

The Newfoundland TONGUE



NELLIE P. STROWBRIDGE

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This collection is dedicated to Gertie (née Smith) Strowbridge and the late Solomon Strowbridge, two wonderful people who, through my marriage to their son, became my second parents.

I also dedicate this book to Newfoundlanders and Labradorians everywhere who have kept the tongue of our forebears alive.

For he and I the vowel violate, and oft we drop the proper aspirate.

– R. A. Parsons, *Salute to Port de Grave*, 1975

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INTRODUCTION

I have wanted to write *The Newfoundland Tongue* ever since I returned to Newfoundland after being away from its land and sea for almost 10 years.

In 1966, Premier Joey Smallwood issued a collective invitation to Newfoundlanders living outside the province to participate in a “Come Home Year.” But for people with down-east fever, any year can be the time to come. For me, “Come Home Year” was in 1978. It was the year I came home to stay.

The Newfoundlander I had married in Toronto for better or worse got worse. His sleep and daytime dreaming were laced with delirium: an ailment I correctly diagnosed as Newf-stalgia. The only permanent cure was to have him take huge gulps of the island’s sea-laced air. It being leap year, I made him a proposal: “U-haul the furniture home and I’ll tow the two offspring.”

With a little revision our plan was put in motion.

A “For Sale” sign soon appeared in front of our townhouse and a truck was bought to transfer all our worldly goods. Immediately my other half began his convalescence.

To show that we had nothing against Ontario, we left all our money there. The house was sold for less than we paid for it three years before. We threw in two Chinese elm trees, three roses bushes, two noisy marijuana-scented neighbours . . . and it wasn’t even Christmas

A neighbour who had heard about Newfoundlanders’ penchant for peculiar names asked if it wasn’t dangerous living in a province with place names such as Pick Eyes and Blow Me Down.

“You don’t know half,” I assured him. “How would you like to live in Calves Nose, Snakes Bight, Dildo, or Joe Batt’s Arm? We’ve

even got a place called Paradise. You can go there and you don't have to die first."

The 365 bones in his herringbone suit practically went into convulsions.

One person who may have been happy to see us leave Ontario was the mailman. What horror he was put through on my account! One day I looked through the kitchen window to see him staggering up the walk holding a large khaki bag away from him as if he had lost the bend in his elbow. The smell of salt fish swirled around my nostrils as he – his nose flared in disdain – laid the bag at my feet and walked away. I marvelled that some postal worker had not destroyed this parcel of such a suspicious nature. The postmark must have explained that there was something fishy about its contents, indicating that the best way to handle this package was to have it delivered immediately. In the process of getting to me, the fish had developed a rosy colour, compliments of the spilled partridgeberries that were sent with it in a milk carton tied with green twine. The pink cod, when cooked, was as appetizing as the usual ivory-coloured variety. "Goody" parcels from home also contained peanut butter kisses and peppermint knobs. This kind of bait is still being used to lure a lot of Newfoundland's children to leave the 401 traffic jam and other far-from-Newfoundland highway jams for Mother's home-cooked berry jam.

The moment my feet landed on the Rock, I slipped into my Newfoundland skin and my comfortable zone. Words and expressions I had not noticed before I left home now leaped out at me, and I collected them like precious coins. Then the *Dictionary of Newfoundland English* was published and I bought it, delighted to find so many familiar words and expressions.

While I was growing up, there were things I couldn't see for looking, in a place where what is often lived is not noted. Living away gave my ear and eye the distance needed to give me a clearer perspective of the people and the place I "belong to" – this very special place.

All in all, I grew up with the influence of other people's accents, from Lears Cove to Pick Eyes (Picco's) to Blow Me Down to Ship Cove

INTRODUCTION

and Bareneed, with a little bit of St. John's lingo and foreign tongues thrown in for good measure.

Across the sea, a short distance from Hibbs Cove, I spent happy summer days with Aunt Lizzie and Uncle John in Bishop's Cove, walking through their garden of lilacs and berry bushes, on a bank that rose high above the ocean. People in Bishop's Cove and neighbouring Island Cove asked: "Ware ye frum?" They used *ye*; we used *youse*.

