

*Ieuan Franklin: Rambling House and The Barrelman:
Folklore and Audience Participation in Radio Broadcasting
in Ireland and Newfoundland*

In an essay called *The Storyteller*, the German cultural critic Walter Benjamin wrote that “the art of storytelling is coming to an end. Less and less frequently do we encounter people with the ability to tell a tale properly... It is as if something that seemed inalienable to us, the securest among our possessions, were taken from us: the ability to exchange experiences... Experience which is passed on from mouth to mouth is the source from which all storytellers have drawn.” (Benjamin)¹

We can perhaps begin to diagnose the reasons for this decline when we consider the effects of the industrial revolution on traditional communities. Artistic and economic production and other social functions began to take place on a scale and level of abstraction far beyond the lived experience of the individual in modern society. Social processes were fragmented, workers prevented from involvement in work processes, and home and community became primarily sites of consumption (Lippert 282). Paul Lippert has written pessimistically of the legacy of such changes:

Under these conditions, the down-to-earth concreteness of oral forms of expression are ill-suited to empowering people whose lives are no longer grounded by direct participation in a local, organic culture. And not only has the production of narrative been taken out of people’s hands and industrialized itself; like another rust-belt industry, it seems to be withering away.

Folk-song collectors and folklorists, of course, have long diagnosed the diminution of oral tradition as a result of the erosive impact of mass media and modern technology. As the folklorist, ethnomusicologist and broadcaster Alan Lomax observed in 1960, local vernacular culture is often crushed under what he termed “a system of cultural super-highways”:

¹ In an oral culture, meaning in language is highly specific and local, and categories of knowledge are based on everyday practical and particular concerns (Inglis 1990: 6). Such concrete forms of thought and expression are by no means exclusive to isolated, traditional or tribal communities, however, and can be said to characterise interpersonal *gemeinschaft* cultures that keep their knowledge “close to the human lifeworld” (Ong 1988: 42; Lippert 2000: 282). Members of modern and otherwise highly literate societies can retain such oral cultural values; this is what Ong refers to as “secondary orality”; an orality consequent upon and dependent on print and written communication (Ong 1988).

Now we of the jets, the wireless, and the atom-blast are on the verge of sweeping completely off the globe what unspoilt folklore is left. It is only a few sentimental folklorists like myself who seem to be disturbed by this prospect today. But tomorrow, when it will be too late, when the whole world is bored with automated mass-distributed video music, our descendants will despise us for having thrown away the best of our culture.

This heartfelt and prophetic admonition is just as salutary now as when it was first published. Due to the rhetorical nature of such criticism, however, there is an attendant danger in assigning folklore or folk song a status as the very antithesis of modernity. This tends to be a spurious argument, as establishing an opposition between folklore and modernity depends upon ascribing stipulatively to folklore those features of social life that are perceived to be lacking from modernity (Cohen 11). This perspective also assumes that people are somehow passive in relation to (popular) culture: they receive it and transmit it, but do not create it (unlike folklore) (Cohen 37).

Secondly, we can recognise that folklorists have often tended to oversimplify associations of folklore with conservatism, and popular culture with dynamism (Laba and Narváez 1). As Peter Narváez has observed, folklore is “a dynamic component of culture which functions adaptively in situations of rapid cultural change”, and the study of it “encompasses a vast array of old *and* modern expressive behaviours, texts and contexts” (Narváez 1986, 125). Narváez has deconstructed the folkloristic perspective that ascribes the mass media the role of “destroyer of folklore”:

The destroyers argument is a deterministic value judgement whose tenets are: folklore is basically good; when popular culture, an inferior expressive form, and the technological media of its transmission are introduced into given cultural scenes, they either supplant or unfairly compete with folklore. It follows implicitly from such an argument that the responsibility of the folklorist is to save, nurture, and maintain folklore before it is entirely destroyed by pernicious forces.

A lengthy debate has taken place between those folklorists like MacEdward Leach who were antagonistic to popular culture because they supported the “destroyers argument”, and those who were alert to the commonalities between folklore and popular culture. Wherever folklore was taught in the 1960s there was a certain tension between these perspectives because folklorists were “still very much wedded to notions of authenticity.” (Narváez 1986) For example, many

folklorists argued that the mass media create new forms of folklore that are more homogenous and widely dispersed than more “authentic” traditions (see Howard 200). Writing in 1968, German scholar Hermann Bausinger argued that industrialisation has not meant “the end of folk culture” but rather its “mutation and modification”, a point of view shared by folklorist Linda Dégh, who, in an influential essay in 1971, called on her colleagues to “expand their field of exploration beyond the “folk” level to identify their material as it blends into mass culture” (quoted in Schechter). More recently, Dégh suggested that media “emancipate” folklore in order that it might “blossom...empowered with more authority and prestige, than ever before” (Dégh 1-2).

