

"The Cut-Off Head Frozen On": Some International Versions of a Tall Tale

Herbert Halpert

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Article abstract

C'est l'étude comparative d'un conte de mensonge dont la première version terre-neuvienne date d'environ 1795. Par une journée froide d'hiver, un homme est décapité mais à cause du gel, la tête reste attachée au corps, laissant l'homme indemne. Cependant, lorsque son cou dégèle, la tête tombe. Ce conte n'est signalé ni dans *The Types of the Folktale* d'Arne-Thompson, ni dans le *Motif-Index* de Thompson.

Trois textes de la Renaissance — allemand, français et anglais — sont présentés. Les versions modernes qui les suivent démontrent que le conte est courant à Terre-Neuve, au Nouveau-Brunswick, aux états de Vermont et d'Indiana, ainsi qu'aux Orcades et aux îles Shetland en Ecosse.

“The Cut-Off Head Frozen On”: Some International Versions of a Tall Tale

HERBERT HALPERT

A tall tale, heard and recorded in Newfoundland in 1794 or 1795 by an English seaman, but not printed until 1968, reminded me when I read it several years ago of a similar tale, told in Indiana, which I had published in 1942. The striking resemblance between the tales, so separated in time and space, started me on the search for parallels which led to this compilation.¹

The story, like most tall tales, is simple. A man has his head cut off, accidentally or deliberately; it is instantly frozen back in place by intensely cold weather and the man appears unhurt; and it falls, or is thrown, off when the man is exposed to heat and thaws.

Although I have found that the story has an international distribution, it does not appear in Stith Thompson's Type and Motif Indexes.² My Indiana version (1942) was abstracted and given motif number X1722*(b), by Ernest W. Baughman.³ I have used "The Cut-Off Head Frozen On" as the working title for this tale.

In this article I shall reprint all the published texts I have located and several unpublished ones. All are told as true (actual experiences), and are usually well localized. Variations appear mainly in the manner of decapitation, and the way in which the frozen-on head is again separated from the body.

The tale recorded by Aaron Thomas in 1795 in Newfoundland is still told in this province, and I shall begin and end my presentation with the Newfoundland texts. Other versions, from Great Britain, western Europe, the United States and the Maritimes will be cited more or less chronologically.

¹I am indebted to Violetta M. Halpert for her firm editing of this article.

²Antti Aarne and Stith Thompson, *The Types of the Folktale*, 2nd rev. (FF Communications No. 184; Helsinki, 1961); Stith Thompson, *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature*, rev. ed., 6 vols. (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana Univ. Press, 1955-58).

³Ernest W. Baughman, *Type and Motif-Index of the Folktales of England and North America* (Indiana Univ. Folklore Series, No. 20; The Hague: Mouton & Co., 1966), p. 579.

The first Newfoundland version is, so far as I can determine, also the earliest text found in North America. It was heard in St. John's in 1794 or 1795 by Aaron Thomas, an English able-bodied seaman, who wrote it in his journal, a fascinating record which was not published until 1968. His complete story is reprinted below, with the permission of the editor and the publisher.⁴

I sat in company the other evening with a poor but merry Fellow who tole me that a Brother of his had been killed in the Woods last Winter, and as it tends to show the extreme severity of the Climate here I shall introduce the anecdote.

When the face of nature was cloathed with Snow in December last, two men of the names of Lacey and Connor went into the Woods to cut wood. It froze so strong that Icicles were form'd by the water that dropped from the Eyes and Nose. Lacey was bending his head down near to the Stick when Connor was cutting. Unhapply the Ax missed the Stick, struck the frozen Snow, rebounded and fatally hit the neck of Lacey. This sever'd his head from his body. But Connor immediately laid hold of the decapitated head, placed it on the body again, which froze and united the body and head, and for the present saved Lacey's life. After this Lacey and Connor carry'd their load of Wood to St. John's. Unfortunately Lacey went into a warm room where there was a good fire and, while he was relating the narrow escape he had had from death in the morning, he stooped over the fire to take some Fish out of a Kettle which was boiling. In performing this office his head fell off (the warmth having thawed his neck), it fell into the Pott and his Trunk tumbled backward on the floor, and both perish'd at the same moment. . . . So much for Master Lacey!

