

## Grubbing for a Moderate Jewel: In Search of the Blooming Bright Star of Belle Isle

Michael Gray

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# *Grubbing for a Moderate Jewel: In Search of the Blooming Bright Star of Belle Isle*

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Michael GRAY

## I. INTRODUCTION

When I arrived in Newfoundland in September 1985 for a three-month working holiday, all I knew of the song I called 'Belle Isle' was that it had always been my favourite track on Bob Dylan's much-derided 1970 double-album "Self Portrait"; I had always been drawn to its mystery and atmosphere—its rainy strings, its surreal Celtic mists—and, as yielded by Dylan's recording, to its tantalising contradictions: that odd combination of extravagance of language with vagueness of storyline; its *gauche* floweriness yet its whispered erotic tension; its confident melodic flow, yet its obscurity; its obscurity yet Dylan's knowingness with it.

I tried to set down why some of this was so attractive in a book of mine fifteen years ago,<sup>1</sup> but in a crucial respect I was wrong about 'Belle Isle'. Knowing no better than to believe the record-label, I thought it was a Dylan composition.

As given on his recording of it, the song went like this:

One evening for pleasure I rambled to view  
The fair fields all alone  
Down by the banks of Loch Erin  
Where beauty and pleasure were known  
  
I spied a fair maid at her labour  
Which caused me to stay for a while  
And I thought of her, goddess of beauty  
The blooming bright star of bright Isle

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1. Michael Gray, *Song and Dance Man* (London, Hart-Davis-MacGibbon, 1972); 2nd edition published as *The Art of Bob Dylan*, (London, Hamlyn's, 1981; New York, St. Martins Press, 1982).

I humbled myself to her beauty  
 "Fair maiden, where do you belong?  
 Are you from Heaven descended?  
 Abidings in Cupid's fair throne?"  
 "Young man I will tell you a secret,  
 'Tis true I'm a maid that is poor  
 And to part from my vows and my promise  
 Is more than my heart can endure

Therefore I'll remain at my service  
 And go through all this hardship and toil  
 And wait for the lad that has left me  
 All alone on the banks of Belle Isle,"

"Young maiden I wish not to banter;  
 'Tis true I come here in disguise  
 I came here to fulfil my last promise  
 And hoped to give you a surprise;

I own you're a maid I love dearly  
 You've bin in my heart all the while  
 For me there is no other damsel  
 Than my blooming bright star of Belle Isle."

Of course, it sounded like a folksong too—or rather, it sounded like a folksong except for some suspiciously high-flown vocabulary. "I wish not to banter"; "are you from Heaven descended?"; "abiding in Cupid's fair throne": these phrases couldn't readily be imaged tripping off the tongues of rural peasants or industrial workers in the hostleries of old.

My assumption, therefore, was that this was pastiche on Dylan's part—a good-natured playfulness with folksong by the ex-folkie whose tastes, aside from rock'n'roll, had always been for narrative ballads: either those of mystery, which as Dylan himself stressed is "a traditional fact. . . traditional music is too unreal to die", and so yields "all these songs about roses growing out of people's brains and lovers who are really geese and swans who turn into angels",<sup>2</sup> or else tales of horses and daughters and hangings, exile and injustice.

'Belle Isle' seemed something Dylan had constructed from all these elements, with a humour that gently mocked his own affection for such stuff and yet embraced (as so often when Dylan gently mocks) an intelligent respect for the milieu he was playing with.

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2. Bob Dylan and Nat Hentoff, interview in *Playboy*, August 1966.

## II. 'BELLE ISLE' AS NEWFOUNDLAND FOLKSONG, PART 1

Within a fortnight of arriving in St. John's, I happened upon three references to 'Belle Isle' (a snowstorm of information, considering that I don't think I'd seen or heard mention of this relatively obscure item in Dylan's repertoire for many years beforehand).

First, a new issue of *The Telegraph* came through the mail, containing an article by Rod MacBeath about Bob Dylan's use of folksongs.<sup>3</sup>

Here I read that 'Belle Isle' "came from Ireland to Canada, where it was adapted to its new environment. . . . The basis was supposedly 'Loch Erin's Sweet Riverside'. . . probably a variant of 'Erin's Green Shore', the lyrics to which can be found in John [Way]'s piece ['Flutter Ye Mystic Ballad'] in ER6."<sup>4</sup>

A week or so later, I received through the post, thanks to the editor of *The Telegraph*, a photocopy of the John Way piece. Though this covered some of the same territory as the MacBeath article, on 'Belle Isle' it was less help than I'd hoped. But it suggested to me the intriguing notion that there might still be a real mystery to be solved about this song: that maybe it wasn't just that I didn't know its lineage: perhaps no-one else did either.

I got my first hint of this possibility from John Way's article, because (comically, from my point of view) he began his discussion of the song by quoting my own attribution of it to Dylan, intending this to confirm his own hunch about its composition. He too, then, had concluded that Dylan had created something which was, as he phrased it, "almost a distillation of the hundreds of sentimental ballads to come out of Ireland in the 18th and early 19th centuries."

Way went on to quote some of the lyrics of 'Erin's Green Shore', which was supposedly, via the off-shoot 'Loch Erin's Sweet Riverside', the Irish original for Canada's 'Belle Isle': and the more I read them,

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3. Rod MacBeath, 'I Know My Song Well Before I Start Singing', *The Telegraph* #21 (Bolton, Lancashire, UK) Autumn 1985. *The Telegraph* is a well-established critical quarterly devoted to studying the work, and to some extent the life, of Bob Dylan. It has published original work by many distinguished critics including Christopher Ricks (UK) and David Pichaske (USA). A book of pieces selected from the first five years' issues of the magazine was published in 1987: Michael Gray and John Bauldie, eds., *All Across The Telegraph* (London: Sidgwick and Jackson, 1987; Futura Paperbacks, 1988).
  4. John Way, 'Flutter Ye Mystic Ballad', *Endless Road* #6, (Hull, Yorkshire, UK) 1984. *Endless Road* was a critical "fanzine" devoted to Bob Dylan published irregularly in the UK in the early 1980s and no longer extant.

the less they seemed to have in common with 'Belle Isle' at all. In the end, the theories offered by Way and MacBeath seemed to cancel each other out.

Then, I met blues guitarist and folklorist Dr. Peter Narváez<sup>5</sup> (a man who had seen Bob Dylan's first Carnegie Hall Hootenany appearance back in 1962. . .) and he asked me if I realised that Bob Dylan had not composed 'Belle Isle' at all - that in fact it was a Newfoundland folksong. It was not a song he'd ever had cause to study personally, but he had no reason to doubt the accepted (Newfoundland) view of it as belonging to Newfoundland's vibrant folk culture. As for me, I stood gladly corrected, and felt kicked by curiosity, granted the rare opportunity my being there afforded me, into seeing how similar or different Dylan's version of the song was to whatever traditional, ethnic versions its home terrain might offer.

I imagined that a good rummage through books of folksong in Memorial University's libraries would yield up 'Loch Erin's Sweet Riverside', supposedly the missing-link song—the Irish love-song behind the Newfoundland ballad - and that the local data on 'Belle Isle' itself would clear up any remaining mystery as to its origin. It didn't turn out that way at all.

I looked up 'Belle Isle' in *The Encyclopedia Of Music In Canada*, an authoritative work published by the University of Toronto Press in 1981:<sup>6</sup> and found, first of all, that the song's proper title is actually 'The Blooming Bright Star Of Belle Isle'.

The *Encyclopedia* entry then stated confidently:

"Newfoundland adaptation of an old Irish love song, 'Loch Erin's Sweet Riverside'. . . . First published in Greenleaf and Mansfield's *Ballads and Sea Songs of Newfoundland* (Cambridge, Mass., 1933). 'The Blooming Bright Star Of Belle Isle' is also included in *The Penguin*

5. Dr. Peter Narváez is Associate Professor, Department of Folklore, at Memorial University of Newfoundland. He is also an American emigré from the Vietnam War era, to note which is, for Europeans like myself, to be reminded that Canada has had an honorable special function for generations of American dissenters, including those who were engaged with the civil rights-New Left movement with which the whole folk-revival/"protest" renaissance was enmeshed. That Canada did offer refuge and an alternative political milieu in these times explains why there was so active an exchange of folksong repertoires between the young of these two countries, so that while in mainstream cultural matters Canada has had little impact outside her own borders, Canadian folksongs and folkie singer-songwriters have been extremely successful and influential in the US.
6. Kallmann, Potvin and Winters, eds., *Encyclopedia Of Music In Canada* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1981).

*Book Of Canadian Folk Songs* (London, 1973) by Edith Fowke. . . ."

I got frustrated by these constant references to 'Loch Erin's Sweet Riverside'. It began to seem a suspiciously invisible song. John Way hadn't quoted from it; Rod MacBeath hadn't quoted from it; no one seemed to know it. Yet why should it be so very elusive, especially if its relevance to 'Belle Isle' was strong and well-established? Perhaps this too was dubious rather than definite terrain.

Eventually, the penny dropped. First, it seemed likely that MacBeath's assertion of the link between 'Loch Erin's Sweet Riverside' and 'Belle Isle' came straight out of Edith Fowke's *Penguin Book of Canadian Folk Songs*. Second, the writer of the encyclopedia entry was also Professor Fowke. It finally occurred to me that the source for this 'Riverside'-'Belle Isle' link-up was always Fowke. Everyone trotted around happily repeating this —yet no one except Professor Fowke had ever actually heard, or read the words to, 'Loch Erin's Sweet Riverside' at all! This was to prove an object lesson in the dodginess of second-hand research. I never came across 'Loch Erin's Sweet Riverside' in any of the books of Irish songs I searched; and, as it turned out, no wonder. I phoned Professor Fowke at home in the end, to ask about this invisible Irish song of hers, and with irreproachable straightness she backpedalled vigorously on her encyclopedia entry. Subsequently she wrote to me to explain:

" 'Loch Erin's Sweet Riverside' is a song I collected from a traditional singer in the Ottawa Valley. It is obviously Irish, and I had assumed it would be known in Ireland. . . ."<sup>7</sup>

Back, then, to 'Belle Isle' itself: and as it happens, I found that it was also misleading of Fowke's *Encyclopedia* entry to say that the Elisabeth Greenleaf and Grace Mansfield book (striking that such a prominent minority of the folklorists of that generation were women—and incidentally Greenleaf and Mansfield were students at this time), *Ballads And Sea Songs Of Newfoundland*, gave first publication to 'The Blooming Bright Star Of Belle Isle', and in 1933. They were pre-empted by that rich and resourceful Newfoundland businessman, Gerald S. Doyle, in the 1920s.

Doyle, who owned the island's pre-eminent drug company and whose folksong publications and radio broadcasts advertised his wares, was nonetheless a genuine enthusiast for Newfoundland folksong. His "free" songbook printed lyrics and carried adverts for Doyle

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7. Edith Fowke, letter to the writer, dated 8th November, 1985.

merchandise into homes in both St. John's and the outport communities.<sup>8</sup> The first edition of this songbook, *Old-Time Songs of Newfoundland*, was published in 1927. A second edition followed in 1940, the third in 1955 and the fourth (posthumously) in 1966, the year that mainland commercial record companies finally realised there was a market for the island's indigenous song culture.