When my father's boat putt-putted across the bay from Hibbs Cove to bring me home from Bishop's Cove, I climbed down the bank and plopped onto the boat's deck. Words with a twist in sounds were ready to pop off my tongue. I came back to Pond Road trying to use *ye*, instead of *youse*, *yez*, and *yiz*. The cove children laughed to kill themselves.

When I was in Cobh, Ireland, awhile ago, I started up a long hill on a beautiful March morning to make the two-kilometre walk to the Old Church Cemetery and to the graves of the victims of the torpedoed *Lusitania*. Soon a man with a dog caught up with me. We talked as we went along. Suddenly he stopped and looked at me, puzzled. "Ware you frum? Yer accent is all mixed up; 'tis not American nor Irish. I don't know wha-er 'tis. I carna tell head na tail ef et."

That's the way it is now with many of us. Though the sounds of our Ireland, England, and Channel Islands ancestors are sometimes heavy on our tongues, we are no longer insulated from outside influences. We move around so much that our forebears' way of speaking has been turned over and mingled, and is evolving so much that there may come a time when we will have no distinct dialect. We will speak the Canadian way.

Still, I believe we will always season our words with an odd turn of phrase. When we open our mouths, words dressed in colourful and delightful expressions will often pop out.

The *Dictionary of Newfoundland English* became a precious testament to our more than 360 dialects. It awakened words and expressions I had long forgotten. Some I knew with variations in meaning. I have included words here that I hope will be added to future editions of our Newfoundland dictionary.

NELLIE P. STROWBRIDGE

Though some words and expressions are no longer spoken, they have lived on our tongues; we may hold them and the people who spoke them in memory.

Come to “the tell” as the tongue of a Newfoundlander stirs your memories to the way it was when our forebears expressed themselves in many unique ways in work and words.

IN A MANNER OF SPEAKING

OUR SPEECH

When journalist Lorilee Harris, in an RTE Radio interview in Ireland asked: “Nellie, do you have bugs in Newfoundland?”

I answered promptly, “Yes, we have lots of bugs.”

“No, I mean *bugs*.”

“Yes, we have carpenters, emmets We have lots of bugs.”

“No, like marshes.”

“Oh. You mean *bogs*.”

Later, in Westport, a woman from Belfast chatted away: “Yer come aleune, did yer, den? I’d be afred ter go ter Canada on me own.”

No matter where we travel we are aware that Newfoundlanders are not alone in having wild and wonderfully intriguing accents.

Newfoundlanders returning from Upper Canada pronouncing their *th*’s and enunciating each word have been accused of “talking large,” or of using “dandified speech.” Someone returning from “The States” with an acquired New England (Boston) accent is said to have a straw in her nose or a crip in her tongue.

People in one cove know where someone in an adjacent cove “belongs” by his or her accent. One lot (all in good fun) is not averse to making fun of people in adjoining communities, or of the “Sin” John’s crowd, some of whom believe they have no accent, but that baywoppers talk “funny.”

“You talk funny” means: “You don’t speak the way I think you should speak.”

The many ways people express themselves in a common language are as diverse as the way we look. From one bay to another, from one

inport (St. John's) to an outport (Port de Grave), accents vary. There are always people who like to pick up on other people. When I taught school in Port Anson, I got picked up on my exchange of "er" and "a." I pronounced Loretta as Loretter, Daphne as Dapherne, and letter as letta.

Enquire Within Upon Everything, a Victorian almanac by Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, had choice words for the practice of dropping one's H's. It had this to say: "H or no H? That is the question. – Few things point so directly to the want of *cultivation* as the misuse of the letter H. . . . We hesitate to assert that this common defect in speaking indicates the absence of *education* – for to our surprise we have heard even educated people frequently commit this common and vulgar error."

Newfoundlanders transpose H's unconsciously. An Irishman in Newfoundland has always known how to leave his H abed while taking 'is 'ead off his piller. Many of us have dropped an H in house and picked it up in hegg. People like John Efford and Bob Mercer have often been maligned for speaking the dialect of their place. When John Efford, offspring of the "mash" in Port de Grave, went to Ottawa, he was in "Ottawar."

A Newfoundlander may drop her R in one word and pick it up in another. Some people, besides Newfoundlanders, use R in fast and lost, but I've never heard anyone tell them to drop their R.

