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The Mysterious Stranger and the Acadian Good Samaritan: Leprosy Folklore in 19th-Century New Brunswick

THE STORY OF LEPROSY in New Brunswick constitutes a fascinating chapter in the province's history.¹ It is not clear when the disease first manifested itself in the province. In 1842 reports began to circulate that leprosy was making serious inroads in northeastern New Brunswick, in an area settled preponderantly by French-speaking Acadians. Two years later, government officials were sufficiently alarmed that they established a lazaretto on Sheldrake Island, situated on the Miramichi River about eight miles below Chatham. In 1849 the institution was relocated in the coastal village of Tracadie, allegedly the epicentre of the disease. In New Brunswick, the disease generated an elaborate pattern of responses, including its own lore. For the historian the problem of decoding this lore and determining its function poses an interesting interpretive challenge.

Leprosy has long been endowed with a unique mystique and steeped in the most fantastic legends. Fear of this disease has been widespread in countries at all stages of civilization. It is agreed, however, that "leprophobia" is an "ill-demarcated phenomenon" — an alluvial blend of deep-seated beliefs and attitudes, some age-old, some medieval, some overlaid by Christian teachings.² Described by Susan Sontag as "one of the most meaning-laden of diseases", leprosy has usually been identified with subjects of the deepest dread — social alienation, deformity and wretched death.³ Well into the 19th century the disease continued to terrify, largely because of its sinister ambiguity, there being no apparent contagion or cure. In most regions of New Brunswick, the reported appearance of the disease elicited an

1 For a detailed examination of the history of the Sheldrake Island and Tracadie lazaretos, see Laurie Stanley-Blackwell, "Leprosy in New Brunswick 1844-1910: A Reconsideration", Ph.D. thesis, Queen's University, 1988.

2 S.G. Browne, "Leprophobia", *The West African Medical Journal*, XIV, 5 (October 1965), p. 175.

3 According to Susan Sontag, leprosy stands in a class by itself in terms of its imaginative power as a symbol. See Susan Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor* (New York, 1977), pp. 92, 58.

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emotional response, awakening latent fears and activating leprosy's potent historic imagery.⁴ The lay population received little guidance from the medical profession. Stalemated by leprosy's obscure ancestry and elusive aetiology, physicians took refuge in such comfortable clichés as “curse”, “visitation” and “afflicting hand” of “a mysterious providence”.⁵

In 19th-century New Brunswick, a diverse cluster of leprosy-related beliefs gained currency. For example, one popular notion claimed that the lepers' eyes dropped from their sockets, and their fingers and toes dropped off joint by joint. Another wide-spread stereotype characterized the leper as ruled by an uncontrollable sexual passion bordering on “excessive vengery”. Although there was no clinical evidence demonstrating that lepers were extraordinarily lustful, the fear was frequently verbalized that leprosy unleashed “an increase of passion and desire for sexual intercourse”. William Todd, a member of the legislative council, was particularly blunt on this subject. In March 1862 he reported that the lepers occasionally strayed from the Tracadie lazaretto and “held illicit intercourse with healthy females”. He demanded from the government some assurances that the lazaretto's inmates, both “men and women...[were] confined as strictly to their respective wards as they might be, and...[that] there is no possibility of their coming together, by stealth, and propagating”. William End also alluded to the close tie between leprosy and depravity, but he phrased his comments more decorously in the House of Assembly when he stated that “one of the peculiarities of the case [is] that the inclination of persons to marry are rather increased than diminished by it [leprosy]”.⁶

Implicit in many of these beliefs was the assumption that leprosy was linked to moral turpitude. This was hardly a novel concept. Since early times, leprosy and sin had been closely coupled in the public mind; the disease was deemed a retributive work of God, unleashed on the abject sinner and the moral delinquent. In fact, there

4 See for example, *The Gleaner* (Chatham), 18 April 1846 and *The Morning Freeman* (Saint John), 20, 22 June, 4, 6 July 1861.

5 Newspaper clipping entitled “Friend of the Lepers”, p. 28, Scrapbook C5, Archives, New Brunswick Museum; *Journals of the House of Assembly [JHA]* (1849), Hart to Head, 19 June 1848, p. 155; Smith to Minister of Agriculture, 31 December 1886, RG 17 A.1.1, vol. 519, National Archives of Canada [NAC]. At first glance, it seems incongruous that these clichés persisted even after the specificity of leprosy became an established fact in 1873 when the Norwegian physician G.H. Armauer Hansen identified the rod-shaped leprosy bacillus. However, according to Charles Rosenberg, even when germ theory came to fruition, medical practitioners in the United States did not quickly discard entrenched beliefs in the role of moral failing in the causation of disease. He explains: “Revolutions in thought are always gradual...and older values continued comfortably to coexist alongside the new. Moralism,...still pervaded medical thought, as it did the American mind in general”. See Charles Rosenberg, *The Cholera Years* (Chicago, 1962), p. 213.