This is a well-told yarn that retains some of the details and flavour of an oral delivery despite the introduction of a few literary phrases. It should be compared, however, with the transcript of a taped version from a twentieth-century Newfoundland storyteller at the close of this article.

Turning now to other examples, I shall begin with the variants in which the man is decapitated intentionally. I have three texts, from Germany, France and England, which are the earliest versions of the motif that I have found to date.

Proceeding chronologically, the first story comes from sixteenth-century Germany. Since this is the period of the great German jestbook compilations, not surprisingly the tale comes from one of them: Hans Wilhelm Kirchhoff's *Wendenmuth*, Vol. 1 (1563).⁵ I give it here in an English

⁴The *Newfoundland Journal of Aaron Thomas*, ed. Jean M. Murray ((London): Longmans, 1968), pp. 157-58.

⁵Rpt. in Karl Goedeke, *Schwänke des sechzehnten Jahrhunderts (Deutsche Dichter des sechzehnten Jahrhunderts, XII; Leipzig, 1879)*, p. 63 (36 *Lügendgeschichten*, No. 13. Kopf angefroren). I got the Goedeke reference from a manuscript "Catalog of Lying Tales," compiled by a Miss Bartelmez for Archer Taylor, and lent to me for copying.

translation,⁶ retaining the compiler's title.

Head Frozen Fast

I once knew a person who says in winter he once saw an executioner cut the head off a poor fellow who was standing up so quickly that it remained on the body and froze fast; afterwards he brought him home and sat him behind the table. Now when the poor man got warm and wanted to blow his nose, he flung his head behind the room door and only then died. Such people who can lie in this way must be of good complexion, since where they're selling such fantasies, the breath of life does not damage them.

This succinct yarn retains only the bare essentials of the plot, as one might expect from the fact of its inclusion in a large jestbook collection. Contrast it with the rich details given in the next version.

In this text the man's head is cut off by thieves rather than by an executioner. The original French version was published in one of the earliest European tall-tale collections: Philippe d'Alcricpe's *La Nouvelle Fabrique des Excellents Traits de Vérité* (1579). Since Renaissance French is difficult to read, I present it here in Gerald Thomas's English translation with his express permission.⁷

About A Man Who Had His Head Cut Off

You will remember (I think) reading and seeing how a man from Tarmonstier in Christendom, while going through a wood one day, was met by some thieves who, to get his money, cut his head off, or at least almost off, so that it was only held by the skin on one side, and how he pinned it together for fear that it might fall to the ground. And because it was winter and it was freezing hard, it stuck and did not bleed.

After the thieves had ransacked him and stolen everything he had, they fled off fast and far. The poor devil came home and told his wife (crying the whole time) how he had been robbed and everything that had been done to him, and then he sat down on a stool by the fire to warm himself. But wishing to blow his nose and remove a snot hanging from the tip of it, he pulled off his head and the pin which held it and threw the lot into the fire. Thus did the poor devil die, without even being aware of it, leaving a wife and four little children. Oh! What a pity! To the Devil and Hell with thieves.

While young and strong we think ourselves to be
We often fall down dead, for all to see.

Despite the verse tag-ending, this text seems close to an oral performance.

⁶My colleague, David S. Artiss, kindly revised my literal translation into idiomatic English

⁷Gerald Thomas, *The Tall Tale and Philippe d'Alcricpe. An Analysis of the Tall Tale Genre with Particular Reference to Philippe d'Alcricpe's "La Nouvelle Fabrique des Excellents Traits de Vérité, together with an Annotated Translation of the Work* (St. John's, Nfld.: The Department of Folklore, Memorial University of Newfoundland, in association with The American Folklore Society, 1977), p. 144 (Tale 94).