The point about the Doyle songbook and its importance to Newfoundland was that here, in the 20th century, in this British colony, so tight-knit by shared deprivation that it kept a thriving and distinctive folk culture yet one derived mainly from Britain and Ireland—here, the Doyle songbook functioned just like the broadsides hawked around those “Old Country” islands centuries earlier. Indeed, broadsides were themselves sold in Newfoundland through the 1920s and beyond.

### III. BOB DYLAN AND BROADSIDE BALLADRY

The crucial thing about a broadside, of course, is precisely that it was put about on paper. All its other pros and cons come from this one basic characteristic.

Shakespeare homed in unerringly on why this makes some people's hackles rise. Country wench Mopsa, in *A Winter's Tale*, remarks: “I love a ballad in print. . .for then we are sure it is true.”

This is just part of a wholly pertinent scene—between the Clown, the aforementioned Mopsa, a second country wench (Dorcas) and the broadside-seller Autolycus, with the bard enjoying himself on the subject of folksong in general:

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8. Gerald S. Doyle, ed., *Old-Time Songs and Poetry of Newfoundland*, (St. John's, Newfoundland, Family Fireside for G.S. Doyle, 1927).

AUT: Here's another ballad. Of a fish that appeared upon the coast on Wednesday the four score of April, 40,000 fathom above water. . .

DOR: Is it true too, think you?

AUT: Five justices' hands at it; and witnesses, more than my pack will hold. . . Why should I carry lies abroad?<sup>9</sup>

Actually there were objections from folk performers themselves to the setting down in print of any ballads at all. One Mrs. Hogg gave the following dressing-down to Walter Scott after he'd used some of her repertoire in his *Minstrelsy Of The Scottish Border*:

"There was never ane o' ma sangs prentit till ye prentit them yoursel' and ye hae spoilt them a'thegither. They were made for singing and no for reading, but ye hae broken the charm now and they'll never be sung mair. And the warst thing o' a', they're nouter right spell'd, nor right setten down."<sup>10</sup>

This is in interesting contrast, of course, with commentary by F.J. Child, who was adamant both that the setting down in print of the old traditional ballads was a good thing, and that equally the phenomenon of the printed broadside was a bad thing:

"Popular poetry cannot lose its value. Being founded on what is permanent and universal in the heart of man, and now by printing put beyond the danger of perishing, it will survive the fluctuations of taste, and may from time to time serve...to recall a literature from false and artificial courses to nature and truth [whereas broadside ballad collections are] veritable dunghills, in which, only after a great deal

9. It might strike you that Shakespeare's mockery here is not directed only at the commercial rip-offs he implies that broadside collections tended to be, but also at that element of the fantastical common to many a genuine folk ballad. Yet it is just this characteristic that Dylan refers to in that remark, quoted earlier, about traditional mystery, and songs that are "too unreal to die". There might be compelling parallels between this "unrealism" in the traditional folksong of neo-medieval rural Britain/Ireland and the "magical realism" in the heavily folk-cultured fiction of modern South American writers like Gabriel Garcia Marquez. It's my belief that the marvellous, unreleased 1981 Bob Dylan song "Angelina" is an attempt at a sustainedly South American creation: a work which experiments with the evocative poetic effects of that "magic realism" in its natural context - and that Dylan finds those effects attractive in the same way as he finds attractive "roses growing out of people's brains" and "lovers who are really geese".
10. I have taken the Scott and the Shakespeare quotation, plus much else on the subject of perceived differences between orally-transmitted song and song in print, from Leslie Shepard's excellent book *The Broadside Ballad* (Hatboro, Pa., Legacy Books, 1978; Esat Ardsley, Wakefield, EP Publishers, 1962; [a very profitable small company, for which I worked, for a pittance, through the winter of 1968-9; the Dickensian tyrant who owned it also ran a builders and funeral parlour from the same premises]).



of sickening grubbing, one finds a very moderate jewel."<sup>11</sup>

A quick think back over some of Bob Dylan's early repertoire reveals, as you'd expect from a staunch anti-purist, a cheerful use of the dunghill format, with its "come gather round" sales-pitch. Indeed, as early as the third song in his chronologically-ordered collected work, 'Hard Times In New York Town', he begins

Come you ladies and you gentlemen, a-listen to my song  
Sing it to you right, but you might think it's wrong,  
Just a little glimpse of a story I'll tell  
'Bout an East Coast city that you all know well.<sup>12</sup>

There is the market-stall sales-pitch intro indeed—and I like the way that this 1962 Bob Dylan used the implication that he was just a local performer as an selling-point, wrapped inside that confident claim in the fourth line. Similarly, his 'Rambling Gambling Willie' opens with this exhortation:

Come around you rovin' gamblers and a story I will tell  
About the greatest gambler, you all should know him well,

A more different spiel opens 'Man On The Street' ("I'll sing you a song, ain't very long/'Bout an old man who never done wrong": not a commercially compelling opener)<sup>13</sup> but we return to the conventional broadside intro for 'North Country Blues':

Come gather 'round friends  
And I'll tell you a tale

and though Dylan here turns the salesman-narrator into the first-person heroine of the song by the start of the second verse ("In the north end of town/My own children are grown...") he has still not, by this point, completed its initial scene-setting.

Dylan's two most interesting "come gather round" intros are those where this conventional opening address is not used conventionally, as a sales-spiel for the song, at all. It gives Dylan, instead, a quick way in to fingerpointing and hectoring "the accused", rather than drumming up business among (dis)interested bystanders. Inverting the traditional function of the format intro, Dylan uses it to attack rather than attract his audience. We find the broadside style purloined

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11. *Ibid.*

12. Bob Dylan, *Lyrics, 1962-1985* (New York, Knopf, 1987).

13. "I'll sing you a song / Though not very long / Yet I think it as pretty as any / Put your hand in your purse / . . . And give the poor singer a penny"; quoted from *Dean's New Gift Book Of Nursery Rhymes* (London, Dean, 1971), a nice reminder, this, of how the sales-pitch relates to sheer begging.

in this way for Dylan diatribes in 'The Times They Are A-Changin':

Come gather round people  
Wherever you roam  
And admit that the waters  
Around you have grown  
And accept it that soon  
You'll be drenched to the bone.

(no way to sell trinkets, this); and still more pared down here:

Come you masters of war  
yes you! I'm talking to you! . . .  
You that build all the guns  
You that build the death planes  
You that build the big bombs  
You that hide behind walls  
You that hide behind desks.

One final observation, arising from the inter-relationship between Bob Dylan's work and different categories of folk ballad, is this: in apparently stark contrast to those of his songs which employ broadside intros, to whatever effect, we also find in Dylan's early repertoire songs which, because derived from or created in the manner of the Child ballads, open with a "plunge right into the action".<sup>14</sup>

'Seven Curses', for example, does this brilliantly:

Old Reilly stole a stallion  
But they caught him and they brought him back

and from then on the action never lets up. But consider that most well-known Bob Dylan composition, 'A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall'. This is based on a Child ballad, 'Lord Randal' (no. 12); yet the opening lines of both songs, though not using the sales-spiel intro characteristic of the broadside, do employ a similar delaying device interposed between start and start-of-action. As with those Victorian ghost stories which begin with old buffers sitting around clubs after dinner asking each other to tell ghost stories, so the far more ancient 'Lord Randal' begins, in one variant at least, with the same story-within-the-story delay, thus:

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14. Edith Fowke, quoted on the subject of the characteristics of ballads of oral tradition and, in contrast, those of broadsides, in Bill Usher, ed., *For What Time I Am In This World* (London, Peter Martin Associates, 1977). The book is of short contributions, often transcripts of taped conversation, by performers and folklorists present at a Mariposa Folk Festival.

O where ha' you been, Lord Randal, my son?  
 And where ha' you been, my handsome young man?<sup>15</sup>

echoed closely, of course, by the opening lines of the Dylan song:

Oh where have you been my blue-eyed son?  
 And where have you been my darlin' young one?

Betsy Bowden<sup>16</sup> shows most entertainingly how here too Dylan twists the old ballad ingredients to his own purposes. She begins, for the reader unfamiliar with 'Lord Randal', by summarising the answer to the question posed in the lines just quoted:

"...he has been off in the woods being fatally poisoned by eels, usually fed to him by his treacherous true love. A listener... can feel in 'Hard Rain' added ominousness: the contrast between modern society and the olden days, when death by poisoning came to one person at a time...and [was] preventable by precautions (such as eating only Mom's cooking)."

"Furthermore, the line-by-line scene shifts in 'Hard Rain' make it resemble a Child Ballad being run through a projector too fast, for a Child Ballad characteristically leaps—but stanza by stanza—from scene to scene of dramatic and emotional intensity. Lord Randal could have spent hours dying while telling his mother who was to blame. In October 1962, we would have had only seconds..."

#### IV. 'BELLE ISLE' AS NEWFOUNDLAND FOLKSONG, PART 2

Such considerations, concerning kinds of distinction and kinds of blurring of distinction between basic ballad types, were in my mind when I came back to the process of sifting through the Newfoundland data on 'The Blooming Bright Star Of Belle Isle' itself, and thereby into the terrain, apparently, of that other ballad type, the Native North American ballad.

There was nothing odd *per se* about the first known publication of this song having been in a broadside collection in 20th century Newfoundland: Doyle's *The Old Time Songs of Newfoundland*.<sup>17</sup>

I found it there in the first (1927) edition, on the same page as the most popular ballad in Newfoundland's history, the lovely 'The Star Of Logy Bay', topped and tailed by adverts for Doyle's merchan-

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15. Quoted in Betsy Bowden, *Performed Literature* (Bowling Green, Indiana, Indiana University Press, 1982).

16. *Ibid.*

17. See n. 8.

dise: "Sanitol is the Best Tooth Paste", "ALWAYS REFRESHING - LIFE SAVERS" and "P. & G. is the most Economical Soap."

One of the grounds for objection to broadsides, that they were inaccurate, was illustrated at once by the song-title being given throughout as 'The Blooming Bright Star Of Bell [sic] Isle'. (Incidentally 'Loch Erin' was here spelt 'Lock Erin'.) This seemed an odd mistake: I paid it no attention when I first came across the material, but it soon became one among many things which began to hint that perhaps 'Belle Isle' wasn't the Newfoundland song it was supposed to be at all.

A whole series of these clues began to crop up. For one thing, it didn't seem very well-known or popular in Newfoundland. Doyle had published it in 1927, and again in the 2nd edition of his songbook in 1940, but I found that it had been dropped from the third edition (1955) and had not been reinstated in the last (1966) edition, even though this had, as noted, been published at a time of revived mainland interest in the regional folksong of the island. The perennial point behind the Doyle publications was to reach the widest possible popular market; yet 'The Blooming Bright Star Of Belle Isle' had been dropped.

Then, reading through Michael Taft's *Regional Discography*, I was struck by this: Taft wrote that "...some traditional Newfoundland songs have been put on record only by non-Newfoundlanders." He put "some. . .songs" — but the only one he could cite was, yes, 'Belle Isle':

"...the song 'Blooming Bright Star Of Belle Isle' has not been sung on record by any Newfoundlander, but has been recorded by at least three mainlanders: Bob Dylan, Joyce Sullivan, and Ed Trickett. One can only guess at where these singers learned the song."<sup>18</sup>

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18. Michael Taft, *A Regional Discography Of Newfoundland And Labrador 1904-1972* (St. John's, Memorial University Folklore & Language Archive, 1975). Taft is my folklorist hero, for his immense work on blues lyrics, *Blues Lyric Poetry: An Anthology* (New York, Garland Publishing Inc., 1983) and its companion volumes, *A series of contextual concordances*: an amazing compilation of blues lyrics from the 1920s to the 1940s, assembled at the Center for Computer Research in the Humanities, at the University of Colorado at Boulder. Taft has also written invaluable on, and taken a long-term collector's interest in, the recordings of Blind Willie McTell.