Historically there has been widespread agreement on the idea of a valid correspondence between producers and receptors of folklore; “since folklore came out of the community, scholars could use it to recover the common voice of those excluded from history.” (Levine 1370). Yet consensus does not cohere in an equivalent fashion around popular culture:

Popular culture is seen as the antithesis of folk culture: not as emanating from within the community but created—often artificially by people with pecuniary or ideological motives—for the community, or rather for the masses who no longer had an organic community capable of producing culture. (Levine)

Newfoundland folklorists Peter Narváez and Philip Hiscock, and the late American historian Lawrence W. Levine (Laba and Narváez; Levine; Hiscock 1994) have studied the ways in which popular cultural forms (typically communicated in mass societal contexts) can span a continuum in order to function in ways similar to folk or vernacular culture (typically communicated in small group encounters) and vice-versa (Laba and Narváez 1-7). Consequently, folklore and popular culture can be used to recover “the voices of the historically inarticulate”; to reconstruct attitudes, values and reactions and to discover what people do with texts, what sort of discourse texts induce, and how people use texts to form identities and communities (Feldman).

I will attempt to further validate such an approach in the rest of this essay, through a discussion of two radio programmes that developed intimate and participatory relationships with audiences in different islands and different eras, through the broadcasting of folklore and stories. To prepare the ground for this discussion we can turn first to the Irish author, dramatist and folklorist Bryan MacMahon (1909-1998), and a talk he delivered in 1976 to a conference at Memorial University, in St. John’s, Newfoundland, devoted to the connections between Ireland and Newfoundland in literature and folklore. In it he spoke of the Irish

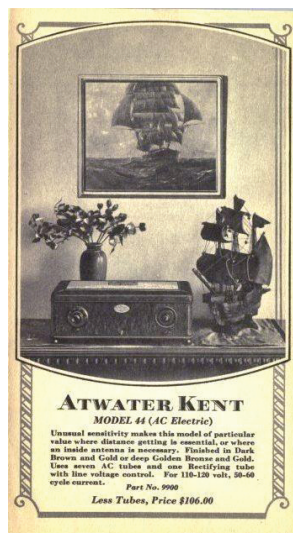
rambling house or *céilí house*, usually the home of a small farmer where the locals would gather on a winter's night to share "superstitions, songs, genealogies, riddles, stories of the Danes... odd bits of local lore" (MacMahon 97). The rambling houses served an important function in creating a sense of belonging, and were responsible for preserving much traditional lore.² MacMahon went on to recollect the impact that the introduction of the mass medium of radio had on (and in) this important social space:

Traditional storytelling died in the rambling house on the night the radio, an old Atwater Kent with a Gothic visage, was brought into the kitchen. Watching the faces of the men as they responded to this new medium I realised that in our midst was a new power with resources we could only guess at. More intimate than the cinema, it challenged tradition on its own fireside stage.

In Newfoundland, during the early years of radio, the gathering of people in outport kitchens around the radio receiver represented an amelioration or restructuring of habitual visiting customs.

Electricity was late to arrive in most outports, and group listening made sound economic sense, because it helped to preserve battery power required for early radio equipment (Narváez 1986). Despite this communal basis of listening, radio was perceived in the following account as being destructive of the local basis of traditional culture in Newfoundland:

Even the customs and beliefs of the people have disappeared with the advent of closer contact with the outside world. This closer contact resulted first of all from the radio, which first came into this area [of Western Placentia Bay] at about 1940 approximately. The first radio in the community was the centre of attraction for everybody. My father, who lived in Taylor's Bay at the time, was the first person in the settlement to have a radio, and told me that every night his house used to fill with men who came to listen to the radio and the news from the



² The same visiting customs still occur during winter in Newfoundland's outports, as does in some localities the custom of "mumming", both of which speak respectively of the Irish and West Country English origins of many Newfoundland settlers (see Pocius 1988).

outside world. So where the men used to gather to sing songs and tell yarns, they now gathered to listen to the news from the world outside of theirs: a world which they knew little about, and which was gradually to change completely their way of life. (quoted in Hiscock 1984, 20)

This contemporary account is in essence a retrospective evaluation that, with their growth and development, we have become increasingly dependent upon communications media for the support and education that traditional customs (i.e. storytelling and recitation) and institutions (i.e. the family, the school, the church) previously provided (see Gumpert 12). With the diminution of a shared inherited culture, communication had to accomplish the “tasks of social creation and integration that were elsewhere the more automatic by-products of tradition” (Carey 87). Hindsight should not blind us, however, to interplay and continuity between old and new forms of social organisation.