This style is one of the factors which led Thomas to suggest, in his excellent translation and study of d'Alcricpe's book, that *La Nouvelle Fabrique* should probably be viewed as the record of the sessions of an early Liars' Club.⁸

The third version in which the victim is decapitated intentionally comes from England almost a century later than d'Alcricpe's story. It is No. 384 in William Hicks, *Oxford Jest*s (1671). I reprint it here from Zall's text.⁹

Two men fighting together in a frosty morning, one struck the other's head off, but fearing the Law, took up the head again, being reeking hot, and clapped it on, which immediately was frozen on. Then they both went to an Alehouse to drink, and he whose head was fastened, his nose began to drop and he, going to blow his nose, his neck being thawed by the great fire, threw it quite into the fire, which saved the other's life.

Probatum est.

Here again, as in Kirchhoff's version, the tale has been condensed. A jestbook compiler, with rare exceptions, prefers the "quickie" rather than a leisurely tale.

Zall makes some interesting observations both on the age of the jests in Hicks' collection and on the style.

In effect this is a pool of the best English jests current since the fifteenth century. . . . Captain Hicks is not merely retelling old tales. He distills his 583 jests to minimum length . . . often neglecting form entirely to emphasize the point.¹⁰

For the variant in which the man is decapitated accidentally by ice, I have only two examples, both collected in the twentieth century. The first, a brief version contributed to me by an Indiana University student, I published in the *Hoosier Folklore Bulletin* in 1942.¹¹

A young man¹² went skating one day and was skimming over the ice with such speed that he failed to see an air hole in his path. He plunged through with so much force that his head was cut off by the sharp edge of the ice and kept going on. Not fully aware of his plight, the young man kept on skating under the ice, until, quite fortunately, he came up through another air hole just as his head came along. He went home and

⁸Thomas, p. 3. See also Chapter 3.

⁹Reprinted from *A Nest of Ninnies*, P.M. Zall, ed. (Lincoln, Neb., c. 1970), p. 242, by permission of the University of Nebraska Press. Copyright 1970 by the University of Nebraska Press.

¹⁰Zall, p. 237. For further discussion of Hicks (or Hickes), see Philip A. Shelley, "William Hicks, Native of Oxford," *Harvard Studies and Notes in Philology and Literature*, 20 (1938), 81-98.

¹¹Herbert Halpert, "Indiana Folktales," *Hoosier Folklore Bulletin*, 1 (1942), 22. The tale was contributed by Mira L. Glass, who secured it from Emma Robinson, of Bloomington, Indiana, in whose family the story was traditional.

¹²The name of any Bloomington man that the storyteller thinks appropriate is used.

did not realize that his head had been cut off until that evening as he sat by the fireside. There he sneezed — and his head flew off behind the backlog.

The brevity of this Indiana version can best be observed by contrasting it with Alan Bruford's superb tape-recorded version from Orkney, published in *Tocher* in 1973.¹³

He was a graet lad for tellin stories, he had a graet lot o stories, and there was a New Year's Day, ice cam on the loch, you see, an aal the young fellows cam there skatin. They were aal oot there wan New Year's Day, ice on the loch, an they were skatin an there were wan of this body 'at geed a bit too far oot, and in the middle o the loch the ice was soft, you ken, an it broake wi him an he geed doon, doon in a hoale, and the other edge o the ice just caught him onder his chin. He slid away under the ice till he came to another hoale, and his head did the same on top o the ice, and when they cam there his heid just stuck on again . . . the frost was that strong, you ken, till it just froze his heid on again!

In the evenin then they were sittin around the haerth tellin stories, and this boy was there too, and he was gotten some o the cowl'd wi his dip in the cowl'd watter, you know, and he start to sneeze. An he was gan to blow his nose — they just blow their nose wi their fingers then, you ken — an he was gan to blow his nose, an wi the haet, it was kind o thaaed the ice about his neck, you ken: he aimed his heid in the fire!

In a letter (Nov. 21, 1978) granting me permission to reprint his story, Mr. David Work, Sr. (who is now in his eighties) added this delightful paragraph:

You will know as well as I do that it must be a lie, but it is as I got it from an old man from the Island of Sanday, and all I can say is just this. If it's lees, it was lee'd tae me.

