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Résumé de l'article

Cet essai traite d'un élément de l'histoire orale terreneuvienne: la légende de l'arrivée, en 1610, du colon anglais officiel, John Guy, dans la Baie de la Conception. D'après cette légende, les Dawe, une famille de pêcheurs, avaient empêché le débarquement de Guy et avaient envoyé celui-ci ailleurs.

Les éléments sociaux, politiques, et économiques qui servent à clarifier l'origine de cette légende y sont discutés. Le context de la transmission traditionnelle de l'histoire orale est aussi examiné. Finalement, l'auteur suggère que, dans certains cas, cette légende peut être considérée comme "dite facétieuse. "

*John Guy Meets the Dawes: The Investigation of an Oral Historical Tradition**

MARTIN LOVELACE

There is a tradition in oral circulation in the Port de Grave area of Conception Bay, Newfoundland, that when John Guy sailed into the bay in 1610, seeking a site at which to found his plantation, he was met by men of the Dawe family who, being already established in Ship Cove and not wishing for competition on their fishing grounds, told Guy to sail further along the coast to Cupids, where he eventually made his settlement. The following is a discussion of the historicity of this tradition and various factors — political, social, and economic — that may account for its existence.

Port de Grave is a fishing community with a population of about 800 on the north shore of Conception Bay.[1] It is currently prospering and many young men there have entered the fishery. It is one of the oldest settled communities in Newfoundland; the precise date of settlement is one of the topics included in the historical tradition investigated here. Leaving aside this date for the present it seems that settlement began during the seventeenth century and continued though interrupted by French attacks in 1697 and 1705; on the latter occasion the French burned property and shipped settlers back to England.[2]

I first met Greta Hussey, my principal informant, in the summer of 1976 when I visited Port de Grave with my colleague, Jerry Pocius. Greta is a widow in her fifties with four sons. She was born in Hibbs Cove, a cluster

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*An oral version of this essay was delivered at the annual meeting of the Folklore Studies Association of Canada in Montreal in June, 1980.

I am grateful to the Maritime History Group at Memorial University for permission to quote from their holdings and publications; I also acknowledge the helpful comments of Dr. Neil V. Rosenberg on an earlier draft of the paper. In particular I thank Mrs. Greta Hussey and her family for their warm hospitality and gentle forbearance.

[1]The population figure is for 1970 as cited in Olive Anstey, "Community Study of Port de Grave," undergraduate essay, Maritime History Group, Memorial University (1971), p. 48.

[2]Gerald Andrews, "History of Port de Grave," undergraduate essay, Maritime History Group, Memorial University (1971), p. 26.

of houses round a very narrow harbour, about a mile from Port de Grave. Some members of her family, the Lears, are still there. As a child and young woman she went with her family for a number of summers to fish on the Labrador. This experience is very important to her and for several years (starting *prior* to her contact with folklorists), she has been writing her recollections of the Labrador visits. Besides this semi-autobiographical work she has also contributed notes on local history, often versions of local historical traditions which she learned from family members, to newspapers. She has at least two large scrapbooks of cuttings relating to local history, which she began to compile in the 1960s. Although she modestly denies being an "expert," for reasons associated with her definition of "history" as involving an academic familiarity with dates and documents, she does consider that she is more interested in history than most people in the area. She is, in C.W. von Sydow's terms, an "active bearer" of historical tradition.[3]

The project began to take shape in my mind following my second visit to Greta's home. We had talked generally about the history of the area and Greta casually told the story that a family named Dawe had been the first to land there and that when John Guy arrived seeking a place to establish his plantation they had sent him to Cupids rather than let him settle where they were in Ship Cove. I decided that my aim in this project would be to test the historicity of this tradition and therefore turned to a variety of documentary and historical sources.