Indeed. But that area of speculation could wait.<sup>19</sup> What about the arresting fact that this great Newfoundland song, dropped by Doyle after 1940, had also never been recorded by a Newfoundlander in all the years covered by Taft's discography (i.e. 1904-1972)?

It was time to look up Belle Isle itself—the place—and then to look through Greenleaf and Mansfield and whatever other books offered texts of the song, to check out what comments they might yield.

John Way had suggested that Loch Erin was Lough Erne, County Fermanagh, Northern Ireland; but Rod MacBeath had backed up his report that the song was “Canadian” by referring to the Straits of Belle Isle as lying, of course, between Newfoundland and the Canadian mainland. How could the most beautiful girl from these geographic parts be down by the banks of anywhere in Northern Ireland? Far more likely, surely, that Belle Isle itself featured somewhere with a similar place-name?

But it didn't. First clue on this one: at the Memorial University library's Centre for Newfoundland Studies (from inside which you can look up from a huge map of St. John's harbour and ocean to see the harbour and the ocean themselves in the distance) there is no listing at all under *Belle Isle* in the index. It just says “See *Straits of Belle Isle*”. Under that entry there are studies of the huge geographic area this term encompasses, ranging from a French account of exploration published in 1758 through to a 1979 historical study of population and ecology.

What this meant was that Belle Isle itself is an *uninhabited*, forbidding lump of rock that holds so little human or other history that beyond getting it mapped, no one has ever troubled to study it. Was this really the setting for so beautiful a song about so beautiful a maiden waiting in service for the return of her lover in a terrain of “fair fields”? Was there a Loch/Lock Erin there?

No. There is a Three Brooks Cove, a Scotswood Cove and a Green Cove—even a Beauty Cove. But the more characteristic island names are Wreck Cove, Black Joke Cove and Misery Point. And though in the heyday of whaling people used it as a temporary stop-off point where they could store mid-season supplies, Belle Isle has never, ever

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19. Ed Trickett's version is on Folk-Legacy FSI-46. This small Vermont company had a big influence on the folk-revival movement of the very early 1960s. However, I've been unable to trace or date the Ed Trickett recording and therefore don't know whether it pre-dates Bob Dylan's 1970 recording on *Self Portrait*.

been anybody's home.

What's more, aside from in 'The Blooming Bright Star Of Belle Isle' itself, there is only one tiny mention of Belle Isle in the entire Newfoundland folksong repertoire. This occurs in 'Concerning One Summer In Bonay', and I'd guess uses *Belle Isle* in the sense of the whole straits area; that seems discernible from the opening line's use of the more specific term "our island" to mean Newfoundland:

The boys in our islands have nothing to do. . .  
 To tell all their names it would cause you to smile  
 We'd Ham, Shem and Japhet—belonged to Belle Isle.

Neither does it work to assume that the blooming bright star of Belle Isle was the pre-eminent beauty of the whole vast ocean-and-tundra terrain encompassed by the *straits* of Belle Isle. There's no Loch/Lock Erin (or Lough Erne) anywhere there either.

Yet when I turned to the other books which published 'The Blooming Bright Star Of Belle Isle' after Doyle, I was back with, if anything at all, the usual licyany as to its background. . .except that some commentators seemed not only to mention the likelihood of an Irish antecedent but to express a cautious folklorist hunch that 'Belle Isle' might actually be, lock stock & ballad, an Irish song itself.

## V. 'BELLE ISLE' AS IRISH FOLKSONG, PART 1

Greenleaf and Mansfield said nothing, beyond stating their own sources for the song: i.e. "Air from Patrick Lewis, Fleur de Lys [Newfoundland], 1929" and "Words by permission of Gerald S. Doyle, St. John's".<sup>20</sup> The spelling of the title was here correct, and Doyle's 'Lock Erin' was amended to 'Loch Erin'. Then in *Folk Songs Of Canada*, by Edith Fowke (again!) and Richard Johnson, there is this background paragraph given:

"There are many good folksongs extolling the charms of Newfoundland girls, from 'The Maid of Newfoundland' to 'The Star Of Logy Bay', but this ['The Blooming Bright Star Of Belle Isle'] is one of the finest. The words suggest a relationship to the many songs about an absent lover who returns in disguise to test his sweetheart's faithfulness, and it may well be descended from an older Irish ballad."<sup>21</sup>

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20. Elisabeth Greenleaf and Grace Mansfield, eds., *Ballads and Sea Songs of Newfoundland* (Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1933; reprinted Hatboro, Penn., Folklore Associates, 1968).

21. Edith Fowke and Richard Johnson, eds., *Folk Songs Of Canada* (Waterloo, Ontario, Waterloo Music Co., 1954).

This write-up must have pre-dated Ms. Fowke's encounter with the much-cited 'Loch Erin's Sweet Riverside'. She continued:

"Wherever it originated, it has spread fairly widely throughout Newfoundland. . . recorded by Kenneth Peacock in 1952 at King's Cove near Bonavista, while twenty-three years earlier Mrs. Greenleaf had recorded it at Fleur de Lys, nearly two hundred miles closer to Belle Isle. . ."

Kenneth Peacock, referred to here, himself published three volumes of *Songs Of The Newfoundland Outports* (1964-5), and Vol. 2 offered 'The Star Of Belle Isle' [sic], plus, incidentally, a version of 'Erin's Green Shore' field-collected at Joe Batt's Arm in 1952 from a Mrs. John Fogarty, who also provided 'The Green Shores Of Fogo'—another "native love lyric written. . . by a sailor" and "patterned on the old Irish song 'The Country I'm Leaving Behind'." On 'Belle Isle' itself Peacock said:

"This lovely lyric is generally considered to be of local origin, possibly because of its reference to Belle Isle. Although I have done no sleuthing, I would strongly suspect an Old World original for this Newfoundland variant. The dialogue form and rather flowery language is pure eighteenth, or perhaps late seventeenth century. . . see 'Bright Phoebe' as one of many lyrics of this type." He went on to mention, after also comparing 'Belle Isle' with "another Irish-inspired native love song 'The Green Shores Of Fogo' " that the Fogo-Joe Batt's Arm area of Newfoundland was certainly "strongly Irish"<sup>22</sup>

Finally, in the authoritative *Native American Balladry* by G. Malcolm Laws (revised edition 1964)<sup>23</sup>, he catalogued 'Belle Isle' and added: "This is a Newfoundland product in the English or Anglo-Irish broadside tradition. For similar stories see [a group of fifteen songs] in *American Balladry From British BroadSides*"<sup>24</sup>

Lots of things seemed promised by all this material. Regardless of whether I should ever find 'Loch Erin's Sweet Riverside', a search would be well worth undertaking among all these other comparable songs: 'The Green Shores Of Fogo' and the localised version of 'Erin's Green Shore'; Laws' fifteen "American ballads from British broadsides"

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22. Kenneth Peacock, *Songs Of The Newfoundland Outports* Vol. 2 (of 3 volumes). National Museum of Canada Bulletin No. 197, Anthropological Series no. 65, Queen's Printers, Ottawa, 1965.

23. G. Malcolm Laws, Jnr., *Native American Balladry* (Philadelphia, Pa., American Folklore Society; revised edition, 1964).

24. G. Malcolm Laws, Jnr., *American Balladry From British BroadSides* (Philadelphia, Pa., American Folklore Society, 1957).

with similar stories to that of 'Belle Isle'; Peacock's 'Bright Phoebe' or some of these other apparently plentiful songs sharing with 'Belle Isle' its "dialogue form and rather flowery language"; plus any of Edith Fowke's many other "songs about an absent lover who returns in disguise". And regardless of what specific clues such songs might turn out to hold, the general drift their hovering presence urged upon me was inescapable: that is, it seemed ever less likely that the lovely 'Belle Isle' should have sprung up in Newfoundland, or should celebrate an inhospitable, uninhabited, barren rock in the middle of a sea that is too cold to bathe in at any time of the year, especially since it had hardly ever been sung there, other than by a handful of people in a partly Irish outport area<sup>25</sup>. Of course it is impossible to say how widely or otherwise the song really has been sung on the island as part of its living folk culture; but no more than five field-recordings seem to exist (nor do any Newfoundland commercial or demo cuts); and whereas the Memorial University Folklore Archive has just one field-tape of 'Belle Isle', this is one out of what was, when Taft's discography was published in 1975, a total of "several thousand examples of folksongs on approximately 1500 tapes and in 1200 manuscript collections."

Wasn't there an unavoidable cumulative message from all these clues? Wasn't it far more likely that 'Belle Isle' was, whether amended by its emigration to the New World or not, essentially Irish itself? And of course if John Way was right all along in urging that "Loch Erin" was Ireland's Lough Erne, then any amendments must surely have been minimal, since that place-name's pronunciation had survived intact.

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25. Collector Melvin Firestone also field-recorded it at Savage Cove (in the Straits of Belle Isle) by John Crane of Pine's Cove in 1964 (Memorial University of Newfoundland Folklore & Language Archive [MUNFLA], tape C131/64-17). Incidentally it felt very strange to sit listening to this tape of John Crane, unmistakably a very old man at the time of the recording, singing (to a completely different tune) words so very nearly identical throughout to the ones I'm used to hearing from Dylan. It emphasised also, for me, the foolishness of trying to be precise about "accuracy" and "authenticity" in these matters. Where Crane's lyrics differed from Dylan's, this was in each case through error: either a mistake or mishearing on Crane's part ("I thought her the goodness of beauty"), or on the transcriber's ('Lock Erin' again) or on Dylan's (that "blooming bright star of bright isle" and the misheard-and-repeated "Cupid's fair throne" instead of "throng"). It was clearly borne in on me that there's no way to establish such a thing as a correct text across several centuries of oral transmission, between people who mishear each other, misunderstand each other's dialects, change bits deliberately, forget bits, religiously pass on other people's errors, and so on.



Then I found that something else in the song which had survived intact further pressed home the case for its (Northern) Irish location. Recognising that it might have been a shaky assumption on my part to dismiss a line like "I wish not to banter" as inauthentic, I looked up "banter" in Joseph Wright's *English Dialect Dictionary* (1898). Eureka! While "banter" had widespread and disparate dialect meanings in different parts of the British Isles, Ireland and America in the 19th Century, only one such meaning—"tease, taunt"—made clear-cut sense within the song: and the only place where "banter" carried that meaning was in Northern Ireland!

Moreover, if it were true that 'Belle Isle' was an Irish song, this would further reduce the puzzle quotient of the song's "unfolkie" ornateness of language. This seemed to have been partially explained away already, either by the song's having descended from a broadside ("written by a hack journalist, for money") somewhere along its line, or by its being "pure eighteenth century" in mode (and anyway there need be nothing mutually exclusive about these two explanations; indeed in the *nineteenth* century a lot of these songs also got fancified and genteelised by well-meaning clergymen with literary pretensions).