The disclaimer in the last sentence is apparently a traditional one in Scotland. In a collection of tales set in the Scottish Highlands, the storyteller concludes with the remark: "And about the water horse, all I'm saying is that 'If it's a lie to you it was a lie to me.'" ¹⁴ Dr. Bruford, commenting on Mr. Work's saying, wrote (2nd May 1979):

. . . I heard a phrase much like "If it was a lee it was lee'd to me" used by a Scots lowland tinker a week or two ago. . . . The Gaelic equivalent is a commonplace in Ireland, and known I think in the Highlands: "If it is a lie from me it was a lie to me," literally.

The third variant of "The Cut-Off Head Frozen On" had the man accidentally decapitated by an ax or other sharp instrument. Aaron Thomas's

¹³: "Ones They Got Away With," *Tocher*, 2, No. 11 (Autumn 1973), 86, from David Work, Shapinsay, Orkney, 1971. Heard from an old Sanday man settled in Shapinsay. Reprinted with the permission of the collector-editor and the storyteller.

¹⁴: Isabel Cameron, *Folk of the Glen* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1937), p. 25.

story, quoted at the beginning of this paper, is the earliest example I have of this.

My second example of this category was published by "Elsie Crane Blossom" in Spring 1960 in *The Potash Kettle*, a small quarterly leaflet issued by the Green Mountain (Vermont) Folklore Society.¹⁵ In reprinting it I have divided the original single paragraph into three for ease in reading.

Fifty Below Zero

"Yes, I guess you would call it cold with the temperature down to thirty-five below zero," Uncle Hiram Mills said, as he came in from the back porch. "But I've seen it lots worse. One winter the temperature went to fifty below right here on this farm. It stayed fifty below for three days. I was a young lad then, but I remember it because of an accident that happened during that cold spell.

"Pa had two men working for him chopping wood. They was two brothers by the name of Lafe and Hollis Hatfield. Powerful built men both of them. Well, on the morning of the first fifty-below-zero day, Lafe and Hollis, with their dinner pails and axes, set off for the wood lot two miles away. They had been chopping about two hours when Lafe leaned down to tighten a boot lace, and Hollis, not noticing, up with his axe and took Lafe's head off slick and clean. It scairt Hollis so bad he picked Lafe's head up and set it back on his shoulders, and the temperature was so low the head froze back on, in no time. 'You all right now, Lafe?' Hollis asked. Lafe, not knowing what had happened to him, said he was fine. So the two men went on chopping, stopping at noon to eat their lunch.

"They chopped until four o'clock, when dark started to settle down and they headed back home. Hollis kept looking at Lafe, but Lafe seemed as lively as usual. Well, when they came in, Ma had a good supper ready, so they sat down and ate with relish. Then they went into the setting room and set down beside the hot stove and lit their pipes. Well, the heat from the stove thawed out Lafe's neck, and his head rolled right off onto Ma's braided rug. There was nothing we could do to save him."

According to her niece, Marjorie R. Russell, "Elsie Crane Blossom" was one of the pen names of Elsie C. Harrison (1885-1973), who was born in Pittsfield, Vermont, and died at the age of 87 in Rutland, Vermont. Her writing over a period of fifty years included historical novels, short stories, children's stories, and a play.¹⁶

Aside from the fact that her story came from Vermont, there is no information on where or when the writer heard it. It is obvious, however, that

¹⁵Elsie Crane Blossom, "Fifty Below Zero," *The Potash Kettle*, 8, No. 3 (Spring 1960), ± 21 (from Rutland, Vermont). Reprinted with the permission of the Editor of *The Potash Kettle* and of the late writer's niece.

¹⁶I am indebted to the Editor, Evelyn W. Stanley, for publishing a query about Elsie Crane Blossom in her publication, and for sending me the letter, dated August 12, 1978, which she received in reply from Marjorie R. Russell. The information in this paragraph is from that letter.

she had a trained ear and memory, for the tale reads much like one told by an admirable yarn-spinner.

In conversation with Sister Catherine Jolicoeur, of New Brunswick, at a meeting of the Folklore Studies Association of Canada, I inquired whether in her wide collecting she had ever heard the story of the cut-off head frozen on. She said that she had, but was unable to recall either who told it or under what circumstances. Although she was reluctant to give me a poorly documented text, she responded to my plea for at least one other Canadian report of the tale outside of Newfoundland. Here is the text as she sent it,¹⁷ a third version of the head accidentally cut off by an axe.