The Archive of the Maritime History Group at Memorial University holds three community studies of Port de Grave by undergraduates in history.[4] All contain some discussion of the Guy and Dawe story; two give it credence. The basic documentary support for the Dawe claim to early presence in Ship Cove is from a claim to property there made by George Dawe in 1755 in which he states that his ancestors had owned it for a hundred and sixty years previously; this would put the date of first possession at 1595.[5]

I did not begin to get a clear perspective on the historical context, however, until I read various works by economic historian Keith Matthews.[6] It is well known that the history of settlement in Newfoundland is unlike

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[3]C.W. von Sydow, "On the Spread of Tradition," in his *Selected Papers on Folklore*, Copenhagen: Rosenkilde & Bagger, 1948, p. 13.

[4]Gerald Andrews, "History of Port de Grave" (1971); Olive Anstey, "Community Study of Port de Grave" (1971); Wallace E. Dawe, "The Story of Port de Grave" (1969).

[5]Anstey, pp. 8–9, cites the *Plantation Book*, Vol. 13, Registry of Deeds (1805), p. 89, no. 514. It should be noted that there is some argument about the date of this document.

[6]K. Matthews, "A History of the West of England — Newfoundland Fishery," unpublished Ph.D. thesis, Oxford University, 1968, and *Lectures on the History of Newfoundland 1500–1830*, Maritime History Group, Memorial University, 1973.

that of other North American colonies. Permanent settlement occurred only slowly and Matthews estimates that up until the nineteenth century most of the English who came to Newfoundland were "commuters" rather than settlers in that they came for the summer fishery and returned to winter in England. He describes a pattern of "semi-settlement" in which "one generation would come to Newfoundland, clear some land and build a house and fishing room, and would then retire in old age to Devonshire or Dorset and let out their property to newcomers."[7] Thus Matthews finds that in 1676 the true permanent population of the island was only 384 and that by 1730, seventy to eighty per cent of the families who had lived in Newfoundland in 1676 had disappeared as a result of French attacks or ill fortune in the fishery.[8]

Matthews' views are in opposition to previous received opinion about the course of Newfoundland history. Judge D.W. Prowse's *History of Newfoundland* (1895) has long been regarded as authoritative and popularizers have mined it assiduously.[9] Prowse's thesis is that Newfoundland's development was deliberately retarded by the British government in order to preserve the monopoly enjoyed by the West Country merchants who controlled the fishery and to provide a training ground for sailors. Prowse considered that the sedentary fishermen, those who had settled permanently in Newfoundland, were in conflict with the migratory fishermen who came out annually from England. Matthews, however, finds from commercial and genealogical evidence that there was mobility between the so-called distinct and opposed groups and that the same man might in turn be a fishing captain and a settler, while his son might return to the migratory fishery; further, since both sedentary and migratory fishermen came from the same part of England there were often close ties of relationship between them.[10]

It would seem that Prowse sought to tell a good story which, like any traditional narrative, employed conflict and resolution in a clear pattern. The idea of "milestones" in history, or significant "firsts," is established in our thinking on both the folk and élite levels. The story of the Dawes' encounter with John Guy is very closely associated with the theme of conflict between planters and fishermen and with the pattern of "firsts." In

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[7]Matthews, "English Emigration to Newfoundland," in *Lectures on the History of Newfoundland 1500-1830*, p. 218. A "fishing room" was the area of beach on which a landing stage and storehouse for fishing gear were built, it also included a mooring for the boat.

[8]Matthews, "Settlement in Newfoundland between 1660 and 1730," in *Lectures on the History of Newfoundland 1500-1830*, pp. 115-116.

[9]D.W. Prowse, *A History of Newfoundland from the English, Colonial, and Foreign Records*, 3rd ed. St. John's: Dicks & Co., 1971. First published in 1895.

[10]K. Matthews, "A 'Who was Who' of Families engaged in the Fishery and Settlement of Newfoundland 1660-1840," Memorial University, 1971, pp. 37-39.