Then, while wading through books in the Memorial University Library in search of all these other comparable songs, and cursing Professor Fowke the while because of course none of these books ever included her 'Loch Erin's Sweet Riverside', I re-read the short piece by Fowke herself which had contained her distinction between the action-packed traditional ballad and the hack-worked broadside, and this time found there a comment I could apply to this "flowery language" question. Her observation comes in the course of a short summary of the whole history of folksong in Canada, the main lines of which run as follows: "The first and largest stock of Canada's folk songs came with the pioneer settlers of New France. These songs were a legacy from the jongleurs of medieval France. Even songs reflecting artificial court life survived in the incongruous setting of rural Quebec—so that the pioneer clearing his land with an axe could still be singing about knights and princesses, and damsels in old Rochelle [my emphasis]. Then came the English-speaking settlers, bringing with them the traditional ballads of England, Scotland and Ireland. And by the time they came, the Child Ballads were tending to be replaced

by the broadsides. . . ."<sup>26</sup>

I came across other confirmatory comments elsewhere. In the section of *Songs The Whalemén Sang* (by Gale Huntington) titled 'Parlor Songs That Went To Sea', Huntington reprints a song found in the logbook/journal of the ship *Cortez* in 1847, called 'Adieu To Erin' (this song-title one of many which re-confirmed that 'Erin' very commonly popped up simply as an old or "poetic" word for Ireland). The song isn't relevant except in the most general sense: its narrator dreams of a revisit to his love in Erin, but is standing on the deck of his ship at the time—but the book's compiler remarks that "Although the words seem literary it is sometimes hard to tell with Irish songs".<sup>27</sup> And in Tomás O'Canainn's 1978 book *Songs Of Cork*<sup>28</sup> he reprints the song 'The Banks Of Sullane' with the comment that this ballad was one of the most popular in West Cork, and that "The language is flowery and somewhat artificial—typical of many such ballads composed in Irish-speaking areas over the last century."

Now that very title, 'The Banks Of Sullane', seemed to promise some resemblance to the lyrics of 'Belle Isle' (just as had the title 'The Star Of Logy Bay', from the Newfoundland folksong repertoire). It seemed time to go back to the lyrics of 'Erin's Green Shore' too: had I been right to think that essentially they bore no real resemblance to 'Belle Isle'?

The lyrics John Way had quoted were as follows:

One evening of late as I rambled  
 On the banks of a clear purling stream  
 I sat down on a bed of primroses  
 And gently fell into a dream  
 I dreamt I beheld a fair female  
 Her equal I ne'er saw before  
 So she sighed for the wrongs of her country  
 As she strayed along Erin's  
 green shore.

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26. As in Note 14. Fowke also notes here that "songs of the returned lover are by far the most popular of all the plots of broadside ballads in Canada. . . probably because there were so many separations in the early days. Men would come over here and try to find work and get settled, and sometimes their wives or sweethearts were left at home in Britain [Ireland]. Or men would go west to California during the gold rush, or to the Yukon or the Prairies. This made the theme of lovers remaining faithful—usually for seven years—very appealing."

27. Gale Huntington, *Songs The Whalemén Sang* (New York, Dover Publications, 2nd ed., 1970).

28. Tomás O'Canainn, *Songs Of Cork* (Cork, Éire, 1978).

I quickly addressed this fair female  
 "My jewel, come tell me your name  
 For here in this land you're a stranger  
 Or I would not have asked you the same."  
 She looked like the Goddess of Freedom  
 And Liberty's mantle she wore  
 And she sighed for the wrongs of her country  
 As she strayed along Erin's green shore.

"I know you're a true son of Grainne  
 So my secrets to you I'll unfold. . ."  
 Her eyes were like two sparkling diamonds  
 Or the stars of a cold, frosty night  
 Her cheeks were like two blooming roses  
 Her teeth of the ivory so white  
 She resembled the Goddess of Freedom  
 And green was the mantle she wore  
 Bound 'round with the shamrock and roses  
 That grow along Erin's green shore.

The resemblance between all this and the lyrics Dylan sings on the *Self Portrait* version of 'Belle Isle' seemed to me scanty rather than strong. It's true that the two songs share an approximate outline of story (male narrator encounters beautiful female walking the water's edge) and of descriptive convention ("Goddess of. . .", "goddess of. . ."; "my secrets to you I'll unfold", "I will tell you a secret") — but the divergences are far more striking than these sparse parallels. In 'Belle Isle' the narrator returns to his homeland from overseas. Once there he heads for his old romantic stamping-ground and, in disguise so as to test her faithfulness, looks up the girl he'd left behind. When her dialogue with this "stranger" proves her true, he reveals his identity, and the faithfulness of both parties is rewarded. The lovers are happily reunited.

Obviously, there are many old ballads sharing this theme—some also sharing the 'Belle Isle' dénouement and some offering different classic endings: the maiden proving "false", or her parents forbidding their marriage, and so on. But 'Erin's Green Shore' conspicuously doesn't fit any of these scenarios. Its narrator, not troubling to convey familiarity with the terrain where he rambles, conjures up his Goddess in a dream; she is neither real nor known to him of old. She is neither his true nor his false love. Their relationship isn't the point of the song, in fact.

So what is it? What is the function of this unknown, unreal damsel? The extravagance of that "Goddess of. . ." gives the answer. Not "goddess of beauty", as in 'Belle Isle' but "Goddess of Liberty". What we have here is not a love song but a political song. The "fair female"

is a symbol, an emblem, not a lover. She sighs not with the loneliness borne of years of keeping her vows and her promise, but “for the wrongs of her country”; she isn’t wearing the working clothes of the maiden still in service, but the green mantle, “bound ‘round with the shamrock”.

A quick check of lines John Way chose not to quote clinches it; they include:

“I’m a daughter of Daniel O’Connell<sup>29</sup>  
And from England I lately came o’er.  
I have come to awaken my brethren  
That slumber on Erin’s green shore.”

This puts beyond doubt that “Erin” in this song simply means Ireland, and not a specific location at all.

Besides—move over, ‘Erin’s Green Shore’: ‘The Banks Of Sullane’ includes this:

...and a damsel of queenly appearance  
Came down by the banks of Sullane.  
I rose with great joy and amazement  
And accosted this damsel so fair:  
For to me she appeared like Venus  
Adorned with jewels most rare. . .

Moreover, it rapidly became clear that ‘The Banks Of Sullane’ had no special relationship here. There was obviously a whole genre of these songs: songs with some real sisterhood to ‘(The [Blooming Bright] Star Of) Belle Isle’.

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29. O’Connell, Daniel (1775-1847): Irish Catholic barrister; founded the Catholic Association in Ireland (suppressed 1825; O’Connell then turned it into the Order of Liberation) to campaign both for Catholic emancipation (which came in 1829) and repeal of the Act Of Union. Known as “The Liberator”, he developed strong links with English middle-class radicalism and was a powerful enough orator to address a 200,000 crowd in Birmingham (and without a microphone) in 1833. As a counterpoint to this article’s main associative thrust between the Irish and a lot of flowery ballads about maidens mooning about on riverbanks, I note that “. . . a mass of immigrant Irish labourers, who poured into England in large numbers in the 1840s—. . . one fifth of the population of Manchester was Irish—were potential revolutionaries. . . they were absorbed into the new economic system as ‘navvies’ and casual labourers or. . . tossed here and there continuing to harbour their national grievances. So long as O’Connell lived. . . most politically-minded Irishmen stood aloof from Chartism, but in 1847 and 1848 they were so prominent in the movement that The Times could call the Chartism of 1848 ‘a ramification of the Irish conspiracy.’” (From Asa Briggs, *The Age Of Improvement: 1783-1867*; London, Longmans, 3rd impression 1963.)

The number of songs I came across with equivalent titles was large, for a start. The following are culled solely from O'Canainn's *Songs Of Cork*:

The Flower of Magherally  
 The Maid Of Bunclody [and many other maids] The Phoenix Of Erin's  
 Green Isle  
 The Star Of Donegal  
 The Little Rose Of Gartan  
 The Flower Of The Vale  
 The Snowy-Breasted Pearl  
 The Blazing Star Of Drung

plus another of dissimilar title but entirely the same approach called 'Dobbin's Flowery Vale', and—of course—of course!—'The Lily Of The West' (of which more later).

If there was a whole list of songs with titles akin to 'The Blooming Bright Star Of Belle Isle', there was also an extravagant number of songs available from the English/Scottish/Irish ballad tradition with parallel opening lines. Far too many to list; but I noted down the following just from one catalogue (of an English collection of folk ballads that is held at Sheffield University<sup>30</sup>):

One evening as I walked  
 One evening by a chance as I strayed  
 One evening of late as young Colin I met  
 One ev'ning not very long ago  
 One lovely morning I was walking  
 One morning as I went a fowling  
 One morning as I went a walking  
 One morning for recreation  
 One morning ranging for recreation  
 One morning very early, a strange thought came into my head  
 One night as I lay sleeping  
 One night as Polly Oliver lay musing on her bed

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30. Peter W. Carnell, ed., *Ballads In The Charles Harding Firth Collection* (Sheffield, Centre for English Cultural Tradition and Language, 1979).

(my favourite) plus:

One night as the moon luminated the sky<sup>31</sup>  
 One night at ten o'clock  
 One night of late, I chanced to stray, all in the pleasant month of May  
 One night sad and languid I went to my bed  
 One night sad and languid I lay on my bed  
 One night the north wind loud did blow

and to those can be added a good many more which belong to the same genre (and offering the same theme) but happen to begin with "As I" instead of with "One day/evening/morning/night"; these include 'The Lovely Maid Of The Shannon Streme':

As I walk'd out of a summer's morning

and 'Mantle So Green':

As I walked out one morning in June  
 To view the fair fields and meadows green

while 'Bonny Labouring Boy' begins

As I roved out one evening being in the blooming spring  
 I heard a lovely damsel fair most grievously did sing.<sup>32</sup>

Now some of these plentiful songs of half-sisterhood to 'The Blooming Bright Star Of Belle Isle' are openly presented in the old Irish song-books as "new" songs. This tends to mean both that they are plagiarised from older ones, and that their re-writes are hopelessly florid and ungainly: so much so that a "new" song can be spotted a mile off, and can be guaranteed not to have survived off the page. There is all the difference in the world between the lyrics of 'Belle Isle' and this sort of excruciating imitative parallel ("A new song call'd the Maid of Bally Moat"):

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31. I see a parallel between this marvellous, vigorous use of the word luminated (which is, after all, only "illuminated" chopped down, yet works incomparably better: "as the moon illuminated the sky" would be prissily mundane, but elipsed into "the moon luminated the sky" it is poetry; another similar song has the appealing, if less vibrant, "the moon illustrated the sky") from traditional English balladry, and the occurrence in 1920s-30s American blues lyrics of a similarly vivid elipsed use of the long word turned inside out, as it were. Consider this wonderful line from Blind Lemon Jefferson's 'Fence Breakin' Yellin' Blues', recorded in Richard, Indiana on 24th September, 1929: "He must be desperated, I don't know nothing else it could be" (taken from *Blues Lyric Poetry/An Anthology*, Michael Taft, as in note 18).
32. This made me notice that one song Bob Dylan certainly did write, "John Wesley Harding" 's under-attended 'As I Went Out One Morning', is modelled on this same genre (and as with 'The Lily Of The West', thus offers a connection with 'Belle Isle' in his repertoire). In this song the narrator walks out "to breathe the air around Tom Paine", placing it closer to the 'Erin's Green Shore' category: i.e. it holds a political connotation.