The Lumberjack's Head

A young man, working in the woods, had an accident. The axe slipped from his hands and cut off his head. He picked it up and put it back in its place. It was such a cold day that the head froze and he was able to go on working.

When he came back to the camp at the end of the day's work, he sat near the fire to warm himself up. His head started to melt. He then started to blow his nose with his fingers as was the custom then and there. He blew so hard that the head fell on the floor.

Sister Catherine added this note: "Heard somewhere in New Brunswick sometime between 1950 and 1970."

The text is unique, in that it is the only one in which the man cuts off and replaces his own head.

A fourth version of this variant of the tale came from Shetland, as given in a letter of 8 October 1978 from Dr. Alan Bruford. After giving me permission to reprint David Work's Orkney text from *Tocher* (see above), he wrote:

Meanwhile I have heard (though not in circumstances suitable for recording) another version of the same tale, this time in Shetland a week ago from Charles Laurenson (some 30 years younger, also a stock-breeder but in this case of sheep, and a son of a well-known Shetland storyteller, Mrs. Kitty Laurenson, now deceased), Susetter, Voe . . . he heard it from the late Robert Robertson, Collafirth, Delting, who heard it told of himself by James Manson of Walls, who had been at the Greenland whaling.

He and a ship's cook had shot a seal and landed on the ice to cut it up and skin it with an axe when he saw a polar bear coming for them: his gun misfired, so he struck out at the bear with the axe and cut the cook's head off. Perhaps this frightened off the bear; anyway he was able to stick the cook's head back on where it froze, and all would have been well if the cook had not blown his dripping nose as he sat by the galley stove and landed his head in the fire.

¹⁷Letter dated August 31, 1978 from Sr. Catherine Jolicoeur, Centre universitaire SLM, Edmundston, N.B.

There are some nice local touches in this version not found in any of the other texts. Both the seal and the polar bear might well have appeared in a Newfoundland version of the tale—but we have no such example to date.

We turn again to Newfoundland for my last texts. The first was contributed in writing on March 4, 1974 by Mr. Howard Genge (then 21 years old), of Flowers Cove on the Northern Peninsula of Newfoundland. Mr. Genge was in my office at Memorial University on February 15, 1974 while I interviewed and recorded Dr. Harris, whose version of the story is the climax of this paper. After the recording session Mr. Genge remarked that he had heard a similar story back home. He promised to write it down for me, giving as much context as possible.

Mr. Genge's folklore collection is now housed in the Memorial University of Newfoundland Folklore and Language Archive (MUNFLA) and the text is published with the permission of the Archive.¹⁸

I heard this story one stormy day when a bunch of young men (eighteen or nineteen years old) gathered at the house for a game of cards and a good yarn. I was eight years old (about 1961). After the card game was finished, jokes were told for entertainment and I heard this.

The characters in the story were given real names, but no names common to the people in the area. Since I don't remember the names, I will call them John and Bill. They worked in the woods, logging, for Bowaters Company at Camp Eighteen.

It was a bitter cold day of about twenty below zero and the wind was from the north. John and Bill were cutting down a huge tree with a crosscut saw. John cut Bill's head off and quickly put it back on. (The story-teller made a gesture of quickly putting his (the) head back on). It froze immediately and Bill didn't even know his head had been cut off. That evening after work they went back to the camp for the night. They were inside the camp about fifteen minutes when Bill decided to blow his nose (gesture of putting forefinger and thumb to nose). When he did — he t'rew his head into the wood box!

— The man telling the story was my cousin. . . . He is considered a good storyteller. He made the gesture of blowing his nose. This made the story funnier and more effective because you could imagine Bill throwing his head into the wood box.

This story has been well-localized to the West Coast logging camp milieu, even to the use of a crosscut saw instead of axes for cutting down a large tree. It should be observed that this is the only text in this final group in which the saw has replaced the axe. Mr. Genge has also given us good contextual details, such as the story-teller's gestures. For this story in

¹⁸MUNFLA 74-103. In editing I have slightly re-arranged and condensed Mr. Genge's introductory comment. I have not tampered with the language of the story itself except to move one parenthetical sentence, and insert one word in parenthesis. I have, however, made some minor changes in punctuation.

particular the gestures are obviously an important element of the story-telling situation.

