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No Part of Our Life: Local and Official Constructions of Meaningful Work in Contemporary Newfoundland

Lisa M. Sullivan

SOME CRITICS have seen the pace and nature of Newfoundland's economic development as evidence of an ambivalent embrace of modernization. Such readings of provincial economic history may acknowledge significant exogenous obstacles to regional growth — noting, for example, the foreign exploitation of provincial resources, the alteration of aqua-environments and the challenges of geographical isolation — but tend to reserve the most vigorous finger-pointing for Newfoundlanders themselves.¹ Provincial labourers, in particular, have been censured for perpetuating the underdevelopment of their region through attachments to “backward” or “traditional” workways and through their tepid support of government-sponsored growth initiatives.² Deliberate resistance to the processes, institutions and “spirit” of industrial capitalism has been marked in workers' reluctance to abandon traditional sectors, disdain for retraining programs and unwillingness to relocate.³ Newfoundland workers, according to this version of

¹See Kenneth Westhues, “Meditation on Newfoundland,” manuscript, Centre for Newfoundland Studies (CNS), Memorial University of Newfoundland, 1983, *passim*. A brief history of the use of the “Newfoundland character” as an explanation for economic failure is offered by James Overton in “A Newfoundland Culture?,” *Journal of Canadian Studies*, 23 (1988), 12-4.

²The most notorious condemnations of Newfoundland workers' “backwardness” are surely those offered by then Premier J.R. Smallwood. See, for example, “Newfoundland To-Day,” in J.R. Smallwood, ed., *The Book of Newfoundland*, Vol. 1 (St. John's 1937), 1-3. See also, Ian Whitaker, “Sociological Preconditions and Concomitants of Rapid Socio-Economic Development in Newfoundland,” in *The Report of the Royal Commission on the Economic State and Prospects of Newfoundland and Labrador* (St. John's 1967), 369-80.

³Workers' responses to the post-moratorium Northern Cod Adjustment and Recovery Program (NCARP) have been cited as evidence of reluctance to change. See, for example,

their history, have stymied the best efforts of human development policy and postponed the benefits of capitalism out of stubbornness or senseless traditionalism or a preference for dependency.

This essay considers an alternative interpretation. Rather than seeking for ultimate culpability, here attention is directed toward the potential influence of an incongruence of belief systems or *mentalités*. Specifically, this paper attempts to reconceptualize the problem of economic development in Newfoundland by reconstructing two competing visions of the ideal working life: one embedded in the development policy formulations of the provincial and Canadian governments and the other preserved within the popular culture of contemporary Newfoundlanders.⁴ It is hoped that by articulating particular conflicts which exist at the level of constructs or values, the way may be paved for a reinterpretation of Newfoundlanders' perceived resistance to change — and for a rethinking of the nature and role of development policy in the province.

Project and Method

THE METHODOLOGICAL CHALLENGES involved in such an investigation are significant. Few individuals fully articulate, even for themselves, the scope of their attitudes toward and beliefs about work, and apperception may be least reliable in areas influenced by "tradition" or intergenerationally transmitted beliefs. A worker may be much more actively aware, for example, of the reasons underlying a belief that high-paying jobs are better than low, than of the basis for beliefs about the status of particular occupations.⁵ Observations of workers' behaviours (for example, work-related decision-making) will clearly offer some insights into prevailing labour *mentalités*, but important aspects of work belief systems may remain invisible until particular circumstances — perhaps an economic crisis — reveal them.⁶ Researchers intent on reconstructing labour *mentalités* must therefore be prepared, to borrow the phrasing of historian of work Jacques Le Goff, to "induce

Atlantic Provinces Economic Council, *Atlantic Report*, 28.1 (1993), 18. Criticisms of the "dangerous habit" of dependency have appeared widely in the local press. For example, *Evening Telegram*, 3 July 1993, 24; *Evening Telegram*, 28 November 1992, 22.

⁴The phrase "popular culture" is employed here with some caution, in the manner of E.P. Thompson (see introduction to *Customs in Common* [New York 1993]) and Jacques Le Goff (see *The Medieval Imagination* [Chicago 1988]), to capture the ensemble of beliefs, meanings and symbolic forms, both shared and contradictory, rooted in the history and experiences of a people. Understood in this way "popular culture" encompasses extant traditional or "folk" expressions (Thompson, 6, 8-9). Le Goff calls folklore "authentic popular culture" (57).

⁵E.P. Thompson, "Folklore, Anthropology and Social History," *The Indian Historical Review*, 3 (1978), 251.

⁶Thompson, "Folklore, Anthropology, and Social History," 251-52.

labour" anywhere where beliefs about work are likely to be recorded or reflected.⁷ Discrete readings of distinct bodies of documentation can then be cumulated to provide a fuller picture of the labour *mentalités* of a particular region and period — a picture which is likely to reflect both commonalities and tensions.

There are many bodies of texts (and of non-textual materials as well) potentially revealing of those views of work which are at work in contemporary Newfoundland. This study considers two. Here a group of contemporary economic policy documents — Newfoundland's 1992 strategic economic plan and three recently commissioned studies of the provincial economy — will be read as representatives of an "official" or "external" belief system which has exerted influence within the province. A contrasting "local" or "internal" view will be provided by the texts of a body of work-related folk and popular songs present in the post-Confederation Newfoundland song repertoire. The evidence-value of these two bodies of material will be considered separately below, and each set of texts will be read with an eye toward both explicit and embedded understandings of work. Particular attention will be paid to beliefs related to work's meaning or "meaningfulness," a concept much employed in recent economic policy.

The dichotomization (external/internal or official/local) which is at the centre of this analysis is, of course, itself a construct and a simplification. Newfoundlanders participated in the formulation of all of the economic policy documents which are examined here as illustrative of an "external" perspective, and provincial workers clearly possess economic values other than, and potentially antagonistic to, the "internal" view reflected in Newfoundland songs. To acknowledge the pluralistic character of Newfoundlanders' beliefs about work does not, however, preclude the existence of significant (perhaps even behaviour-shaping) tensions between aspects of regional *mentalités* and the constructs and objectives favored by policy-makers. Indeed, a rift between external perceptions of work in Newfoundland and some local, particularized understandings of work has already been noted by previous observers, forming a cornerstone of the Community Service Council's 1983 study of unemployment in the province. More recently, potentially critical tensions have surfaced surrounding provincial hopes for an economically stimulative, "modernized" labour force. Such developments would seem to re-affirm the need for a thorough investigation of prevailing views of work.

