The Newfoundland Poetry Anthology: Dialect Literature as Carrier of Cultural Identity

STEPHANIE McALLISTER
University of Toronto

Introduction

Newfoundland English was influenced by multiple dialects and languages by virtue of the province’s once thriving fishery, which attracted emigrants from Great Britain and other parts of Europe. The dialect of English which arose under these conditions is one aspect of the unique culture that developed over the centuries that Newfoundland remained a highly isolated dominion of the United Kingdom. In the years preceding the referendum for joining confederation, Newfoundland culture, and its distinctness from that of mainland Canada or Great Britain, became an important part of the political debate. One means of tracing the position of dialect in terms of Newfoundland culture, and the degree to which Newfoundlanders felt comfortable using dialect as a way of asserting their unique cultural heritage, is to examine the way in which dialect features are utilized in the province’s literature. More specifically, poetry composed and published in the years surrounding the referendum to join Canada is especially important as it participates in the political debate both directly, as well as by virtue of the interplay of culture and national politics. These poems, and more specifically the anthologies and collections within which they appear, demonstrate a degree of anxiety about the way in which ‘non-standard’ dialects can celebrate and assert cultural difference while at the same time threatening to position that culture negatively in relation to the ‘Standard.’

History and Development of Newfoundland and Its Dialect(s)

Newfoundland was settled by Europeans beginning in 1583, and according to Sandra Clarke, who has done extensive work in the study of Newfoundland’s language development, it is the first English-speaking colony in North America (Clarke 2004b, 352). For the most part, these settlers came from south-western England and Ireland. Schneider notes that settlers from south-western England arrived in the sixteenth century, while settlers from south-eastern Ireland emigrated, for the most part, in the eighteenth century. These speakers, Schneider notes, constituted the ‘two massive IDG settler streams’ which developed into what is now
called Newfoundland English (Schneider 2007, 238). These groups settled along the shore of the island in the various coves which were ideal for fishing—the area’s most, if not only, vibrant industry for several centuries.

These two dialects, however, do not constitute the only linguistic influences on Newfoundland English. Richard Bailey gives a concise and useful description of these influences:

...through contacts along the Grand Banks, [English] contributed to the growth of an Atlantic creole in which English vocabulary and structure joined with contributions from Breton, French, Portuguese, and Spanish. Little is known of the contact language that developed in northern fisheries, but vocabulary that survives suggest its diversity and constitutes the first of the ‘Canadianisms’ of English. (Bailey 1982, 137)

In Bailey’s model, then, the main IDG strains of SW England and Ireland were supplemented with other dialects to create a unique form of English suited to the island’s economic interests. He goes so far as to categorize this form of English as a creole, which suggests that the influence of these other languages was quite significant. This emphasizes the difference between mainland Canadian English, where British and Irish dialects were also influential, and Newfoundland English.

Despite the many influences on Newfoundland dialect, it is generally accepted amongst scholars that the main influences remain dialects from SW England and Ireland. While the fact that two English dialects are the basis of Newfoundland English may seem to suggest that it is not so very far removed from the rest of Canada, the fact that no Loyalists emigrated to Newfoundland (or at least not in significant numbers) is considered one of the significant ways in which Newfoundland and Canadian Englishes differ. American Loyalists arriving in the late 18th century had a considerable impact on language development in Canada (Schneider 2007, 238).

This speaks to the relative isolation that Newfoundlanders experienced from mainland Canada, and to their isolation from other cultural centres. Newfoundland remained a remote, and largely self-sufficient, colony of the United Kingdom until it became the youngest province of Canada when it joined the confederation in 1949. Almost all scholars of Newfoundland English make a point of highlighting this conservatism as an important feature of the dialect (including Schneider, Bailey, Clarke, and Avis). Clarke asserts that ‘the extremely localized nature of its immigrant population sets Newfoundland apart from much of mainland North America’ and that ‘[f]rom a linguistic perspective, these geographical, socioeconomic and demographic factors have had a conservative effect’ (Clarke 2004b, 366-7). Overall studies of Canadian English in encyclopaedias of the English language, for example, often end their quite abbreviated discussions of Newfoundland English with disclaimers regarding it uniqueness and conservatism that justify the fact that the island is not mentioned in the larger discussion of Canadian English. Schneider, for example, ends his brief discussion of Newfoundland English by arguing that ‘the connections between the NE off-shore island [Newfoundland] and the mainland were weak for a long time....Hence, in the following discussion I will largely exclude
This island’ (2007, 238). Such justifications only highlight the island’s unusual position in terms of language development.

