

“The Fate of Daniel Gwinn” : A Narrative Obituary Poem

Ronald Caplan

Volume 13, numéro 2, 1991

Ethnologie régionale : les provinces maritimes
Regional Folklore: The Maritimes Provinces

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1081722ar>
DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1081722ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Association Canadienne d’Ethnologie et de Folklore

ISSN

1481-5974 (imprimé)
1708-0401 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer cet article

Caplan, R. (1991). “The Fate of Daniel Gwinn” : A Narrative Obituary Poem. *Ethnologies*, 13(2), 109–119. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1081722ar>

Résumé de l'article

Cet article analyse un poème nécrologique, «The Fate of Daniel Gwinn», recueilli dans la région de la baie d'Aspy sur l'île du Cap Breton, Nouvelle Écosse. L'auteur soutient que le poète, Andrew Dunphy, a interprété à sa guise les circonstances du décès dans son récit pour apaiser le deuil des vivants et préserver la solidarité de la communauté. Le poème nécrologique est donc plus qu'une pratique religieuse. Si la narration de ce type de poème était généralement destinée à la famille immédiate, dans ce cas le poème a connu une circulation plus large et il s'est immiscé dans le répertoire des chanteurs de la localité.

REGARDING 'THE FATE OF DANIEL GWINN': A NARRATIVE OBITUARY POEM

Ronald CAPLAN

Cape Breton's Magazine

Cape Breton

I first heard the song, THE FATE OF DANIEL GWINN by Andrew Dunphy¹, from John D. MacDonald of Aspy Bay in northern Cape Breton Island, Nova Scotia.² John D. sat looking up and out at some point between the ceiling and the sky; he gave no body or facial expressions, as though it was his responsibility to pass that song from where it was made in 1902, just as it was made to the present occasion--and to pass it unchanged, unaltered by the act of presentation. We know that isn't what happens, ever. We know that every song performance is both new and a renewal, despite the attempt to sing the song correctly, to make no changes. But the intensity with which John D. worked to present the song rather than himself, alerted me that there might be very particular information available through this song.

I had already been given several clues by Helen Curtis,³ who came from, and raised, a singing family in northern Cape Breton. While Helen was willing to talk about old songs, she *wanted* to talk about Andrew Dunphy. She had told me: "He had a little bit of deformity"—indicating with this detail that he did not carry out the normal work of men in his community. Born in 1865 at White Point on Aspy Bay, Dunphy had one hand that remained tiny like a baby's. He had a crippled arm that kept him from most ordinary work. George Rambeau⁴ of Smelt Brook added: "He was disfigured quite a bit in more ways than one. He had an awful hare lip. And his eyes were a little different than mine and yours".

While other people also made poetry, Dunphy alone is remembered in his community as 'The Poet'. He never married, wandered the Aspy Bay region of Cape Breton, and was welcomed for long stays in several homes. Helen told me—and I was told over and over by others—that Andrew wrote only on request of the immediate family. All evidence indicates that he gave the poems to the mourning family, who seem to have controlled further circulation. He

1. For the text and air of THE FATE OF DANIEL GWINN, see the end of this article. Also, please note that even within a single family the spellings Gwinn and Gwynn are used.

2. John D. MacDonald and Ronald Caplan, *Cape Breton's Magazine Tape*.

3. "Searching for Cape Breton Folksong", *Cape Breton's Magazine*, 41 (1986), p. 16-23.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 19-20.

either did not recite them, or perhaps very rarely. Some of his poetry found its way into the community's song repertoire, but he was not considered a singer. Although I have found a couple of humorous compositions by Dunphy, clearly his principal form was the obituary poem. Creating narrative obituary verse has given Andrew Dunphy a particular social role in his community's remembered history, a role akin to a mid-wife or a coffin-maker or a lay-clergyman.

