



Wherein Elinor Benjamin talks with Anita Best and we get to listen

Though I had never met Anita Best, she responded most graciously to my request to an interview. I had obtained her address from mutual friend, and storyteller, Katherine Grier. Katherine and Anita collaborated on evenings of storytelling and ballads at Cape Spear Lighthouse several summers ago. We planned to meet in St. John's in early July, but I was surprised one evening in June to receive a call saying she was in Corner Brook for several weeks working with the Anglican Diocese archives. We spent three pleasant evenings together - one of them in my attic studio/guestroom, and other two over good food and drink, first at our house, and then at Dino's pizzeria which overlooks the beautiful Bay of Islands. By one of those grand coincidences, Anita was pleased to discover that Dino's was run by the same charming Bulgarian couple who had run a restaurant she had frequented for lunch in St. John's a few years ago.

Anita was born on Merasheen Island in Placentia Bay in 1948, almost a year before Newfoundland joined the Canadian Confederation, making her a member of the last generation of native Newfoundlanders. She remembers leaving this outpost community just prior to its being resettled¹. As a former teacher, she had much to say about the denominational school system and its shortcomings. We spoke, too, of the cultural dislocation and loss of community loss that resulted from resettlement. She spoke of her new company, *Newfoundland Voices*, through which she organized *Voices at the Rim of the World*, the popular summer Thursday evenings of song and story that take place at Cape Spear National Park. I learned more of her participation, with Pamela Morgan, in the company *Amber Music*². *Amber Music* has now produced 10 music CDs, among them: Anita's recent CD of unaccompanied ballads, *Cross-Handed*; *The Colour of Amber*, Pamela and Anita's fine duo album of traditional Newfoundland songs; *Vive la Rose*, the last CD of Newfoundland's charismatic fiddler, storyteller, and friend, mile Benoit; *An Amber Christmas*, featuring a talented array of Newfoundlanders, including Anita. *Amber Music* has also re-issued the albums of Newfoundland's ground-breaking band, *Figgy Duff*. Anita's respect for Pamela and the pride in *Amber Music's* accomplishment animated our conversation.

We also talked of Anita's work as an archivist and the vast realms of hidden stories that lie in

Crack!

archives awaiting discovery³. From all this wonderful talk, I could choose only a little. I decided to focus on Anita's remembrances of her storytelling father-in-law, Pius Power of Clattice Harbour and Southeast Bight, and her CBC program *Little Ball of Yarns*. Mr. Power's storytelling was the subject of Anita's folklore research at Memorial University of Newfoundland (MUN), but the affection and respect with which she speaks of him, transcend the academic connection.

EB: You are a former teacher, a collector, singer of ballads, a linguist, a storyteller, a folklorist, an archivist and a source of all kinds of amazing lore, as well as a broadcaster and creator of Little Ball of Yarns, one of the most delightful radio programs to come out of the regional CBC, and a national treasure. What have I left out?

AB: I never think of myself as a storyteller. I think of myself more as a *story singer* because I sing these big long classical ballads, and even locally composed ballads. But my father-in-law used to tell fairy tales, märchen: *Jack meets the Cat, Jack and the Giants* and so forth. I love them, and I've got them on tape, but I never thought to perform them myself because Mr. Power was alive, and after that Pius [his son, and Anita's husband of seven years] was alive, but now Pius has died as well, and none of Pius's sisters can remember those stories, so I feel like I have to do them now because I'm the only one.

EB: Why did you feel that you had to wait until then?

AB: I never told Mr. Power's stories while he was alive because I consider myself a very pale imitation of his talent. Also it would never be "correct" to tell his stories if he were in the room or even the community. I am telling them now because none of his family remembers them or wants to tell them. I didn't grow up being a storyteller. I had to take it on because there's nobody else to do those stories. I grew up being singer and a listener and a singer of stories. Certainly, I never thought of myself as a storyteller, but I'm working on it now.

EB: Good! And I'm waiting to hear them.

AB: I told my daughter all kinds of stories when she was young, but I really liked the kind of story Mr. Power used to tell because they were really told for the entertainment of adults. They were told by adults to adults. When we lived in Southeast Bight, the adults in the community would come down and he would tell the stories. The children would also be there, but he told the stories to the adults. Children weren't excluded, but they weren't for children specifically. In fact,

they had lots of stuff in them that some people would consider inappropriate for children, but Mr. Power, and Pius too, were very [?Inuit] in their approach to child rearing. He thought that children should see and hear everything, and that nothing they did was wrong.

