they evoke, however, the more I have come to appreciate the songs as well. They’ve grown on me.

The Brian Pickell Band has recently released a second album, *Entwined*, featuring more of Brian’s compositions. I highly recommend both recordings to fiddle fans who are looking for something just a bit different from the usual fare of “Big John McNeil” and “St. Anne’s Reel”.

Sherry Johnson, Toronto, Ontario

John Spearn. *Northern Sightlines*. Reidmore/ Spearn NS-0699.

John Spearn. *Canada Songs*. Spearn JS-1202.

John Spearn. *Lonely Heroes*. Spearn Canada Songs III. (no mailing address on packaging). 780-716-2106. www.canadasongs.com

As explained by John himself in the leading article of this issue of *Canadian Folk Music*, these three CDs are part of his “Canada Songs Project”. The project aims at promoting an awareness and love of our country together with a better understanding of Canadian history and the efforts and achievements of the many individual Canadians who have contributed to building the nation. Folksong is the medium John has chosen for this endeavour, and writing and performing new songs about Canadian heroes is his main contribution to it.

A worthy—and much-needed—initiative, to be sure. But how well has he carried it out so far? Do these CDs contain memorable material that we might want to listen to again and again? Are there songs that we would want to learn and sing for ourselves?

Northern Sightlines is the earliest of the three CDs, dating from 1999. It contains one of John’s most popular songs, “Edith Cavell”, and one of his catchiest, “The Chilkoot Mountain Trail” (both of which are transcribed in this issue). As the latter (a song about the Klondike gold rush) suggests, there is a northern and western flavour to the material. For example, there is a ballad about the Franklin expedition and its tragic fate in the bitter cold of an Arctic winter, and a celebration of the Oblate priest Father John Lacombe, whose life of service to the Native people of the lands that would later be called Alberta earned him the name “Good Heart” among the Blackfoot people. Harder hitting is “Riel (The Batoche Campaign)”, written from the point of view of an ordinary government soldier who, in retrospect, questions the wisdom and justice of the successful military operation against the Métis of Saskatchewan. Equally poignant is “Ribbon of Broken Dreams”, about the deaths of over five hundred Chinese workers in the struggle to build the CPR through the Rockies and down the Fraser Canyon.

So, yes, there are good songs here, and the simple production of the CD is effective: one can hear the words, and the instrumental backing and breaks are appropriate and enjoyable. John’s singing and guitar work are competent, but not as refined as on his most recent release, *Lonely Heroes*. At this point he was still feeling his way as a songwriter and learn-

ing his craft as a musician, but the CD is nonetheless an admirable, appealing and, above all, strikingly original piece of work.

Canada Songs was a more ambitious affair, with a larger backing group and a sound that might be classified as folk-rock. It is probably the most commercially viable of John's three CDs, but in my view perhaps the least successful artistically. Why? Because in some cases the words of the songs get lost in the noisy accompaniment. That is true, for example, of "Dieppe", one of John's most popular songs, a fact that he acknowledged by rerecording it acoustically on *Lonely Heroes*. Here it is probably just a matter of a poor mix, but, frankly, it is no use letting the voice be drowned out if you are writing lyrics that you intend the listener to understand. That, of course, is a problem with the vast majority of rock CDs these days, including, unfortunately, very many interesting productions by indie bands, but it is important for folksingers to avoid the trap. Assuming, that is, that they want to communicate verbally as well as musically.

By and large, the slower songs on *Canada Songs* fare better. I particularly like "When the Crop Comes In (Fair Meaghan)", at once a homesteading song, a love lyric, and a ballad of a woman's life. It has a lovely tune, too, which is one reason why we chose to transcribe it in this issue of *Canadian Folk Music*. Another favourite of mine on this CD is "A Few Scarlet Horsemen", about the migration of six thousand Sioux from Dakota to the Canadian prairies in the wake of Little Bighorn. I liked the sentiment behind "Requiem for Montcalm", and there are some good World War I and World War II songs on the album (in addition to "Dieppe"), such as "Ten Thousand Guns", "Roy Brown and Wop May" (shades of Stompin' Tom!), and "The Corvettes of Halifax". Also worth mentioning are an amusing parody of "The Cruel Wars Are Raging", set in the era of *Star Trek* and titled "Song of the Nepton Child", and the third of Spearn's three 'hits' to date, the catchy "Run, Terry Fox, Run". Despite the production, there are enough good songs on the album to make it special, a must buy for anyone interested in songs about Canadian history and Canadian popular culture.