The text I have reserved to conclude this paper is, like the one from Orkney given earlier, from a transcript of a tape recording.¹⁹ It was told by Dr. Leslie Harris, Vice President (Academic) of Memorial University of Newfoundland, during a recording session on February 15, 1974, and the story is used here with his permission.

When I asked when and where he had learned this story, he said, "Well, I think I can remember the exact circumstances in which I heard that — on the first occasion. There was a small general store in Badger's Quay, Bonavista North, run by an elderly man, Skipper Nat Spurrell. . . . He had a dixie stove—a potbellied iron stove. And he sat by it, and there were always three or four chairs around it . . . there was always a group around it. . . . Now I was a teacher at the time, and I would come out of school in the evening and on the way home I would pass Skipper Nat's shop. And I invariably dropped in and sat for awhile and yarned and listened to stories and so on. So that's where I heard that one."

In telling the story Dr. Harris, as he explains, adopts the role of the storyteller from whom he heard it.

This is Aaron Thomas's story in part, although I heard it long before I read it in Aaron Thomas's diary. I'll have to tell the tale as I heard it told. So — this happened in Bonavista North, and say the man's name is Baxter (fictitious) and Baxter is telling the story and he begins:

"Did I ever tell you 'bout the time I chopped off me father's head?"
And of course his audience say — no!

"Well boy," he said, "'twas like this. We was in the woods now, we was up in the north-west arm, in by Ten Mile Pond. We in cuttin' spars for the schooner. . . . An' me an' me father was cuttin' down this bloody gert pine. An' we were choppin' away an' choppin' away, I was on one side of un an' father was on th' other.

"And by an' by, I don't know what I was thinkin' about, I wasn't thinkin' at all I s'pose, but father was chopped deeper than I thought he was or I was chopped deeper than I thought I was, but in any case me axe goes right on straight through the tree, takes father in the neck an' off comes his head.

"Now," he said, "'twas a bitter cold day. Wind was no'west, scatter snow squall. And the temperature — Oh Jesus, I don't know, perhaps 'twas forty or fifty below zero. I knows 'twas pretty cold. Anyway, I gets the fright but I jumps an' grabs father's head almost before he struck the

¹⁹The story has been edited for this paper by Violetta M. Halpert, from the careful detailed transcription made by Dr. John D.A. Widdowson from the tape recording. Nothing has been added except punctuation necessary for clarity. Omissions have been minimal, primarily repetitious or confusing words or phrases, and a number of the "pause" words and syllables which add so much to a storyteller's style but are distracting to a reader.

ground, an' stuck un right straight back on his neck, an' Jesus!" he said, "he stuck. An' father didn't even know he was off. Didn't know what happened.

"So, I looked at un for awhile an' he seemed all right. So we went away, carried on. We limbed out our pine. An' we got un ready for haulin' out an' got the haulin' ropes on un. And (here a pause of about five seconds) be this time now it's gettin' late in th' evenin' an' we're on our way back to the camp.

"Now I was almost after forgettin' now," he said, "about father's head bein' chopped off. But suddenly it come in me mind: what's goin' to happen when father gets in the heat? This is goin' to thaw out. Now what I goin' to do?"

"So," he said, "we goes back to the camp and soon as we gets back father said to me 'Now Baxter, you go down to the pond an' fill the kettle an' I'll light the fire.' An' I says, 'Father, no boy. No, you go down an' fill the kettle an' I'll light in the fire.' An' he said, 'Baxter boy, what's wrong with you? You knows I'm the hell of a lot older than you is.' And I said, 'Yes father I knows you are, but I'm tired this evenin'. You go down an' fill the kettle, and I'll light in the fire.'

"So," he says, "father goes off with the kettle, grumblin' away, an' he goes on down to the pond, an' I lights in the fire an' gets the fire started. An' bye an' bye sees father comin' back up the path. Comes up an' he lodges down the kettle an' he says, 'Baxter boy, this is goin' to be some good to get in 'longside o' that fire.' An' I says, 'Father, we haven't got enough wood for the night.' (The storyteller laughs) An' he said, 'Well Baxter, what's wrong; we got thousands o' wood.'