[Mr. Power] had a formulaic beginning and ending. His stories always began, "There was one time in olden times, in former times [Here, one of many laughs, as Anita imitated Mr. Power's voice] in *farmer's* times. It wasn't in my time, and it wasn't in your time, but in times ago." That was how he started. And he always ended with some variant of: "And the last time I saw them, they were sitting down to a tin table and the table bended, so my story's ended. If the table's been stronger, my story'd been longer."

I never knew whether it was a thin table or a tin table. I'm *still* not sure if it was a thin table, which could have been thicker or a tin table. Either way, you had a bending table. I like a tin table. It makes a nicer noise.

[Mr. Power] had a great way of including people in the story. "The last time, they had coffee for tea when I came away," tea being a meal in Newfoundland. He loved that ironic juxtaposition. "They had coffee for tea when I came away, and if they don't live happy, I hope we may." "They were sat down to a tin table when they got married."

Meantime, Jack Ward would be in the kitchen, asleep, tired after the day's work. He would have dozed off while Mr. Power was telling the story. When he'd get to the end, Mr. Power would notice, and he'd put that in: "And they had the biggest kind of time at the wedding. Myself and Jack Ward were there, but he fell asleep." I loved that.

And he would always work in the kids. [For example] in *Jack meets the Cat*: "You know, Bill and Tom were reasonable guys. They could do pretty well everything that needed to be done around the house, but Jack was good for nothing. He just lived in the coal-pound, grew his fingernails and his toenails. He just lived in the coal-pound, and he had dirt behind his ears, just like you have behind your ears and your mother's always trying to get you to wash," he'd say to one of the youngsters. This would be an aside right in the middle of the story, and it would include the people in the kitchen, or in the living room at the time he was telling the story.

Kate [Best's daughter] used to like him to tell stories to her at night before she went to bed. One of my favourite times, and I can't really speculate about why he did this or how it arose, but this night she asked him for the story of Cinderella; that really wasn't in his repertory, but he knew it. He didn't really tell those kinds of

stories. They were sort of silly to him and he didn't tell them. That was the subject of my thesis: how his choice of stories reflected his world view. He didn't tell stories where the women were weak and frail. He always told stories where the women were heroic, because in his own outlook, women were really strong; his own daughters were, his wife as well. Kate asked for Cinderella, I guess because the Walt Disney stuff is pervasive; it's poisonous, but it is pervasive.

So, he told her Cinderella. I was washing the dishes or something and he got to the point where the prince was coming around with the slipper to see whom it would fit, and the sisters were trimming off their feet with their pocket knives. That was another thing I loved about him. He always Newfoundlandified everything, so Jack had long rubbers, like fishermen do. Things took place aboard schooners or boats. The King of England came down to the gate to meet you, and stuff like that. It was really great. The prince was coming around with the glass slipper, and Cinderella saw him coming. She didn't really like the look of him that much, so she went into the pantry and she hid. She looked out, and he was talking to the sisters; they were trying the shoe on, and it didn't fit, so he asked, "Is there anybody else?" and they said "No," because they didn't want her to fit the shoe. She said to herself, "I don't really think he looks as good as he did the other night at the ball. I think I'll just pretend that the shoe doesn't fit." That is how the story ended. She stayed at home with her parents and didn't marry the prince. He went on. Presumably he's still looking for someone to fit the shoe. She decided against choosing the prince in the end, but it was her decision.

I found that flabbergasting. You'd never call Mr. Power a feminist, not by any kind philosophical choice. He wouldn't call him himself a feminist. His wife got tea for him. When he was on the boat, he got tea for himself. He was regular Newfoundland man.

EB: Mrs. Power probably answered the phone and took messages for him when they got a phone?

AB: Well, yeah! ... Actually he never talked on the phone. He hated it.

EB: What was Kate's reaction to the story?

AB: She thought it was hilarious. She just roared laughing.

EB: And she's not warped for life?

AB: She thought was hilarious. I was amazed, because that's the kind of thing you see in modern feminist retellings of fairytales. Certainly he'd never read any of those, but that was how he thought he'd vary it. I don't know whether he did it for fun or whether he found Cinderella so silly he had to do something to turn it into a half decent story.

EB: Did you get a chance to ask him about it?

AB: Yes, but he wasn't up to discussing those kinds of things, his motivations, or anything. He just did it because that's what he did. He never really provided much in the way of an answer when you asked about why he did things. He just did them because "it made the story go good." If you asked, "How did you come to include songs?" "Just to make it go good" at the time of the performance - like Emile Benoit. Emile was a consummate performer; if you wanted a 60 minute story, you'd get one. When he asked Gerald Thomas [Professor of Folklore at MUN], "How much time do I have," Gerald said the class was fifty minutes. Forty-nine minutes to the second, he stopped.