We should remember, for example, that the rambling house in the Gaeltacht of Ireland, and most likely the kitchens of Newfoundland outports, had also been places “where the affairs of the day were debated, where entertainment mingled with education” (Kelly, quoted in O’Donoghue and McMahon). Radio may well have encouraged such activity to continue, rather than simply promoting passivity. Elements of Newfoundland vernacular culture, such as indigenous ballads, long anticipated the expressive and documentary roles normally associated with print or electronic media by narrating, documenting and commenting upon the topical events of the day.

Upon consideration of the impact of the mass medium, Bryan MacMahon was convinced that “the seanchaí could be born again and could also come to terms with the media under a new form.” (MacMahon 101) MacMahon’s friend Eamon

Kelly (1914-2001, see picture), an actor and member of the Radio Éireann Players (REP), came to be recognised, through his many performances on the stage, on radio, and on television, as Ireland’s best-known and – loved storyteller; “a reborn seanchaí or traditional storyteller”



Eamon Kelly, television performance (1987)³

³ Screenshot, from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BzP4FM3WqwY>

Kelly's stories were derived predominantly from the living oral traditions of his native Kerry (he was born and grew up in Glenflesk) (Hayes), yet he approached storytelling through the public medium of radio as he would a play on the public platform of a stage; his stories were "carefully scripted, and every phrase or nuance rehearsed in advance of the performance, rather than re-created on an extempore basis in each telling, as is more usual among traditional storytellers" (Dhuibhne 5). Evidence can be found for his status as a kind of 'media seanchaí' in the Manuscripts Department in the National Library of Ireland, where Eamon Kelly's papers have been deposited. Kelly's original hand-written scripts, with their numerous corrections, amendments and additions, are carefully filed with the typed and photocopied copies used for the broadcasts. In 1961 Eamon Kelly hosted for the first time the epoch-making *Rambling House* programme for Radio Éireann, in which he told stories and singers Teresa Clifford and Seán Ó Síocháin and actor Eamon Keane recited poems and sang ballads (O'Donoghue and McMahon). The programme began with the following invitation:

The rick is thatched, the fields are bare,
 Long nights are here again.
 The year was fine, but now 'tis time,
 To hear the ballad men.
 Boul in, boul in and take a chair,
 Admission here is free,
 You're welcome to the Rambling House,
 To meet the Seanchaí... (O'Donoghue and McMahon)

The very first story broadcast in *Rambling House*, entitled "The Wig and the Wag", was about a woman with magical powers who is robbed by a servant girl she has just employed, who absconds with the ill-gotten gains. When she finds the girl, with the help of several animals, she turns her into a milestone on the road. The story begins with the following formula:

It wasn't in your time and it wasn't in my time, *or* in my father's time,
 'twas away back in old Bett's time, before the animals lost their power of
 speech, and 'tis said to have happened in the County Clare.⁴

Like many of Kelly's stories, this one featured several vernacular expressions for ordinary and extraordinary things, which are examples of Hiberno-English. For example, in "The Wig and the Wag", the servant girl is described as having a great big "mothal of hair" (resembling a wig), and the woman with magical powers

⁴ "The Wig and the Wag", Recorded 1st October 1961, Eamon Kelly Papers, National Library of Ireland Collection (No. 72, MS 36, 940, Li).

possesses a walking cane, otherwise known as a “baitín draíochta” (a “rod of enchantment”). The woman’s daily chore was described as follows:

She’d go twice every day with the cliabh to the cróitin to gather up the eggs and put ‘em in the big ciseán by the dresser—a layer of eggs and a slake of hay and the ciseán’d be full by Saturday.⁵

Many stories broadcast on *Rambling House* were specimens of classic folkloric tales, and can be classified according to the standard Aarne-Thompson index.⁶ For instance, there is a tale in which a woman, in preparing tea for the first time, serves a plate of boiled tea-leaves to the parish priest (AT 1339C: Woman unacquainted with tea), and a tale in which a man discovers that his discontented wife has been holding secret parties by hiding in a sack (AT 1419: The Returning Husband Hoodwinked).

Of special interest within the Eamon Kelly Papers at the National Library of Ireland are letters containing folktales and legends sent to Kelly by *Rambling House* listeners. Not only do these letters indicate the popularity the radio programme and the high level of audience interaction with the media in Ireland, they also “provide examples of stories with local provenance and provide insight into the state of oral narrative tradition in Ireland in the 1960s and subsequently.” (Dhuibhne).