While isolation and conservatism are important qualities of the island’s English, these same circumstances characterised the relationship between communities within the island itself. The superabundance of cod surrounding the island provided a seemingly inexhaustible source of income, and so small communities sprung up all along the coast, occupying many of the coves which were ideal places from which to fish. These communities remained quite self-sustaining, and the interaction between these areas was limited. Since joining confederation in 1949, the isolation between the island and the mainland has slowly been reduced, and more recent studies by scholars like Boberg, D’arcy, and Clarke suggest that those living in the urban centre of St. John’s, especially youth, are developing a much more Standard Canadian English in their speech. The essential collapse of the fishery, at least in comparison with its former supremacy, along with the Resettlement Program in the 1960s, has forced many of the smaller outport area residents to relocate to the more urban centres, resulting in a move towards a more homogenized Newfoundland dialect located in these urban centres. This urbanized dialect, in turn, is becoming heavily influenced by Canadian English.

The fact that Newfoundland was largely isolated from other cultural centres resulted in a culture that is as unique as its dialect. This sense of identity could be threatened by the significant political and cultural changes inherent in joining confederation, and the subsequent move towards centralized urban communities through the dissolution of the outport system. It is this preoccupation with Newfoundland identity that I aim to explore through my reading of the island’s poetry written around the time of Newfoundland’s confederation with Canada. The unusual interaction between ‘Standard’ English and Newfoundland English within the canon of the island’s poetry offers a means of recognizing how artists are representing or engaging with the shifting cultural and political position of Newfoundland through language.

Representations of Dialect in Literature

Before beginning any discussion of the specifics of the island’s poetry, it is important to examine the ways in which literature can be seen to represent specific cultures, and how it can be employed as a means of asserting, affirming, or communicating anxieties about cultural (and linguistic) difference. To suggest that poetry is an unproblematic way of celebrating and disseminating aspects of a particular culture is to ignore the possible political and ideological ramifications. The use of dialect features in poetry is one especially powerful means of honouring and representing a particular cultural identity. These features, while they highlight an important and formative part of that identity, are implicated in political considerations, not only in cultural exchange.

In her useful overview of scholarship, ‘Dialect Representations in Texts’, Joan Beal outlines some of the ongoing debates regarding the significance of attempts by authors to communicate dialect difference in literature. She notes that these representations only become problematic ‘when the language concerned has been standardized and there is a norm for the written usage against which dialects are judged to be deviant or different’ (Beal 2006, 531). In this formation, Beal is recognizing the dual potential inherent in the representation of dialect
features. On the one hand, attempts to record the dialect could simply signal a desire to
differentiate this particular dialect from the ‘Standard’, and position its speaker as ‘non-
standard’, and thus a member of a marginalized group. Beal, however, notes that scholars have
also recognised that these assertions of difference in terms of language can be interpreted as, or
utilized by the author for the purposes of, highlighting the language as deviating from the
‘Standard’, and therefore the norm.

Studies of reader’s responses to orthography that attempt to reproduce a particular
dialect are also useful in terms of understanding how and when these techniques are
interpreted as ‘deviant’ rather than ‘different’. Alexandra Jaffe and Shana Walton conducted
one such study in which they asked volunteers to read texts whose orthography represented a
‘non-standard’ dialect: that of Southern Americans. In their conclusions, they note ‘that the use
of non-standard orthographies to represent features of non-standard speech runs the risk of
delegitimizing the non-standard code’s claim to be a language (to be “like” the “standard”)
(Jaffe and Walton 2000, 582). The representation of a dialect, then, has the potential to place a
dialect, and by extension its speakers, in a marginalized and stigmatized position.

Jaffe, in her introduction to an issue of the *Journal of Sociolinguistics* on ‘non-standard’
orthography and speech, also tends to see representations of dialect in texts as risking being viewed as deviant. She concludes by asserting that ‘every use of a non-standard form is colored by histories of representational practice which...overwhelmingly link non-standard spellings with stigmatized social identities’ (Jaffe 2000, 511). These ‘histories’ allude to the ways in which the dialect has been represented in texts which are written by speakers of the ‘Standard’, and which were therefore used to differentiate the speakers of the ‘non-standard’ within the text, often for the purposes of highlighting their inferiority. Such texts, Jaffe argues, ‘are almost always subject to “darker” interpretations based on the well-known stereotypical conventions that link linguistic non-standardness with stigma’ (Jaffe 2000, 509). This potential for stigma also threatens those texts which are written by the very speakers of the dialect they aim to represent. Readers may have, as a result of the long tradition of dialect as a marker of inferiority, a tendency to view these texts in the same light.