An "External" View

EVEN THE MOST CURSORY READING of the recent employment policy, proposals and analysis generated in Newfoundland is sufficient to reveal the pervasive influence of a single, externally generated system of economic beliefs. This coherence is all the more striking given an apparent diversity of players, objectives and approaches — a diversity reflected in the four texts consulted in the present

⁷Jacques Le Goff, "Labor, Techniques and Craftsmen in the Value Systems of the Early Middle Ages," in *Time, Work and Culture in the Middle Ages* (Chicago 1980), 71.

study.⁸ The earliest of the documents, the 1980 Economic Council of Canada (ECC) report, is the result of a federally commissioned study of the relationship between unemployment and development in Newfoundland. Conducted almost exclusively by economists, few of them from or resident in the province, the ECC study emphasizes abstract quantitative methods and quantifiable macroeconomic data. By contrast, the 1983 report of the Community Services Council of Newfoundland and Labrador (CSC), a document generated as a critique of the ECC study, makes extensive use of ethnographic and social survey data in its attempt to add a "human perspective" to the study of work and unemployment "in the Newfoundland context." The report of the provincially sponsored Royal Commission on Employment and Unemployment (1986) seeks the middle methodological ground. Chaired by sociologist Douglas House and staffed by a multi-disciplinary and Newfoundlander-dominated investigative team, the Royal Commission farmed out research projects to specialists, solicited briefs from interest groups and held public hearings before conducting its own qualitative and quantitative meta-analysis.⁹ Finally, the 1992 *Strategic Economic Plan for Newfoundland and Labrador* attempts to take engagement with provincial economic difficulties from theory to praxis — a move which reflects, surely, the deepening economic crisis of the early 1990s.

If the array of intent and method represented by these four documents is undeniable, so too is the substantial (and substantive) overlap among their economic world views. We should not, of course, be surprised by such commonalities, particularly in the area of work. At a very basic level, official national definitions of employment and unemployment — curious hybrids of accounting expediency and neo-classical economic theory — dominate and shape the way policy makers evaluate human resource needs, frame solutions and assess outcomes. These definitions do more than provide a common ground for communication. By establishing the framework within which the "official" discourse about work must take place, a-contextual formal definitions cannot help but constrain the ways in which policy-makers *think* about work and worklessness. Moreover, to the extent that legitimation within the policy-making arena depends upon manipulation of a common, supra-local body of language and theory, the requisites of effectiveness can make "outsiders" (if only temporarily) even of "insiders."

⁸Economic Council of Canada, *Newfoundland: From Dependency to Self Reliance* (Hull, Québec 1980); Community Services Council, *The Meaning of Work and the Reality of Unemployment in the Newfoundland Context* (St. John's 1983); Royal Commission on Employment and Unemployment, *Building on Our Strengths* (St. John's 1986); *Change and Challenge: A Strategic Economic Plan for Newfoundland and Labrador* (St. John's 1992).

⁹James P. Feehan, "Learning from Studies of Newfoundland's Economic Problems," *Newfoundland Studies*, 7 (1991), 6; See also David G. Anderson, "Government Programmes and the Generation of Employment in Newfoundland and Labrador: Policy into Action," *British Journal of Canadian Studies*, 6 (1991), 422-430.

The intellectual constraints imposed by a standardized analytical framework are immediately apparent in the writings of those policy-makers who *do* perceive significant local economic mentalities at work in Newfoundland. These writers, often Newfoundlanders themselves, are compelled to negotiate terminological minefields as they explicate the particularized labour beliefs and labour practices that they observe. Consider, for example, the efforts of the Royal Commission — staunch advocates of analysis based in “the real economy in which many Newfoundlanders live” — to articulate Newfoundland-specific employment objectives:

We will have to take the eradication of unemployment and the commitment to full employment as a societal and political goal to be sought by all means possible. By “full employment” here we do not mean that everyone would have a permanent, year-round job, but rather we mean full employment in a Newfoundland sense. Many people particularly in rural areas would continue to pursue a seasonal round, with periods of self-employment, paid employment, household production and, when necessary, some income supplementation... [Still] even the “official” unemployment rate would decline significantly.¹⁰

While such statements succeed admirably in illustrating tensions between internal and external perceptions of work, they also suggest that the Commission’s potential to conceptualize and communicate internal perspectives may have been constrained by the demands of the official discourse. Leaving aside the unwieldiness of the process, to articulate local labour concepts from the basis of admittedly antagonistic external constructs — illustrated here by the attempt to define a Newfoundland-specific concept analogous to the external construct of “full employment” — can hardly help but impose intellectual blinders on researcher and audience alike. Receptivity to differences between external and internal views, in other words, must surely be hindered to the extent that analysis proceeds along the lines: work (or employment or unemployment) in Newfoundland can be understood by first envisioning the official constructs and then undertaking a series of amendments to them.

Such Procrustean measures, rooted in the belief that the official constructs and theory are universally applicable, tend to suggest analogies even where none are appropriate. Two of the four policy documents examined here — the reports of the Community Services Council (CSC) and the Royal Commission — grapple explicitly with the issue of Newfoundland-specific work terminology, only to employ the official language themselves by default. Interpretive difficulties abound when documents that acknowledge significant discrepancies between official and local understandings of work nevertheless make use of the standardized concepts to define research or policy objectives. How are we to interpret, for example, the generic goals of “employment” creation or “unemployment” alleviation in writings that grant local meanings but utilize Statistics Canada definitions?

¹⁰*Building on Our Strengths*, 35.

Despite such considerations, attempts to address terminological issues nevertheless mark out an area within which external observers of the Newfoundland economy have been able to remain fairly conscious of their status as outsiders. Definitional constraints have the advantage of visibility and hence of potential navigability. Not so for some of the obstacles to conceptualization embedded in the belief system which supports (and is reinforced by) the official language of work. Understandings of the boundaries between employment and unemployment, for example, rest upon particular and often invisible judgments concerning the appropriate nature, motivation and sphere of economic activity. The analytical framework of the official discourse thus rests upon implicit presumptions concerning shared economic values — presumptions acknowledged explicitly by the CSC Report:

The official concepts and definitions are derived from the values and meanings of an economic system in which the allocation of capital and labour takes place through a cash mechanism, and in which the main motivators of economic activity are pay and profit.¹¹

It should come as little surprise, then, that while the external observers represented in the documents examined here diverge substantially both in their desires and in their abilities to reach beyond their own economic value systems, their visioning of optimal solutions to Newfoundland's labour difficulties are ultimately coloured by some shared beliefs in the efficacy — or at least the inevitability — of the capitalist market mechanism.