6 *Report on Leprosy by the Royal College of Physicians* (London, 1867), p. 3. See also *Debates of the Legislative Council [Synoptic Debates]* 20 March 1862, pp. 30-1, microfilm reel no. M-70, Provincial Archives of New Brunswick [PANB]; *The New Brunswick Reporter and Fredericton Advertiser* (Fredericton), 24 February 1846.

was a general misapprehension that the disease was allied with sexual depravity.⁷ Many 19th-century New Brunswickers subscribed to this familiar paradigm, attributing the disease to some disreputable vice or character flaw. Leprosy was an outward and visible sign of an inward state; in short, the lepers' physical decay mirrored their moral corruption.⁸ Discourses on leprosy in the New Brunswick press and government forums were invariably accompanied by a recital of the lepers' multiple transgressions — their unsanitary mode of living, indigence, scanty and unwholesome diet, and promiscuous sexuality. Some pundits even discerned a correlation between leprosy and social class. The disease, they maintained, preyed only on the poorer, inferior classes, especially those people "lowest in the scale of intelligence".⁹ By implication then, leprosy was not the disease of the prosperous, nor was it the affliction of the proper and the pious.

But in New Brunswick there was a tendency to draw finer distinctions. Here, leprosy was specifically linked to the Acadian way of life. Their habits, it was argued, were "calculated to engender contagious disease".¹⁰ Physicians solemnly enumerated such predisposing factors as the "great sociability" of the Acadians and their "close intimacy of family life".¹¹ One doctor argued that leprosy was induced in part by their pernicious overconsumption of potatoes and salted fish.¹² Another medical practitioner went so far as to suggest that Acadian homes were heated to such excessive temperatures that they simulated an "equatorial" or "intertropical climate" congenial to the disease.¹³

This indictment of the Acadian way of life quickly pushed to the forefront the argument that leprosy was a congenital condition among Acadians. The ethnic identity of leprosy was further bolstered by the use of the cognomen, "The Tracadie Disease".¹⁴ The belief that the disease "lay dormant in the blood" of French-speaking New Brunswickers acquired a considerable following.¹⁵ To some, it

- 7 Saul N. Brody, *The Disease of the Soul, Leprosy in Medieval Literature* (Ithaca, 1974), p. 55; Joseph Jones, *Medical and Surgical Memoirs; containing investigations on the Geographical Distribution, Causes, Nature, Relations and Treatment of various diseases, 1855-1886* (New Orleans, 1887), pp. 1179-81, 1205; *Report on Leprosy*, p. 3
- 8 Brody, *Disease of the Soul*, p. 191, 52-7, 142-6; *The Gleaner*, 11 March 1850.
- 9 *Canada Sessional Papers*, 1892, vol. 5, appendix 10, Annual "Report on the Leper Hospital, Tracadie", 31 December 1891, p. 21; "Report on the Lazaretto, Tracadie", *Canada Sessional Papers*, 1895, vol. 5, appendix 14, 31 October 1894, p. 31.
- 10 Odell to Daly, 20 May 1844, RG 3, vol. A 1842-5, PANB.
- 11 J.C. Taché and A.C. Smith, *Questions regarding Leprosy, Enquiry made by the Hawaiian Government* (n.p., 1885), p. 30.
- 12 *Le Courrier des Provinces Maritimes* (Bathurst), 2 décembre 1886.
- 13 "Report of the Commissioners appointed by the Executive to visit and examine the Lazaretto and Lepers upon Sheldrake Island...", *JHA* (1848), p. 64.
- 14 J.E.L. de Bellefeuille, "The Lepers of Tracadie", *Catholic World*, vol. 25 (1877), p. 197 [originally published as "Les Lépreux de Tracadie", *Revue Canadienne*, vol. 7 (août, 1870), pp. 545-7].
- 15 *The New-Brunswick Reporter and Fredericton Advertiser*, 24 February 1846; Pascal Poirier, "Les Lépreux de Tracadie, N.-B. (extrait d'un voyage en Acadie)", *Annales de la Propagation de la Foi pour la province de Québec*, n.s., no. 3 (octobre, 1877) p. 163. The assumptions about leprosy's ethnic

seemed almost axiomatic that a people with their own customs, language and mentality should have their own distinctive disease. Clearly, the ethnic interpretation of leprosy was not only compatible with but reaffirmed broader public stereotypes of the Acadians. In fact, leprosy simply served as additional evidence that New Brunswick's ethnic groups were separated from one another by irreconcilable differences. Although Henry W. Longfellow's portrait of the pastoral, soulful and heroic pre-deportation Acadian may have possessed poetic charms for some New Brunswickers, the assumption that contemporary Acadian culture was inherently inferior, less dynamic and doomed to extinction was pervasive.¹⁶ The Acadian as the poverty-stricken and backward "paysan" was a popular stereotype. And the frequently deprecating comments about the fecundity of the Acadians and their high rate of intermarriage neatly overlapped with the old clichés about the leper's carnal proclivities.¹⁷