One day as I chanced to go rovin'  
 Convenient to sweet Ballymoat  
 I met with a charming young fairy  
 Hard by her own rural abode;  
 I thought she was Juno or Venus  
 On whom Paris the apple bestowed  
 Or the devil counsel'd in legions  
 That Pluto from Sicily stole.

The same disease, the priest or the man of letters showing off his classical education, and hang the consequences for comprehensibility and poetry, is rife all through the genre. Here is the second verse of "a much admired song call'd The Lovely Maid Of The Shannon Streme":

I then accosted this lovely fair one  
 To tell her name and her dwelling place  
 Or was she Hebe or lovely Seres  
 Or Vulcan's bride whom the apple gain'd,  
 She then made answer I am no goddess  
 I am no proud or immortal dame  
 My appealation [sic] I must leave mysterious  
 I live convenient to the Shannon stream.

When, however, all this well-nigh unsingable pap is stripped away<sup>33</sup>, we are still left with a whole body of work that closely resembles 'Belle Isle', some of it Irish folksong and some of it of Newfoundland currency: and what it shares includes what might be called the discretionary power of poetry. The language may still be "flowery" but the floweriness, including the pseudo-classicism, is always minimised, and a counteractive simplicity of expression is always there too. What's more, there is always, in these genuine songs, some idea or some flash of vivid imagery which commands direct, timeless appeal. Thus, in Newfoundland's 'The Star Of Logy Bay' we still get the intrusion of mythology (the maiden is compared with "Venus") yet not only is it a fleeting mention but even this is mitigated at once by the song's also offering a more earthbound, rurally accurate comparison:

O Venus was no fairer  
 Nor the lovely month of May

followed at once by this inspired, poetically uniting, felicitous extravagance:

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33. This folk process of streamlining broadsides and making them singable is discussed at length in *Laws*: see n. 24.

May Heaven above shower down its love  
On the Star of Logy Bay

This is inspired because it is almost a stock couple of lines—almost the same, that is, as you’ll find at the end of any number of the ballads within this genre—yet here, the stock formula is beautifully *minimally warped* into something individually apt for this song. It is poetically, deftly integrated.

The stock phrase actually does occur at the end of ‘The Star Of Logy Bay’. That lovely “shower down”, carrying such marvellous extra evocateness from its coming straight after the conjunction of “Venus” and May’s benign weather, is dropped at the song’s end in favour of the standard, formulaic

May Heaven above send down its love  
On the Star of Logy Bay.

I dwell on this because, as I found early on in my researches, ‘The Blooming Bright Star Of Belle Isle’ itself owns one such standard ending, giving it a verse or two more than Bob Dylan’s version offers. This ending varies slightly between other versions, though not, unfortunately, because any variant offers inspired poetic flash. Essentially, as in Greenleaf and Mansfield, Dylan’s ending:

For me there is no other damsel  
Than my blooming bright star of Belle Isle

is followed by these extra eight lines:

Now then this young couple gets married;  
In wedlock they both join in hand,  
May the great God of heaven protect them  
And give them long life in the land!

May the great God of heaven protect them  
And loyalty be theirs all the while!  
And honey will sweeten their comfort  
For the blooming bright star of Belle Isle.

Allowing for minor performance error, the version on tape sung by John Crane of Pine’s Cove is the same, and so is the one published by Doyle<sup>34</sup>. In Kenneth Peacock, where, incidentally, the title is given as the shorter ‘The Star Of Belle Isle’, this tacked-on, repetitive, formulaic, hack-journalistic, bathetic ending is to a small extent mitigat-

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34. So it is too in the version in the popular songbook collection by Omar Blondahl (an outsider who has turned himself into a kind of Newfoundland version of Burl Ives), *Newfoundlanders, Sing!* (St. John’s, E.J. Bonnell Associates [sponsored by Robin Hood Flour Mills Ltd.], 1964).



ed and improved by changes which, though minor, are at least more internally alert:

This couple they both got married  
 In wedlock and soft unity  
 May the great God above them protect them  
 And give them long life in the land.

May the great God above them protect them  
 And loyalty be theirs all the while  
 And honey may sweeten their comfort  
 Along the banks of Belle Isle.<sup>35</sup>

This ending still reduces the song's power by drawing back from the protagonist to no narrative purpose; but at least the Peacock version manages something a bit more fibrous than the others with that "In wedlock and soft unity", which in turn sets up some kind of resonance with the otherwise marooned note struck by "honey"; and at least this version's final end, to use an apt Dylanism, is not sheer gibberish.

There is another Newfoundland song, quite similar to 'The Star Of Logy Bay' and using the same tune, called 'Down By Jim Long's Stage', which serves to emphasise both that the songs in this genre can be robust even when flowery, and that variants need not be dishonest imitations. Here are its familiar yet graphic and distinctive first five lines:

As I roved out one day in June  
 'Twas down by Jim Long's stage  
 I met my true-love's father  
 All in a frightful rage  
 His eyes shot blood and slaughter. . . .

Similarly, a variant of 'The Blackwater Side', one of the timeless Irish songs in this genre, opens with a lyric that within two lines takes us beyond the standard and familiar by the power of its graphic simplicity:

As I roved out one evening fair down by a shady grove  
 I little thought I would be caught all in the chains of love. . . .

The sisterhood to 'The Blooming Bright Star Of Belle Isle' is never lost, though, in these other songs. The variant just quoted continues:

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35. 'Erin's Green Shore' is one of the songs to use this stock ending, which gives it a further superficial resemblance to 'Belle Isle':

May the great God of heaven shine on her  
 For I know I shall see her no more  
 May the great God of glory shine on her  
 As she strays along Erin's green shore.

Returning to my dwelling place a charming girl I spied  
 She's the blooming rose of Erin's isle  
 Down by the Blackwater Side

while the standard 'Blackwater Side' itself opens like this:

As I roved out on a fine Sunday morning  
 To view the fair streams as they gently did glide

and though the popular, and spasmodically powerful, 'Down By The Tanyard Side' starts out as though the 'Belle Isle' mode were not close, and rattles through this sturdily independent second stanza:

Her lovely hair of tresses rare lies on her snow-white neck  
 And the tender glances of her eyes would save a ship from wreck  
 Her two red lips beguiling and her teeth so pearly white  
 Would make a man become her slave  
 Down by the Tanyard Side

it skids without pause straight back to familiar territory indeed:

I courteously saluted her and fixed was my gaze so  
 I said "Are you Aurora bright descending here below?"  
 "Oh no, kind sir, I'm a maiden poor" she modestly replied. . .

Another song that similarly swims in and out of these same waters, as may be guessed by its title, is 'The Maid Of Lough Gowna Shore'. It stands out here because its version of the heroine's speech raises that other great theme of Irish drama, religion, bringing the topic up as extra grounds for demurral at the "stranger's" initial proposition. This maiden, sacrificing poetic flow to denominational scruple, pipes up:

Kind sir, I am but a poor female,  
 For riches indeed have I none,  
 Besides, we are not one persuasion  
 My heart lies in the Church of Rome.

Finally, and perhaps rising above all these other similar, peculiar hybrids, at least in terms of helping to get the measure of 'Belle Isle' itself, I came across another Newfoundland song with strong Irish roots: 'The Green Mossy Banks Of The Lea'. This had been collected from one Pat Moloney in the outport of King's Cove in July 1951, and published by Kenneth Peacock in his *Songs Of The Newfoundland Outports* in the mid-1960s.<sup>36</sup>

Clearly it belongs with 'Belle Isle'. It shares as many parallels of vocabulary as any other one song in the genre:

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36. As in n. 22.

One evening I carelessly rambled  
 Where the clear crystal fountain do flow  
 It was down by the banks of Lock Erin  
 Where the sweet running waters do flow.

'Twas there that I spied the fair damsel  
 She was most modest appearing to me  
 As she rose from her seat near the water  
 On the green mossy banks of the lea

yet what is also clear is that this is a song both addressing the subject of, and itself bearing the scars of, transposition across the Atlantic—which is, of course, the theme implied but unmentioned in 'Belle Isle' itself. The lines just quoted are not from the opening verses of 'The Green Mossy Banks Of The Lea', as are their sister-lines in 'Belle Isle'; they are the third and fourth verses, and are preceded by these two:

When first to this country a stranger,  
 Curiosity caused me to roam  
 Over Ireland in exile I wandered  
 Far from my American home.

Till at length I arrived in sweet Erin  
 In the land where I longs to be  
 My footsteps were guided by fairies  
 On the green mossy banks of the lea.

If there seems some confusion here, with one end of the journey as "home" and the other as "where I longs to be", it is par for the course, and shows how the transposition process itself acts on the songs which have it as their theme. 'The Green Mossy Banks Of The Lea' is not alone in this.

## VI. ATLANTIC CROSSING: SONGS OF TRANSPOSITION

In retrospect it was obvious that in amongst the mists of passage in a genre with a main theme of separation and return across from one side of the ocean to the other, and where the songs themselves get taken across that ocean too, and where then they remain faithful or else marry into a new and different situation, and where all this adaptation is going on amid songs there were always many versions and variants of, not to mention as well the conscious "literary" nineteenth-century abductions of any of these folksongs by would-be poets . . . with all this going on in the world that 'The Blooming Bright Star Of Belle Isle' is a part of, there was bound to be some striking transposing done, with girls' names left the same and place names altered, and names retained for rhyming's sake yet warped by shifts in the old names' applicability. For instance, the traditional En-

glish song 'The Barley Mow' is sung in Newfoundland—where, since agricultural harvesting is non-existent, the name means nothing and is therefore 'The Baltimore'!<sup>37</sup> I should not have found it especially odd, then, to come upon an Irish version of another North American ballad I was previously familiar with, 'Lily Of The West'. Indeed I was familiar with this in its Yankee ballad form primarily from its having been recorded by Bob Dylan. As he sings it, the song opens thus:

When first I came to Louisville  
 Some pleasure there to find  
 A damsel there from Lexington  
 Was pleasing to my mind  
 Her rosy cheeks, her ruby lips  
 Like arrows pierc'd my breast  
 The name she bore was Flora,  
 The Lily of the West.

Now, stepping shyly from the pages of a number of the Irish song-books, came Erin's green version, as follows:

When first I came to Ireland some pleasure for to find  
 It's there I spied a damsel fair, most pleasing to my mind  
 Her rosy cheeks and sparkling eyes, like arrows pierc'd my breast  
 They call her lovely Molly O, The Lily Of The West.

It was a surprise to see it there, so familiar yet so wholly relocated, with "the West" as serviceable in the one context as in the other, yet its meaning so geographically different in each case, and likewise, instead of hearing "Lily" as a brash American western saloon name, to recognise it, suddenly, as part of that great catalogue of flowers of here and stars of there and maids of down the road. This made the song at once recognisably in the same tradition as 'Belle Isle' and riddled with evidence of that process of transposition which all this balladry is heir to.