External constructions of "meaningful" employment in Newfoundland offer a case in point. Such constructions take on particular significance given the pervasive presence of "meaningful work creation" among the objectives of the contemporary policy-making literature. Fulfillment of promises to generate meaningful employment is surely predicated on beliefs regarding the sources of satisfaction in labour.¹² But what do policy-makers mean when they utilize the phrase "meaningful labour?"

Here we are often on our own. In writings scrupulously careful to define terms like "labour force," the characteristics of "meaningful employment" may be left entirely unspecified — suggesting, disconcertingly, a belief that meaning in labour is transparently and universally understood. Where details are provided, they are

¹¹*The Meaning of Work*, 22.

¹²From the report of the People's Commission in 1978 through to the province's most recent strategic economic plan, there are calls to recognize the importance of occupational identification, to create employment which offers "some measure of personal satisfaction" and to safeguard "the intrinsic value," "dignity" and "moral income" associated with work itself: Douglas May and Alton Hollett, *The Causes of Unemployment in Newfoundland* (St. John's 1986), 290; People's Commission on Unemployment, *Now That We've Burned Our Boats* (St. John's 1978), 91; *Building on Our Strengths*, 406; *From Dependency to Self Reliance*, 153; and *The Meaning of Work*, 79.

much more apt to concern the results or effects of meaningful work than its attributes: more apt to reveal, in other words, what meaningful work *does* rather than what it *is*. This difficulty plagues even the most cross-culturally sensitive of the policy-making documents examined. The report of the CSC, tantalizingly entitled "The Meaning of Work and the Reality of Unemployment in the Newfoundland Context," is ultimately far more successful in indicating the social and personal benefits of meaningful work than it is in offering policy-makers sufficient information to replicate locally satisfying work experiences.

Consider, for example, the following description of local labour values, drawn from an ethnographic study of Harbour Breton and included in the CSC report:

...[I]n Harbour Breton, work ... involves the provision of goods and services which maintain valued social institutions — the household and the family. In addition, in the local concept of work there is a "moral income" from work which is absent from the official concept. Work itself is a valued activity and one which links the household and the individual with the community.¹³

This statement, which the report indicates "may be of general applicability in rural Newfoundland," provides some interesting clues to the nature of meaningful labour in the Newfoundland context. The value of labour, in this understanding, is linked to its material role in sustaining individual labourers and their families and its social (and perhaps symbolic) role in sustaining community identification. But, with the exception of the criterion of material productivity ("the provision of goods and services"), we learn little that could enable us to cull potentially meaningful employments from the rest.

A careful reading of the remainder of the CSC report yields some additional insights, largely through descriptions of unfulfilling labour experiences. "Employment which is monotonous, stressful and alienating," for example, is "implicated in the etiology of social problems."¹⁴ Government jobs are generally regarded as "sinecures," providing rewards well out of proportion to the light effort involved, and participation in government make-work programs is derided unless the project is deemed socially necessary.¹⁵ Desirable labour experiences, on the other hand, provide "structure" and offer the opportunity for demonstrations of initiative which can be observed by the worker's community and family.¹⁶ Descriptions of work in a number of local contexts indicate ties between worker initiative and assumption of "legitimate adult status in the community."¹⁷

Such insights are entirely consistent, as will be seen below, with one view of work preserved within the provincial popular culture. Yet, after having acknow-

¹³*Ibid.*, 79.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, 24.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, 61, 272.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 25, 62.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, 71, 79.

ledged the significance of ethnographic evidence — indeed after having sponsored five major studies of work in Newfoundland communities — the CSC makes little of the particularized labour beliefs its own research begins to reveal. The Council's "provincial social survey" (the analysis of which constitutes almost two-thirds of the 350-page report), largely limits its questions to formal economic categories. Worker satisfaction is proxied in the survey by fulfillment of wage expectations, continuity of employment, achievement of full-time (market) rather than casual employment, and adequate utilization of formal training or education. While such concerns are clearly important to many Newfoundlanders, particularly those in urban settings, the Council's decision to focus its survey research and analysis on the formal sector raises serious questions about its ability to assimilate and employ local labour understandings.

Given that the CSC report, undertaken with the benefit of extensive community-level study of work in Newfoundland, ultimately finds it difficult to break with external perceptions of valuable work, it is perhaps unsurprising to find that the same difficulty plagues the remainder of the policy documents gathered here. The report of the Royal Commission — which, like the CSC report, is intentionally multi-disciplinary and Newfoundland-centred — argues on the one hand for "the need to divest ourselves of any inappropriate assumptions built into theories that were originally designed to describe large scale economies," yet makes extensive use of the constructs of neo-classical economics.¹⁸ The Royal Commission report thus, rather paradoxically, makes room both for observations about pride and autonomous artisanship and for depictions which paint Newfoundland workers' concerns strictly in terms of income optimization.¹⁹ The report's apparent balancing of internal and external views of meaningful work is finally tipped in the area of policy formulation. The Commission advocates the creation of "meaningful work which would make a real contribution to the long-term economic prospects and quality of life of the province."²⁰ In the acid test of policy creation, "meaningful" is measured against a macroeconomic benchmark rather than against personally relevant satisfactions. The traditional labourer of the past is recast as "the entrepreneur of the future," a role likely more "meaningful" to the professionalized staff and consultants of the Commission than to the objects of their policy suggestions.

The two remaining documents, the 1980 report of the ECC and the 1992 *Strategic Economic Plan*, lack any positive consideration of local labour constructs. The ECC report raises the issue of traditional labour with respect to the fishery only to blame the "way of life, characterized by the traditional skills and enterprise of individual fishermen" for "low incomes and sluggish economic development."²¹ While the ECC acknowledges that particular aspects of traditional

¹⁸ *Building on Our Strengths*, 104.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 406, 109.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 230.

²¹ *From Dependency to Self-Reliance*, 83.