Narrative obituary verse is poetry about death that features the story of the death. Tristram Coffin coined the phrase⁵, encouraging its study as the primary influence on traditional ballads. Robert Bethke⁶ took issue with Coffin, offering a long list of other genres — such as funeral sermons, gallows sermons, literary elegies and so forth — that could have contributed to the American ballads. Despite Bethke's useful 1970 clarification, Mark Coffin, Tristram's son, set out in *Narrative Obituary Verse and Native American Ballads* to demonstrate that "most if not all American ballads were influenced by narrative obituary verse".⁷

Mark Coffin's conclusions were based on a very limited definition of narrative obituary verse. Elsewhere, I take issue in detail with his definition.⁸ In short, Coffin's definition did not encompass verse I was looking at, verse that exhibited a variety of approaches, included borrowings and influences, demonstrated considerable creativity within tradition, and seemed to fulfil important social responsibilities. The poems seemed to me, in a place and time, to be used as specific tools toward the comfort, guidance and even the preservation of the community within which they were made. Mark Coffin's crucial limitation is that he treated the verse as literature only, comparing one item with another, and not as part of a specific social crisis in a particular community.

Andrew Dunphy's *THE FATE OF DANIEL GWINN* is one of 11 obituary verses I have found that were made in the Aspy Bay Region of northern Cape Breton Island, circa 1894 to 1902. It represents just one of three distinct parallel traditions of obituary verse I found in that region: 1) Gaelic lament poetry; 2) balladic verse that Bethke refers to as "narrative elegiac"⁹ and that would most closely meet Mark Coffin's defining elements for "narrative obituary verse", concentrating on the details of the event; and 3) obituary verse that

5. Tristram P. Coffin, "On a Peak in Massachusetts: The Literary and Aesthetic Approach" in M. C. Boatright (editor), *A Good Tale and a Bonnie Tune*, Dallas, Southern Methodist University Press, 1964, p. 206.

6. Robert D. Bethke, "Narrative Obituary Verse and Native American Balladry", *Journal of American Folklore*, 33 (1970).

7. Mark Tristram Coffin, *Narrative Obituary Verse and Native American Ballads*, Norwood, Norwood Editions, 1975.

8. Ronald Caplan, "The Function of Narrative Obituary Verse in Northern Cape Breton, 1894-1902", MA Thesis, Saint Mary's University, 1989.

9. Bethke, p. 65.

Bethke calls "homiletic"¹⁰, a less obviously singable, sermon-like presentation which, while it may tell a story, concentrates on homily rather than on narrative.

We don't know what Andrew Dunphy called *THE FATE OF DANIEL GWINN* or any of his other verses. No one I met in the Aspy Bay region called them narrative obituary poetry. They usually referred to them by saying, "It's the poem Andrew Dunphy made for Danny Gwinn" or "for the MacPherson Children", or "for Francis MacKinnon's wife". No one ever suggested any connection between what Andrew Dunphy made and the kind of verses that appear in the daily newspapers on the anniversary of a death, although there are similar elements. The poetry was never compared to a tombstone or eulogy. I have been assured that despite the fact this community often carried out its burials without the aid of a clergyman, obituary verse never had a part in graveside services. On the other hand, at least four of the narrative obituary verses I found (including three composed by Dunphy) were taken into the community's song repertoire. Once relatively popular in home contexts, they are now very rarely performed.

Briefly, here is the story of the event that provoked *THE FATE OF DANIEL GWINN* and three other obituary poems about Daniel Gwinn's death. In winter of 1901-2, Daniel and his cousin Alfred Gwinn left Cape Breton for seasonal work in the lumberwoods at Bemis, Maine. The song suggests that they usually worked inside the mill. One day in February, 1902, the boss offered Daniel the chance to haul logs to the landing. Daniel chose instead to work at repairing the mill roof, and the task of hauling logs fell to Alfred. Daniel was working up on the roof — when he fell "down through the hole he made". He was struck by a huge drive wheel and was thrown across the room, slamming against a wall. He died and the lumber company sent him home to Cape Breton in a casket. He was buried surrounded by family and friends.