Beal also recognizes this risk when she makes a point of differentiating between dialect
literature and literary dialect as she turns her overview towards artistic language. Drawing on
Shorrocks, Beal defines dialect literature as literature which is written entirely, or largely, in
dialect, while literary dialect represents ‘non-standard’ speech within a text which is written, for
the most part, in the ‘Standard’. Both Shorrocks and Beal recognise that dialect literature is
often more sophisticated, and is also directed towards other speakers of that ‘non-standard’
dialect. The representation of dialect in text is especially difficult, and sometimes requires that
the reader have some degree of familiarity with the dialect in question. Dialect literature, then,
is an attempt to communicate as an insider, rather than as an outsider who appropriates the
dialect for the purposes of their narrative. This literature demonstrates a desire to celebrate, or
perhaps legitimize, a particular dialect and by extension its culture and people. Nevertheless,
the danger remains that dialect literature could be interpreted by outside readers in a similar
way as literary dialect, by virtue of the long history of dialect features as indicators of
inferiority.
The use of dialect in literature brings with it even more complications than does the representation of dialect in other kinds of texts, as literature is so closely tied to cultural representation. In her study of Hawai’ian Creole English, Suzanne Romaine recognises that Hawai’ian Creole English is used in literature written by Hawai’ians as a means of representing the unique identity of a colonized people: ‘Writing in HCE becomes, in the terms of lePage & Tabouret-Keller, an “act of identity”’ (Romaine 1994, 533). Through the use of a creole, the author is asserting a particular cultural identity of which a unique language is only one part, but nonetheless a component that is useful in communicating that identity.

The question of who the author is communicating to is a complicated one. For the purposes of her study, Romaine asserts that ‘Creoles, like other minority languages and non-standard varieties, are symbolic of familiar, intimate, and solidary relations among in-group members’ (Romaine 1994, 546). The use of the dialect in literature seems to be, in one way, addressed to the group of speakers themselves as a way of reinforcing the importance of language in terms of their collective cultural identity. On the other hand, there is a sense in which the literature is simultaneously directed at an audience of outsiders to which this marginalized identity is being compared, and buttressed against. By celebrating this identity in literature, there is an attempt to assert the uniqueness and worth of the identity that the literature is conveying.

Romaine’s allusion to ‘minority languages and non-standard varieties’ alongside Creoles is essential to any discussion of a dialect variation like Newfoundland English. She takes into account not only the languages of colonized peoples, but ‘non-standard’ dialects more generally. While it is important to nuance any discussion of these theories in order to take into account the differences between Newfoundland and other colonies, there is nonetheless a precedent to viewing language as a marker of identity within contexts where the colony is not necessarily one with a history of slavery or racial hierarchies. Romaine also alludes to Scots dialect and working class New York accents in her article. Newfoundland has been marginalized on the basis of socio-economic factors and isolation, rather than in terms of racial identities. The degree of shared experience amongst Newfoundlanders as a result of their isolation and widespread economic troubles creates a cultural and linguistic identity that is marginalized.

Literature cannot be seen as an unproblematic means of preserving the ‘non-standard’, and by extension a cultural identity, through text. There is always an anxiety about the way in which this ‘non-standard’ will be viewed and judged by the ‘Standard’. Even though a work of dialect literature may aim to celebrate its dialect, there is always the possibility that this attempt at celebration could be interpreted negatively as a result of a tradition of literary dialect, and a history of viewing ‘non-standard’ dialects as ‘deviations’ of the more prestigious ‘Standard.’ The authors from these marginalized groups are often forced to consider whether or not to reproduce their dialect within their work, as such a project risks having this dialect viewed negatively, rather than as another feature of the culture that is being explored through the text.
Newfoundland Art Scene and Confederation

In order to examine the use of dialect in literature produced by Newfoundlanders, it is helpful to consider the political and cultural environment. As noted above, the production of literature, especially that produced by the members of marginalized groups, cannot be fully divorced from political considerations. Of particular interest in terms of Newfoundland literature is the period surrounding the island’s confederation with Canada in 1949. It is significant that literature and culture became key issues during the province’s most dynamic political moment. In my later discussion and close reading of poetry, anthologies of poetry written in the years just before and after 1949 are my most fruitful sources. Before moving on to more detailed analysis of the literature, however, a discussion of the political climate at this time will allow for an understanding of why literature became a preoccupation, and how it was being viewed by both Newfoundlanders and mainland Canadians.

The most contentious political debate before 1949 dealt with whether or not Newfoundland should join Canada, remain a dominion of the United Kingdom, or become its own sovereign nation. The debate, however, tended to be waged between those who supported becoming a province of Canada, and those who saw Newfoundland as its own nation with stronger cultural and political ties to the United Kingdom than to its closest geographical neighbours. Those Newfoundlanders who wanted to become part of Canada often did so in consideration of the economic hardships that were facing the island at this time, and the unfeasibility of maintaining a sovereign nation under these circumstances, rather than as a result of any feelings of particular attachment to Canada in terms of a shared culture. Those who championed the idea of Newfoundland sovereignty often focused on the cultural differences between Newfoundland and mainland Canada.