Newfoundland culture provide that "the human condition in Newfoundland may be a good deal better than is indicated by economic statistics alone," it frames its economic objectives for the province as a move *away* from traditional labours and customary labour practices.²² Similar suggestions are advanced by the *Strategic Plan*, a document which, in a passage that suggests the magnitude of the gap between internal and external views of Newfoundland's labour traditions, argues that provincial workers should adopt "the ideals of productivity, quality, profitability and a passion for excellence" — as though such ideals were entirely unique to the formal economic sector.²³

An "Internal" Perspective

ADHERENCE BY POLICY-MAKERS to any particular set of work beliefs would, of course, pose no difficulties as long as those beliefs were shared by the communities for whom policies were formulated. Yet questions about the commensurability of internal and external views are raised even within official considerations of work and unemployment in Newfoundland. Suspicions of some critical divergence of views are strengthened when the reality of contemporary Newfoundland labour behaviour is consulted. Official predilections for "productive" market employments notwithstanding, many whose livelihoods have been threatened by the northern cod moratorium have proven reluctant to accept government-funded training to leave the fishery. A similar disregard for the "logic" of external views has long been evident in local responses to the unemployment insurance system (UI). A staggering 40 per cent or more of Newfoundland families depend annually on unemployment insurance for at least part of their income, many of them viewing UI as one of the diversity of earned incomes that make possible a productive working life centered in the region's traditional industries.²⁴ Newfoundlanders who have left the province for work elsewhere often return to the region despite dim prospects for employment there.²⁵

²²The Council envisioned "exciting prospects for raising the incomes and for generating employment for many Newfoundlanders," a process that would entail "overcoming seasonality" and "increasing the... professionalism of workers." *From Dependency to Self Reliance*, 155, 79.

²³*Change and Challenge*, 13.

²⁴The distinction between "earned" unemployment insurance and welfare is well enough known to be acknowledged in the national press. See, for example, *The Vancouver Sun*, 6 April 1993, A4.

²⁵Studies of return migration have tended (sometimes grudgingly) to acknowledge the importance of extra-economic factors. See Barnett Richling, "'You'd never starve here': Return Migration to Rural Newfoundland," *Canadian Review of Sociology and Anthropology*, 22, 2 (1985), 243-5, 246; J.D. House *et al.*, *Going Away... and Coming Back*, (St. John's 1989), 2-4.

Clearly, some contemporary Newfoundlanders have made work choices and responded to employment policy in ways which official understandings of work might not predict — that is, in ways not easily explained by orthodox models of income optimization. Unless we are willing to dismiss this decision-making as simply perverse or intentionally subversive, there is hope that a fuller appreciation of popular work beliefs might aid in identifying critical factors within Newfoundland's recent labour history — and perhaps assist ultimately in the formulation of new employment policy directions.

The present study looks to Newfoundland song as one viable doorway to regional labour beliefs. The analysis presented in this section is based upon a sample of just over two hundred compositions collected by the author from the manuscript, tape and record collections of the Memorial University Folklore and Language Archive (MUNFLA), the songster and sheet music holdings of the Centre for Newfoundland Studies (CNS) and five published collections of Newfoundland songs.²⁶ In an attempt to capture those songs likely to reflect elements of contemporary regional labour *mentalités*, compositions within these collections which met the following criteria were selected:

1. The lyrics of the song addressed or indicated the desirability or undesirability of particular occupations, work behaviors and goals and/or addressed or indicated attitudes regarding participation in government economic programs.
and either
2. The song was a native or traditional folksong, extant in an individual Newfoundlander's song repertoire between 1950 and 1990.
or
3. The song was a post-Confederation popular composition, composed by a Newfoundlander and dealing with the experiences of Newfoundlanders past or present.

Multiple variants of a single song were included in the sample only in those instances where variations in lyrics appeared to impinge on the work-related content of the song and, despite considerable diversity in the characteristics of singers and performance settings, the following analysis will treat the songs collected as a body of related creative expression.

²⁶Of the 202 songs in the corpus, 105 were gathered from the tape and manuscript collections of MUNFLA, 10 from songsters held at MUNFLA and 8 from MUNFLA's collection of commercial recordings. 15 songs were collected from the holdings of the CNS; 10 songs from the author's collection of contemporary Newfoundland recordings. The remaining songs were drawn from Kenneth Peacock, ed., *Songs of the Newfoundland Outports* (Ottawa 1965); Mac-Edward Leach, *Folk Ballads and Songs of the Lower Labrador Coast* (Ottawa 1965); Omar Blondahl, ed., *Newfoundlanders Sing!* (St. John's 1964); Genevieve Lehr, ed., *Come and I Will Sing You* (St. John's 1985); S. Ryan and L. Small, eds., *Haulin' Rope and Gaff* (St. John's 1978). [If necessary to indicate other editions, dates have been added to subsequent references to these works.]

Such an approach clearly forestalls the sort of individualistic, performance-oriented analysis favoured by many contemporary folklorists. Indeed, by choosing to focus on text and by minimizing attention to the histories of songs and to the identities of singers or composers, this study sets aside some potentially rewarding avenues of investigation. But abandoning the close-up for the broad view offers significant advantages in its own right, particularly if our interest is in those economic values which might extend across lines of class, gender, occupation or community. Historians of the *Annales* school, for example, have long argued that the collective consciousness of particular regions and periods may be revealed through the examination of broad bodies of creative expression — like folk genres — sensitive to both changes and continuities in beliefs.²⁷ Some Marxist scholarship has also looked to folk and popular culture for evidence of collective responses to shared economic and historical experiences.²⁸ The influence of both of these approaches will be clearly apparent here. The present study, seeking to illuminate aspects of Newfoundland's contemporary economic *mentalités*, treats the post-Confederation period as a phase in the province's economic and historical development and regards the texts of songs composed and/or sung during this period as one viable "cultural fund."²⁹

The choice to look to Newfoundland songs for evidence of culturally embedded beliefs is, admittedly, somewhat arbitrary. Yet, while much of the province's cultural production (such as literature, art, and drama) would be amenable to this sort of reading, the genre of song seems particularly well-suited for a number of reasons. The fairly delimited role of song as a communicator of beliefs, meanings and emotions suggests that any moment of song "production" — composition or performance — has the potential to reveal the attitudes of the composer or singer and through him or her the *mentalités* of a time or region.³⁰ True folksongs, those songs "sung and internalized" by a population over a considerable period of time, may be particularly valuable barometers of collective beliefs.