EB: I remember Emile coming into one of Gerald's lectures (I think it was an Atlantic Institute, or maybe an Elderhostel) in Corner Brook. He told one of these long stories about the Glass Mountain and the Witch, and made himself some funny teeth out of paper, and borrowed a wig from me and had a grand time acting up.

AB: Mr. Power didn't tell like that. He was a very straight teller. He was animated with his hands, though. It was as though he was reciting. It wasn't prose to him; it was very rhythmically based. He kept [the stories] in his mind because of the rhythm involved in each line and there was a lot of repetition. They definitely weren't bits of prose. You know the Kalevela; they were like that in their construction.

EB: We were watching this "In the footsteps of Alexander" on TV the other night, the Michael Wood show where he follows the route of Alexander's marches through the Middle East and Central Asia to India.

AB: It was on A & E. Yes!

EB: Do you remember the Irani storyteller and the rhythms in his storytelling?

AB: Oh yes! It was amazing. Certainly Mr. Power's storytelling has a remnant of that in it, which must have been stronger in the generation before. Our speech patterns are changing because of ...

EB: The man on the 6:00 news?

AB: Well, exactly. Because of the international media, our speech patterns are changing, especially young people. Each generation now, even if they are telling the stories, are [telling] from a previous culture; they are not coming from a current culture, which I find really sad, but that's the case.

[Here we had an odd exchange on the nature of oral language which didn't make much sense listening to our tape but led to the more interesting comment]:

AB: Mr. Power could read, but he didn't read very much. He could easily read, but he'd rather do something else. He'd rather talk. He'd rather knit. I like to knit. I think knitting belongs to storytellers.

EB: *It does make you talk!*

AB: When you're telling the story, you have a pattern going, different colours all woven together. If you drop a stitch, you have to go back and fix it before you go on to the next.

One of [Mr. Power's] stories, *Jack meets the Cat*, got taken and changed completely by Sheila's Brush [a St. John's theatre group].

EB: *I've heard of Jack meets the Cat, but have never heard it told yet, or seen it performed as theatre.*

AB: That was one of Mr. Power's stories but it got changed so it was really quite different. Mr. Power was a really classic märchen teller. [His stories] are not full of extraneous drama at all; they're straightforward fairy tales, just like the Grimms'.

EB: *Then this was the real article, the märchen, in a setting much like the Grimms would have encountered when they were doing their collecting, told to adults, with children listening eagerly at the edge as they always did.*

AB: I don't know if you've read any of Bengt Holbek but he became sort of my unofficial mentor. I never met him; he died [while I was studying]. He wrote a book called *Interpretation of fairy Tales*⁵. If there was ever an academic who wrote about fairy tales! There were two, actually; one was a Swiss guy, Max Lutti ...

EB: *Yes, I familiar with Max Lutti's work, but not Bengt Holbek's.*

AB: As far as I'm concerned, those people had more to say about fairy tales [than other academics.] They spoke about the märchen; that was what they were interested in, that's what they meant by fairy tales, and that's what I'm interested in. They followed all the rules - the whole folklore thing. Mr. Power had about 14 different ones that I have heard during the time that I was there.

EB: *Are these all Jack tales or a mixture of things?*

AB: A mixture. There was one called *Pretty Raven*, another one called *Johnson and the Fellow Traveller*. I hoping to have those under my belt before long ..

EB: *I am hoping so too because I want to hear them.*

AB: The two I have really have now are *Jack Meets the Cat* and *Peg Bearskin*. Peg Bearskin's fabulous.

EB: *Would you mind telling me Peg Bearskin ?*

AB: *Peg Bearskin*. I'll tell you the summary. Peg Bearskin is the ugly daughter that's born after the beautiful daughters. She's big and ugly and hairy. The girls go off to seek their fortune in the world. They're beautiful; they don't want her to come and she wants to come. She chases them and they throw rocks at her and she sneaks after them. They get into the woods and they're really frightened. She rescues them from their fear and looks after them. They end up going to a witch's house and escaping somehow with three magical gifts. Because of these three magical gifts, she gets the king to agree that his two sons will marry her two sister. One of the things is a horse that gallops so swiftly that he outstrips the wind, [and there's] a decanter that never runs dry and a lantern that sheds a hundred square miles of light. Great gifts!