The Newfoundland nationalist movement often expressed its views in terms of a desire to preserve Newfoundland’s culture and its people’s way of life. In his article ‘Vernacular Song, Cultural Identity, and Nationalism in Newfoundland, 1920-1955’, E. David Gregory examines the use of song in these political campaigns, and suggests that ‘songs reflected elements of national culture’ (Gregory 2004, 6). In order to promote the idea of forming a sovereign nation, the unique qualities of that nation needed to be fostered and extolled, both in campaign literature and rhetoric, as well as in their rallying cries. By promoting patriotism and unity, the nationalist movement made a strong stand in the referendum. While the majority voted for confederation, they did so by only 6,989 votes out of a total of 149,657 cast (Gregory 2004, 5). It is clear that a desire for nationhood, or at least a desire to remain independent from Canada, was very strong. This can be connected, to some degree, with the campaign promoting the uniqueness of Newfoundland’s culture.

While the celebration of Newfoundland’s culture was an effective tool in the fight for national sovereignty, those supporting confederation with Canada did not abandon such an approach. They participated in a similar venture. J. R. Smallwood, who was the leader of the movement which promoted union with Canada, was especially interested in promoting Newfoundland culture. One way in which Smallwood worked to promote this was through his radio programme ‘The Barrelman’. This program was sponsored by Francis O’Leary, a businessman who was as involved in the political debate surrounding confederation as was
Smallwood. In his article ‘Constructing Community and Consumers: Joseph R. Smallwood’s Barrelman Radio Programme’, Jeff A. Webb differentiates the two men’s views on confederation by stating that: ‘[Smallwood] did not deny the viability of Newfoundlanders, only the viability of the Newfoundland state. This is in contrast to O’Leary’s nationalism which focussed on the return of responsible government as its goal’ (Webb 1997, 186). In this way, Webb sees both men as nationalist, even though their individual political aims may have differed.

The larger goal of the Barrelman program was to foster and promote the unique cultural identity of Newfoundland, and it did so with two of its driving forces on opposite sides of the confederation debate. Strengthening this identity seemed to be beneficial for both parties in that it would help to make an argument for sovereignty based on the island’s apparent cultural incongruity with the mainland, or it would present this culture as resilient enough to survive and flourish even after the province was incorporated into Canada. Webb suggests that Smallwood ‘could reconcile nationalism and union with Canada because he had decided that the form of government did not matter as long as there was a cultural transformation of Newfoundland’ (Webb 1997, 186). This ‘cultural transformation’, of which the radio programme was to be a catalyst, was based on a celebration of Newfoundland culture through the recollection of oral tradition asserting a distinctive and venerable cultural history.

This desire to promote Newfoundland culture led to an increase in artistic production, not the least of which was literary. After his election as the first premier of Newfoundland, Smallwood instituted the Arts and Letters Competition, which continued the focus on preserving Newfoundland culture as ‘a programme of awards for historical essays on Newfoundland, for poetry, the short story, portraiture, landscape painting, radio scripts and drama to replace the O’Leary competition’ (Rompkey 1998, 271). It is clear that, despite joining confederation, the preservation of Newfoundland culture, as opposed to the promotion of a homogenized Canadian culture, was still very important, especially in light of the slender majority won in the referendum, and the desire not to lose that culture because of economic necessity.

The celebratory aspect of this cultural promotion may appear to be an important way of avoiding homogenization through absorption into the larger cultural landscape of Canada. This undertaking, however, is not unproblematic. This is evidenced by one of the listener responses to ‘The Barrelman’ that Webb quotes at length in his article. While the show was meant to foster pride in Newfoundland culture, there is a clear anxiety about the way in which they may be viewed by an outside audience, and how this perception could be reflected in political and economic relationships. Smallwood’s anonymous listener admonishes him by asking if he ‘thinks the intelligence of the people of this country has reached such a low ebb’ by:

broadcasting such nonsense and silliness. I wonder what the people of Canada or the U.S.A. would think....This Country is well known for its illiteracy and undoubtedly you are doing your best to foster this belief....If you have no consideration for the intelligence of the people of this country at least you might remember that people from other parts might be listening to the rubbish that you broadcast. (qtd. in Webb 1997, 184)
This listener is obviously preoccupied with the way in which the island is viewed by outsiders, most importantly Canadians and Americans. There is already a pre-existing anxiety about how Newfoundland is perceived by its neighbours, and attempts to canonize a unique cultural tradition run the risk of being interpreted negatively.