²⁷See Alun Hawkins and Linda Merricks, "'Wee be black as Hell': Ritual Disguise and Rebellion," *Rural History*, 4, 1 (1993), 42-3; Le Goff, "Labor Techniques and Craftsmen," 71-2.

²⁸J. Brunton, *et al.*, "Uneven Underdevelopment and Song: Culture and Development in the Maritimes," in Liora Salter, ed., *Communications Studies in Canada/Études Canadiennes en Communication* (Toronto 1981), 111: "Because the economic realities of life under capitalism are the same, so to a degree are the creative responses of people." See also José E. Limón, "Western Marxism and Folklore: A Critical Introduction," *Journal of American Folklore*, 96 (1983), 34, 39.

²⁹Precedents for regarding the years between Confederation and the present as a "phase" are fairly numerous. See, for example, G.M. Story, "Newfoundland: Fishermen, Hunters, Planters and Merchants," in H. Halpert and G.M. Story, eds., *Christmas Mumming in Newfoundland* (Toronto 1969), 31-2.

³⁰Compare John Greenway, "Folksong as an Anthropological Province," in Mody C. Boatwright, *et al.*, eds., *A Good Tale and a Bonnie Tune* (Dallas 1964), 213.

Folksong shares with other forms of oral transmission a fluidity that enables it to reflect “the colorations, nuances and styles of the group among whom it circulates, and ... to suit their responses to time (and) place.”³¹ A native or traditional folksong extant within the contemporary Newfoundland song repertoire will, according to this understanding, articulate themes or beliefs that resonate with its contemporary performers and audience. Recent compositions, lacking the filter of historical distillation, are in themselves less reliable mirrors of collective belief — but have the advantage of more direct access to contemporary attitudes, offering a useful counterpoint and check in a study of current *mentalités*.

Examined as evidence of beliefs about work and read against the fairly turbulent socio-economic context of the post-Confederation period, Newfoundland songs appear as a refuge for information about satisfying or “meaningful” work. Most notably, by preserving a vision of what work did once offer Newfoundlanders — or, what is effectively the same thing, a vision of what work is believed to have offered them — the province’s song tradition has sheltered a body of work ideals even as it has idealized and romanticized particular labours and labourers.³² And what do we see when we look to Newfoundland song with an eye toward the sources of meaning in work? Though the boundaries are by no means rigid, two attributes dominate portrayals of meaningful work experiences: meaningful labours offer the opportunity to achieve status and identity within worker cohorts (most often of men) and larger communities and, at the same time, provide the opportunity for economic autonomy and holistic production experiences.

Status, Masculinity and Primary Production

WITHIN THE SONG SAMPLE that forms the core of this research, by far the greatest number of compositions reference Newfoundland’s “traditional” primary production activities of fishing (or the more comprehensive category of seafaring), sealing, lumbering, trapping and mining.³³ The thematic dominance of these industries

³¹Barre Toelken, “Ballads and Folksongs,” in Elliott Oring, ed., *Folk Groups and Folk Genres* (Logan 1989), 147.

³²Brunton, *et al.*, “Uneven Underdevelopment,” 105-32.

³³Logging and mining, which acquired importance after the turn of the century and which are associated with the rise of a cash economy in Newfoundland, do distinguish themselves in some important ways from the other “traditional” extractive sectors indicated here. These distinctions do not, however, figure prominently within Newfoundland song — a result, perhaps, of the close integration of these industries into the rural economy of the province before World War II. Compare G.M. Story, “Newfoundland: Fishermen, Hunters, Planters, and Merchants,” 31. Fishing, sealing, lumbering and mining have all been associated with the semi-proletarianization of rural Newfoundlanders. See Brunton, *et al.*, “Uneven Underdevelopment,” 118-99. Also, R. James Sacouman, “Semi-proletarianization and Rural Underdevelopment in the Maritimes,” *Canadian Review of Anthropology and Sociology*, 17, 3 (1980), 238-42.

remains evident even among those songs composed or collected in the last decade, and is most striking when only the positive portrayals of work are considered. True, a number of these songs offer us little more than uncritical and relatively unenlightening occupational paeans, as in the chorus of "The Fisherman's Alphabet":

So merry, so merry, so merry are we,
No mortals on earth are like fishers at sea;³⁴

But most provide at least one substantive argument on behalf of their particular work culture. Interestingly, advocations of occupations are only rarely grounded in historical significance, relying instead on a set of common, valued work characteristics. These characteristics set a benchmark against which the values of other labours are measurable and, taken in sum, reveal an idealized vision of labour that has parallels within vernacular understandings of "real" work.

It is the colourful and romantic aspect of this vision that first impresses upon an acquaintance with Newfoundland song. Idealized representations of the difficult and often dangerous lives of fishers, loggers and miners are common and are often replete with references to "bold," "hardy," "stout" and "rugged" workers. Such songs translate hazardous work environments into settings for adventure and heroism — and thus into opportunities for the display of physical prowess, bravery and endurance. Indeed, within the most idealized or romanticized of the work portraits considered here, heroism or death (or both) often appear as the pinnacle of work achievement. The most noble of fishermen, for example, risks himself in a gallant rescue effort or relinquishes his life in an attempt to save his ship and comrades.

Such depictions, I would suggest, may often be but extreme statements of a widely accepted song criterion for ideal occupations: "real" work is linked with masculinity. Indeed, so male-centred are the representations of work provided by Newfoundland song that extrapolations — particularly to the meanings women derive from their labours — may well be unreliable.³⁵ Men (or women disguised

³⁴Peacock, *Songs* (1952), 125.