Popular attitudes towards leprosy in New Brunswick, therefore, were only partially an inherited response. They also derived much of their force and inspiration from the ethnocentrism of anglophone New Brunswick. These two strands of thought converged, forming a cluster of prejudices and value judgements which fortified and sustained one another. The incidence of leprosy in northeastern New Brunswick was cited as concrete evidence that Acadian inferiority was more or less a biologically determined state, and hence a permanent condition. Such arguments reassured those who stood securely on "the top rung of the English-made ladder of racial development", confident in their superior faculties, virtues and achievements and the innate immunity of Anglo Saxons to the ravages of leprosy.¹⁸

exclusivity became common currency. See for example, *New Brunswick Courier* (Saint John), 18 March 1848; *Gleaner* (Chatham), 9 May 1848; Smith to Tilley, 1 January 1866, *JHA*, (1867), appendix 13, p. 19; poem entitled "A December Walk" by Jos. Nobthorne, *Union Advocate* (Newcastle), 9 December 1869; James F.W. Johnston, *Notes on North America, Agricultural, Economical, and Social* (Edinburgh, 1851), vol. 2, p. 2.

- 16 James Doyle, *North of America, Images of Canada in the Literature of the United States 1775-1900* (Toronto, 1983), pp. 41, 46. Although stereotypical views of the Acadians may have mellowed over the years, they have been remarkably tenacious. An analytical assessment of public school textbooks in Nova Scotia, conducted in 1982, ascertained that these materials tended to neglect the Acadian component of the history of the Maritimes. The overall impression conveyed in these textbooks was that the "Acadians no longer exist as an identifiable group", thereby disparaging the significance "of the place of Acadians in our society". See Réal Samson and Andrew S. Hughes, *The Treatment of Acadians in the Public School Textbooks of Nova Scotia* (Halifax, 1982), pp. 30, 39.
- 17 The view that leprosy was somehow linked to the misguided practice of intermarriage took firm hold of the public mind. This aspect of Acadian tradition reinforced the conviction that leprosy was a punishment for some transgression or violated taboo. Quite typical of the mentality of the period was Sweetser's statement that leprosy's continued existence in northern New Brunswick "is attributed to the closeness of the relation in which intermarriage is sanctioned among the Acadians (sometimes by dispensations from the Church)". See M.F. Sweetser, *The Maritime Provinces: A Handbook for Travellers* (Boston, 1890), p. 62.
- 18 L. Perry Curtis, *Apes and Angels* (Washington, 1971), p. 15. One correspondent of the *New Brunswick Courier*, (Saint John), 18 March 1848, touted this instance of biological infallibility as evidence of the innate superiority of the Anglo-Saxon race over all others. "This is a comfort for John Bull!!" he

Mid-19th-century medical science did little to discredit this type of cultural arrogance. In fact, it was invested with scientific respectability as physicians both in the colony and Great Britain increasingly leaned towards the conceptualization of leprosy as a hereditary disease and adopted a pseudo-scientific vocabulary of such terms as “latent taint” and “hereditary poison”.¹⁹ This trend was vividly illustrated in a medical report commissioned by the New Brunswick government in 1848. In their report, Doctors Robert Bayard and William Wilson, with prestigious practices in Saint John and Dorchester respectively, employed a clever device — a consanguinity chart — to illustrate that the “leprosy taint” flowed inexorably along familial lines, pursuing each generation of the Benoit, Savoy and Robichaud families.²⁰ Dr. Stafford Benson of Chatham echoed similar sentiments, coining the expression “the family curse” for the centuries-old disease.²¹ In 1867 the hereditarian interpretation of leprosy was unreservedly endorsed by the British Royal College of Physicians. This *ex cathedra* pronouncement commanded the attention of medical practitioners in New Brunswick and cast a long shadow over the leprosy debate for most of the 19th century.

There were members of the Acadian elite who refused to accept the imputation of leprosy’s exclusivity with mute compliance. Pascal Poirier, for example, fiercely marshalled evidence to refute the odious stereotype.²² So too did Philias Bourgeois, an Acadian historian. In his biography of Father François-Xavier Stanislas Lafrance, he exclaimed: “Bien que les premières victimes aient été, par accident, des Acadiennes, il n’est pas vrai de dire que les Acadiens ont été les seules victimes de cette maladie. De 1815 à 1830, on a découvert un bon nombre d’Anglais qui souffraient de cette triste infection. Parmi les victimes, on compte B...et sa fille mariée à Paul G...puis St...et ses deux neveux John et Edmund F..., qui moururent au lazaret de Tracadie, vers le milieu du dix-neuvième siècle”.²³ Bourgeois’

exclaimed triumphantly. Throughout the 1880s and 1890s the notion of Anglo-Saxon invulnerability was shaken, as Europeans “ceased to show the immunity from its [leprosy’s] attacks which were once thought to be their privilege”. See Zachary Gussow and George S. Tracy, “Stigma and the Leprosy Phenomenon: The Social History of a Disease in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries”, *Bulletin of the History of Medicine*, XLIV, 5 (September-October, 1970), p. 437. In the Maritimes, the identification of several loci of leprosy in Cape Breton during the 1880s made arguments about leprosy’s purported racial bias increasingly indefensible.