In much the same way that dialect literature risks being viewed negatively in comparison with literature in the ‘Standard’, artistic productions inspired by a marginalized cultural identity are sometimes judged negatively, especially by an audience of outsiders. Responses to this art add further to the anxieties felt by the artist, who is negotiating how to represent the marginalized culture to which s/he belongs. Even before this literature is produced, members of a marginalized group, like Smallwood’s listener, may anticipate such a response, thereby pre-empting attempts to write explicitly as a member of a marginalized group, be it by means of dialect features or not. While this anticipatory response on the part of Smallwood’s listener could be interpreted as somewhat paranoid, or at least as an overreaction, such reactions can be justified on the basis of the way in which Newfoundland culture was being characterized by critics and writers from Canada.

One example of a negative response to Newfoundland’s artistic production post-confederation can be found in an article by Paul West in Saturday Night magazine on March 3, 1962. This magazine was based out of Toronto, and so its perspective is important in terms of how Newfoundland artists and art was being viewed by Canadian commentators in the metropolitan heart of the country. In this oft-pretentious and patronizing article entitled ‘Walden Pond and Late Rome: The Arts in St. John’s, Newfoundland’, West outlines what he sees as the key issues facing Newfoundland artists in what he considers their struggle for a position in the ‘legitimate’ art scene:

St. John’s is now provincial, not parochial, and those people resolved to shove it forward into the mid-century muddle deserve all the help they can get. Again, St. John’s needs art critics; not blithe admirers of pretty paintings, but stern analysts and even articulate mockers. (West 1962, 22)

It appears throughout this article that West is blithely offering himself up as an ‘articulate mocker’[, and his analysis focuses, for the most part, on denigrating and dismissing the nature of the art scene in St. John’s, and campaigning for a full overhaul that would introduce Newfoundlanders to the ‘True’ artistic productions of the outside world.

West’s argument does not simply compare the art produced by Newfoundlanders to his ideal vision of what art should be, but sees Newfoundland art as an extension of a backwardness in Newfoundland culture more generally. Artistic production is not easily divorced from cultural and political considerations. West’s criticism of the art bleeds into his criticism of Newfoundland itself, a place he characterizes as a ‘waste land[[]] newly reclaimed. But, as yet, little built upon’ (West 1962, 23). His dismissal of Newfoundland culture reaches its height in his brief discussion of Newfoundland speech: ‘Daily, on TV as on the local radio, prolix heavy-throaters pervert the English language; students listen, then quote the wiseacres to their teachers and think the world is made of shouts’ (West 1962, 23). The dialect of Newfoundland, as viewed by an outsider, is characterized as a perversion of an idealized, and
‘Standard’, English pronunciation and tone. This dialect is considered to be one of the barriers to ‘true’ artistic production in Newfoundland, rather than as a feature of the culture that is integral to the communication and preservation of a unique identity.

Dialect, as a hindrance to artistic expression, is also alluded to by Sandra Gwyn, whose article ‘The Newfoundland Renaissance’ appeared in *Saturday Night* magazine fourteen years after West’s. This article centres on what Gwyn sees as a rebirth of Newfoundland culture after the dissolution of the outports, and the resulting urbanization, in the 1960s. While Gwyn’s article seems to lean towards a celebration of Newfoundland’s art scene, it is nonetheless infected with a similar belief in Newfoundland’s backwardness as it privileges the urbanization of the island with the increase in artistic production, and refers, in its subtitle, to the island as ‘Canada’s poor, bald rock’ (Gwyn 1976, 38). While this subtitle may appear playful, the article as a whole does not fully escape such a perception or characterization of the island.

Gwyn divides her discussion between visual art, theatre, and writing (which she deals with last). Although her article has a congratulatory tone in its overview of developments in the visual arts and theatre, her analysis of the literature produced is less upbeat:

> But Newfoundland prose and poetry, when it reaches the mainland, travels with considerably less assurance than theatre or painting. One reason, I think, is that while Newfoundland dialect and speech patterns work fine on stage, in print they tend to look provincial and quaint. (Gwyn 1976, 45)

Gwyn’s hypothesis regarding the relative success of drama over prose or poetry is only dealt with in this brief statement, but she is nonetheless touching on a very complex issue. Her intuition speaks to the divide between written and spoken language that exposes the ‘Standard’, as a concept, to closer scrutiny. On the printed page, the ‘Standard’ language can be more easily separated from the particular sounds and pronunciations of which oral language is constituted. The written ‘Standard’ has no clear connection to a particular spoken form, and so it is perhaps more jarring for the reader to encounter deviations from the ‘Standard’ in print than it is on the stage, as different dialects are more often heard than read.