1610 John Guy, representing a company of merchants who had invested in his attempt to found the first plantation in Newfoundland, arrived in Conception Bay and sailed to Cupids where the colony was established. Guy's company anticipated trouble with the fishermen who had been used to occupying the same fishing rooms over successive summers; Guy was accordingly instructed to explain that his intentions were to be agricultural and mercantile rather than to compete with them for fishing rooms since, clearly, a resident population of a colony could monopolise the fishing rooms before the migratory fishermen returned in the spring.

The oral tradition, as recorded from Greta Hussey, certainly fits the basic facts of the fishermen's suspicions of Guy:

Greta Hussey: They (the Dawes) were the people that wouldn't let John Guy land, in 1610.

M.J.L.: Ah yeah.

Greta Hussey: John Guy steamed up there, you know where the fish plant is in Ship Cove, well he steamed up to put in Ship Cove there. You know, not up here in the harbour, but down in Ship Cove. And the Dawes came out and wouldn't let him land. They told him 'twas a better place up the bay farther. So uhm, that was in the late 1500's. They got records to prove that but I don't know where you'll uh, where you could pick them up, but I've heard that that they have.

M.J.L.: Why didn't they want Guy to land there?

Greta Hussey: They didn't want anybody taking their fishing grounds *(said in a tone which implied that the answer was obvious).* "We've got a nice little cove, plenty of fishing grounds, we don't want anybody here." You know. Well that was the *idea*. Yeah, they didn't want anybody in there talking — like you've got the berry patch, you *know?*

M.J.L.: You want to keep it for yourself. So what about Guy, what happened to him? He went on somewhere else?

Greta Hussey: Oh to Cupids, he settled a colony out there, a plantation. Yeah, sawmills and grew vegetables and everything. He had a big thing.[11]

J.R. Smallwood gives a slight variation wherein the Dawes are out on the fishing grounds rather than in Ship Cove when they advise Guy to go elsewhere.[12] Mrs. Lear, Greta's cousin, also told the latter version.

The event as described in the oral tradition might have happened; there

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[11] Transcript of tape recorded interview, March 19, 1977.

[12] J.R. Smallwood, *Handbook, Gazetteer and Almanac: Newfoundland 1940,* St. John's: Long Bros., Printers, (1940), pp. 108-109.

is no real evidence that independent settlers were living in the area at this time though there is strong circumstantial evidence that in the next few years they were doing so. But the tradition does not depend on the Dawe family being actually *resident* there anyway; Guy arrived during August of that year by which time migratory fishermen, such as the Dawes may have been, would have been established in their summer fishing rooms. Greta, in fact, said that this was in the period when people were "not allowed" to stay here in winter.

From the evidence of the company instructions to John Guy, however, we can see that he was warned against antagonising the fishermen and he chose Cupids as more suitable for his agricultural schemes than the rocky and narrow Port de Grave peninsula. Some of Guy's letters and other memoranda survive and none mentions this encounter.

Guy's letters are interesting, however, as evidence on the question of whether the Dawes or anyone else were wintering in Newfoundland prior to John Guy's plantation of 1610. Guy was clearly uncertain of whether it was possible to survive a Newfoundland winter and kept careful records of the weather; had settlers been wintering there before it would probably have been known to him. He could also have cited the success of these settlers in his letters, which were designed to promote investment in his enterprise and contained glowing accounts of the "healthfulnesse of these countries," the thriving state of his animals, and his hopes for a harvest of grain. He does claim, however, that independent settlers were considering living there:

> Many of our masters and sea-faring men seeing our safetie, and hearing what a milde winter we had, . . . doe begin to be in loue with the countrey, and doe talke of comming to take land here to inhabit, falling in the reckoning as well of the commodities that they may make by the banke fishing, as by the husbandry of the land, besides the ordinary fishing.[13]

While none of these factors destroys the possible validity of the oral tradition they do make it seem less likely. The story emblematises a conflict of interest which can be documented from other sources; that is, Guy anticipated opposition from the fishermen and later, in 1617, finding that the company could only make a profit by joining in the fishery, the planters did begin to fish and thus antagonised the migratory fishermen, the "Western Adventurers."[14] Possibly the legend represents the end of a

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[13]Prowse, p. 127, quoting Guy's letter to Slaney, from Cupids, 16th May, 1611.

