“Such a thing as writing a book”: The Making of William Morris Barnes’s Autobiography

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William Morris Barnes was born in St John’s, Newfoundland, in 1850. Aged eleven he sailed to Brazil aboard a vessel owned by his father which was loaded with salt fish. Homeward-bound, when Barnes’s ship stopped in New York, he was unaware that during his retirement in the same city some 70 years later he would meet a woman who would help him immortalize his life in autobiography. Will Barnes’s life story came to me in the form of *Rolling Home: When Ships Were Ships and Not Tin Pots*,¹ a green cloth-bound volume published by London’s Cassell & Company in 1931. The autobiography, nearly 500 pages in length, is filled with tales of Barnes’s life in the merchant marine. That a sailor should write an autobiography was by no means exceptional. The historian David Alexander has noted that seafarers produced memoirs at a rate “far larger without doubt than can be found for any other sector of the economy.”² What, then, makes *Rolling Home* so special? The long answer lies in Barnes’s contradictory identity: he was an officer and a Newfoundlander, but he often diminished the importance of those categories and adopted a skilled working-class manhood he felt defined him better as a manly, experienced seafarer. The not quite *short* answer to what makes Barnes’s autobiography different from the others produced by seafarers involves the circumstances surrounding the creation of his book.

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1 William Morris Barnes, *Rolling Home: When Ships Were Ships and Not Tin Pots* (London: Cassell & Co., 1931).

2 David Alexander, “Literacy Among Canadian and Foreign Seamen, 1863–1899,” in *Working Men Who Got Wet*, ed. Rosemary Ommer and Gerald Panting ([St. John’s]: Maritime History Group, Memorial University of Newfoundland, 1980), 3.

The real mystery of *Rolling Home*'s publication became apparent as my research into the issues of identity in the autobiography picked up speed in the fall of 2009. In his book, Barnes takes the reader right up to his present, 1930, in New York and includes his meeting with the woman he credits as encouraging him to "write" his life story. Here I use the word write with caution because Barnes did not actually put his own story into writing; though he was literate and did make extensive use of notebooks, *Rolling Home* was primarily a transcription from a series of Dictaphone cylinders.³ The woman he met in Abingdon Square invited Barnes to her home and encouraged him to speak his stories into a Dictaphone during 1929. Although she seemed to be crucially important to the creation and publication of the book, she is not named.

I wondered how I would solve this mystery until I discovered that there was another, earlier edition of Barnes's autobiography. This newly identified book, the American edition, entitled *When Ships Were Ships and Not Tin Pots: The Seafaring Adventures of Captain William Morris Barnes*, was published in 1930 in New York by Albert & Charles Boni.⁴ While the differences between the two texts are minimal, what is different is the paratextual material: the American edition contains a dedication and a foreword not included in the later British edition, as well as illustrations by Francis Shields, including a frontispiece.⁵ In this picture Barnes looks down and away from the artist in a way that suggests bashfulness. The etching is quite detailed, and Shields manages to capture Barnes's self-description when he writes, "my head is sculpted, every inch all over" (viii). The most distinctly "sculpted" aspect of his face is the scar on his cheek where a bullet exited his jaw when he was abandoning the torpedoed ship *Saxonian* during the war.⁶ Most significant for me, however, is the

3 Barnes, *Rolling Home*, 466.

4 Barnes, *When Ships Were Ships and Not Tin Pots: The Seafaring Adventures of Captain William Morris Barnes* (New York: Albert & Charles Boni, 1930). Albert & Charles Boni will be hereafter Boni. All further references are to this edition and are cited in the text.

5 There are no illustrations in *Rolling Home*; the few in *When Ships Were Ships* are either visual interpretations of the text or images of seafaring life. See Barnes, *When Ships Were Ships*, v, 138, 141, 190, 243, 250, 258, 278, 309, 315, 334, 348, 364, 371, 381, 410, and 466. Barnes's portrait, on page v, is captioned "Wild Will Barnes," but his shy pose, button-up shirt, and bow tie suggest that this moniker was dated.

6 "There's a hole gone through from the right side of the cheek and out through the left side ... it was caused by either a bullet or a very small piece of shrapnel,

dedication that identifies the woman who helped Barnes produce the book and credits her as editor. Barnes writes, "I dedicate this book to Hilda Renbold Wortman as a mark of my great respect and gratitude to her for past favors and the trouble that she had with this book; and as it was she that first put it into my head to write a book of my life, as such a thing as writing a book would be the last thing that ever entered my head" (v).