Whether or not Gwyn is correct in her diagnosis of the relative ‘quaintness’ of written versus performed Newfoundland speech is for the most part unimportant. The fact that she detects a different response on the part of the audience, however, is key in terms of my focus on the ways in which dialect is represented in Newfoundland poetry. The prose and poetry she alludes to is only that which includes specific dialect features, and which can therefore be interpreted as either ‘quaint’ or ‘provincial’. It is this kind of prose and poetry which is most clearly alienated from mainstream Canadian art, and is, unlike prose or poetry not written in dialect, less successful outside of the province. It is responses like Gwyn’s and West’s, though Gwyn’s is far more even-handed, that articulate responses by outside audiences that may have an influence on Newfoundland artists, and those Newfoundlanders who work to promote the province’s unique culture and identity through art. The possible anxieties that arise from anticipating or encountering such responses, I think, can be traced through a closer examination of the island’s artistic productions.
The Newfoundland Poetry Anthology

Any survey of Newfoundland’s artistic productions would be extensive, and is far beyond the scope of my analysis. Instead, a closer examination of the island’s poetry, especially in the years surrounding confederation, will offer insight into the ways in which poets, and their promoters, dealt with the anxieties surrounding the act of producing literature as a member of a marginalized group. An analysis of the dialect features in these poems, or the lack thereof, highlights some of the ways in which the representation of unique identities is approached by artists and arts promoters.

A fruitful source for poetry to examine is an anthology of the winners of the annual O’Leary Newfoundland Poetry Award between 1944 and 1952. The collection spans important years before and after the 1949 referendum. The O’Leary Poetry Award was judged by a committee comprised of faculty in the English Department at Memorial University, and headed by Dr. A. C. Hunter. This anthology represents a clear desire within the province to foster a home-grown and distinct collection of poetry through a publisher’s note, introduction, two letters of commendation from important Newfoundland figures (including Premier J. R. Smallwood), and a foreword. All of this introductory material alludes to the importance of creating this volume as a means of preserving these poems in order to communicate, to the rest of the world as well as to Newfoundlander itself, the literary merit and potential of Newfoundland.

The prefaces and introductions celebrate Newfoundland culture, and view this anthology as a means of fostering pride in Newfoundlander, and respect on the part of outsiders, for the island’s literary productions. In A. C. Hunter’s foreword, he deals directly with language as one of the features of Newfoundland culture which will be highlighted through the publication of the collection:

To no one familiar with the speech of Newfoundland should it be surprising that they command the force, the colour, the pregnancy needed for good verse. The language of this country has not been formalized into an abstract and impersonal correctness, nor has it degenerated into a vulgar slang....An attentive listener will hear the poetical phrase, the poetical image come spontaneously and freshly from the lips of the unsuspecting countryman. (Hunter 1971, xiv)

Hunter is here suggesting that the Newfoundland dialect is, at core, poetic. The outsider is apparently able to recognize a universal poetic nature in the everyday use of this particular dialect.

Although Hunter’s endorsement of the dialect, and the other prefaces’s celebration of the poetry and culture of Newfoundland, seems confident, there is also an undertone of anxiety about the way Newfoundland poetry will be received. Hunter, for instance, notes that it is the ‘attentive’ listener that will recognize the poetry of the dialect, and the prefaces work to remind or prompt the reader to be attentive, and to search for the merit that is in all the poetry collected. By re-iterating such arguments throughout the introductory material, the authors reveal a degree of discomfort about their project. This anxiety is also traceable through a close
reading of the kinds of poetry that were both awarded the O’Leary poetry prize, and subsequently included in the collection.

Most of the poems in the anthology treat Newfoundland landscape or its people and culture as their subject. I isolated these poems from those that do not deal with Newfoundland, even in passing, in order to see to what extent, and in what ways dialect features were employed. I based the inclusion of dialect features on whether or not there was a clear attempt to transcribe speech phonetically (or semi-phonetically), the syntax in a sentence was ‘non-standard’ for the purposes of mimicking the dialect, and/or words were used that are not part of ‘Standard’ English vocabulary. I was also careful to ignore any instances where ‘non-standard’ forms were used for the purposes of the rhyme or meter, and focused on particular dialect features pinpointed by linguists whose work focuses on Newfoundland, or which appear in Story’s dialect dictionary.

The anthology of the O’Leary prize winners was organized in chronological order, and there were some very interesting changes through time. The earlier years showed a clear preference for poetry that celebrated Newfoundland’s culture, landscape, and people, while the later years include more poems which do not clearly engage with Newfoundland culture. Interestingly for my purposes, however, almost all of the poems about Newfoundland do not include clear examples of dialect features, but rather focus on Newfoundland in terms of the images and themes in the poem, and use a highly formal poetic diction. Many of these poems greatly resemble the style and preoccupations of Romantic poetry through a focus on nature, and in terms of meter and word choice.