Robert L. Wright, in his 1975 work *Irish Emigrant Ballads and Songs*<sup>38</sup> reports that there are many such songs that specifically mention this transposition process; he quotes a song called 'Dear Old Ireland', which opens with "Deep in Canadian woods we've met, from one bright island flown" and ends, with the sort of future gloom Hank Williams would have enjoyed, thus:

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37. All the more remarkable, then, that in 'Belle Isle' the pronunciation of "Lough Erne" (as "Loch/Lock Erin") has never received this kind of warping for local applicability's sake.
38. Robert L. Wright, ed., *Irish Emigrant Ballads & Songs* (Bowling Green, Ohio, Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1975).

But deep in Canadian woods we've met, and never may see again  
The dear old isle where our hearts are set, and our first fond hopes remain!

and similarly there are many many songs of departure. As a matter of fact, 'The Star Of Donegal' is one of them, and begins:

One evening fair to take the air, alone as I chanced to stray  
Down by yon silv'ry stream that ran along my way  
I spied two lovers seated by an ancient ruined wall  
This fair maid's name was Mary or The Star Of Donegal

He pressed her hand and softly said, 'My darling I must go  
Unto the land of Stars and Stripes where peace and plenty flow  
But give me your faithful promise that you'll wed none at all  
Until I do return to you, bright Star Of Donegal.'

You might think this is setting us up for a less than happy ending, and that the blooming bright star of Belle Isle enjoys better luck than many of these hapless young couples, torn asunder by all this poverty-induced relocation: but actually Mary or The Star Of Donegal has a superior, less passive solution, persuading her young man to marry her *first* and take her with him when he goes.

Another transposition: earlier in these researches, while still looking in vain for 'Loch Erin's Sweet Riverside', either alongside or separated from 'Erin's Green Shore' (there was an adjacent song in the Robert L. Wright book, called 'Erin's Blooming Jane'), I did find mention of one 'Dixie's Green Shore' (my emphasis): apparently one of 600-odd "Ballads and Folk Songs of the South West" that were collected in Oklahoma in the 1950s and 60s.

The crucial point, always reasserting itself, seemed as if it must be this: that regardless of the particulars of a song's storyline or setting, regardless of how those born in the Americas might re-write European narrative songs, songs of transposition would always obey the primal force of history. That is, they would begin with the Old World and the New World would come after. Even their recurrent rapture about "the land of Stars and Stripes where peace and plenty flow" is the *emigrant's* rapture, its politics born of repression and poverty back in the old country.

In other words, the conclusion urged on me as to the origin of 'The Blooming Bright Star Of Belle Isle' was, as ever, that it must be Irish—and that this would be the case even if, by the time we found it lurking obscurely in Newfoundland, its theme of exile and return had become, as it were, geographically *reversed*, as with that 'Lily Of The West' with its "when first I came to Ireland", or as with that "Over Ireland in exile I wandered / Far from my American home" in 'the Green Mossy Banks Of The Lea'.

## VII. 'BELLE ISLE' AS IRISH FOLKSONG, PART 2

By the time I'd got thus far through wrestling with all this, it was getting close to Christmas, and I didn't have long left in Newfoundland. Then, just as nothing very conclusive seemed ever likely to arise, I got a note from Edith Fowke:

"I have discovered that 'The Blooming Bright Star Of Belle Isle' is not merely an offshoot of Irish ballads—it *is* an Irish ballad. John Moulden, a collector and scholar in North Ireland [sic] told me of two versions collected there in different areas. . .".<sup>39</sup>

I phoned Dr. Fowke for John Moulden's address, and then wrote to him at once. His reply came speedily and was of considerable length. He had been seriously interested in the song for years.

He confirmed that he had indeed come across two different versions of 'Belle Isle' in Ireland itself—the first collected by Len Graham from one Hugh Tracey of Boho (pronounced *boe*, as in *oboe*) in County Fermanagh, in July 1972, and the other a manuscript dating from about 1910, written down by a sailor who had learnt his songs around 1870. John Moulden had acquired this document from an antiquarian bookseller in Ballinahinch, County Down.

While this all appeared to confirm the Irish origin of the song, and certainly to confirm John Way's supposition that Lock Erin was Lough Erne, County Fermanagh, John Moulden's testimony also served to emphasise yet again how complex can be the ins and outs of these songs of transposition. For the curious thing was this: while the locations retained in the version known in, and assumed to be native to, Newfoundland are *Northern Irish*, the two versions eventually located in Northern Ireland itself *introduce the apparently Newfoundland place-name St. John's!*

The version Len Graham collected in the field from Hugh Tracey's performance ran as follows:

One evening as I strayed out for pleasure  
 Where beauty and love do resort  
 It was down by the banks of Lough Erne  
 I wandered for pleasure and sport  
 Where the maidens do sing at their labour  
 Through hardships and trouble and toil  
 There I met with a beautiful fair one  
 Called the lovely sweet Star of Belle Isle.

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39. Edith Fowke, letter to the writer, dated 8th November, 1985.

I instantly stepped it up to her  
 She approached me right there with a smile  
 Saying I am no lady of honour  
 But a poor working maid of Belle Isle

Oh Mary resign from your labours  
 And come to the town of St. John's  
 'Tis there many pleasures await you  
 And servants all at your command

Oh I'll not resign from my labours  
 Through hardships and troubles and toil  
 I'll wait for the lad that has left me  
 Here alone by the banks of Belle Isle

So now I've a story to tell you  
 I'm only a maid that is true  
 But to break the fond vows that I made him  
 Is a thing that I never will do

I ne'er thought that Cupid would win me  
 But beauty it did me beguile  
 For seven long years I've been wandering  
 For you lovely Star of Belle Isle

Now I heard that this couple got married  
 In wedlock they have joined their hands  
 For him she crossed over the ocean  
 Far away from *sicé* the town of St. John's

May the great King of Glory protect them  
 May liberty shine on their toil  
 May Johnny find comfort for ever  
 With his beautiful Star of Belle Isle.

How engaging the similarities and dissimilarities are between that lyric and the New World one Bob Dylan found himself singing in a Nashville studio a couple of years earlier—the comparison repays much attention, and show graphically how the whole process of folk-song works, as it is passed from hand to hand. I find it rather a distraction from this, to have to grapple instead with the almost irritating specific of why this Irish version introduces, as it were perversely, the non-Irish place-name St. John's, when the Newfoundland versions of the song all managed without it.

John Moulden's letter took up this point:

“. . .the introduction of the additional place-name was worrying, and I have only, as I have been writing to you, thought of a possible way round. . .previously I was, without conviction, offering the town of St. Johnston in Donegal, not that far from Belle Isle, though probably too far for sense, since the Irish scale of distance is still very limit-

ed and would have been more so earlier."<sup>40</sup>

Moulden's fresh solution, built on the very reasonable assumption that we were dealing here with essentially an emigration song, arose from learning that anyone emigrating from County Fermanagh in the 19th century would have left Ireland through the port of Derry, and that on the other side of the Atlantic it was the port of St. John, New Brunswick which was "the cradle of Derry trade with North America and the destination of great numbers of emigrants for Canada or in transit to the United States"<sup>41</sup>.

This solution seemed to me doubly plausible. First, the confusion of St. John, New Brunswick, and St. John's, Newfoundland, is unsurprising and perennial. As if to confirm the point, while I was in the latter, several hundred South Korean football fans, keen to see their national team play Canada's in the World Cup qualifiers, were prevented from doing so because their travel agency booked them a flight to the New Brunswick city instead. Second, it would then be reasonable indeed that the versions of the song home-grown in the British colony of Newfoundland should retain no place-naming of an Irish emigrant port of entry many hundreds of miles away along the frozen coast.<sup>42</sup>

The other Irish version, the sailor's 1910 manuscript version, effectively an 1870s version,<sup>43</sup> was a tremendous find—and seemed, really, the end of the trail. It appeared to confirm and clarify that 'Belle Isle' was indeed an Irish song, and a song of transposition—an emigrant song—while also pointing fascinatingly towards the pruned-

40. John Moulden, letter to the writer, dated 26th November 1985.

41. Quoted by John Moulden from Sholto Cooke, *The Maiden City and the Western Ocean* (Dublin, Morris, n.d. [ca. 1955]). Moulden calls this the standard work on 19th Century emigration from the port of Derry (i.e. Londonderry), and notes, in 'The Blooming Bright Star Of Belle Isle: American Native Or Irish Immigrant?', *Canadian Folk Music Journal* 14 (1986), that "the Maiden City" is "a poetic appellation for Londonderry."

42. I heard it mooted that in the case of Newfoundland an alternative explanation might lie with the hostility of outport communities towards the big city, which would tend to result in their determinedly omitting mention of it from their own native versions of the song. Such parochialism may be a well-established aspect of the island's life, and have many other manifestations in its culture (to note which is not to suggest that Newfoundland is unusual in this regard) but I do not find this convincing: not least because that far more popular folksong of the outport communities, 'The Star Of Logy Bay', is happy to mention "St. John's town".

43. From the Higgins manuscript of County Down, in the possession of John Moulden (and published in his *Canadian Folk Music Journal* article: see n. 41).



down, simpler, superior emigrant the song itself was to become by the time that Doyle was publishing it as a native Newfoundland ballad in 1927:

the lovely swete star of Berlile  
 one evening as I roamed for pleasure  
 Where beauty and love do resort O its Down by the banks of lohern  
 Where the youl find pleasur and sport  
 A yong fael tha sang at her labour  
 that caused me to stop for A while  
 and I found her a charming yong Creature  
 and the lovely swet star of Berlile  
 I umbeled my self to her beauty  
 and ask her where did she resid  
 he says then elope from your perants  
 and Shortley ill make you my bride  
 She said im no laidy of fortune  
 aproshing me then with A smile  
 She said im A [poor] plain Country girl  
 and A poor Servant maid from berlile  
 O mary resine your hard labour  
 and Com to the [ton] town of saint Jon  
 Where the flowers ar groing. . .  
 most charming  
 and servants for you at Comand  
 I cam to fulfill my last promes  
 So let us have Brandy and wine  
 and its now I embrase my old  
 Charmer  
 Shes the Lovely Swet. . .star of Berlile

### VIII. CONCLUSIONS

I came back to England that Christmas Eve, with, among other things, a large wad of unsorted notes on 'Belle Isle'. John Moulden went into print with the material he'd given me such a generous advance glimpse of in his letter. Incorporating an array of statistics about Londonderry emigration and ports of entry and so on, his six-page article, "The Blooming Bright Star Of Belle Isle: American Native Or Irish Immigrant?" was published in the *Canadian Folk Music Journal* sometime in 1986. I discovered this in 1987, when a copy mailed for my attention by Dr. Narváez reached me just as I was writing an earlier version of the present article: a version aimed specifically at a readership of Bob Dylan enthusiasts.

But this piece, "Back To Belle Isle", published in *The Telegraph*

in the spring of 1988,<sup>44</sup> all too unquestioningly followed the Moulden line, partly, I think, because of that ringing, confident endorsement with which it was introduced to me by Professor Fowke (“I have discovered that ‘The Blooming Bright Star Of Belle Isle’ is not merely an offshoot of Irish ballads—it *is* an Irish ballad”)<sup>45</sup> and partly because by this point I could no longer see the wood for the trees.

Specifically, I had written that Bob Dylan’s version and the version of the song that Len Graham had collected from Hugh Tracey in Northern Ireland would repay close comparative attention, but I had failed to give them enough such attention myself.