³⁵Few Newfoundland folksongs deal with the productive contributions of women and, where women are portrayed, stereotypes abound (Brunton *et al.*, 116; Martha MacDonald, "A is for Alphabet Songs," *Culture and Tradition*, 9 (1985), 58, 64). To deny the utility of folksong as an adequate reflection of women's historical experiences is not equivalent, however, to dismissing as insignificant a contemporary Newfoundland woman's affinity for traditional work-related songs. It may well be that the presence of "male-centred" celebrations of work within women's song repertoires suggests some regions of shared values: work as an opportunity to display skills, do exciting things, achieve status. (Some evidence in support of this interpretation is offered by songs emanating from women's social organizations: MUNFLA 82-274/pd1010, 7, 9; MUNFLA ms. 87-149, 1). Such interpretations clearly cannot be ventured in advance of the study of materials more clearly reflective of contemporary Newfoundland women's views of work. While popular song would seem to offer a rather

as men) dominate song portrayals of worker-heroes, and implicit connections between valued labour and maleness, visible in the pairing of work with the stereotypically masculine virtues of aggressiveness, courage, strength and endurance, are ubiquitous, appearing in fully half of the songs collected.³⁶ Sixteen songs make explicit connections between valued work experiences and "actin' like a man" or male camaraderie,³⁷ and a small but potentially telling group of songs indicate that hard physical labour facilitates the transition from boyhood to manhood.³⁸

The association of masculinity with certain occupations and ways of working is reaffirmed by representations that brand as effeminate outsiders to a community of resource-extractors. In the well-known tune "The Squid Jiggin' Ground," for example, those "inclined to go squiddin'" are cautioned to reconsider if they are apt to feel "cranky without a hanky."³⁹ Merchants are especially likely targets for this sort of abuse, a preference which no doubt reflects some particular historical antagonisms between Newfoundland's working and commercial classes. But the merchant of traditional song seems also to have functioned symbolically, serving as a lightning rod for a more general animosity toward non-manual labourers. Songs which take merchants to task for their treatment of workers almost invariably contrast the rigors of traditional occupations with the soft life and plentiful leisure enjoyed by merchants:

When the black clouds is rising to wind'ard
And tells us the storm is at hand,
Those rogues they are at home on their pillows
Their darlings they have close to hand.⁴⁰

When such songs do reference the working life of merchants, it is often the unworklike quality of merchant labour that receives attention: the (relatively) late starting hour, the opportunity to labour in comfortable or luxurious surroundings, the pristine and perishable work "uniform."⁴¹ These are attributes, of course, shared

slim basis for such research, some preliminary work by the author suggests that women's verse may provide a rich resource.

³⁶These same characteristics could be held up as a measure of work value even in cases where either the work or worker was "non-traditional." See, for example, the scathing treatment of a "cowardly" local mail carrier in "Mr. Costler," Lehr, *Come and I Will Sing You* (1977), 140-2, and the portrait of the doughty (disguised) woman sailor in "Flora and Jim," Peacock, *Songs* (1952), 190-1.

³⁷"Fishin' in a Dory," MUNFLA ms. 73-132, 41.

³⁸See, for example, "I'm a Newfoundlander," MUNFLA ms. 85-254, 27; "Me Old Ragadoo," Lehr, *Come and I Will Sing You* (1977), 135; "My Old Brown Coat and Me," MUNFLA ms. 81-171, 35-6.

³⁹Blondahl, *Newfoundlanders Sing!*, 32.

⁴⁰"The Merchants," Lehr, *Come and I Will Sing You* (1977), 136.

⁴¹"The Merchants of the Government," MUNFLA ms. 74-208, 19-22.

by much nonmanual work. They are also attributes that, within many Newfoundland songs, mark the questionably masculine.

Consider, for example, the plight of Francis Daly in "The Ballad of Dog Hood Daly." After the fifty-eight year old Daly goes to live with his successful son in the United States, he finds himself surrounded by luxury, perfumed by his barber and wearing "silk pajamas all bedecked with Chinese dragons." The veteran sealer is mortified:

Just think of me, who used to be at home, "Old Dog Hood Daly"
 Bein' told by grown up wimmen that I'm "just too, too divine" —
 If that gets home I'm finished with me mates in Sandy Harbour...
 Though I'm strong and straight, come May the Eight, I'll then be fifty-nine
 But — I'd never live to raise again this ole white head o' mine.⁴²

For Daly, the only antidote is a return to Newfoundland and, more specifically, a return to the manual labours of his outport community. There the emasculating effects of his brief taste of "swank" city life can be cleansed through the physical efforts of garden-clearing, fence-mending and lobstering. Better yet, returning home offers Daly a chance to re-enter a community of work, camaraderie and competition — a community whose rules of status he comprehends and within which a "horny-handed Skipper" can secure a position of respect.

Economic Ideals

"THE BALLAD OF DOG HOOD DALY" and, indeed, all of the songs cited above suggest that certain occupations are valued, in part, because of their ability to tie (at least male) workers to, and establish their status within, relevant social groupings. By offering an opportunity to develop and publically demonstrate a set of work-related, status-enhancing behaviours (manliness, bravery, prowess, competitiveness, ingenuity), such labours are shown to offer workers a chance to measure themselves and others against social standards of hard work. Songs about fishing, sealing, logging, lobstering, mining and the like thus reveal and define a set of favoured virtues and status considerations — ones based upon the criteria for survival and success within the difficult work environments of these occupations — while modelling a work experience within which success is accessible to each and beneficial to all. Such understandings are complemented by song representations of the material advantages of primary-sector work. The work environments of sea, forest, mine and farm are seen to facilitate economic independence, flexibility and the opportunity for reward in proportion to effort. At the same time, these labours are linked to the personal work satisfactions of pride, freedom and sense of self.

All of these virtues are linked to the first. Economic autonomy, articulated in the ideal as control over the most significant of production decisions (those

⁴²Ronald Martin, ed., *Poems of Emotion, Sentiment and Reflection* (St. John's 1945), 7.

involving pace, tools, scheduling, quality and risk), is represented as critical both to economic viability and to the psychic satisfactions of work experiences. While the archetypal purely independent producer — the cross-handed fisherman, the old trapper “so gay and so free” and their ilk⁴³ — is more populous in Newfoundland song than in Newfoundland history, representations of petty-commodity producers and wage labourers suggest that the greater the degree of economic autonomy the greater the likelihood of work-related benefits.