One example of this stylistic choice is a poem called ‘On Iron Ore’, which is in many ways an ode to one of the natural resources of the island. This style of poetry, however, was not necessarily the most popular approach when these poems were composed and published. They often include cliché poetic language like ‘ne’er’ or thee and thou, which belong to a prestigious British literary tradition. The inclusion of such poetry in the anthology fulfils one of the mandates outlined in the many prefaces in that it justifies Newfoundland poetry, and by extension her poets, by closely tying them to a respected and formal movement in British literature.

The several prefatory articles demonstrate a degree of anxiety regarding the need to ensure that Newfoundland poetry is recognized and accepted outside of the province, and so I think that the inclusion of so many of these highly traditional ballads and lyrics are attempts to do so. On the other hand, however, the focus in the prefaces on Newfoundland as a unique cultural milieu is abandoned to some extent through this approach. Hunter’s emphasis on the poetic nature of the Newfoundland dialect, for example, is almost entirely abandoned in practice. The dialect of Newfoundland is absent, and so it appears that the dialect was simply a means of recognizing the poetic potential of Newfoundlanders that, in formal poetry, would resemble the most prestigious forms.

While the anthology may seem to overlook Newfoundland dialect in favour of a highly formal diction which corresponds to a Romantic tradition of poetry, other poems in the collection do not entirely lack reference to Newfoundland dialect. Another type of poem in this anthology is written in the highly traditional verse but includes some Newfoundland vocabulary. These words, interestingly, are inserted with quotation marks. The effect of these
words, and their typographical format, is often jarring in comparison to the highly formal language, especially those terms which gesture towards a particularly different pronunciation. Such poems seem to be participating in largely the same project as those without dialect features. By including dialect features within quotations marks, the language is documented and displayed in a similar way as are the natural images of landscape that appear in these poems. These examples of the dialect are inserted, and to some degree celebrated, as yet another part of Newfoundland culture, but this language is not deemed to be the appropriate vehicle for poetic expression.

One poem in the anthology, however, includes several features of Newfoundland English, both in terms of vocabulary and semi-phonetic transcription. Don Parson’s ‘Caplin Time’ does not incorporate these features consistently, but there is a clear blurring between what is ‘Standard’ poetic language and what is Newfoundland dialect. Unlike the other poems, where dialect features were mediated through quotation marks in order to separate them from the ‘Standard,’ this poem uses the dialect, at least in part, as a vehicle for poetic expression. In terms of the mandate of the prefaces, this poem does capture aspects of Newfoundland culture, but it does so in a way that distances it from ‘outside’ poetry, and which is perhaps more daring in that it does not call on a certain tradition of poetry to validate its merit. Interestingly, this is the only poem in the anthology which does anything like this, and is also the only poem that is included from a special prize in the competition which is awarded to the best poem written by a tenth or eleventh grader.

The fact that this poem was written by a younger and far less established poet calls into question the compiler’s approach to the use of dialect features. Several of the other poets anthologized here went on to become successful poets, publishing their own collections of poems later on. Georgiana Cooper’s ‘The Deserted Island’, for example, which is anthologized in this O’Leary collection, is the later title poem of her most successful personal collection of poetry. By including Parson’s poem alongside a note positioning it as the work of a younger and less established poet, it seems as though there is some anxiety about whether or not this poem is fully representative of the goals of the O’Leary Prize. This may be a result of the fact that these goals are at times conflicting, in that Newfoundland is to be celebrated at the same time that there is a clearly articulated desire to have the poems be accessible to, and respected by, an outside audience. Parson’s distinctive approach to poetic diction in his poem can be included for its merit, but only after its position in relation to the other poems and poets is clearly articulated on the same page as the poem. Biographical information about the other poets, conversely, is outlined on the final pages as an appendix to the text, and is therefore not necessarily read in conjunction with the author’s contribution.

In terms of the political debate surrounding the referendum, the O’Leary anthology, and the poetry prize, are implicated in both sides of that debate. This position is analogous to that of the Barrelman radio show, which, like the anthology, was influenced by Smallwood and O’Leary, who had opposite viewpoints in terms of Newfoundland sovereignty. Smallwood wrote an introduction for the anthology, and O’Leary financed the poetry prize. The panel of judges—whose political beliefs in terms of confederation are unknown and possibly conflicting—were also involved in the creation of this anthology. Both sides of the debate were invested in the idea of Newfoundland as a distinct cultural force, whether in terms of being
strong enough to weather a union with a larger mainland culture, or as evidence that the island needed to assert its sovereignty. This shared project of celebrating and communicating this identity to Newfoundlanders, as well as to the rest of the world, was inextricably linked with politics and the politics of reception. Anxieties regarding reception are evident not only through the introductory material, but the poems themselves.