Dr. Narváez subsequently scrutinized all this published material and paid attention where mine had lapsed. He wrote a short rejoinder to my “Back To Belle Isle” for a subsequent issue of *The Telegraph*,<sup>46</sup> in which he argued forcefully for, in effect, his original assertion, as made to me when first we’d met back in Newfoundland in September 1985 and before I had researched into ‘Belle Isle’ at all: that is, he argued again for Newfoundland as the original, rightful terrain of the song.

First, citing counter-statistics provided by John Mannion’s work,<sup>47</sup> Narváez appeared to trounce Moulden’s Irish immigration statistics:

“It is true that the massive out-migrations of Irish during the famines of the 1840s bypassed Newfoundland, but by the 1840s *there already were significant numbers of Irish here.*”

Second, he pointed out that Saint John, New Brunswick is an area where the song has never been collected. Third, in place of my “uninhabited, forbidding lump of rock” (Belle Isle) he offered a most convenient alternative island:

The correct Belle Isle is in Conception Bay, only twelve miles from St. John’s, today known as ‘Bell Island’. This latter name was only made official in 1910. The earliest sixteenth century references are spelled ‘Belile’ (reminiscent of the 1910 manuscript version [of the song]. . . reference to ‘Berlile?’). Later spellings are either ‘Belle Isle’ (1762; 1795; 1801; 1839; 1842; 1868) ‘Great Bell {e} Isle’ or ‘Bell Isle’ [no dates given].

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44. Michael Gray, ‘Back To Belle Isle,’ *The Telegraph* (since issue #26, Spring 1987, publication has been from Romford, Essex, UK) #29, Spring 1988.

45. As n. 39.

46. Peter Narváez, “‘Sic’ as Forced Fit: A Commentary For The Newfoundland Provenance Of ‘Belle Isle’,” *The Telegraph* #31, Winter 1988.

47. John Mannion, ed., *The Peopling Of Newfoundland*, St. John’s, Memorial University of Newfoundland, 1977.

Then, drawing our attention back to the special significance of the Tracey variant of the song, he continued:

Today the visitor to Bell Island is struck by its verdant meadows and *dramatic steep banks*, the 'banks of Belle Isle' still providing a very romantic setting. . . . In the nineteenth century its inhabitants were Irish and English farmers (the soil is remarkably fertile) who sold their produce to people in St. John's and smaller fishing settlements. . . . around Conception Bay. The wealthy merchants of Newfoundland lived in St. John's. Thus *the relations of social class* exhibited in the Tracey variant. . . . not only make ballad sense, given the many songs which exhibit similar situations, but they make historical sense as well, for such relations are in keeping with the given place names.

In my estimation, notwithstanding the date of its collection (1972), the oldest variant of 'Belle Isle' is the Tracey version. Like so many broadsides *it has a convoluted, complicated plot that was later simplified by the folk through oral transmission*. The initial voice of the ballad is that of a wealthy man from the St. John's merchant class who one evening wanders 'for pleasure and sport'. He then meets a beautiful 'working maid' from Belle Isle whom he attempts to seduce to a St. John's life but her response is that she has promised herself to another. Then the *flashback ends* and the (first person) merchant indicates that seven lonely years have elapsed since that first meeting. . . . and he has heard that during that time the young beauty got married to her 'Johnny', to whom she was betrothed, and to do that she had to leave and cross 'over the ocean, faw away from the town of St. John's.' *Unlike Moulden and Gray, I am unable to conveniently turn 'from' into 'to' through the offhanded use of 'sic'!*. . . . This interpretation is not only reasonable in terms of historical social relations in Newfoundland, but also in terms of broadside piety, since the poor female protagonist<sup>48</sup> successfully resists the temptations of the rich St. John's merchant."<sup>48</sup>

Narváez argued that the other versions are later ones, streamlined down into two-person narratives with the well-known "lover in disguise tests faithfulness" motif, and thus negating "the interesting thematic question of *class*. . . posed by the Newfoundland broadside balladeer in the original".

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48. In interesting contrast, consider the following, quoted from the retrospective 'Diary' column of *Q magazine* #18 (London, EMAP Metro, March 1988):  
'March 2, 1964. The Beatles begin filming their first movie, *A Hard Day's Night*. One of the production's better kept secrets was the dressing-room/caravan in which the Fab Four would invite starlets to "relax" between takes. Model Patti Boyd, with a small part in the film, quickly caught the eye of Beatle George [Harrison] but declined the offer of a visit to the caravan and even of a proper date, explaining [that] she owed some loyalty to her regular boyfriend. She finally relented when The Quiet One virtually begged her to let him take her to dinner. Asked later where this left her regular boyfriend. . . . Ms. Boyd (who within a month had moved in with George) replied: "I said I was loyal, not stupid."'

Finally, having tried also to account for the stubborn, perhaps inconvenient, presence of the Irish “Lock/Loch Erin/Erne” in every known variant of the song, Narváez concluded, in both senses, thus:

...the geographic laws of cultural diffusion are at work again. The oldest version of an orally circulated ballad, originally composed by a broadside balladeer who resided and published his song in nineteenth century Newfoundland, has been collected in the twentieth century on the cultural periphery of Newfoundland—Ireland. . . .<sup>49</sup>

So. Did Dr. Narváez’s late entry into the quest provide a final verdict?

Well, no; his intervention was welcome, and much of it persuasive, not least in its style: a man who has “the geographical laws of cultural diffusion” on his side, as immutable-sounding as gravity, is hard to contradict; but I was no longer prepared, after all that had gone before, to see anybody’s intervention as adjudicational. Everyone was entering the ring from their own corner: me, Fowke, Moulden, Narváez. No one was in a position to be the referee.

Moulden, after all, had an interest in concluding that the song was Irish: if it belonged to Ireland, then in a sense it belonged to him. He lived there, and worked there, and if he were right, then he was the person who had discovered/uncovered its Irish provenance. Narváez, equally, had an interest in the song belonging to Newfoundland—he lives and works there, and his work includes advancing the idea of the limitless folkloric richness of the island. It struck me that as a result of my being English, which the song most certainly isn’t, I might be closest to the objective.

While the Narváez article swiftly disposed of any naive idea that the Irish provenance of the song was now proven, and used the variants found in Ireland to keen effect in constructing a more persuasive alternative territorial claim, there were, nonetheless, a number of things which still did not dovetail together.

If the first big wave of immigration to Newfoundland was 1811-1816, and the next 1825-1833, and if Newfoundland broadsiders were “probably publishing local broadsides based on Irish and British models as early as 1817”, then if ‘Belle Isle’ originated there and then—i.e. in Newfoundland but based on an Irish model and aimed at an Irish market, indeed one necessarily of people only newly arrived from Ireland, and circulated in a form itself new to Newfoundland yet long-established in Ireland—then it seems mere carping for

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49. All quotes taken from Narváez, details as in Note 46.

us to call it a Newfoundland, and not an Irish, song. And if instead, as seems more probable, the song came into circulation rather later, perhaps during what Narváez quotes Newfoundland scholar George Story as calling "the golden age of the published Newfoundland broadside", 1850-1914, then "long established and deep connections" between Ireland and St. John's need be no more significant in themselves than the connections by then also established, as Moulden reported, between Ireland and New Brunswick. In truth, nobody's statistics clinch anything.

As to matters of text interpretation, I must declare at once that I did not, as Narváez complained, use "[sic]" to transform "from" into "to": on the contrary, I used it to emphasize the importance of that small work in the original text. I *accept* the sense Narváez thus makes of it, in his useful disentanglement of the three-person narrative, the class relations contained within it, and the way that this sits comfortably within the traditional broadside mould. However, several things conspire against the edifice he tries to build from this.

First, there is an important drawback to the notion that the version concerned with class relations, the version specifying St. John's and offering a social realism, arose before versions with these elements streamlined out of the song: that is, it asks us to accept that when turned down by the working girl, the rich merchant would abandon his business "for seven long years" in order to wander around nursing his unrequited love for her. Far more plausible that this element in the song should be there as a left-over from earlier versions in which it was the maid's "Johnny" who went wandering, of necessity, for the seven years specified by convention in songs of this genre.

Second, everything Narváez says about the song's otherwise accurate evocation of social relations between merchant, working lad and working maid rings as true, and makes just the same sense, and always had done, in Ireland as in Newfoundland.

Likewise, the Tracey variant sits equally comfortably within the traditional mould of the *Irish* broadside as of any Newfoundland one. And as Narváez reminds us, there are very few surviving Newfoundland broadsides, so that it seems reasonable to remember that actually we know rather more about Irish ones. It follows, therefore, that the conformity of the Tracey variant to a main category of traditional *Irish* broadside can be noted with more certainty than its conformity to Newfoundland broadside patterns.

So, in spite of his illuminating reading of these aspects of the text, we cannot link it exclusively with Narváez turf. Although it all

*could* fit, nothing here establishes that the setting for this drama must be St. John's, Newfoundland. It could all take place just as Narváez unravels it, yet centred upon that other, Moulden-propounded city of Irish arrival, Saint John, New Brunswick—near which there is a small town called Belle Isle. And it seems clear from the text of the sailor's variant that it too shows signs of having been a three-person narrative, and thus of having reflected the same social relations that Narváez rightly finds in the Tracey variant. In the sailor's variant these three-person elements are vestigial but they are plainly indicated by that switch from "I" to "he" and back again in the second stanza, and by the last stanza's combining of two different approaches, i.e. voices: the attempt to lure "Mary" with the promise of servants at her command, and then the switch to a narrator coming back to fulfil his promise by embracing his "old Charmer".

But what of the special suitability of Bell Island? First, out of fairness to John Moulden, who may be felt to be disadvantaged by having allowed me to publish extracts from correspondence that caught his first hesitant thoughts about some aspects of his thesis, I hope it might be acceptable as a gesture of balance to point out in regard to one of Peter Narváez's contrastingly confident proclamations, his crucial one that "The correct Belle Isle is. . .Bell Island", that while this may turn out to be true, and is certainly an inspired assertion, it is not one so incontestable or so obvious that he had thought of it when I was in Newfoundland researching the song originally with his assistance and discussing with him the puzzles involved. Neither had anyone else.

What's more, Bell Island may be "only twelve miles from St. John's", but this is no easy stroll. First you have to go right across the Avalon Peninsula from south-east to north-west, over high and wild terrain, and then you have to take a boat. The nineteenth century St. John's merchant who "strayed" over there to eye up the local girls "one evening for pleasure" would have spent an awful lot of his evening travelling there and back.

And whereas Northern Ireland's Lough Erne does contain an island called Bellisle, let it not be overlooked that Newfoundland's Bell Island neither contains nor sits within any Loch Erin.

This means, not least, that in an Irish setting, the song's apparently careless interchangeability between "the banks of Loch Erin" and "the banks of Belle Isle" makes full sense, whereas in the Newfoundland setting it does not. In the latter, "the banks of Loch Erin" merely reminds us that we have the puzzle of a non-existent town/vil-

lage/lake. Why doesn't the three-person narrative name a real one, granted its commitment to social realism and its clear citing of a real city and a real island?

