

Wayne Bartlett. *Louder Than the Sea.*

Paul Chafe

Volume 20, Number 2, Fall 2005

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/nflds20_2rv03

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Faculty of Arts, Memorial University

ISSN

0823-1737 (print)

1715-1430 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Chafe, P. (2005). Wayne Bartlett. *Louder Than the Sea*. *Newfoundland Studies*, 20(2), 317–319.

explored adequately, and this does constitute a weakness. The most important empirical contribution of this work is not in improving on our understanding of *what* gender means to work, but in helping us see *how* gender comes to mean what it does to the organization of work. A greater accounting of where and how this work intersects with and complements current feminist scholarship on women, work, and labour history, would thus have greatly strengthened the book.

Nonetheless, this work is a highly enjoyable read and an exceptionally well-executed qualitative investigation into an important and interesting subject. It should be placed on reading lists for upper-level and graduate courses on the sociology of work, as well as for courses on gender and work. In addition, students of qualitative methods would greatly benefit from reading about Cullum's experience in merging qualitative interview data with archival and historical research.

Helga Kristin Hallgrímsdóttir
University of Victoria

Wayne Bartlett. *Louder Than the Sea*. Dunvegan, ON: Cormorant Books, 2001, ISBN 1-896951-28-7

NOT SINCE the Stone family in Percy Janes's *House of Hate* has there been a crowd like this. Wayne Bartlett has aptly titled his story of the Bellman family *Louder Than the Sea*, for the only thing louder than the ocean, literally outside their door, is the sound of their petty but volatile arguments. Bartlett captures (perhaps a little too well) every aspect of the lives of this family, resettled on Newfoundland's Northern Peninsula. A way of life is preserved in this text — but so too is a claustrophobic madness, an anxiety and a tension that grows in an isolated community where everyone lives in close proximity to everyone else.

Violence is never too far away in this text — punches are thrown freely, and hands readily wrap around offending throats. Early in the book, the youngest son, Martin, assaults his grandmother as the family looks on:

The old woman flicked her teeth back in her mouth. Coffee stained her apron. The boy grabbed her by the throat. Her glasses fell down her nose and she let out a loud cry of anguish. Her teeth slipped and blocked her mouth as she tried to scream again.... [S]he began to turn pale. Her eyes rolled back in their sockets and thick, warm saliva dripped off her chin onto Martin's hand. (54-5)

Martin's mother and father sit idly by, hurling abuse at Martin as he throttles his grandmother, "affectionately" called "Aunt Kizzie," although no one ever shows her affection. Without the buffer of 120s and the other card games that enabled embittered and embattled family members to inflict sly psychological wounds on each

other in *House of Hate* (and in Michael Cook's *Jacob's Wake*), the members of the Bellman family insult each other openly and endlessly. The least offence provokes violence.

No element escapes Bartlett's descriptive pen. Every mannerism is broken down — Ambrose, the family patriarch, does not just sip his tea: "He could never drink hot tea without making his face into a caricature. Wide popping eyes. Lips pursed. Shivering. Long inward breaths sucking more air than tea. Steam" (23-4). Every cigarette stamped out, every curtain blown, every crockery dish taken down from the cupboard is conveyed in fine detail. Every fart, gob of phlegm, and stream of urine is recorded — vividly. Annie Proulx's blurb on the back cover states that Bartlett is "depicting the vanishing outpost world [with] a voice of raw and powerful authenticity." While I do not subscribe to her doomed-yet-noble perception of Newfoundlanders, there is no doubt that Bartlett is painting a clear picture of particular moments and images. Unfortunately, he commits so much page time to describing kitchens, bedrooms, and nose-picking that the plot suffers, at times stumbling along like Ida Bellman through her overcrowded kitchen.

This book is at its most entertaining when the pace of the action outraces reflective moments of description. Bartlett's depiction of the seal hunt reads like a living, bleeding how-to text for first-time sealers. His unapologetic portrayal of the slaughter on the ice pans immortalizes the skill-tempered urgency with which these men took to the ice — endangering their lives to ensure the preservation of their families. Judging by the passion Bartlett brings to this scene, it seems unlikely that any of the proceeds from this book will be going to Greenpeace.

When Martin becomes stranded on the island that was once his family's home, the book becomes a boy-in-the-wilderness tale much like those popular at the turn of the century (Catherine Parr Traill's *Canadian Crusoes* comes to mind) and revitalized over time by Farley Mowat (*Lost in the Barrens*) and another Newfoundland Wayne (Johnston's *The Navigator of New York*). During these anxious moments, as Martin struggles to survive and a rescue team is assembled, the plot moves along quickly.

Ambrose's character makes for an interesting case study of the effects of Confederation, resettlement, and changing times on the Newfoundland male psyche. A largely impotent character, Ambrose rarely makes a decision without deferring to his adopted son Garf. It is Garf who makes the decisions as to how the family is to survive, how Martin will be disciplined, how much gas will be needed to fuel their ski-doo trip to the ice pans. A man who has had so many decisions made for him, Ambrose has become accustomed to handing over responsibility. He seems comfortable with this arrangement until he is in Martin's presence. Then he relentlessly insults the boy and wonders how his son will ever become a "man." One sees underneath the fierceness and the futility a weakened and broken man, trying to force his son away from this life.

No conflicts are resolved in this novel, though there are plenty moments of finality. These are a people in transition — a transition that will never be complete. An isolated and independent people, they still call everything they do not understand “the devil” (never *a* devil — *the* devil) and suffer under the ancient and exploitative credit system. The world outside is forcing its way into the community, leaving these people sometimes unhappy, sometimes uncertain, but always hopeful for a better life. Bartlett preserves these moments like a bottled turr in Ida’s pantry — and like the turr, it may not always be easy to consume, but you will never forget it.

Paul Chafe
Memorial University of Newfoundland

Ballads and Sea Songs of Newfoundland, collected and edited by Elisabeth Bristol Greenleaf and recorded by Grace Yarrow Mansfield. 1933; reprint, with a foreword by Neil V. Rosenberg and Anna Kearney Guigné. Memorial University of Newfoundland Folklore and Language Publications, 2004, ISBN 0-88901-337-3

THIS PIONEERING FOLK collection by Elisabeth Bristol Greenleaf and Grace Yarrow Mansfield, originally published in 1933 and now re-issued by Memorial University of Newfoundland Folklore and Language Publications, is a treasure for scholars and amateur historians as well as for musicians and singers. In addition to MacEdward Leach’s graceful Preface to an earlier reprint, which emphasizes the significance of Greenleaf and Mansfield’s contextually embedded collecting practices, this edition is further enriched by a Foreword by Neil V. Rosenberg and Anna Kearney Guigné which guides the reader through the publications about, and archival resources for folksongs in Newfoundland and Labrador, and what else is known about the wonderful women who put together this book in the first place. The bibliography to Rosenberg’s Foreword lists enough of the significant books and articles on the subject of folksong and folksong collecting in Newfoundland to orient any scholar with a desire to work further on the subject.

Elisabeth Bristol Greenleaf first visited Newfoundland in 1920 as a summer volunteer teacher for one of the Grenfell mission schools. As she recalls, someone in the family with whom she was staying offered to sing her a song, and “I listened without particular interest, until it suddenly dawned upon me that he was singing a real folk-song, one handed down by oral tradition” (xix). At Vassar College she had listened to ballads sung by the Fuller sisters and had heard lectures on the subject by John Lomax; now she recognized that this was a special experience. “From that night ... I spent my leisure time listening to the songs and writing them down. No pupil of mine worked harder learning to write than I to record the tunes they sang” (xix).