[14]Matthews, "Relations between the Migratory Fishermen and the Settlers during the Seventeenth Century," in "Lectures on the History of Newfoundland 1500-1830," p. 87.

"chain of testimony" about this general conflict.[15]

Since the historicity of the tradition is not to be proved or refuted by documentary evidence we may turn to an examination of its content and contexts to see what other factors might account for its retention in oral tradition. It should first be noted, however, that the age of the legend itself is not established. The earliest printed source I have seen is from 1940 in Smallwood's *Gazetteer*.[16] My informants Greta Hussey and Mrs. Lear, however, both state that it was regarded as an established fact among the people at Port de Grave for as long as they can remember, which, in Mrs. Lear's case, would give it a currency of at least sixty years. Judge Prowse, whose family lived at Port de Grave, should have known the tradition but it does not appear in his *History of Newfoundland* (1895); it seems strange that he does not at least allude to it as a tradition since it accords so well with his view of the history of settlement in Newfoundland.

Prowse stresses, without offering precise documentation, that "winter crews" began to be left on the island and that these became the first permanent settlers before the organized attempts at plantation began with Guy. He argues that Newfoundland was colonized "not by aristocratic and fantastic patentees but by hard-working humble settlers from the West of England; oppressed by the harsh laws of the Stuarts, and persecuted by the Western Adventurers, they clung with sturdy tenacity to the land they made their home."[17] Smallwood's version makes the same contrast between the humble fishermen and the "wealthy newcomers." This view is certainly an exaggeration of class and economic differences between the fishermen and the planters. It has the effect, however, of giving the story a traditionally satisfying content in which underdogs — the humble fishing Dawes — defeat the powerful, wealthy, official, John Guy. As Neil V. Rosenberg has observed, this conflict is still a potent element in the Newfoundland political mythology — the migratory fishermen, in this reading of history, are the original 'come from aways' — exploiting without helping permanent development.

The idea that the settlers came to Newfoundland to escape oppression in England and to make a better life is an aspect of Greta Hussey's historical belief:

> They just moved out for a better way of life, more freedom and a better way of life. No taxes. And I think at that particular time in England there

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[15]For the concept of a "chain of testimony" see Jan Vansina, *Oral Tradition: A Study in Historical Methodology*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1965, p. 20 *et passim*.

[16]Andrews, pp. 30–32, cites an article by N.C. Crewe, *Evening Telegram* (St. John's), 21 Jan., 1966. Dawe, p. 3, cites Wayfarer, *The Daily News* (St. John's), 6 Feb., 1962; L.E.F. English, "The First Settlements," *Newfoundland Quarterly*, 49 (1949), p. 15.

[17]Prowse, pp. 113–114.

> was a sort of a "Upstairs Downstairs" affair, you know what I mean *(laughs)*. Segregation, the higher class, the middle class and lower class. Probably they were persecuted a bit, I don't know, and they just picked up and came out to what they considered a freer country.[18]

It is difficult to know whether this represents the end of a chain of tradition from her great grandparents or is Greta's reconstruction of motivation based on her exposure to the various media by which popular historical assumptions are spread.

Ideas about motives for emigration are inevitably coloured in North America by the American mythology of emigration and settlement and many ideas not strictly applicable to the Newfoundland situation have been applied to it via the popular media. Where an individual oral historical tradition accords closely with a popular stereotype we should be particularly guarded about accepting it as true.