The most fundamental of those advantages associated with economic independence is clearly the ability to construct a personal economic safety net. While autonomous or relatively autonomous producers (such as petty-commodity producers, sharemen or contract workers) in traditional industries are rarely portrayed as affluent, they are shown to have some control over the provision of subsistence. Most notably, economic autonomy is seen to facilitate a connection between effort and reward: the independent fisherman can bet he will “always have chow,”⁴⁴ just as the sealer who once “worked with heart and will... seldom came without a bill.”⁴⁵ The ability to sustain oneself and one’s family is further encouraged by ownership of the necessary tools of one’s trade — particularly by possession of a fishing boat and gear — and by access to familiar economic environments and to customary rights of common resource usage. The significance of these two final factors is illustrated most vividly in the antiresettlement song repertoire — those songs written in response to government efforts to centralize the Newfoundland population during the 1950s and 1960s. Such works frequently articulate the resettlement experience as a tragic separation from traditional resources:

No more we’ll watch the caplin as they wash upon the sand,
The little fish they used for bait, to fertilize their land;
No more they’ll watch their gardens grow or their meadows full of hay,
Or walk the roads in their working clothes in the good old-fashioned way.⁴⁶

The economic safety net associated with autonomous production in a known environment is, as the lyrics just cited hint, strengthened by occupational pluralism. There is a marked appreciation for multi-talented workers within Newfoundland song, an appreciation indicated vividly by the striking flexibility of some of the region’s worker-heroes:

⁴³Pat Byrne, “Pad’s Song,” MUNFLA tape 82-236/C9979; “The Trapper’s Life,” in Beatrice Watts, *et al.*, *Songs of Labrador* (Labrador Integrated Schoolboard 1982), 79-80. See also “Old Man’s Memories,” MUNFLA ms. 86-242, 10.

⁴⁴“Poor Fisherman,” MUNFLA ms. 81-171, 46.

⁴⁵“Ice Bound Hunting Seals,” MUNFLA PD35178-439, 78.

⁴⁶“The Leaving of Merasheen,” in Lehr, *Come and I Will Sing You* (1975), 114. See also “West Moon,” MUNFLA tape 82-236/C9979.

I's the b'y that builds the boat,
 I's the b'y that sails 'er,
 I's the b'y that catches the fish
 And brings them home to Lizer.⁴⁷

The ability to move easily from task to task when seasons change, opportunity arises or exigency demands is often portrayed as the difference between success and mere subsistence — or between survival and failure — for an individual or working crew.⁴⁸

And many songs point to occupational pluralism, which at its heart implies autonomy with respect to the scheduling of work, as the identifying strategy of the successful outport or village economy.⁴⁹ Personal control over work time, like control over other productive assets, is seen as integral to the appropriate allocation and use of economic resources, and thus to the reduction of economic uncertainty.

While the regional song tradition allows that natural factors may thwart opportunities to achieve economic autonomy (as when a storm wrecks a boat or traps), a more comprehensive threat to economic security is discerned in the capriciousness of federal and provincial policy. Resettlement programmes, for example, are condemned for having extracted productive workers from viable economic settings and transplanted them into sterile ones:

To a place called Placentia, some of them went
 And in finding their new homes their allowances spent
 So for jobs they went looking, but they looked all in vain
 For the roof had caved in on the Government Game.

It's surely a sad sight, their moving around
 Wishing they still lived near the cod-fishing ground
 But there's no going back now, there's nothing to gain
 Now that they've played in the Government Game.⁵⁰

⁴⁷Peacock, *Songs* (1951), 64. See also "The Fisher Who Died in His Bed," Peacock, *Songs* (1961), 127 and "John Hinks," in Blondahl, *Newfoundlanders Sing!*, 30.

⁴⁸The relationship between occupational pluralism and survival is seen most clearly in songs which detail diminished resource bases and declining economic opportunities. See "The Badger Moose," MUNFLA tape 83-145/C6199; "The Change Islands Song," in Blondahl, *Newfoundlanders Sing!*, 93; "Concerning One Summer in Bonay," *Newfoundland Stories and Ballads*, 17, 2 (1970-71), 37; "Hook and Line Fishermen," MUNFLA ms. 74-208, 35-6; "Me Name is Walter Kippenhuck," *Songs of Labrador*, 25-6.

⁴⁹See, for example, "Fish and Brewis," Peacock, *Songs* (1960), 123; "For the Fish We Must Prepare," MUNFLA ms. 82-008, 15; "The Year 1951 at Bay de Verde," MUNFLA ms. 73-132, 24-26.

⁵⁰Pat Byrne, "The Government Game," MUNFLA ms. 83-65, 41; See also "The Blow Below the Belt," MUNFLA ms. 84-125, 34; "Tragic Resettlement," MUNFLA ms. 85-106, 19-20.

Songs suggest that, without the means or opportunities to survive independently, many relocatees found themselves with no choice but to depend wholly on the productive resources of others, relying on wage work, locally or on the Mainland, or on government-sponsored safety nets.

Song representations leave little doubt that dependence of either sort — on wage labour or on government assistance — could impinge significantly on Newfoundland workers' ability to control their own economic destinies. On the one hand, factory work, while providing admittedly welcome income, is portrayed as clearly undependable. It is possible for a wage worker to work "real hard" and get laid off if a factory closes, and probable that access to reasonable work hours and better-paying assignments will fluctuate at the whim of an employer.⁵¹ A still greater threat to autonomy is discerned in the social welfare network. Full or partial dependence upon government funding is seen as the likely consequence of exposure to Social Assistance or UI — with the ultimate costs reckoned in the erosion of those work ethics associated with independent production. Frustration with the ethos of dependency is marked in serious condemnations of "dole-mongers,"⁵² as well as in tongue-in-cheek celebrations of the practice of "fishing for stamps."⁵³

Finally, and perhaps most significantly, several Newfoundland songs align government-erected obstacles to the *mentalités* of economic independence with social and psychological disturbances. Concern with conflicts between the aims of government economic intervention, however benign, and the community-level effects of that intervention is apparent in a number of compositions, as is suspicion regarding the government's capacity to follow through on its promises. Both fears are illustrated in the contemporary song "Woman of the Sea Man," a dialogic composition that pairs the partner of a beached fisherman and an anonymous representative of official policy. In the following two stanzas, the first voices the "woman's" concerns, the second, the "government's" response:

For he is a man who asked no more
 Than the right to live by his hand
 For he is a man who asked no more
 Forced to live on the lean of the land.

There is no need to curse your lot
 For jobs will soon be found

⁵¹The Wonderful Grand Band, "UIC," *UIC*. Grand East Records 1001. Sound recording. Gerry Formanger, "The Linerboard Mill," *Side by Each*. Country Records 6022. Sound recording. Pierce Cull, "Cold Storage Song," *Working in the Cold Storage*. Audat 477-9039. Sound recording. "The Crab Plant Song," MUNFLA ms. 86-252, 34.

⁵²"The Dole Song," MUNFLA ms. 81-266, 1-2; "Self-Supporters' Rhythm," MUNFLA ms. 69-13f, 9-11.