Lonely Heroes is the CD that Spearn himself seems most satisfied with, and that is understandable. The production is simple (acoustic accompaniments only) and the mix is good: John's voice comes over more strongly and his singing is more assured and powerful. There are some great songs here too, starting with the poignant "The War Bride" and continu-

ing with "The Crimson Maple Leaf", a paean for Canada from sea to sea to sea. It could effectively replace that Canadianized version of Woody Guthrie's "This Land is Your Land" that we sing from time to time. There is an acoustic performance of "Dieppe", which is much better than the rock version on *Canada Songs* because this time around you feel the combination of heroism, stupidity and futility that characterized the Dieppe Raid.

On the other hand, I could see that some listeners might find Spearn's patriotism over the top on some tracks. "Hong Kong Christmas", for example, might be criticized as rather redolent of Kipling's less subtle celebrations of British imperialism (although, to be sure, the victims in this case were Canadian and the imperialists were the Japanese). Personally, I wouldn't have included a rendition of "O Canada" on the album, and one has to be in the right mood not to find "The Sons of Canada" just a little too simple and formulaic in its praise of the troops. At this particular juncture in our history there is a fine line between celebration of the Canadian spirit and pro-military propaganda. I don't think Spearn ever quite crosses that line, but once or twice he comes uncomfortably close.

Yet despite a few blemishes, this is a very fine CD. Some of these songs have that appealing simplicity, honesty, and poetry which is a hallmark of good songwriting. "The War Bride" and "The Wild Wolves" are cases in point. My own favourite is "Ice and Fire", the beautiful words of which remind me of the metaphysical poetry of George Herbert. Incidentally, the one traditional song on the album is "Canada-i-o", essentially a cover of the Nic Jones version, but none the worse for that.

David Gregory, Athabasca, Alberta

A Peak in Darien

Some of these will be reviewed in upcoming issues; some are outside our purview, but are included as a courtesy to the people who sent them to us, and to inform our readers.

Recordings

Black Lodge. *Watch This Dancer!*. CR-6429. Canyon Records, 3131 West Clarendon Ave., Phoenix, AZ 85017, USA; canyon@canyonrecords.com; www.canyonrecords.com

Carolina Chocolate Drops. *Done Got a Ramblin' Mind*. Music Maker Relief Foundation, Eno Valley Sta., P.O. Box 72222, Durham, NC 27722-2222, USA; www.musicmaker.org; info@musicmaker.org

The Douglas Brothers. *The Possibilities of More*. Mark Wonneck, 6512 Laurentian Way SW, Calgary, Alta. T3E 5N3; www3.telus.net/douglasbrothersmusic; doug-bros@telus.net

The Irish Descendants. *Southern Shore*. FNCD5516. Universal Music Canada, 2450 Victoria Park Ave., Suite 1, Toronto, Ont. M2J 5H3; new.umusic.com; michael.greggs@sympatico.ca

Northern Cree and Friends. *Calling All Dancers: Round Dance Songs Recorded "Live", vol. 6*. CR-6413. Canyon Records (address above)

Verdell Primeaux and Johnny Mike. *The Color of Morning*. CR-7081. Canyon Records (address above)

Sirens. *Look Up*. BCD183. Borealis Records, 225 Sterling Rd., Unit 19, Toronto, Ont. M6R 2B2; www.borealisrecords.com; info@borealisrecords.com

Tha Tribe. *Blue Scout: Pow-Wow Songs Recorded Live in Parker*. CR-6426. Canyon Records (address above)

Lost Soul

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