Three poems were made: Andrew Dunphy wrote *THE FATE OF DANIEL GWINN*; Daniel's brother Charles wrote *IN MEMORIAM OF DANIEL GWYNN*; and either a brother or sister wrote *DEATH HAS BEEN HERE*.¹¹ All three poems were found in the Gwinn family Bible and all seem addressed to Daniel's immediate family. Dunphy's and Charles' poems are narratives, telling a story of the death. Only Dunphy's is specifically concerned with Daniel's cousin, Alfred Gwinn. Three times *IN THE FATE OF DANIEL GWINN*, Dunphy refers to Alfred as Daniel's "dearest friend" who after the accident "stood by his side" and "manfully did his part". Near the end of the poem Alfred is given further distinction:

And Alfred Gwinn his dearest friend will not forget him soon
In memory of him Dan will live although beyond the tomb.

10. Ibid.

11. For the texts, see the end of this article.

I suspect that something terrible happened to Alfred in Bemis, Maine, that possibly he had not done his part. It may have been no more than Alfred's having felt that he should have been the one on the roof. As Dunphy describes it:

The boss asked Dan if he would choose to go and drive a team.
But Dan replied he'd rather not and Alfred he did go,
To haul the logs from where they lay down to the mill below
Dan went to work upon the roof saying that he rather would,
Not thinking that death lurked beneath the very spot he stood.

Stating that Daniel chose to work on the roof is Dunphy's way of saying no one else should feel responsibility for what happened next. The sun shining "in Destiny" when they rose for work that morning reinforces that, as does the word 'fate' in the title. The larger point that the poet seems to be making is that there is no one left behind who can be blamed.

Dunphy suggests there is a problem in his several confirmations of Alfred having acted appropriately, and with the lines:

Mid strangers in a foreign land with a sad and aching heart,
To meet his friends and those he loved with all his grief combined,
What wretched troubled thoughts that passed through Alfred's troubled mind.

Unlike the other poems about Daniel Gwinn, Dunphy writes a death scene that both comforts the immediate family and deals with cousin Alfred in particular. Daniel's death, as we will see, was in reality very messy. It is handled by Dunphy with remarkable reserve. We can clearly see formulaic balladic conventions working here in ways other than simply as an aid to memorization. Daniel is thrown by the machine against the solid wall, and "calmly lay just where he fell". Despite the "mortal pains of death", he does not speak, there is no sound. "His dearest friend" Alfred Gwinn, "stood by his side" and doctors (according to Dunphy) "soon arrive but Oh alas too late". He dies in the workplace. "The damp of death is on him now, his marble brow o'erspread". These details are very clean, very noble—and they avoid any more troubling detail. Considering family and later community acceptance (when the verse became part of the common song repertoire), I have to assume no further detail was required.

In another place, another time (for instance, in the popular literature of the streets of eighteenth-century England or in the elegiac literature of Puritan New England) the physical details would have been thoroughly exploited for melodramatic effect.¹²

It should be pointed out that people in the Aspy Bay region *did* sing other songs that included details of horrible deaths, such as "The Jam on Jerry's Rock", with "Meanwhile, their mangled bodies, down by the stream did flow/

12. See in particular John W. Draper, *The Funeral Elegy and the Rise of English Romanticism*, rep., 1929, New York, Octagon Books, Inc., 1967.

while dead and bleeding near the bank, was that of young Munroe". But for the local dead of this particular community, such detail is usually avoided in the narrative obituary verse.

As it happens, Daniel's brother, Charles A. Gwinn, also wrote a narrative obituary poem — IN MEMORIAM OF DANIEL GWINN.¹³ It tells a very different — even contradictory — story. While Dunphy has Daniel Gwinn die on Friday, in the mill where he was struck with his friend at his side, Daniel's brother Charles writes in a poem directed solely to his family:

Far from his friends and happy home
No loved one was by his side
In a hospital that lonely place
On Sunday night he died.