If, on the other hand, we now follow Narváez in looking to the sailor's variant, then we note too that the sailor's variant never mentions "the banks of Berlile" at all: it only mentions "the banks of lohern." So talk of the visitor to Bell Island being struck by its dramatic steep banks gets no corroboration here.

What else may or may not be of special pertinence in the sailor's variant? If, as Narváez suggests, we pay attention to, and place some reliance on, its sound-spellings and so on, then surely "lohern", "Berlile" and "saint Jon" all shout for Ireland and Saint John, New Brunswick.

On the other hand, we may prefer not to place much reliance on the sailor's eccentric transcription, but rather, on the evidence, may wish to demur from Narváez's claim that it shows "a good grasp of word separation" and has significant capitalizations of letters. The use of capital letters is random throughout the text: this is true at the start of lines; for some indefinite articles but not others ("for A while", "found her a charming", "with A smile"); and for some small mid-text words that there is no reason to stress ("its Down by the banks. . .", "a charming yong Creature", "and Shortley", "let us have Brandy and wine"). Even "Berlile" is also rendered as "berlile". If the sailor's variant doesn't therefore, help the cause of Bell Island, we might feel that to try to use its "lohern" to abolish the inconvenient Lough Erne / Loch Erin problem by seeing it instead as referring to a "lochan . . . a small arm of the sea" is to flounder on sandbanks of the improbable.

As for New Brunswick being "an area where the song has never been collected", well which way do we want it? Does the area where a song is collected tend to be its home, as Narváez seems to argue when the location involved is Newfoundland, or does it tend to be collected on "the cultural periphery" of its home, which may be an ocean away, as Narváez seems to argue when the location is Ireland? If the former, well the song has hardly been collected anywhere, has it? The Tracey variant, discovered in 1972 (or rather, in the mid-1980s effectively), marked its first appearance in Ireland, while in Newfoundland, as noted already, it has almost never been field-recorded, collected, professionally recorded or published. Making evidence out of lack of evidence seems a dangerous business in a case such as this.

New Brunswick, therefore, might well be the home of the sailor's

variant, and we might as accurately say that it is an area where the song has never been looked for as one where it has never been found. And if, on the other hand, we can expect a song to turn up, like an old ripple, at the farthest edge of the water, then clearly, that the sailor's variant turns up in Northern Ireland makes it as plausible that it moved there from New Brunswick as that it moved there from Newfoundland.

Further, on this notion, I might add that while I understand the reasons for Narváez coming to describe Ireland as "the cultural periphery of Newfoundland", it still seems rather like calling Mexico City the cultural periphery of Nuevo Laredo. In any case, emphatically, it works the other way round too: Newfoundland is on the cultural periphery of Ireland. So just as surely as the versions found in Northern Ireland may be from Newfoundland, the versions found in Canada/Newfoundland may be from Ireland.

We are left with this: judging that the versions found in Northern Ireland are older rests upon acknowledging the truth of Narváez's contention that, over time, the folk process streamlines complicated, garrulous broadsides into simpler, easier, less cluttered narratives. Yet how does this sit with the fact that the broadsides were written "to make money", to appeal efficiently to a market, and were in any case modelled on older songs? These two notions conflict, and yet both enjoy valid currency: which ought at least to suggest that you cannot date variants by length alone. In any case, the Tracey variant is the longest and the sailor's one of the shortest, yet while both these versions have three-person narrative elements, no version found in the New World does.

My conclusion, therefore, must be this: that the Tracey version, mentioning St. John's, almost certainly does exhibit Newfoundland content. Equally, the sailor's version, mentioning "saint Jon" (Saint John), relates just as near-certainly to that other place of Irish landing, New Brunswick. But that these two versions should have arisen in these two separate far-flung places, versions that are, indeed, the most different from each other of all the variants known to exist and yet which still hold so much in common: this suggests compellingly that both are New World revisions of an older, *Irish* song; a strong romantic song appealing enough for emigrants to take it with them when they sailed to the eastern seaboard fearing their poverty-forced exile, dreaming of home and hoping to remain in the hearts of those left behind; a song that spoke to all these desires, that in doing so embraced the seven-years-wandering element far more plausibly than



the moonstruck-merchant alternative, and that was set in a place of aeons-old romance and natural beauty, down by the banks of Bellisle (which is connected to the mainland by an ancient bridge, so that all this straying and roaming for pleasure can be managed without boats, which are, you might otherwise think oddly, never mentioned by those visiting Belle Isle or Bell Island or wherever) at the eastern end of Lough Erne. County Fermanagh. Northern Ireland.

And the nearest thing to this original song, with its atmospherically Irish content, is the song that Doyle published in Newfoundland, and *The Penguin Book Of Canadian Folk Songs* published in Toronto and London, and Bob Dylan recorded in Nashville, all on the cultural peripheries of Ireland.

As for relating 'Belle Isle' to Dylan, of course, there is still—after all the foregoing—a large question that remains unanswered: where did *Bob Dylan* find the song? Where did he encounter a song so far from common in the mainland folkie world? He wasn't going to have found it in Greenleaf and Mansfield, was he? In a 1961 *Sing Out!* I found a listing of all the songs they'd published in that magazine's first ten years' issues, and there was 'Blooming Bright Star Of Belle Isle' listed for the Summer 1957 issue. Would Bob Dylan have picked it up from that? Not at the time, but perhaps from rifling through back numbers in 1961 or '62, when he was mopping up songs like a sponge(r)? One of those cases of him keeping things back for years before using them, as he has been noted for doing with other songs? Yet this can't be right; I can't believe Dylan would have got the words so accurately after a 7 or 8 year gap. Then did he, perhaps know the song by heart all along? If so, well again: where from?

One tentative guess, now that ‘Belle Isle’ may be as much an Irish ballad as a New World one: could it be that Dylan learnt it from the man he’s called “the best ballad singer I’d ever heard in my life”—Liam Clancy? Talking in 1984, in Ireland, about the impact on him of the Clancy Brothers and Tommy Makem, Dylan said: “There was a bar [in New York] called The White Horse Bar, and they were in there. . . and they’d be singing. . . Irish folk songs. I—actually I learnt quite a few there myself. . .”<sup>50</sup>

This source—or, similarly, that of the McPeake Family<sup>51</sup>—would perhaps be more probable if ‘Belle Isle’ itself had been well known in Ireland, which of course (as we’ve seen) it wasn’t. But even granted it absence from the Irish songbooks and so on, there is still a beguiling possibility here, if we look at some remarks of Liam Clancy’s made in 1984:

“ . . . an American woman. . . Diane Hamilton. . . was a wealthy woman who was interested in collecting. . . I helped lug all her recording equipment around Ireland, and discovered music I never knew existed in our own country. . . ”<sup>52</sup>

More plausible, unfortunately for romance, is that (via *Sing Out!* or not) Dylan actually picked it up from the easiest, most mainstream collection in which it has appeared: the standard *Folk Songs Of Canada* edited by Richard Johnson and, yep, Edith Fowke.

The very simple, flat fact that makes this the most likely and reasonable source for Dylan’s learning ‘Belle Isle’ is that it is this version’s lyric, and this version’s alone, that Bob Dylan sings well-nigh word for word.

50. Bob Dylan, quoted from an interview conducted at Slane, Eire by Derek Bailey and David Hammond for their TV/film documentary *The Clancy Brothers & Tommy Makem* (London, Landseer Films Ltd., 1984), condensed for publication in *The Telegraph* #18, 1984; reprinted in “All Across The Telegraph” (details in n. 3). As a recent example of Dylan’s ability to file a song in his head for future, often far-into-the-future, use, I note that on his US concert tour of 1988 he has begun to perform for the first time (at least in public), a song definitely learnt from the Clancy Brothers, the lovely ‘Eileen Aroon’.
51. John Way’s ‘Flutter Ye Mystic Ballad’ (details n. 4) quotes this from Dylan’s Verona press-conference, 1984:  
Has Irish folk music had any influence. . . ?  
“Oh yeah, very much so. . . The McPeake Family, The Clancy Brothers. Have you heard the McPeake Family? I used to listen to them all the time. . .”. and also says that it was from the McPeakes that ‘Wild Mountain Thyme’ was collected. And, *n.b.*, the McPeakes were from Belfast, Northern Ireland.
52. Interviewed by Patrick Humphries, *The Telegraph* #18, 1984.

Even the omissions are identical. We noted earlier that Dylan omits the stock ending. Can it have been mere coincidence of good taste that Fowke, alone among those who published Newfoundland renditions of the song (and with the confidence of one pre-eminent in her field, and with, too, her refined intolerance toward “hack journalist” elements) had not hesitated to omit the song’s reductive closing detritus also?<sup>53</sup>

A week before this, Dylan had held a press-conference at the National Film Theatre in London to announce that he was going to make the film *Hearts Of Fire*, with Richard Marquand directing (Dylan’s first “proper” film since *Pat Garrett and Billy The Kid* back in 1973), and I spent a couple of days just trying to acquire a ticket to get in to it. John Bauldie, editor of *The Telegraph*, came too. Robert Shelton, one of Dylan’s biographers, was there also. Dylan was very surly for almost all the time, but gave out a couple of flashes of extraordinarily strong-spirited mischievousness. Another person there was an old friend of mine, a picture-researcher, and she took the opportunity to ask Dylan, on my behalf, where he’d learnt ‘Belle Isle’. Unfortunately she rushed in before I could explain to her that he

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53. Since the publication of ‘Back to Belle Isle’ (details in n. 44) I have received, via *Telegraph* editor John Bauldie, the following correspondence from the distinguished Scandinavian “Dylanologist” Christer Svensson (Molkom, Sweden, letter to John Bauldie, undated but summer 1988):

“...a shortcut to the source of Dylan’s *Self Portrait* version of ‘Belle Isle’. . . [is] “Reprints From *Sing Out!* Volume 9’ [New York, Sing Out! Publications, 1966]”. Svensson supports the contention that this was Dylan’s source for the song by pointing out that the same collection contains three other songs also recorded on the *Self Portrait* album, namely ‘Copper Kettle’, ‘It Hurts Me Too’ and ‘Little Sadie’.

Because *Broadside* was the new, supposedly irreverent magazine, born of the “new”, Greenwich Village, folk-revival mood of very early 1960s New York, and because Dylan contributed to it from the start, its significance has always been overstressed in the Dylan mythology. The result is that *Sing Out!* gets somewhat disregarded. Yet *Sing Out!* was, both inside Greenwich Village and beyond, by far the more widely-read, substantial and influential of the two publications. One of its important functions was in consistently, down the years, publishing large numbers of folksongs from widely disparate ethnic sources, greatly to the benefit of the revivalist performers and their ingenué contemporaries like Dylan.

Finally, there’s a second large unanswered question about Bob Dylan’s ‘Belle Isle’. The present article has been entirely concerned with the words on the *Self Portrait* performance, and these do indeed match, except for slight performance error, those published in *Reprints From Sing Out! Volume 9*: but the melody Dylan uses is not as given there at all. Perhaps someone else would like to deal with where he found his tune?

would only respond if she could somehow put it into a context—wrap it up in noting that part of the film was to be made in Canada, for example, and tip the talk in that general direction. As it was she just asked him, out of the blue, with nothing to show that she was interested and not just another journalist with another random dumb question:

“Where did you learn ‘Belle Isle’?”

Bob Dylan just scowled and muttered “I dunno.”

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Thornton-le-Dale  
North Yorkshire, England