The effect of official attempts to hinder settlement has also been exaggerated, according to Matthews, but they have become established in Newfoundland's historical and political mythology. An extreme example occurs in a book "Recommended by the Bureau of Education for Use in the Schools of Newfoundland" by Frances B. Brifet, published in 1929, which describes how some fishermen wanted to remain in Newfoundland because "they loved this beautiful land" but King Charles II, "a very lazy man who did not care about his distant colony," was petitioned by the "rich merchants" to forbid settlement; but the hardy settlers "loved Newfoundland and would not leave it."[19] The propagandist tone is unmistakeable here and reflects the era of Newfoundland's semi-independence in which Prowse, and this popularizer, wrote. A desire to establish the presence of settlers, committed to permanent residence in the island, independent of official English attempts to found plantations, is characteristic of nationalistic sentiment and is a major element in the context of the Dawe and Guy story in the popular consciousness.

The tradition thus accords very well with received opinions about the course of Newfoundland history. Another possible explanation for the rise of the story, however, is the social prestige and economic advantage it might give the Dawes. As such it would parallel family traditions which link prominent American families to the Pilgrim Fathers; in fact, were the Dawes' claim to be proved, they might call themselves "the oldest settled family in North America."[20]

There may also have been more local issues as a basis. The Port de Grave peninsula is a narrow strip of land with steep cliffs and few fishing

[18]Transcript of tape recorded interview, March 19, 1977

[19]Frances B. Brifet, *Little Stories About Newfoundland*, Toronto: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1929, p. 15

[20]Dawe, p. 1

rooms. It is possible that the tradition had bearing on disputed possession of fishing rooms or fishing grounds for it could have been in the Dawes' interest to establish prior claims. Until ten or twelve years ago fishing grounds and rooms had been occupied by hereditary right; since that time there has been an annual drawing for berths. The Dawes were one of the three or four families in the area and it is possible that the dominant family in a settlement reshapes and interprets history to suit itself.

Having come thus far without locating evidence for or against the truth of the tradition, or being able to establish its duration, one might wonder whether the story ever had much importance for the community. Greta is generally disparaging about the amount of historical interest among the present residents; she was shocked to find that people in their seventies did not know the tradition although, as she said, the foundations of the Dawes' houses could be seen on Net Point. This ignorance of a tangible evidence seems particularly strange to her. She considers that people today are interested only in the state of the fishery. Her cousin Frank Lear shared her opinion and felt that the youngsters didn't even know about the trips to the Labrador which had been a major part of the community's life only some thirty years ago.[21]

Greta's interest in history is exceptional; she is a tradition bearer. I attempted to discover the type of personality that she felt went with an interest in history and to find out the contexts in which historical information was learned. Both Greta and Mrs. Lear spoke of Greta's grandmother as having had an exceptional amount of historical knowledge; in fact they had sometimes been bored by her and now say that they wish they had listened more:

> Her memory was like a tack, as the saying goes, and she used to talk so much — put my hand over my mouth *(laughing, implying that she is talking too much)* — she used to talk so much that we got weary, you know, day and night.[22]

Her grandmother was a midwife and thus travelled about and knew everyone in the area. Greta's father was similarly gregarious and this she feels has an effect on the amount of history a person gathers: "You're bound to be talking about something," she said. Greta herself certainly personifies the gregarious type of personality with what she humorously identifies as "the gift of gab."

The contexts of oral history, as far as I could elicit them, were closely associated with work, like mending fishing gear, that brought people together in a span of generations during the evenings or in the winter. The

[21] Interview with Frank Lear, Hibbs Cove, April 2nd, 1977.

[22] Transcript of tape recorded interview, March 19, 1977.

historical knowledge was communicated casually: "It didn't seem I was taking any interest in it at the time," Frank Lear said. "It was all cuffed over," Greta said, "every bird that was shot, every boat that was built, was shot over again and built in our kitchen." Now that this kind of event no longer takes place there seems to be a loss of technical competence and historical knowledge. Frank Lear feels that the young men do not know how to make the kinds of nets that the old men did and that they know little of local history.