This collection of letters is equivalent in content, if not in size,⁷ to the prodigious archive of correspondence sent from ordinary Newfoundlanders to Joseph Smallwood and Michael F. Harrington, presenters of *The Barrelman* radio programme between 1937 and 1955. We will later investigate the way in which the *Barrelman* collection provides a reflection of the oral narrative tradition prevalent in Newfoundland at that time, as well as discussing how the programme itself, which incorporated audience interaction as its central component, may have impacted upon this tradition.

Responses to *Rambling House* took the form of Christmas cards, personal expressions of thanks (one, for example, in the form of a poem), and offerings of stories to be broadcast. These responses are similar to many of those which can be found in the *Barrelman* collection in terms of broadly comparable types of folklore,

⁵ “The Wig and the Way”, *ibid.*

⁶ I will use the abbreviation A.T. for Antti Arne and Stith Thompson, *The Types of the Folktale*, Helsinki 1928, along with the classification number from this index. I am indebted to the National Library of Ireland for this cross-referencing (Dhuibhne 2003).

⁷ There are only 17 letters from *Rambling House* listeners in the Eamon Kelly Collection at the National Library of Ireland, whereas *The Barrelman* collection, which is held in the Archives and Manuscripts Division of Memorial University’s Queen Elizabeth II library, consists of 34 archival boxes, 22 of which contain scripts (or 6.34 metres of textual material in total). This discrepancy may be attributed to a number of factors, including the differing lengths of the broadcast runs; the near-complete archival preservation of the scripts and correspondence of *The Barrelman*; the fact that Kelly did not (to my knowledge) actively and consistently request contributions from his listeners as an organising principle of programme preparation; and the fact that Smallwood explicitly made attempts to allay any insecurities listeners may have had regarding their writing deficiencies (Narváez 1986: 56). Further comparative research is needed to confirm the relative importance of these factors.

and the letters reveal some similarities in terms of attitudes held by the letter writers. For example, the desire for anonymity on the part of the letter-writer, characteristic of a great many letters to *The Barrelman*, can be observed in several letters to Eamon Kelly (“I have been asked by an old listener who takes a great interest in the stories you tell in the *Rambling House* to send you a story...Please mention no names”, “I must remain unknown”).

This small collection of *Rambling House* correspondence contains several interesting stories and responses from listeners. One story is about some “tinkers” who rent a room in a London hotel with the help of the legendary Irish political leader Daniel O’Connell. Another is about a trick played on the police by a household harbouring an escaped prisoner from Clonmel jail. The police ask several people in a community if they have seen the man, to no avail. When they ask the local blacksmith if he has seen a stranger, he replies in the affirmative:

[...] “He arrived at my house last night I never saw him before he is there yet and ye can come down and see him if ye like...” The Sergeant went in and they were showed the cradle in the corner. The stranger was a baby that was born the night before.⁸

Another of the stories concerned another slyly humorous deception, which occurs after the death of an old age pensioner:

An old man living near Killarney many years ago had an only daughter. When he got the old age pension he gave up his place to the daughter who married a very truthful honest man. In them days if it was known that an old age pensioner died before Friday they got no pension for that week. Well it happened that the old man got sick and was very bad for some weeks. So all the neighbours knew about his illness. However it happened that he died on Thursday evening. But to get the pension, the young couple kept it to themselves until the pension was drawn on Friday morning. So the young man started off early on Friday for the Post Office. Not far from his home he happened to meet one of his neighbours who naturally asked about the old man. The young man then answered and told the neighbour the truth but at the same time he left him as dull as if he had never asked and this was the answer he made...*Last night was the quietest night he spent yet...*⁹

⁸ Enclosed in letter from James Ridge, Curraghmore, Portumna, Co. Galway, 31 January 1962. Eamon Kelly Papers, National Library of Ireland Collection (No. 72, MS 36, 959, IV.iii, No. 19).

⁹ Name of author not included. Undated. Eamon Kelly Papers, National Library of Ireland Collection (No. 72, MS 36, 959, IV.iii, No. 14).