⁵³Dick Nolan, "Unemployment Song," *Be True Newfoundlanders*. Arc ACS 5024. Sound recording.

There is no need to curse your lot
We'll set him to digging a hole in the ground.⁵⁴

These lines suggest fundamental connections among traditional workways, self-subsistence and self-definition. Viewed from such a perspective, economic transitions appear doubly threatening. Movements from one type of work to another (or from one locale to another, and perhaps even from one type of economy to another) present a risk not only to material circumstances, but to identity. This risk is clearly heightened if the ultimate situation is itself uncertain — that is, if it can fail to be sustaining for reasons beyond the worker's control — or if the transition would require a significant readjustment to self-perception. Thus, songs suggest, however enticing the potential remuneration of wage employment and however perilous the process of securing a livelihood in traditional occupations, for some the cost-benefit analysis must surely point toward staying put:

Well Skipper Jim Pittman said he wouldn't go,
While there's nets to be mended and hay to be mown,
He said he'd never work, no matter the pay,
In a hockey stick factory out Stephenville way.⁵⁵

Far from tragic heroes, song resisters to modernization like Pittman act in a way entirely consistent with their own economic value schemas and with their own tolerances for and perceptions of risk. Within Newfoundland song, such decisions to “stand up and fight the game” are buttressed by ample testaments to the failed promises of government policy and, indeed, of modernization itself. Even those workers “successfully” absorbed by contemporary capitalism, that is, those able to obtain steady wage employment in Newfoundland's private sector, are shown susceptible to crises of work “meaning”: alienation, frustration and boredom.⁵⁶ Pittman's preference for the traditional labours of the outports — work that is tremendously arduous, often dangerous and itself economically uncertain — makes sense only in the context of a particularized understanding of the sources of value and satisfaction in work.

Conclusion

JIM PITTMAN'S ECONOMIC OBJECTIVES and ideals are clearly not those of the Economic Council of Canada. Recognizing this has little practical import, of

⁵⁴MUNFLA ms. 78-150/appendix.

⁵⁵Gary O'Driscoll, “Out from St. Leonard's,” *New Songs and Music of Newfoundland* (St. John's 1983), 6.

⁵⁶See, for example, “The Blow Below the Belt,” MUNFLA ms. 84-125, 34, in which a former fisherman finds himself an employee of a St. John's psychiatric hospital following resettlement. See also, Brunton, *et al.*, “Uneven Underdevelopment and Song,” 128-9.

course, unless Pittman's beliefs can tell us something about the beliefs of contemporary Newfoundlanders — and unless the represented gap between *mentalités* is (or at least has been) relevant to and reflected in behaviours within the provincial socio-economy. The claims that this study can make regarding the first of these criteria are, of necessity, fairly modest. While a broad consideration of the contemporary Newfoundland song repertoire can, I believe, help us to begin to perceive overarching or collective regional beliefs about work, such analysis would be well complemented by research oriented toward variations in songs: perhaps by area of collection, origin, occupational association or performance setting. Given that Newfoundlanders are likely to be divided by issues of class, gender and locale even as they are united by common history and regional identification, reconstructing provincial *mentalités* will entail analysis aimed toward revealing distinctions as well as commonalities. Moreover, to the extent that a full and nuanced understanding of Newfoundlanders' views of work is a desirable objective, there is an impetus for parallel studies of a wide range of sources. Mentalities are related to "the whole range of historical data,"⁵⁷ but the limitations of particular documents — evidenced here by the questionable ability of Newfoundland song to reveal women's work — argue for multiple and multi-disciplinary investigations.

This said, there is certainly some evidence that the sources of work meaning associated here with the "internal" view — status, autonomy, pride — may have influenced the ways in which actual Newfoundland workers have responded to the changing nature of work in their province and to government employment policy.

While any comprehensive attempt at authentication is beyond the scope of the present essay, it is surely significant that the "official" writings consulted here themselves offer examples of workers whose decisions have been influenced by values much like those reflected in Newfoundland song. Observations which pin continuing attachment to the fishery, for example, on "an ethic of independence" or concerns of "identity" would seem to affirm that the "real" economic functions of traditional labours have been supplemented — and in some areas perhaps even replaced — by their role in the "symbolic social processes through which ethos and identity are maintained."⁵⁸ Indeed, to the extent that considerations of status and autonomy continue to inhabit regional labour *mentalités*, there are entirely rational reasons why workers might choose to adopt a pattern of work and government assistance rather than to divorce themselves entirely from primary production. And for some workers compelled to make a transition from traditional sectors, the absence of meaning can sometimes be felt along with the absence of income:

⁵⁷Le Goff, *Labor, Techniques and Craftsmen*, 72.

⁵⁸*Meaning of Work*, 245; Anthony P. Cohen, "The Whalsay Croft: Traditional Work and Customary Identity in Modern Times," in S. Wallman, ed., *The Social Anthropology of Work* (London 1979), 249.

I worked for about seven and a half years [as a miner] with Alcan... When they pulled out and went and the cheques stopped coming in and the bonuses stopped, that was when you really felt it. The good times were gone then. That was in '76.

It started going downhill for me then. I started off with a job in the Burin fish plant. In '77 and '78, I got enough stamps for pogeys but *the fish plant was no part of our life*. All the miners hated it. We cursed the fish plant...⁵⁹

Such findings clearly have implications for the development of employment policy. If the province is to avoid the significant economic, social and personal costs associated with chronic worklessness, it must create employment opportunities consonant with the needs of its current workers as well as with any vision of its long-term economic future.⁶⁰ In particular, alternatives to the fishery and to other traditional resource-based occupations must be truly viable substitutes in the sense of having the capacity to support the sorts of labour values, satisfactions and behaviours seen as important to the province and its workers. Without substitutability in this sense, it is unlikely that employments generated to supplant traditional industries will ever give rise to the worker participation levels, commitment and initiative recognized as essential to the process of economic development in Newfoundland. More, and perhaps more critically, unless new employments are designed to sustain workers in ways which workers themselves deem important, the province stands to pay heavy costs in terms of human development in the long term.

⁵⁹*Building on Our Strengths* 107, emphasis added.

⁶⁰Economic Recovery Commission, *New Opportunities for Growth* (St. John's 1992), 61.

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References to MUNFLA holdings are provided using the archive's accession numbers, which begin with the last two digits of the year of collection. Where known, collection dates for other material are provided in square brackets.