Happily, thanks to help from Dr. Edward Ives, we have a newspaper account from the *Rumford Falls Times*, February 8, 1882. They change Gwinn to Quinn, but it is undoubtedly our man:

A man by the name of Quinn [sic] was brought down from Bemis last Friday night, injured in a horrible manner. Mr. Quinn was at work on the roof of the engine house and in some way fell through striking on the big drive wheel which was running at full speed. He was thrown about forty feet striking with a dull thud on a brick wall opposite. Mr. Quinn was picked up unconscious and brought down here where he was put in charge of a local physician until Saturday morning, when he was taken to a hospital in Lewiston. He seemed to be injured mostly about the head and internally. He had not regained consciousness when he left here Saturday morning.

So it was messy. Moreover, Daniel did not die as Dunphy has it, in the workplace, peacefully, with his closest friend at his side. Charles had Daniel die where the newspaper said he died, in the hospital. He may have been alone. Charles' poem never mentions Alfred Gwinn. His poem is a record for the immediate family, while Andrew Dunphy, the professional, seems to have a wider agenda.

Dunphy's changes suggest his intentional function was, using Bascom's terms, that of "maintaining the stability of the culture".¹⁴ It is a function that required and was worth the risk of eliminating and changing important facts. Dunphy chooses among the known facts. He does not, for instance, describe the body. But he does maintain the tossing against the solid wall. Dunphy works in THE FATE OF DANIEL GWINN as a peacemaker, as does Charles. But Dunphy is making choices that seem to be more deliberately aimed at easing troubled minds beyond the immediate family, aimed at giving a final and — within the culture's requirements — acceptable version of what happened

13. The text is at the end of this article.

14. W. R. Bascom, "Four Functions of Folklore", *Journal of American Folklore*, LXVII (1954), p. 333-349. Rept. in Allen Dundes (editor), *The Study of Folklore*, Englewood Cliffs, Prentice-Hall Inc., 1965, p. 297.

to Daniel Gwinn, a carefully made version that, where possible, eliminates all residue of outstanding questions or lingering blame.

I do not know precisely how this worked within the Aspy Bay community, circa 1900. I cannot believe that people did not know that the two stories conflicted. Certainly within the family of Daniel Gwinn there was ample opportunity to recognize the conflict. A Sabbath Day ritual developed in the Gwinn home in which the poems related to Daniel's death, plus two printed Joe Scott ballads¹⁵ that had come home on Daniel's body, along with other family obituary poems were the only reading other than the Bible permitted in the Gwinn home during the Sabbath. The poems were kept together inside the Bible and the children read them aloud to one another.

As for the wider Aspy Bay community, until very recently when poetry was collected for a community museum, there is no evidence that any Daniel Gwinn-related verse other than Dunphy's *THE FATE OF DANIEL GWINN* was circulated beyond the immediate family. Dunphy's was the only poem to become part of the community's song repertoire. Ninety years later, there are still a few people in the community who will sing it when asked — and sing it as John D. sang it for me, in the old way, a presentation as far from personal expression as possible. We could dismiss this way of singing as only style (thereby forgetting that style has roots and meaning), or we can see it as in keeping with the role and responsibility of every singing citizen of the community — to keep the local song pristine, to offer oneself as a kind of neutral conduit, to let the song come through. I recognize that this is the way they often sang the old songs, whether a traditional ballad or the latest Joe Scott song — but I also read in this, the singer demonstrating vital local social responsibility, permitting the song to do its work.

John Gwinn, Daniel's nephew, is an important exception. He is the youngest singer of that song I have found, probably about sixty-three. He sings *THE FATE OF DANIEL GWINN* very occasionally. He has also changed some words and has put the song to a faster country tune to (he says) help him remember the words and (I think) to please his audience. For instance, John has changed Dunphy's "down through the hole he made" to "down through the hole so wide", because it rhymes. While John finds the song more singable and it serves the needs of a living community, the change eliminates what seems to have been Dunphy's intention, that of dispelling elements that might provoke doubt or discord within the community.