Several of the letters contain, in language that betrays a definite “residual orality” (Ong), accounts of either the nature of the listening context in which the programmes were received, or the effect of the broadcasts on the listener during his everyday life:

I take a great pleasure in making these stories it’s a wonderful time. I was out in the haggard a few days ago and I was making up this one and talking out laughing. And I was really enjoying it and from the kitchen window is a full view, so the Mrs was looking out and saw the carry on. She called me to the dinner but I did not hear her so she called again in the high DOH and brought me to earth at once. I went in as usual humming a tune and she was very lonesome looking inside she said what’s coming over you or you loo-sing your head you are talking out there with half an hour [sic]. I had my eye on you you should see a doctor or was it the fairies you were talking to, you have the heart turned on me I declare. So I answered quite cool I am glad you have your eye on me all the time it remind me of our young days when you would be throwing the glad eye across the dance floor at me, and I have my perfect senses all time and you heart will be set right again when I tell you I was only making up a story for Kelly.¹⁰

Such letters represent rich resources for studies of audience reception, as they provide evidence of listening contexts, audience participation, and the relationship between the listener and the radio personality. Joseph Smallwood, the initiator and first presenter of *The Barrelman* programme developed a similarly intimate and familiar rapport with his Newfoundland audience, predominantly through the active soliciting of audience contributions.¹¹

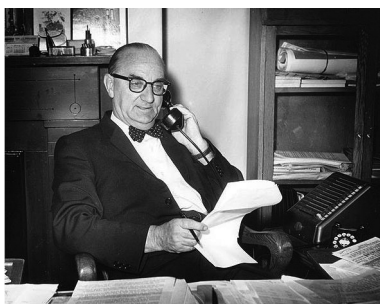
Unlike *Rambling House*, *The Barrelman* was a one-man show—Joseph Smallwood (and later Michael Harrington) researched, compiled, scripted and announced every episode himself. The programme was dedicated to (in the words of Smallwood) “making Newfoundland better known to Newfoundlanders”, through the presentation of personal stories, riddles, tall tales, geographic and economic

10 Letter from P.M. Brosnan, Knockacorran, Scartaglen, 20th August, 1960. Eamon Kelly Papers, National Library of Ireland Collection (No. 72, MS 36, 959, IV.iii, No. 22).

11 The maintenance of this relationship, and Smallwood’s status as a “trusted authority” in the minds of Newfoundland radio listeners, is seen to have been instrumental (Paine 1985; Narváez 1986; Narváez 2007) to Smallwood’s central role in bringing about Confederation with Canada, and to his becoming elected the first Premier of Newfoundland in 1949, a position he occupied until 1972. This is essentially because elements of his *Barrelman* broadcast persona - along with rhetorical and technical (voice) skills learnt as a broadcaster - were invoked and utilised by Smallwood during the Confederation debates, which were broadcast across Newfoundland on VONF (the very station which had broadcast his *Barrelman* programmes) between 1946 and 1948. During these broadcast debates, Smallwood cultivated the impression and presentation of himself (Goffman 1969) as a sort of “tribune of the working class” by consistently making reference to the fact that he was speaking to listeners across the island (and not to “the Chair”).

data, historical information and folklore.¹² It aired from 6.45 to 7.00 p.m., six nights a week, eleven months a year, from October 18th, 1937 to December 30th, 1955 (Weir) on the government-owned radio station VONF. In his autobiography, Smallwood explained the meaning of the programme's name, which had formerly been his by-line in a newspaper column for St. John's newspaper *The Daily News*, and was sustained as a signature pseudonym for his radio programme:

The Barrelman is the member of a ship's crew who climbs to the masthead and, from the protection of a barrel-shaped enclosure, peers about to sight whales or seals or ice packs, and calls the information down to the bridge below. (Smallwood 205)



(Premier) Joseph Smallwood at his desk.
Memorial University of Newfoundland,
Archives and Manuscript Division,
Collection 285 — JR Smallwood

Stories broadcast on *The Barrelman* often highlighted the courage, endurance and resourcefulness of Newfoundlanders, as

Smallwood set out to destroy what he regarded as “the horrible inferiority complex that our people had” (quoted in Narváez 1986: 53). While Smallwood would chronicle the achievements and exploits of historical personalities, he also celebrated the same qualities in ordinary (and living) working-class people. This was a conscious lack of differentiation, which Smallwood hoped would allow “his audience imbue their own lives with a kind of mythic strength, based on the congruency of their lives with those of the people he told of” (Hiscock 1994: 129). In doing so he also highlighted the “public service” nature of his programme, in its ability to change their lives through the goodwill of listeners, such as in the following extract about the sealer Edward Dinn, who was secured a berth in a seal-hunting ship and a good overcoat as a result of the programme:

I'm sure, ladies and gentleman, you'll all be glad to hear that Edward Dinn, the man who walked seventy miles to town in his rubber boots, short coat and overalls to seek a berth in the ice, has landed a berth and will be going to the icefields tomorrow morning on the steamship Imogene... (quoted in Narváez 1986: 53)

¹² Thus Smallwood broadcast a miscellany or mosaic of information, in a similar manner to newspapers, journals or magazines.