EB: *That's a new one me .. the lantern.*

AB: She wants the younger son to marry her, and the younger son is not that keen. It's a Gawain and the Green Knight sort of story. He does marry her because his father [wants the magic gifts.] After they've been living together for awhile, she gets him to throw her into the fire and then she emerges as a beautiful girl.

EB: *Of course!*

AB: *Johnson and the Fellow Traveller* is the ghost, the dead body, that Johnson pays for the burial of early in the story; the dead body is the guy who helps him out all through the rest of the story, but you don't know that until the end

EB: *And you wouldn't want to know it, would you? Even you knew it, you wouldn't want to know it officially until the end.*

Anita also described the way of life in Placentia Bay at the time she was listening to, and collecting, Mr. Power's stories.

AB: When I married in 1977, and went back to *The Bay* [the universal Newfoundland term for any place beyond the outskirts of St John's] to live, it was a place not really very far from Merasheen. They were just beginning to get electricity in Southeast Bight. Mr. Power and Pius had a schooner, the last working schooner in Placentia Bay, maybe even in Newfoundland. He worked and lived on it. I lived on the schooner when I was pregnant with Kate, and when she was a small baby, until she got up and started moving about [and I had visions of her] plunging overboard in April.

When you live your life, if you're fishing in a schooner, you think about time in different ways. You can't have appointments at 3:00 pm because the wind might not be fair for you to get from A to B at 3:00 pm. When you're living on the water that's your mark for time: when the water's high and when the water's low. There are things that you can do when the water's high that you can't do

when it's low, and there are things that you must do when the wind changes, and things like that, so you really pay attention a lot to the rising and falling of the tide, and you really pay attention to the direction the wind is blowing, and the actual weather conditions. In modern urban life, we just don't pay any attention to that at all. There is a different sense of time.

Your whole concept of time becomes very relaxed. Ways of spending your time are different. When you're on the boat with no electricity, you don't run to the TV. You'd converse and conversing leads into telling stories, short anecdotal type of stories, then longer stories, and then if you're lucky, you'd get one of those really longer fairy tales. Or you'd get one of the big long ballads being sung.

EB: This talk of time reminds me something that was said at a storytelling symposium conference I went to several weeks ago at the University College of Cape Breton. The speaker was Kira Van Deusen, who had spent quite a bit of time with the Tuva people in Siberia, learning about their stories, and publishing a book of their stories⁶. Once, when she asked someone to tell her a story, he replied, "Do you have 10 days," because that's how long a story can go on, with breaks here and there for necessities of course!

A further meditation on the topic of time brought me to thoughts of *Little Ball of Yarns*, the program that was created by Anita and broadcast early Sunday mornings on CBC Radio. Among the many definitions contained in the Dictionary of Newfoundland English for a *time*, this most flexible of Newfoundland words, is the following example of usage:

"In the smaller places during the fall and winter months almost every night there is some kind of a *time* on, as any social function is called. It might be a dance or a concert, or a church supper an' so on; whatever it is, it's called a time."

EB: Anita, for me Little Ball of Yarns captured something of the mood of a kitchen party or a time on the radio. How would you describe it?

AB: It was a Newfoundland folklore hour. I didn't use the word *folklore*, but that's what I wanted to get across. I started out thematically. There was one that was pirate songs and stories and so on. Another was ghosts. I tried to suit them to the time of the year, so that the ghost ones were around. All Souls and Hallowe'en, and I always tried to have calendar customs that related to whatever time the show was going to be one the air. We had nice Christmas shows [and] the July Drive Remembrance Day⁷. The soldiers' remembrances were always great stories. There were a lot of letters.

One interesting thing about that show were the comments that I had from really younger people in their early 20's. How many letters did I get from people that age who were amazed to know this part of their culture! They didn't get it in school. It makes me angry.

EB: I think our readers might like to hear a few stories about how you went about collecting the stories that you used on Little Ball of Yarns - the stories of the stories.

AB: Myself and Kenny Goldstein [another MUN folklorist] went up the South Shore one time looking for songs, and went to Mrs. Margaret Hyde in Bay Bulls. Somebody had told us that she could sing. We walked in the door and she was so frail, small and short. She was sitting in a rocking chair very quiet. Her daughter was shouting at her, so we thought she was partially deaf. Her daughter yelled at her who we were, and introduced us. I said, "Mrs. Hyde, we were wondering if you knew any of the old songs." We didn't even have time to turn on the recorder. She started singing these really old songs and she got right into the whole thing. She told that great story; it's a cante-fable, *Little Dickie Milburn*⁸, only she called it *Dickie Melvin*, which is interesting because Melvin is a name up there. There are Melvins from La Manche. Instead of going to the end of the world to get the bottle of Sweet Absolom, Dickie Melvin was going to *Town*. That's the universal Newfoundland name for St John's. She had this huge voice, this huge blasting voice; it was really surprising for such a tiny woman.