"'No, father, he says, 'it's goin' to be a cold night. An' not only that, it looks like it might goin' be snow tomorra, we're not goin' to be able to get out. So we got to have a lot o' wood cut up. You go now,' he said, 'an' cut down a couple o' rampikes an' start gettin' some wood ready.' "So," he says, "father grumbled, but he took the axe an' he goes off an' he cuts down a couple o' rampikes an' he comes back an' he starts in choppin' 'em up.

"An' bye an' bye he has a big pile o' wood cut up — enough for a week. An' he says, 'Father, are you sure we got enough wood?' (The storyteller laughs) An' father said, 'Yes, Baxter, we got enough wood for a week.'

"So," he said, "I didn't know what to do anyway so I had to let un come in. Couldn't keep un out any longer. An' bye an' bye he was goin' to get 'spicious. So he comes in an' he sits down longside the fire there, an' I'm watchin' un. An' he says, 'Baxter, that fire is some good!' An' I'm watchin' father all the time wonderin' what's goin' to happen.

"An' bye an' bye," he says, "There's a drop starts to gather on the top of father's nose. Like it would, you know, when you comes in out the cold. Anyway, I'm watchin' father an' I'm watchin' this drop on his nose. An' bye an' bye," he says, "up with his thumb an' finger to blow his nose, an' — away (very high pitch, strong stress, final syllable lengthened) goes his over (in) the corner, (Storyteller laughs) That was the end o' father!"

With this text I conclude my presentation of all versions of "The Cut-Off

Head Frozen On" known to me, having demonstrated that the story has been in circulation for several centuries and in several countries, and is still in active tradition. It will be interesting to observe how many other versions come to light in Canada and elsewhere and whether or not they introduce any new or different themes.²⁰

Memorial University of Newfoundland
St. John's, Newfoundland

Extrait

C'est l'étude comparative d'un conte de mensonge dont la première version terre-neuvienne date d'environ 1795. Par une journée froide d'hiver, un homme est décapité mais à cause du gel, la tête reste attachée au corps, laissant l'homme indemne. Cependant, lorsque son cou dégèle, la tête tombe. Ce conte n'est signalé ni dans The Types of the Folktale d'Arne-Thompson, ni dans le Motif-Index de Thompson.

Trois textes de la Renaissance — allemand, français et anglais — sont présentés. Les versions modernes qui les suivent démontrent que le conte est courant à Terre-Neuve, au Nouveau-Braunswick, aux états de Vermont et d'Indiana, ainsi qu'aux Orcades et aux îles Shetland en Ecosse.

²⁰This paper had been completed when I discovered yet another version of the Cut-Off Head, in a small Newfoundland joke collection recently published. See Robert Sheppard and Edwin Nofle, *Newfie Lafts* (Nfld. (Lewisport, Nfld.): The compilers, 1979), p. 4. Mr. Robert Sheppard, in his letter of September 20, 1979, giving me permission to reprint the item, wrote: "This particular version of the story was told to me by a mate on one of the Canadian National ferries; he heard it at Goose Bay (Labrador)." Here is the Sheppard-Nofle version.

Two boys were in the woods one winter cutting firewood with their uncle. The axe, which was as sharp as a razor, slipped out of the boy's hands and cut his uncle's head completely off. The boys picked up their uncle's head and put it back on. Because it was a good frosty day, it stuck firmly and the uncle went on about his work. A few months later, someone who had heard about the accident asked the boys how their uncle was getting on.

'Uncle Garge drowned the other day,' one of the boys informed him.

'Oh, what happened? Did he fall overboard?'

'No, no,' the other boy said. 'When we stuck his head back on last winter, we put it on upside down. We had that heavy rain the other day and the water ran up in his nose and drowned him!'

The first part of this story obviously belongs to the tradition I have presented in this paper. However, instead of retaining the suspense about when the head would thaw, this version explains the uncle's death with an ending from a different tall tale pattern.