The Barrelman also broadcast educational information which furthered the validation of Newfoundland culture, by “instilling a sense of regional pride in heritage.” (Narváez 1986, *ibid.*) Compensating for this tension inherent in live broadcasting, and the antiquarian character of his historical accounts, Smallwood formulated his scripts in informal language. In the following extract, for example, he explains the historical origin of a popular colloquialism:

I suppose that most of my listeners especially in the outports have often heard the old Newfoundland saying about “owning half the harbour”. This is one of the very oldest sayings in the country, but I doubt if many people know how it originated in the first place. The saying itself is used something like this: If a man in a settlement is inclined to be a bit proud or stuck-up, or people think he is, you’re likely to hear somebody say: “He’s so proud that you’d think he owned half the harbour”. Over 300 years ago John Guy, the first official coloniser of Newfoundland, who founded his colony at Cupids and also at Bristol’s Hope, received from the King a Royal Charter granting him all the land between Bonavista and Cape St. Mary’s. John Guy wanted to get this territory settled, and one of his inducements to gentlemen adventurers from England was his offer to sell to either of them, for the sum of 100 pounds sterling, one half of any harbour he desired...¹³

This extract hints at the way in which Smallwood highlighted the linguistic separateness and preservation of what has become known as Newfoundland Vernacular English (as Kelly had done with Hiberno-English), of which there was already a strong local sense at the time of broadcast. It also illustrates the somewhat delicate balance Smallwood struck, in broadcasting a mixture of educational and entertaining content—in the above example portraying the ancestry of contemporary Newfoundlanders as patrician *and* picaresque. After accounts such as the one above, Smallwood would name families descended from these original settlers, establishing and reinforcing the continuity between past settlement and present socialisation. Whenever possible, he would connect people to their genealogy or extended family, often asking for contemporary descendents of people who feature in his tales to get in contact with him.

In his solicitation of listener contributions, the Barrelman somewhat paradoxically assumed the dual role of private confidante and public promoter of local lore. As Philip Hiscock has noted in his extensive study of *The Barrelman*, by

¹³ Centre for Newfoundland Studies (henceforth CNS) Barrelman Papers, 1.01.02, December 17th 1937.

sending information about Newfoundland, or in particular their own locality to the Barrelman, “contributors were acting the same way they might in telling a cousin or a niece a family story.” (Hiscock 1994: 119) In publicly imparting anecdotes and tales, and publicising historical accounts from documentary sources, however, Smallwood created a kind of canon of Newfoundland history and lore, for which he eventually found a more enduring form in the *Encyclopaedia of Newfoundland and Labrador*:

It is partially by this technique, of calling attention to the mundane and unnoticed items of local language, that the Barrelman valorized, or mythologized, aspects of Newfoundland life. By using certain words and phrases of popular speech, he associated them with the usually more formal medium of radio, and with the likewise usually more formal subject of history. Placing otherwise invisible items (words, collocations of various sorts) in a prestigious medium is to make them more visible, a reification of culture. The choice of what is to be thus made visible is, further, a kind of invention of culture, an invention through compilation of self-conscious culture. (Hiscock 1994: 173)

Here we can also apply Raymond Williams’ concept of the “selective tradition”, which posited that what a culture decides is traditional is tied directly to its present-day values: “The traditional culture of a society will always tend to correspond to its *contemporary* system of interests and values, for it is not an absolute body of work but a continual selection and interpretation.” (Williams 68) Forms of expressive culture selected for broadcast should not therefore be regarded as quaintly antediluvian but as “products of the human imagination which serve to articulate (and thereby, to some degree, moderate) the communal anxieties of the day by assimilating them into deeply familiar narrative patterns.” (Schechter 66).¹⁴ Such oppositional stresses place pressure on the social groups in question, stimulating the circulation of new symbols and meanings.

For example, further research on *The Barrelman* collection could set out to assess whether oral traditions or identity symbols were modified, revived or created due to the stresses and losses of life during Second World War. Even a brief sample of several months’ worth of wartime correspondence (January and February 1943) yielded several modern folkloric motifs, in the form of jokes or “superstitions”,

14 This is a useful definition for both folklore and popular culture, which offer “a means of rendering experience intelligible and graspable through recognizable forms that are both pleasing aesthetically and relevant in a social interactional sense.” (Laba and Narváez 1986: 2) Like ritual, folklore and popular culture “domesticates the unattainable and the threatening, and reduces the increasing range and strangeness of the individual’s world to the synthesized, rehearsed and safely repeatable form of a story, documentary, a performance, a show”; “The structures of leisure exist as repositories of meaning, value and reassurance for everyday life” (Burns 1967; quoted in Laba and Narváez 1986: 2).

which provide evidence of attempts by ordinary Newfoundlanders to maintain hope for their troops, and faith in ultimate victory in difficult times. Many letters to Smallwood report of sightings of the letter “V” in nature or as mysterious phenomena, as in this letter, dated February 8th 1943, which begins:

Dear Barrelman,
No doubt you heard many stories, of people finding the form of the letter V, which of course stands for that “Victory” which we are all longing for...¹⁵

The correspondent goes on to relate a household episode about a teapot being knocked over, and the spilt tea leaves on the floor forming a letter “V”. Another letter related an episode about a fishing trip in which a man happened to dredge up from the sea an antique jug with the letter “V” on it.