Hilda Renbold was born in London in 1899, but her family immigrated to the United States in 1907. Her father worked as a photographer for Thomas Edison, who tested his early movie cameras on Hilda and her siblings.⁷ In 1929, when she met Barnes in Abingdon Square, she had recently married Denys Wortman, an artist who published cartoons in the *New York World*, a New York paper produced by Scripps Howard.⁸ This circumstance was crucial for the meeting of author and editor.

Abingdon Square is on Twelfth Street, in Greenwich Village. Barnes sets the scene for his meeting with Wortman: "I sat down and I began to fill my pipe to have a smoke and noticed this lady and she seemed to be working at a paper and every now and the she'd look up. I began thinking to myself, 'She's drawing a picture of this place and I don't want to be seen sitting down here in this park – I'd just as soon be out of that picture'" (458–59). Barnes, however, was still curious, and had to see what she was drawing. Wortman noticed him glancing over her shoulder for a look.

Perhaps it was Barnes's prominent scar that led Wortman to ask if he was a sailor, and if he had ever gone whaling or sealing. Barnes's physical appearance was often the lead-in for him to tell a stranger his stories. "She guessed [my history] by the look of me," he declares in the text (459), echoing the physical description of minor disfigurements he had made in the foreword, where he

I don't know which because I hadn't time to run after it to find out" (Barnes, *When Ships Were Ships*, viii).

7 Obituary of Hilda Wortman, *The Boston Globe* (city edition), 1 May 1992.

8 When the Duke and Mopey Dick cartoons were first published, this publication would have been known as the *New York World-Telegram*, but Wortman began working there when it was owned by the heirs of Joseph Pulitzer and called simply the *World*. It was purchased by Scripps Howard in early 1931. Wortman was still publishing cartoons when the *World-Telegram* merged with the *Sun*, becoming the *New York World-Telegram and the Sun* in 1950. See Denys Wortman VIII, "About Denys Wortman," *Welcome to the Two Worlds of Denys Wortman*, http://www.dwortman.com/about_denys.htm.

concluded: "that's about all the scars I can think of, so if anybody now that reads this, meets me on the street, they will know me" (ix).

The look of Barnes, his visual appearance as a hardy, seasoned working man, was important to Wortman because of what she was doing in Abingdon Square: collecting material for her husband to use in his cartoons. As her son would later remark, Hilda Wortman was "my father's primary idea person. She would sit on park benches and listen to the conversations around her, reporting back to my father the phrases and conversations that she overheard. From these and other captions, he would create the image, the atmosphere and the surrounding [*sic*] that would communicate the idea visually."⁹ Through this meeting, Barnes became the inspiration for one of Denys Wortman's most famous cartoon characters, Mopey Dick, who was the companion of the Duke, based on Wortman himself. These two men were presented as members of the New York working class, who used their plebeian wisdom to offer commentary on New York life, often rendering the so-called important issues of the day ridiculous. In one example, the two shabbily dressed men walk into a car dealership and declare, "We've come to buy an expensive car with no down payment."¹⁰ Many other examples show the men sitting on a park bench with newspapers in hand (Figure 1).

Denys Wortman's status as a beloved New York cartoonist provided me with more than several visual representations of Barnes. His fame was also my link to his wife since their son, Denys Wortman VIII, has created a website about his father and his work, which also makes a point of emphasizing his mother's significance in his father's creative process. His respect for his mother's work, and for Barnes, was apparent when I spoke to him on the telephone. He had saved her papers and one wax cylinder from *When Ships Were Ships*, and they arrived in St John's recently. Hilda Wortman's papers include several stages of her revision and transcription process, a small amount of material not included in the final manuscript that she sent to the Boni publishing firm, as well as 10 composition books filled by Barnes. All this material is now in a public collection.¹¹

Among these papers are indications that Wortman worked hard to maintain a sense of Barnes's accent in its transition from spoken

9 Denys Wortman VIII, "About Denys Wortman."

10 Denys Wortman VIII, "Home," *Welcome to the Two Worlds of Denys Wortman*.

11 Hilda Renbold Wortman Papers, Unaccessioned Box, Maritime History Archive (MHA), St John's.

Figure 1: A Mopey Dick and the Duke cartoon by Denys Wortman, originally published in the *New York World-Telegram*, 14 April 1947, with this caption: “Oh, well, Mopey, what’s a measly coupla billion dollars, anyway?”
 Courtesy of Denys Wortman VIII.