19 See Stanley-Blackwell, “Leprosy in New Brunswick”, pp. 234-305; “Report of the Commissioners...”, *JHA*, (1848), pp. 61-2.

20 *Ibid.*, p. 72. Bayard and Wilson dismissed any evidence that deviated from their conclusions as simply anomalous.

21 *Report on Leprosy*, p. 6.

22 In 1877 Poirier decried those Anglophone writers who suggested that leprosy existed “à l’état dormant chez tous les Acadiens, par suite d’ancienne corruption du sang, que c’est chez eux une maladie endémique”. Poirier contended that Mary Gardiner of Chatham, not Ursule Landry, had the dubious honour of being the mother of leprosy in New Brunswick. See Poirier, “Les Lépreux de Tracadie”, p. 163.

23 Philias Bourgeois, *Vie de l’abbé François-Xavier Lafrance*, (Montréal, 1913), p. 55.

rebuttal, however, made little dent in the treacherous logic that deemed leprosy culture-specific to the Acadian population.

It is interesting to note that many early sources were curiously evasive about the existence of leprosy among anglophone residents along the Miramichi River during the 1830s and 1840s, such as Mary Gardiner, John and William Brown, Mary Sweezy, James Moir, Alexander Stewart and Edward and John Tingley. So well concealed was this information that Lieutenant-Governor Arthur Gordon, during his tour of northern New Brunswick in the summer of 1862, found it impossible to ascertain “the truth or falsehood” of the allegation that settlers of English descent “had caught and died of the disease”.²⁴ Too often the medical profession offered little assistance in solving this mystery. One physician, for example, disavowed Mary Gardiner’s leprosy condition and declared her a syphilitic prostitute.

Throughout the 19th century the well-entrenched ethnic stereotypes about leprosy posed a dilemma for the French-speaking residents who found themselves so harshly stigmatized. For them, fatalism and moralism were too arbitrary and punitive frames of reference for explaining the chance visitation of the disease upon some coastal communities in northeastern New Brunswick. Moreover, they needed to disprove the imputation of leprosy’s cultural exclusivity. The dilemma was further compounded by the fact that the Acadians in northeastern New Brunswick could not physically and psychologically distance themselves from the realities of leprosy. Its victims were not the anonymous horrors described in the headlines of a newspaper. Instead, they were living and breathing entities, with common names and familiar countenances, members of a society which placed a high premium on kinship and community loyalties. The disease was in and of the community, and in Tracadie it touched every aspect of life in varying degrees. Under such circumstances, the disease could not be shunned as a foreign element. As something familiar and familial it had to be accommodated on much more generous terms.

In Tracadie and the nearby communities of Pokemouche and Neguac, the disease spawned its own indigenous mythology, a corpus of narratives which could be designated as “leprosy origin stories”.²⁵ As late as 1902, Father Achille Danel, a Jesuit priest briefly stationed at Tracadie, was struck by the fertile repertoire of “légendes” surrounding the appearance of leprosy in northern New Brunswick. He noted that “Chaque localité qui fut et est encore un centre de lèpre a conservé le souvenir des circonstances qui lui ont apporté cette terrible maladie.”²⁶ These

24 Arthur Gordon, “Wilderness Journeys in New Brunswick”, in Francis Galton, ed., *Vacation Tourists and Notes of Travel in 1862-3* (London, 1864), p. 493.

25 For a folklorist’s discussion of the personal experience narratives of several Carville leprosy patients see Marcia Gaudet, “Telling it Slant: Personal Narrative, Tall Tales, and the Reality of Leprosy”, *Western Folklore*, 49 (April, 1990), pp. 191-207.

26 A. Danel, “Historique des lazarets de Shel Drake et de Tracadie au Nouveau-Brunswick”, [manuscript] 5131, ch. 1, p. 3, Archives de la Compagnie de Jésus, Province du Canada-Français. Although collection, classification and analysis of Acadian folklore have expanded greatly in the last decade, folklorist, Ronald Labelle suggests that researchers “have only just scratched the surface” of this rich

stories constitute not only a fascinating prism of images, but also an important historical artefact. Indeed, they offer the historian a glimpse into contemporary fears, customs and values. Admittedly, they are filled with ambiguities and silences which often conceal more than they reveal. It is clear, however, that although these stories were largely the coinage of popular imagination, they were much more than ephemeral folklore amusements. They became the medium by which the inhabitants could explain leprosy's foothold in their midst. Essentially, the narratives served a therapeutic function. They demystified the disease, mitigated its harshness and combated the pervasive notion that the disease was an hereditary scourge among the Acadian population. In other words, the residents of Gloucester County took recourse to the format of "once upon a time" in order to create some useable context in which to understand the enigmatic disease and to diminish its terrors.