In the early part of the twentieth century, there was an insurgence of Newfoundland poetry being published. Another anthology, Gerald S. Doyle’s collection of *Old-Time Songs of Newfoundland*, was amongst the most popular. Doyle was a very successful businessman, and a competitor of O’Leary’s. He also utilized radio to foster a sense of a larger Newfoundland community. His anthology was distributed free of charge, with the inclusion of several advertisements for products which fell under Doyle’s financial interests in health products and medicines. The anthology went into four editions, from 1927-1966, and included a different introduction for each edition, all of which focused on a desire to isolate a poetic tradition in Newfoundland that can be differentiated from that brought over from England. Each new edition included the previous introductions in chronological order. In the introduction for the 1966 edition, F. W. Rowe claims that the songs and ballads of Newfoundlanders ‘mirror their history and culture’ (Rowe 1966, 5). As with the O’Leary Prize anthology, the introductions celebrate the poetic talents of Newfoundland through a collection of songs and ballads which are representative of the rich literary history. This positive tone, however, seems to indicate a similar degree of anxiety about supporting the creation of this anthology as is found in the O’Leary. Both of these collections focus on asserting that contemporary Newfoundland poetry has a strong foundation in either the songs and ballads of the people, or in their naturally poetic way of speaking.

Gerald S. Doyle was ‘a nationalist and a Catholic with Irish roots’, (Gregory 2004, 5) and so he wanted a sovereign Newfoundland nation rather than a continued allegiance to Britain which was reminiscent of home rule in Ireland. The inclusion of the ‘Anti-Confederation Song’ is the clearest indication that this artistic collection is not fully distinguishable from the political concern of the time. Despite the collection’s more clearly demarcated political position, the format of the collection in terms of dialect features is very much the same as the O’Leary collection. The ‘Anti-Confederation Song’, for example, does not include any dialect features. This song is especially interesting in this respect because it was not one of the traditional songs sung in Newfoundland, but rather one produced around the time of the referendum, and can therefore be more closely allied with the poems in the O’Leary collection. This song appears for the first time in the 1966 edition.

These two early, and popular, collections of poetry constitute a foundation for the poetry that was produced on the island in subsequent years. While it would be beyond the scope of this paper to discuss all of the poetry published after 1949, it is clear from investigating a few larger collections of Newfoundland poetry that dialect literature is not a powerful literary force. An anthology of poems collected from decades of the *Newfoundland Quarterly*, edited by Everard King in 1987, does not include any poems with dialect features. *Banked Fires*, published in 1989, and *Wild on the Crest*, published in 1995, also lack poems written in a recognizably Newfoundland dialect. All of these collections include introductory material that plays on many of the same tropes as the early anthologies. The few words or semi-phonetic
transcriptions that appear in these collections are often placed in quotation marks, or are part of
dialogue in a narrative poem, and are therefore reminiscent of the O’Leary collection. Perhaps
this indicates that the anxieties about dialect literature expressed in the O’Leary and Doyle
anthologies were still present at the time these later anthologies were published.

There has not been another anthology published in recent years, and so it is difficult to
see to what extent dialect literature is being used by contemporary Newfoundland poets. While
individual poets and poetry collections could give an idea of this, the anthology format tends to
demonstrate how groups of individuals decide what kind of poetry is most representative of
their cultural identity. It is clear that, though a comparison of these anthologies, especially in
terms of their introductory material, there is some unease about making sure that the poetry is
received well by outside cultures and by Newfoundlanders themselves. The lack of dialect
features within the poems themselves seems to speak to a desire to avoid features which will
alienate, rather than celebrate, the unique qualities of Newfoundland identity.

Conclusions

The increase in the production of poetry, and the creation of poetry anthologies, in the years
surrounding the 1949 referendum speaks to the important connections between the politics of
identity and cultural productions. Supporters on both sides of the political debate in
Newfoundland saw poetry as a means of fostering and honouring the unique culture that
developed on that long-isolated area. Whether this stronger sense of community was created in
order to bolster against homogenization with Canadian culture, or as a patriotic argument for
the viability of a sovereign nation state, the poetry that was collected demonstrated the uneasy
relationship with the dialect. Dialects, as many sociolinguists have suggested, are both
powerful carriers of identity, but are also easily interpreted by outsiders as representative of
inferiority and backwardness. The risks inherent in dialect literature pervade these poetry
collections. This hesitation is not simply based on an abstract fear, however, which can be
evidenced by the reactions of some reviewers to the literature and art created in the province,
and by the way in which Newfoundlanders articulate a concern about how they are being
perceived by other Canadians and Americans. By creating a foundation for subsequent poetry,
and poetry anthologies, the collections published during the confederation debate have
influenced the ways in which, and to what degree, dialect features appear in the island’s poetry.
Classified Bibliography

General Linguistic Background and Historical Overviews


Dictionaries and Reference Works


Studies of Recent Linguistic Change


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