word to text: she made lists of abbreviations of words like “topm’st” (topmast), “t’gallant” (topgallant), and “mainsa’l” (mainsail) to keep his voice consistent and precise.¹² More research needs to be done here, looking at her notes, transcriptions, and editing in comparison with the printed text, but the volume of papers demonstrates that Wortman was seriously dedicated to the project, and a rejection slip from another publisher reveals that she fought to keep Barnes’s autobiography from being reduced to one or two anecdotes rather

12 Wortman Papers, folder “Misc. Notes and Scraps,” MHA.

than the full-length book which was finally published.¹³ What her notes seem to indicate is that she initially sent Barnes's 1928 composition books to publishers and these were rejected. She rented the Dictaphone in April 1929, after these negative responses. Why Wortman made this decision is unknown, but perhaps she felt that an autobiography more clearly invoking Barnes's voice and storytelling capabilities would be more marketable. *Harper's Magazine* had suggested that Barnes was "not capable of putting [the manuscript] into available form" and perhaps this is what made Wortman try a different approach from having Barnes write his life story.

Why the British version *Rolling Home* neglected to credit Wortman with the editorship is still a mystery. Fewer pages to print might have been a consideration, but Cassell & Company published the text on better quality paper than Boni, and leaving out the ten pages of dedication and foreword could hardly have saved them much time or money. One wonders how much say Wortman had in the British publication.

Little information exists on how Barnes's book was received in Newfoundland after its publication. The American edition ran to fewer than 1,500 copies; no numbers are available for the British edition. There is evidence that genealogists and local historians knew the book existed and often used it as a resource.¹⁴ English and folklore scholars also recognized the unique oral quality of the autobiography: William Kirwin referred to the street terminology used in *When Ships Were Ships* to describe the development of street names in St John's.¹⁵ Newfoundland publications generally cite the British rather than the American edition, which suggests that it was this volume which was mainly available. Kirwin did use the New York edition, however, and one of the American copies in Memorial University's Centre for Newfoundland Studies was owned by Newfoundland's first premier, Joey Smallwood.

13 It was rejected by *Harper's Magazine* in November 1928 and by *Collier's: The National Weekly* in March 1929 for being too long. See Wortman Papers, folder "Publishing Information," MHA.

14 See, for example, P.K. Devine, *Ye Olde St. John's, 1750-1936* (St John's: Newfoundland Directories, 1936), 30-31, 134, <http://collections.mun.ca/u/?cns,29735>; and "Newhook, Jonas N.," in *The Encyclopedia of Newfoundland and Labrador*, ed. Cyril F. Poole and Rubert Cuff (St John's, Harry Cuff Publications, 1993), 4: 73.

15 William Kirwin, "Lines, Coves, and Squares in Newfoundland Names," *American Speech* 40 (October 1965): 168.

When Ships Were Ships is the embodiment in book form of fascinating stories. In it, Barnes recalls his life, reliving many trials and excitements. The skill with which Barnes told those stories highlights the importance of oral storytelling in his everyday life. It took Wortman to see that his tale could be put into print and thus *When Ships Were Ships* was also the product of her dedication. When Barnes's life story as a conventional written autobiography failed to attract publishers, Wortman adapted the relatively new technology of the Dictaphone to capture what had made Barnes interesting to her in the first place: his storytelling ability.

SOMMAIRE

À la suite d'une rencontre fortuite dans un parc de la ville de New York, le marin à la retraite de Terre-Neuve, William Morris Barnes, se retrouva du jour au lendemain dans le monde de l'édition new-yorkaise. Il servit de modèle à Mopey Dick, personnage de bandes dessinées (*Mopey Dick and the Duke*), créées par Denys Wortman et publiées dans un journal de la ville de New York entre les années 1930 et 1950. Avec l'appui de Hilda Renbold Wortman, Barnes se mit à écrire son autobiographie dont une édition américaine parut en 1930 et une britannique en 1931. Cette étude décrit l'ouvrage en devenir ainsi que les efforts déployés par l'éditrice Hilda Wortman en vue de maintenir dans son intégralité la prose colorée des récits de Barnes.