It is difficult to ascertain precisely when the "leprosy origin stories" first surfaced. As early as 1842 Doctors Alexander Key and John Thomson noted vaguely that the disease had been transmitted from Caraquet to Tracadie by a Mr. Landry.²⁷ Two years later, a government-appointed commission, spearheading a medical inquiry into the extent of the disease in Gloucester and Northumberland counties, encountered a more elaborate version of leprosy's inauspicious arrival in New Brunswick.²⁸ From the testimony of some of the "oldest settlers", they learned that 70 years earlier some sailors from a "foreign" vessel that ran aground near Caraquet had spent the winter under the roof of a local Landry family. One of the daughters, Ursule, later became New Brunswick's first hapless victim of leprosy. For the commissioners, the origin of her disease remained a conundrum, for they were unable to glean from the inhabitants whether the sailors had been leprous.

By the 1860s the tale of Ursule's demise, immortalized in the "leprosy origin stories", was substantially fleshed out.²⁹ Details of time and place were now woven into the increasingly luxuriant narrative. The origin of the crew was given as Marseilles, and the source of their unique affliction was precisely identified as the Levant. Even Ursule's funeral became part of oral tradition. In fact, the popular tale about her funeral in 1828 made an evocative addition to the repertoire. Narrative accounts of the event conjured up with clarity details of an oppressively hot and mosquito-ridden day. The story's most vivid feature was the description of a putrid fluid which oozed from Ursule's decomposed body through the seams of the casket onto the shoulder of François Sonier, one of the pallbearers.³⁰

Throughout the 1870s, stories about leprosy's origins in northern New Brunswick continued to multiply. The version which enjoyed a vogue at this time

cultural deposit. See Ronald Labelle, "The Neglected History of New Brunswick: A Look at the Study of Acadian Folklore", in Reavley Gair, ed., *A Literary and Linguistic History of New Brunswick* (Fredericton, 1985), p. 193.

27 Key and Thomson to Cunard, 22 March 1842, *Journal of the Legislative Council*, (1844), Appendix no. 5, p. 179.

28 A. Key *et al.* to Lt. Governor Colebrooke, 5 April 1844, *Royal Gazette*, 3 July 1844, p. 1444.

29 Gordon, "Wilderness Journeys", pp. 493-4.

30 "Report of the Commissioners...", *JHA*, (1848), p. 64. The motif of the leaking casket became a staple of disease folklore in central Canada during the period of the cholera epidemics.

did not revolve around Ursule Landry. In this case, the tale was totally recast in the time-frame of the 1750s with the Miramichi River as its setting.³¹ According to this variant, local fishermen retrieved some bales of old clothing cast upon the shore after a vessel called L'Indienne was shipwrecked near Baie du Vin in 1758. The fishermen outfitted themselves in the dirty remnants of clothing, and later that spring the nearby settlement of Beaubair and its population of Acadian refugees were devastated by an "epidemic" of leprosy. Those spared fled with the germ of the pestilence to Prince Edward Island, while others scattered to Neguac, Tracadie and Pokemouche, unwittingly extending the locus of the disease. Several mutations of this story evolved. For example, one version suggested that the local fishermen not only salvaged the shipwrecked L'Indienne but billeted the stranded crew who hailed from Morlaix, France. In recognition of this act of charity, the sailors offered their hosts a gift of clothing originating from the Smyrna trade. The double folly of donning the foul garments and fraternizing with the shiphands, some of whom were Lascars, proved fatal.³²

Coincident with the Miramichi account, an analogous version emerged about a ship from the Levant that visited Caraquet in 1758. According to this thematic variation, the crew, who arrived late in autumn, had been forced to winter in Caraquet. Although some of the sailors appeared diseased, the settlers obligingly housed them and the local women laundered their clothes. In 1882 the Acadian genealogist and historian, Placide Gaudet, assembled for the newspaper *Le Moniteur Acadien* an adaptation of this account.³³ This was a flesh and blood composite of familiar surnames and place-names, pieced together from reminiscences gathered on genealogical excursions to Tracadie and Neguac during the winter of 1878-9. In reconstructing leprosy's murky past, Gaudet recycled many of the staple components of earlier leprosy origin stories. Indeed, it restored Ursule Landry to her former centrality in the myth. This variant asserted that two European sailors, afflicted with "la mauvaise maladie", had arrived in Caraquet some time between 1838 and 1842 on a vessel navigated by Michel and Elie Landry. After docking, the two foreign shiphands joined a small fleet of boats headed for the gaspereau fishing grounds near Tracadie. It had been customary, Gaudet explained, for the Tracadie families of Prospère Losier, Pierre Bastarache and Joseph Benoit to

31 de Bellefeuille, "The Lepers of Tracadie", pp. 195-7.