Time spent in the presence of such a dynamic and multi-faceted human being like Anita Best passes all too quickly, and soon it seemed as though the tide was high and the wind fair, and each of us had to get on about the things that had to be done. I am looking forward to the next time. Maybe I will finally get to hear *Jack meets the Cat.*, or the long version of *Peg Bearskin* or who knows?

Notes:

1. Resettlement was the official Newfoundland government policy to get people to relocated from their outport communities to larger settlements where they were promised a brighter future in the industrialized Newfoundland that would unfold. When this did not materialize, it led to bitterness and resentment against Joey Smallwood which continue to this day. As Anita put it. "Joey will never make it to heaven for what

he did; he wasn't bad enough to go to Hell, because he really believed in what he was doing."

2. Amber Music has a home page (<http://www.ambermusic.nfnet.com>) where you can meet Anita Best and Pamela Morgan and the other people who have contributed so much to the preservation and advancement of Newfoundland traditional music and traditions. Or you can contact them at:

Amber Music, P.O. Box 156, Topsail, NF A0A 3Y0
Phone: 709-834-1705; FAX: 709-834-5741

3 The home page of the Memorial University's Folklore Archive where Anita was first inspired to take up further studies in archives is at: <http://www.mun.ca/cgi-bin/mfs/03/folklore/munfla.html>

Another collection rich in Newfoundland culture is MUN's Centre for Newfoundland Studies:

[Http://www.mun.ca/library/cns/arch1.htm](http://www.mun.ca/library/cns/arch1.htm)

4. *Come and I will sing you; a Newfoundland Songbook edited by Genevieve Lehr. Songs collected by Genevieve Lehr and Anita Best.* St. John's: Breakwater Books, 1985. 0-8020-2567-6 cloth; 0-8020-6586-4 pbk.

5. *Interpretation of fairy tales; Danish folklore in a European perspective* by Bengt Holbek. Helsinki; Suomalainen Tiedekatemia, Academia Scientiarum Fennic, c1987.

6. *Shyaan Am! Tuvan folktales*, selected and edited by Kira Van Deusen. [Bellingham, Wa: Uagan Books, 1986] 0-9647716-0-8 Address is: Uagan Books, P.O. Box 29374, Bellingham, Wa 98228] \$9.95.

7. Before Confederation, Newfoundland's Day of Remembrance was July 1st, commemorating the battle of Beaumont-Hamel during the Somme campaign of WW1. The Newfoundland Regiment took disastrous casualties.

8. Full text of Little Dickie Milburn as told by Leo O'Brien, transcribed by Kelly Russell, can be found on Pigeon Inlet's website: <http://www.pigeoninlet.nfnet.com/archive.htm>

Elinor Benjamin was born in Nova Scotia and has lived all over the place, from New Brunswick, New York, San Francisco, Copenhagen and London, UK to Ottawa and London, Ont. She has lived in Corner Brook, Newfoundland for nineteen years, where she is a library administrator with the provincial library system. She tells stories because it is the only sane thing to do, given

the way things are in public libraries these days. One of her current interests is Viking mythology, which is not all that surprising as she lives only five hours drive from the Viking site at L'Anse aux Meadows. She serves on the Board of Directors of Theatre Newfoundland Labrador, teaches belly dancing, tries to play the fiddle and to grow things where they don't want to grow. She is married to mathematician, Ron Richards, who is a terrific cook, and also tries to grow things where they don't want to grow.

Originally published in Applesseed Quarterly, The Canadian Journal of Storytelling, 1998

Noted Gaelic language singer Mary Jane Lamond will be teaching two sessions on Gaelic song (one for youth and one for adults) at the Highland Village Museum in Iona, Cape Breton, this August:

August 7 to 9, 10:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m.: Young Singers (suggested ages 12-16);

August 21 to 24, 10:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m.: Songs and History.

For more information contact:
Highland Village Museum, 4119 Highway 223, Iona, N.S. B2C 1A3; (902) 725-2272; 725-2227 (fax);
highlandvillage@gov.ns.ca;
<http://highlandvillage-museum.gov.ns.ca>