15. WILLIAM SULLIVAN, a death-in-the-woods ballad similar to what happened to Daniel Gwinn and HOWARD CARRICK, the story of a young man who did not heed his mother's warning and who eventually hanged himself in a syphilitic delirium. Texts of WILLIAM SULLIVAN and HOWARD CARRICK can be found in Edward D. Ives', *Joe Scott: The Woodsman-Songmaker*, Chicago, University of Illinois Press, 1978.

There is, of course, more to this than I can explain. Exactly where Daniel died is less important to Dunphy than the assurance that everyone did his part, and that no living person is to blame.

Even the lumber company is declared blameless. Dunphy says the Cummings organization — the company Daniel worked for — paid to dress him, to get him a casket, and to send him home. Dunphy adds: “And they could do no more”. This is certainly a very particular view of the company’s responsibility, and this lack of anger may simply characterize the people for whom the verse was made. It may also be another way of avoiding leaving an issue unresolved, a way of making peace.

This narrative obituary verse — THE FATE OF DANIEL GWINN — is a complex social tool functioning toward the preservation of community, toward personal and communal reintegration. I suggest that it is akin to other social tools occasioned by death such as coffin-making, preparation of the body, digging the grave, waking and burial. These were all examples of local responsibilities, particularly in communities such as Aspy Bay where until relatively recently, there were no funeral parlours or permanent clergy. The community is re-organized around such processes. Destabilizing versions of the event are given an opportunity to be set aside.

Despite contradictions, the family cherished the poems — had the two conflicting poems side by side in the family Bible, read them both with other related poems on the Sabbath — and shared them with me with no apparent sense of conflict. The family accepted and, as the song got out, the wider community accepted. No one has ever told me any other version of the story than the one offered in Andrew Dunphy’s poem. Even though many must have known the facts of Daniel’s death, that he was badly hurt, that he probably died alone in a hospital, and perhaps even that cousin Alfred was shattered for at least a while in Maine — which Dunphy transmuted into “at his side” and “manfully did his part”.

The acceptance, I suspect, is one of the leaps we make in order to maintain family, community and self, in the face of what we think would otherwise destroy us.

THE FATE OF DANIEL GWINN

by Andrew Dunphy

- 1) Both young and old I pray draw near, with sorrow I begin,
While I relate although in grief the fate of Daniel Gwinn,
He and his comrades late last fall they left their native shore,
All in the prime of youth and bloom with prospects bright before.
- 2) To part with home and friends is sad, for parting causes pain,
But still these young men felt assured they’d see their homes again.

- To home and friends they bid adieu, they went aboard the train,
The iron horse soon bore them on, they arrived at Bemis, Maine.
- 3) They were employed by Cummings to work into a mill,
And were it not for what occurred they might have been there still,
But death will come although unseen in some mysterious way,
And nature gave no warning voice it being his dying day.
- 4) Those young men rose with cheerful hearts one winter's morning clear,
To go as usual to their work not thinking death was near,
The sun did rise in destiny sent forth a silver gleam
The boss asked Dan if he would choose to go and drive a team.
- 5) But Dan replied he'd rather not and Alfred he did go,
To haul the logs from where they lay down to the mill below
Dan went to work upon the roof saying that he rather would,
Not thinking that death lurked beneath the very spot he stood.
- 6) While working on that iron roof of eighteen feet or more,
A powerful engine with flywheels stood 'neath him on the floor,
When lifting up an iron sheet close by his comrades side,
He lost his balance and fell forth, down through the hole he made.
- 7) Those wheels flew round with lightning speed on which poor
Dan did fall,
It threw his body with great force against the solid wall,
He calmly lay just where he fell beneath that monstrous stroke,
Those mortal pains of death he felt but not one word he spoke.
- 8) His dearest friend stood by his side and sad lament his fate,
The doctors too did soon arrive but Oh alas too late,
No earthly skill could him avail the spark of life had fled,
The damp of death is o'er him now, his marble brow o'erspread.
- 9) His dearest friend stood by his side and manfully did his part,
Mid strangers in a foreign land with a sad and aching heart,
To meet his friends and those he loved with all his grief combined,
What wretched troubled thoughts that passed through Alfred's troubled
mind.
- 10) The Cummings that did him employ the whole expenses paid,
They costly robed his lifeless form and in a casket laid,
They sent his body home again, unto his native shore,
To be laid at rest among his friends, and they could do no more.
- 11) Oh sad and awful was the day when his body home they brought,
Cruel death will take our dearest friends whose heart and hand we sought
His mother's grief could scarce control, most bitterly she wept,
For one who oft held in her arms and on her bosom slept.