Another recurring motif was a joke based on the invention of an acronym. Several people wrote in during the month of February to relate stories about soldiers from Newfoundland who were belligerently asked what the letters “NFLD” on their shoulder patches referred to. In both cases, the quick-witted soldiers instantly replied, “Never Found Lying Down.”¹⁶ Such an item was bound to find its way to the Barrelman, who seized any opportunity to bolster the confidence of Newfoundlanders.

In terms of the emotional resonance of certain items with the listeners, it would also be interesting to chart the prevalence, across the years of the programme, of tales of miraculous survivals of men lost at sea who had been “given up for dead”. Smallwood broadcast tales of this type from the outset of his career as the Barrelman, and the tales often belonged to the established folklore pattern of the “too late return of the husband”, who has been cuckolded with the remarriage of his wife.¹⁷

One example is the story of John Hawe, a fisherman from Brigus in Conception Bay who was tricked and captured by pirates during the 1700s.¹⁸ Hawe spent twenty years as a pirate, biding his time and waiting for an opportunity to escape and return home; “he was almost like a black stranger back from the grave—his own children now grown to young manhood and womanhood didn’t know him.”¹⁹

¹⁵ CNS Barrelman Papers, Coll. 028, 2.02.072, February 8th 1943.

¹⁶ See, for example, correspondence from Mrs Fred Bennett, February 10th 1943, CNS Barrelman Papers, 2.02.072. Newfoundlanders are still very fond of coining acronyms – contemporary examples are CFA (‘Come From Away’, meaning someone who has not native to Newfoundland) and NBC (Newfoundlander By Choice, meaning someone who has made a conscious choice to settle in Newfoundland).

¹⁷ This motif was especially strong in Newfoundland due to E.J. Pratt’s “Rachel: A Sea Story of Newfoundland in Verse” (see Clark 1980).

¹⁸ Brigus songwriter Shawn Lidster has written a song based on this story, John Hawe The Pirate. <http://www.shawnlidster.com/pirate/hawe.htm> (accessed 25th February 2009).

¹⁹ CNS Barrelman Papers, 1.01.02, November 13th 1937.

Note here the Barrelman's use of the term "black", which is not a racial reference but a localism, commonly used to indicate that which is ascribed an outsider status (Faris 166). Tales of misadventure at sea have always had a real poignancy in Newfoundland maritime communities often beset by loss of ships and life in "fickle seas", and the threat of war would have created further anxiety at the loss of troops. It might prove interesting to chart the frequency of such stories and the nature of listener responses to them across the wartime years of *The Barrelman*, in order to ascertain whether these tales became difficult to listen to in wartime with the posting of Newfoundland troops overseas, whether they provided comfort with their idea of miraculous survivals and reunions, or, indeed, whether such tales were so "ingrained" within traditional culture that no connection was made in this manner. As Narváez has argued:

The importance of The Barrelman scripts and correspondence for folklorists and students of Newfoundland culture is that they represent the results of a five year folklore and oral history project by a broadcaster who amassed a tremendous amount of primary documentation which deserves scholarly analysis. Furthermore, an understanding of the folkloric content of The Barrelman would enable folklorists to assess the degree to which the program's transmission of folklore in Newfoundland modified, revived or created new oral traditions.²⁰

Such research could also be undertaken into the Eamon Kelly papers, for example, to assess the extent to which Eamon Kelly's broadcast stories interwove topical concerns with the inherited traditions of his own milieu. This would create a wider understanding not just the state of oral narrative tradition at this time, but also of the importance of this particular form of radio broadcasting to its audience. Conducting oral history interviews with radio listeners during the period of broadcast would likely prove particularly fruitful in this instance, as such analysis can be found in contemporary recollections of the programme:

To understand Kelly's popular appeal is to understand the vital role radio played in Ireland during those years. The country was emerging from the depression and the shortages of war. The authorities of church and state were rigid, and emigration was seen as the only solution to chronic unemployment. The radio brought a new world of entertainment, music and drama to a deprived rural population. Eamon's stories were told in the persona of a traditional seanchaí (someone who passes on folklore,