32 *The Daily Telegraph* (Saint John), 29 July 1878, 20 July 1880.

33 *Le Moniteur Acadien* (Shediac), 21 septembre 1882. Gaudet later regretted having published this account because of its historical inaccuracies. See Gaudet to Taché, août 1884 [no precise date given], 1-64-11, Centre d'études acadiennes [CEA]. It is difficult to determine the extent to which Gaudet modified or embellished the oral information which he gathered about leprosy's first appearance in New Brunswick. He apparently made no effort to record these accounts in their original form; after all, he was not a professional folklorist. I am not suggesting that his versions cross the line from folklore to what has been termed "fakelore", meaning that the leprosy origin stories are pseudo-lore, the products of writers rather than the folk. The tales about leprosy, which circulated in northeastern New Brunswick, clearly predate Gaudet's research activities, although his published articles probably reinforced, perhaps even influenced and shaped, subsequent folkloric renditions. See Edith Fowke, *Canadian Folklore* (Toronto, 1988), p. 41.

provide this fleet with laundering services. The unfortunate lot of washing the soiled clothes of the two strangers fell to Benoit's wife, Ursule Landry. Shortly after, "elle aussi était atteinte de la maladie".³⁴

In the early 1890s Gaudet recorded yet another interpretation, based on information collected personally during the spring of 1884. This version suggested that leprosy was carried to Tracadie in 1815 by two fugitives from a Norwegian lazaretto. Although Gaudet offered no explanation for this deviation, the idea had a lineage dating back at least two decades. Writing for the *Colonial Empire* in the 1860s, Father Ferdinand-Edmond Gauvreau, one-time chaplain to the Tracadie lazaretto, posited the argument that an escaped leper fleeing from a leper hospital in Norway had "passed through Northeast New Brunswick scattering the seeds of desolation and death in his pathway".³⁵ With Gauvreau's interpretation as a precedent, Gaudet produced for *L'Évangéline* a compelling narrative.³⁶ The two mysterious Norwegians, he claimed, had reached New Brunswick on board *La Floride*, a schooner co-owned by Michel and Elie Landry, who sailed regularly between Quebec and the Bay of Chaleur. Observing that his foreign passengers were mottled with fetid sores and bore the marks of "un mal honteux de la pire espèce", Captain Michel Landry urged his companions to give them a wide berth. When they touched land at Pointe Maisonnette, the two Norwegians headed towards the Miramichi on foot. Captain Landry also set out, hoping to forewarn the inhabitants of Tracadie and Pokemouche about the sickly pair. But he arrived too late. The strangers had already sojourned at the Tracadie home of Joseph Benoit and Ursule Landry, who volunteered the use of their bed and tableware to the weary travellers. As a memento of their stay, the visitors left their "salive empestée" upon the dishes and the bed linens of this "famille hospitalière".³⁷

New Brunswick's leprosy origin stories were the products of selective recall — in short, they were compounds of fact and invention. Their historical accuracy is highly suspect. Placide Gaudet, for example, dismissed the *L'Indienne* account as totally bogus, offensive to his sense of Acadian history and genealogy. In 1902 he wrote insistently: "Cette histoire de 'peste' à Miramichi est de pure invention. Tel fléau n'a jamais existé à Miramichi de 1755 à 1760....Il est grandement temps d'en finir avec cette prétendue 'peste'".³⁸ Conversely, even the authenticity of Ursule Landry's purported encounter with the leprous sailors, the version that Gaudet

34 *Ibid.*

35 Placide Gaudet, "Tracadie, N.-B. Les Lépreux" (cahier), 1-31-32, CEA. This is a transcript of an article by Father Gauvreau published in *The Colonial Empire* (Saint John).

36 *L'Évangéline* (Weymouth, Moncton), 7 avril 1892. See also Gaudet to Michaud, 19 mars 1890, 1-64-25, CEA.

37 *Ibid.*

38 Gaudet to Smith, 9 décembre 1902, RG 29, vol 2355, NAC. By 1902, even the stories about Alexis Landry and the two Norwegian sailors strained Gaudet's credulity. He tossed all the traditional myths aside and admitted to Dr. Smith, "Non, ce n'est pas *L'Indienne* qui a apporté le germe de la lèpre au Nord du Nouveau-Brunswick. Ce n'est pas non plus Alexis Landry, ni la famille de Louis Brideau. Il faut chercher ailleurs".

championed, is also doubtful. In 1847 Ursule's mother, Marie Brideau, protested that "a sailor did come to Caraquette but that he had no such disease upon him".³⁹

The importance of these narratives lies not in their historical content but in their thematic structure. Although each plot differed slightly, the narratives had formulaic features. In almost each case, an outsider — a sailor from the Levant, or a fugitive from Norway, or a stranger from Europe — bore the onus of having brought the disease with him. Moreover, the role of the unappreciative visitor who left his kindly host infected with leprosy was accented. The thrust of these themes was clear. First, leprosy was imported by an intruder; and secondly, New Brunswick leprosy was unblemished by any imputation of sin. Quite evidently, these largely fictive stories were not designed to withstand historical scrutiny. They were, after all, created by people who craved explanations more than the truth.