The real oral historical knowledge of a community is about the network of relationships between people, their occupations, and the places where they lived. Watching and listening to Greta in her conversation with the Lears and others it was obvious that here was the real interest for them. This kind of historical knowledge has a real function and the very act of participating in it is an expression of relatedness and friendship. Communication about relationships seems to be the basic conversational matrix in which oral history is held and should be made the starting point for oral history studies in this community.

The story of the Dawes' meeting with John Guy cannot be established as an authentic oral tradition on the basis of my study since no chain of testimony was discovered. There has almost certainly been much assimilation of printed accounts of the story even supposing that there was an oral version as an original. The tradition fits the model of Newfoundland history developed by Prowse as a series of conflicts between hardy settlers determined to set down roots in the face of opposition from migratory fishermen, grasping merchants, and the British government. As such the story takes on the character of a foundation myth, which is indicative of a society's chosen view of its history but may not be objectively true.

The project as a whole has raised basic problems about the study of oral history in a literate society. Where published records exist these tend to be uncritically accepted as being the final truth and people abdicate from the responsibility for carrying historical knowledge of their community; this, they feel, is best left to "experts" such as academics or self-styled amateur historians.

Oral historical accounts of past events collected from literate informants are likely to tell more about the narrators themselves and their, and their society's, assumptions about the past than they do about historical events. The reinterpretation of the past goes on continually in a literate society where there is exposure to diverse sources of historical theory. This should not deter the folklorist, however, from pursuing oral history as a source of insight into the worldview of a contemporary society and as a study of that society's use of narrative material for the common folkloric function of education in its beliefs, manners and values.

Since preparing this essay for publication new information has emerged which suggests that I had been ignoring the possibility that the Dawe and Guy story could, in some contexts, be used as what C.W. von Sydow terms a "jocular dite" ("Popular Dite Tradition: A Terminological Outline," in his *Selected Papers on Folklore,* Copenhagen: Rosenkilde and Bagger, 1948, pp. 108-110), in other words, it might be a humorous assertion which is not intended to be believed. This obvious point struck me on reading the following joking reference to a still earlier encounter between settlers and newcomers which was made by Rev. Roger D. Tucker of St. James United Church, St. John's, when interviewed by Sheila M. Brown, graduate student in the Department of Folklore, Memorial University; I am grateful to them both for permission to cite this material:

> And you may wonder how come the Vikings didn't land in Cape Onion. Cape Onion's a beautiful harbour, whereas L'Anse aux Meadows is only three miles away . . . it's just three miles from Cape Onion, is where the Vikings landed. And I've been asked "How come, when they came over here they landed in L'Anse aux Meadows, which is a difficult place to get into, shoals and rocks, and Cape Onion's a good harbour?" The only answer I can give for that is that the Tuckers wouldn't let them come ashore.

Rev. Tucker's family is old-established at Cape Onion.

This type of humorous explanation of a puzzling historical detail is surely widespread. Its play with anachronism is reminiscent of the humour of St. John's balladeer Johnny Burke whose "The Landfall of Cabot" has the members of a St. John's household outdoing each other in tongue-in-cheek claims to have sailed with John Cabot, been his bunk mate at the ice, and even to have gone to school with him *(The Ballads of Johnny Burke: A Short Anthology,* ed. Paul Mercer, St. John's: Newfoundland Historical Society, 1974).

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Résumé

Cet essai traite d'un élément de l'histoire orale terreneuvienne: la légende de l'arrivée, en 1610, du colon anglais officiel, John Guy, dans la Baie de la Conception. D'après cette légende, les Dawe, une famille de pêcheurs, avaient empêché le débarquement de Guy et avaient envoyé celui-ci ailleurs.

Les éléments sociaux, politiques, et économiques qui servent à clarifier l'origine de cette légende y sont discutés. Le context de la transmission traditionnelle de l'histoire orale est aussi examiné. Finalement, l'auteur suggère que, dans certains cas, cette légende peut être considérée comme "dite facétieuse."