20 Peter Narváez, "Joseph R. Smallwood, The Barrelman: The Broadcaster as Folklorist", *Canadian Folklore Canadien*, 5 (1-2), 1983, p. 76.

traditions and customs from the past), but were wickedly entertaining and subversive of authority—whether of the parish priest, bishop, judge or lord. But the subversion was gentle and witty, and the entertainment was as much in the joyful and imaginative use of language as in the content of the story. (O'Donoghue and McMahon)

The concept of the Rambling House has seen a recent revival in Irish local radio, which suggests the format continues to serve the needs of a rural population in this way. Since 1998 Joe Harrington has recorded more than a thousand contributors for a weekly “Rambling House” programme which is still running on a Limerick local radio station (O'Donoghue and McMahon). Mid West Radio (MWR) in Mayo had previously created another “Rambling House” format, in which guests “drop in the studio unannounced to discuss life, sex or whatever springs to mind.” (Curran) It goes almost without saying that such a concept is tailor-made for the vibrant community radio sector in Ireland.

Radio Éireann's *Rambling House* was a truly *local* broadcast in a more profound sense. Archival programme materials from the *Rambling House* and *Barrelman* programmes testify to performer-audience interaction, which helped to reduce the spatial and social distances between performer and audience that are typically associated with a mass medium (Laba and Narváez 1). Of course, storytelling is typically associated with a high degree of performer-audience interaction, and (a) minimal distance between performer and audience. Undoubtedly, this element of participation enabled Kelly and Smallwood to adapt their storytelling to the interests and beliefs of their audience, which is in a sense comparable to the way in which serialised novels (such as those of Charles Dickens) were influenced by reader responses. This interaction and flexibility, which has consistently been associated with oral cultures (Scott), can be contrasted with the fixity of stories that are written and read in isolation. As Buchan has observed in *The Ballad and The Folk*, the oral poet does not share the print-oriented author's belief that the words are the story. For him, the story is a conceptual entity whose essence may just as readily and accurately be conveyed by different word-groups (Buchan; Hiscock 1986).

There remains the fact, however, that the historian investigating radio broadcasts that are “dense” with residual orality (Ong) often has to rely on typographic evidence (i.e. scripts) rather than actual recordings, which may not have been preserved. This means the loss of registers of indirect meaning that may have characterised such broadcasts, which can only be imaginatively recovered from the scattered evidence that exists within notes, script drafts and amendments, listener correspondence and internal memoranda from broadcasting institutions.

Many historians who have made use of oral histories will be familiar with this predicament, as elements of voice-related expression, such as silence, intonation, voice, rhythm, volume and accent, are utterly lost in the transcript—and may even be difficult to decipher from an audio recording (Mazé 243). The importance of the oral tradition lies in the presence of the speaker, the very phenomenon that print disguises, and which can be recovered only archaeologically (Carey 102).

We are assisted in this “recovery work” by the existence of a limited number of audio recordings of *The Barrelman* and *Rambling House*, and by the fact that the *Rambling House* and *Barrelman* scripts exist in the form of palimpsests, for a story, according to Walter Benjamin, is the product of many tellings which effect “that slow piling one on top of the other of thin, transparent layers which constitutes the most appropriate picture of the way the perfect narrative is revealed through the layers of a variety of retellings” (Benjamin 93). As I noted earlier, each of Eamon Kelly’s radio scripts is usually accompanied by at least one handwritten draft version, and in some cases differences are enough to warrant correspondence with oral “retellings”. Joseph Smallwood amended his *Barrelman* scripts through the use of underlining, exclamation marks and phonetic representations of words—these diacritical elements represent both a key to the reader (visual cues for the presenter) and a record of his performance (for the historian).

The foregoing theoretical discussion and archival evidence have established that generalisations about “folklore” and “mass culture” have concealed possibilities, especially in the case of local or regional media production, for the channelling, amplifying and shaping of traditional culture through electronic media. The ability of storytellers, lay speakers and listeners to adapt to, appropriate and participate in broadcast forms and forums—albeit where limited opportunities have existed for their inclusion—is certainly under-researched in cultural and media studies. Although I have only “scratched the surface” both of this subject and of the archival evidence, hopefully I have demonstrated that such collections of scripts and correspondence represent important corpora for the study of folklore, social history, radio broadcasting, and sociolinguistics. *The Barrelman* and Eamon Kelly collections offer the possibility, for example, of an investigation into contrasts and comparisons between the mediation and circulation of folklore in radio broadcasting in Newfoundland and Ireland during different periods (the war-time period and post-war eras). Clearly there is a great deal of interdisciplinary work to be done in mapping the interstitial borderlands between folklore and popular culture in this fashion.

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