The folk narrative in any culture holds a special status. It matters little that these representations of reality are not completely factual.⁴⁰ These parable-like leprosy origin stories, structured around the classic encounter of the traveller and his Good Samaritan host, were almost homiletic. In this instance, however, an interesting twist was introduced. The Acadian host, personified by Ursule Landry, who invited the sickly wayfarer to her table, offered to launder his clothes and volunteered the use of her bed, was portrayed as the victim of her own charity. Indeed, she was the innocent victim of a cultural impulse, the custom of hospitality so highly prized in Acadian New Brunswick where, in the words of Gaudet, "On était cependant hospitalier et nul étranger ne frappait à la porte d'une famille acadienne sans être accueilli".⁴¹ Admittedly the leaking casket story contained few of the familiar components featured in other leprosy origin stories, such as the mysterious visitor, the shipwreck and the contaminated bed linens. However, the recounting of Ursule's funeral had a symbolic subtext. It not only dramatized the events at the graveside, but identified them as a portent of François Sonier's eventual demise as a victim of leprosy. The overriding preoccupation of the leprosy origin stories with unrequited goodness highlights the role of hospitality as a valued social duty in 19th-century Acadian culture. This ethic held a commanding place in most pre-industrial cultures. For example, Keith Thomas demonstrates that Tudor and Stuart England esteemed the traditional obligations of neighbourliness and hospitality.⁴² In fact, popular belief postulated a causality linking human calamity,

39 "Report of the Commissioners...", *JHA*, (1848), p. 71.

40 James Reed, "The Border Ballads", in E.J. Cowan, ed., *The People's Past* (Edinburgh, 1980), p. 18 notes that such accounts record "with understandable elaboration and partisan feeling something of events that actually occurred, but of course they are not to be regarded as historical in any but the most generous sense; nor should their inaccuracies and embellishments be interpreted as errors of ignorance, or of deliberate propagandist deception (though both of these elements may be present). They are a commemoration, emotionally generated, of family and regional loyalties *within* the events the narratives portray".

41 *L'Evangéline*, 7 avril 1892.

42 Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (London, 1971), pp. 553-7, 561-7.

supernatural retaliation and a breach in the norms of neighbourly behaviour.⁴³ The thread connecting Tudor and Stuart England with mid-19th-century Acadian New Brunswick may seem tenuous. Nevertheless, in the leprosy origin stories a clear message shone through the characterization of the virtuous Ursule, who made her nemesis “l’objet sacré de la belle hospitalité française” — the traditional code of charity and neighbourliness had not been violated.⁴⁴ The Acadians had not shut their doors against the leprous wayfarers, nor sent them away empty-handed, nor put selfish interests before social duty.

If Acadian behaviour was indeed irreproachable and no taboos were broken, why then the unwarranted visitation of leprosy? The narratives did not provide an answer. They simply echoed the Acadians’ assertion of neighbourly goodness, which served as a denial of personal culpability. In short, the leprosy origin stories constituted a rebuttal to the commonplace equation of leprosy with moral iniquity and misanthropy. The theme of abused hospitality even pervaded the popular accounts of Ursule’s funeral, where poisonous fluids from the corpse allegedly contaminated one of the “four strong men” serving as pallbearers. Once again, the performance of a “neighbourly act” had unwittingly advanced the course of leprosy.⁴⁵

It is interesting to note that these stories became so deeply embedded in northeastern New Brunswick that they in turn exerted a decisive impact on popular behaviour. In short, they sometimes transcended their fictional dimension. Mary Rose Robichaud, taking her cue from the tales about Ursule Landry’s fateful laundering of leper clothing, found herself “very particular in washing the bed clothes”.⁴⁶ Louis Doiron applied the typology of the putrid casket to his own predicament, tracing the source of his disease to the time when he had carried the coffin of the leprous Ide Sonier. So potent was the imagery of Ursule’s funeral that traditional burial customs were eventually modified. By the 1870s the practice of shoulder-bearing coffins had been abandoned in many of the French-speaking settlements in northern New Brunswick.⁴⁷ Even the medical profession found the

43 Stith Thompson’s multi-volumed *Motif-Index of Folk Literature* (Bloomington, Indiana, 1932, 1934, 1936) is replete with references to the array of punishments (including the plague) meted out to those guilty of inhospitality and conversely the rewards allotted those who performed hospitable acts. It is interesting to note that according to fairy lore, the code of the fairies placed a high value on courtesy, charity, liberality and hospitality from human beings. The “chief villain” was the miser, who invariably suffered punishment for failing to demonstrate goodwill. See Katherine Briggs, *The Fairies in English Tradition and Literature* ([1967] London, 1989), p. 112. Such beliefs corresponded closely to Christian notions of hospitality and the traditional view that the stranger-guest was often Christ or a saint in disguise, who should therefore be propitiated with acts of kindness. Not only was hospitality deemed a “function of charity” but its practice was regarded as “decisive for eternal life”. See *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, vol. VII (Washington, 1967), p. 154; Margaret Visser, *The Rituals of Dinner* (Toronto, 1991), pp. 91, 93-94.