- 12) His brothers and his sisters too likewise his parents dear,
Gazed sadly on the cold cold corpse as fell each bitter tear,
For him who fell in youth and bloom in sorrow deep they mourn.
For he will sleep all in that sleep till dust to dust return.
- 13) Now in the cold cold grave he lies, so narrow long and deep,
The mother earth closed o'er her son, let none disturb his sleep,
And may he sleep in blissfulness that none can him disturb,
The heavenly sun will dry the dew from off the tender herb.
- 14) Both day and night roll calmly on as they have done before,
The birds have flown return again but Dan will come no more,
And Alfred Gwinn his dearest friend will not forget him soon
In memory of him Dan will live although beyond the tomb.
- 15) Now sisters do not weep for him and brothers too also,
Fond parents both be reconciled for it's there we all must go,
Though we are falling one by one still let us hope in Christ,
That we shall meet them all again in the field of Paradise.

IN MEMORIAM OF DANIEL GWYNN

by Charles A. Gwinn

Come all my kind relations
Where ever you may be.
I hope you lend a listening ear
And kind attention give to me.

I have a very mournful tale,
I will relate to you.
It's most too sad to talk about
And hard to think it's true.

Concerning my brother Daniel Gwynn.
While in his youth and prime.
He lately left his happy home.
And the friends he loved behind.

Poor Dan he went away from home.
Both healthy strong and brave,
And little he thought before the spring
He would lay mouldering in the grave.

Little did his sisters think
Or his kind mother he loved so true.
As he kissed her so fondly saying good-bye
That he was bidding his last adieu.

Or did his kind father he cherished and loved
As he held his brave son by the hand
Think he never more would meet him again
Till across death's dark river they'd stand.

T'was in Beams (sic), Maine, in the lumber woods
Where the woodman's axe sounds shrill
Poor Dan he met with his sad doom
By falling through the roof of a mill.

Far from his friends and happy home
No loved one by his side
In a hospital that lonely place
On Sunday night he died.

As I sit in the twilight and ponder
When the evening shadows draw nigh
And think of the happy days we squandered
The days that have passed and gone by.

But never again with my brother I'll roam
O'er those hills and valleys so fair
And hear his sweet cheerful voice
O'er gase (sic) on his dark curly hair.

Mother I know you'll miss your kind boy
You will miss the kind smile that he wore
Never again will you hear his quick step
Upon the threshold of your door.

Kind father I know your boy he is gone
He has gone to return never more
I know you will miss his kind helping hand
As they helped you so often before.

And all of us brothers and kind sisters too
That mourn o'er our loss every day
For like the sweet flowers that bloom in the spring
Our brother was taken away.

And he sleeps in that cold silent grave
All his cares and troubles are o'er
Prepare for to meet him above
Where kind friends meet to part never more.

DEATH HAS BEEN HERE AND BORNE AWAY

Death has been here and borne away
A brother from our side
Just in the morning of his day
As young as we he died.

We cannot tell who next may fall
beneath God's chastening rod
One must be first but let us all
prepare to meet our God.

Farewell, dear friend, a long farewell
You we shall meet no more
Till we are raised above
on Zion's happy shore.

Our friend and brother lo is dead
the cold and lifeless clay
has made in dust his silent bed
and there it must decay.

Farewell dear friend again farewell
Soon we shall raise to thee
and when we meet no tongue can tell
how great our joys shall be.

No more will mourn their parted friend
But lift our ardent prayer
and every thought effort bend
to raise and join thee there.

God our father watch above us
keep us all from danger free
do thou guard and guide and love us
till like him we go to thee.