44 de Bellefeuille, “Les Lépreux de Tracadie”, p. 558.

45 *Evening Journal* (Ottawa) 12 April 1902, RG 29, vol 2355, [newspaper clipping entitled “The Lepers of Tracadie”], NAC.

46 Key to Colebrooke, 22 February 1845, *JHA*, (1845), p. 169.

47 Taché and Smith, *Questions regarding Leprosy*, p. 12.

leprosy origin stories persuasive. Dr. Robert Bayard, for example, succumbed to the graphic power of the leaking casket motif and incorporated it into his diagnostic pronouncements. His contemporary Dr. Alexander Key borrowed ingredients from these communal tales to identify the source of one female patient's disease. In this case he pieced together an implausible scenario, recounting her unfortunate shipwreck at Tracadie en route to Quebec. When his patient returned home to Chatham, he explained facetiously, she was "labouring" under the disease. In its barest outline — the shipwreck and the traveller — Key's description of Mary Gardiner's mishap seemed drawn from the public reservoir of leprosy origin stories. As late as 1902, traditional folklore weighed heavily on Dr. Alfred C. Smith and determined his course of action. "Remembering that leprosy in New Brunswick [was] supposed to have had its origin in the washing of leper sailor's clothing", this one-time medical superintendent of the Tracadie lazaretto ordered that the bedstead, table and bed linens used by a suspected leper detained in a local jail be destroyed by fire.⁴⁸

It is well-recognized that the Acadian population, especially during the post-Deportation period, enlisted both history and imagination to forge a corporate identity. Celebrating Acadia as a peaceable kingdom of "warm hearts, outstretched arms and open doors", their mythology has had a strong idyllic vein.⁴⁹ In the drama of the Deportation of 1755-63 and the story of *Evangeline*, the Acadians found their most compelling myth. By giving an epic scale to their lives, the story enshrined their heroic virtues of Christian perseverance, fortitude and resignation. It idealized them as, in Naomi Griffiths' words, a "simple, pastoral people, devout, content, hospitable, and almost without stain of original sin".⁵⁰ More importantly, it highlighted their moral blamelessness as a people unwittingly victimized by a "war begun elsewhere by people to whom they had no real link and with whom they had no deep quarrel".⁵¹ In a sense leprosy, like the Deportation, was also a tragedy of innocence, a miscarriage of justice against those without guilt or guile.

Admittedly, Ursule Landry hardly had the iconic appeal of the demure *Evangeline*. Nor was leprosy a particularly attractive symbol of Acadian martyrdom. Yet the stories generated by leprosy's unwelcome presence in northeastern New Brunswick should not be trivialized. Although lacking in strict historical truth, they were not whimsical, shapeless or meaningless flights from reality. These narrations possessed an underlying unity, and the evolving variations became more complex, more descriptive and less ambiguous over time. More importantly, they were imbued with contemporary relevance and met a psychic

48 Smith to Montizambert, 23 July 1902, RG 29, vol. 3, file 937015 pt. 1, NAC.

49 Martin Spigelman, "The Acadian Renaissance and the Development of Acadien-Canadien Relations, 1864-1912: 'des frères trop longtemps séparés'", Ph.D. thesis, Dalhousie University, 1975, pp. 13-14.

50 Naomi Griffiths, "Longfellow's *Evangeline*: The Birth and Acceptance of a Legend", *Acadiensis*, XI, 2 (Spring, 1982), p. 32.

51 *Ibid.*, p. 34. See also Janice Kulyk Keefer, "The ideology of innocence: Anglophone literature and the Expulsion of the Acadians", *Revue de l'Université Sainte-Anne*, (1984-1985), pp. 39-46.

need. Helplessness in the face of leprosy was the essential motivating element behind these tales. They may not have neutralized local fears of leprosy, but they stabilized them. The Acadians in northeastern New Brunswick must have derived some consolation from the recital of familiar place names and surnames. These stories enabled them to work out their anxieties publicly, rather than privately. Somehow, when a distinct pattern of sequence and events was imposed on the progress of the enigmatic disease, it seemed less cryptic and more real. Moreover, details about time and place gave the stories an air of authenticity and authority. They helped reduce the crisis to manageable proportions, fending off leprosy's stigma and validating the contemporary contention that the "poisonous virus was not the growth of this spot, but was brought here by some traveller".⁵² With these narratives, the Acadian inhabitants in northeastern New Brunswick created a humanized and indigenous aetiology for leprosy.

52 de Bellefeuille, "The Lepers of Tracadie", p. 197.