My daughter wasn't happy when someone made fun of her for pronouncing Tuesday as Chewsdays. Her grandfather Kennedy always pronounced necklace as neckless, tomato as tomattoe, produce as projuce, and kelp as kelep.

I was at an Arts and Letters Awards reception at The Arts and Culture Centre one year and people standing around were discussing "Old Folk Charms."

I mentioned that my grandparents could put away werts.

"Werts?" one townie said, looking at me hard. "What's a wert?"

I could have replied, "Those little thingies – whachamecallems – that sprout on the human fingers, face, and even on some people's nethermost parts, sometimes without cause or rhyme. Other times they develop on the hands when a person is in the habit of fondling jellyfish."

IN A MANNER OF SPEAKING

But I didn't. I looked at her, knowing she knew what I meant. I waited for her to out with it.

"Oh, you mean wart."

"Yes, spelled w-a-r-t, and – if spelling was everything – we could rhyme it with art."

Many old-timers pronounced "war" with one lip moving far away from the other, instead of having their lips pursed like a kisser. Wharf was pronounced the way it was spelled, not with the *o* sound.

In the past, many English/Irish words took on their own life because people wrote them the way they spoke them, the best way they knew how.

An elderly lady was telling me how hard life was when she was a girl. She played cobby house with bits of broken dishes her mother had discarded. "We had a name for it," she said. "We called it panshard."

"How do you spell it?" I asked.

"Oh I can spell it. I used to be a wonderful speller in my day. It's spelt just like it sounds, my dear: p-a-n-s-h-a-r-t-e."

She was referring to potsherd.

Grampa Walcott, a character in Ted Russell's *The Chronicles of Uncle Mose*, in speaking of low-lying wetland, which was called "by rights" a marsh, was indignant: "And what," said Grampa, "did you call it before they had dictionaries? Do you think," said Grampa, "that generations of people lived for thousands of years alongside a mish, and even tumbling into the mish and picking berries off the mish, and then had to wait until two or three hundred years for some fellow to write a dictionary to tell 'em what to call it?"

Some Newfoundlanders pronounce the letter *a* as *o*, and vice versa, and *rd* is often substituted for *th*, as in farder for father. Many Newfoundlanders, in keeping with the tradition of our Irish forebears, have long preferred to let *th* sleep through a lot of words.

Consonants are sometimes changed to add a syllable, usually a vowel: Askes, ghostes, priestes, noticeed, xerays.

All of us use tag endings "You know what I mean?": to keep the person we are speaking to engaged.

Not only do Newfoundlanders like to create new words, we like to compress old ones. In the synaloepha (melting together) the eagle becomes th'eagle or d'eagle. We all understand the quick spurt of a question, "Wasgoimon?" Slowed down a bit, it becomes: "Whas goin' on?" This sentence is shorter, quicker, and more to the point than "What is going on?" The answer is just as quick: "nuttin', b'y."

Newfoundlanders are known to talk fast. An example: Coley's Point, slowed down, becomes Cold East Point. Pot, hook, and hanger become pod auger, and pick and empty her becomes pickanemper.

Conversations are often short in the fishing boats. Fishermen know not to waste their consonants and vowels. They finish their sentences before they are caught up in the wind. If half a sentence can convey a meaning, that will do.

"E'er one (Either one)?"

"Nar one (Neither one)."

This is supposedly the shortest conversation between two Newfoundland fishermen.

With the motion of the skiff slapping against the waves, the roar of the engine, and wind swirling around their heads and grabbing at their ears, fishermen like Uncle Jim and Clayton, my father, didn't need words. Uncle Jim would catch my father's eye and tilt his head in the direction of home. A nod of my father's head and they were on their way. There were times when there was just a grunt and a nod between them.

Sometimes we wax a little long in our sentences, "Why don't you come and visit me?" rather than, "Why don't you visit me?"

The Newfoundlander subtracts and adds at will: *s* is often added to like(s), want(s), and *s* is added to do (dos).

"I'd' ar' no" is a common answer in Ireland and Newfoundland. T'other and ag'in come from the English.

Newfoundlanders have be's in their sentences (and not in their bonnets) because our Irish counterparts have them. It's not only a Newfoundlander who is heard to say, "I bes at me work the livelong day."

The word "shall" was never used in common talk when I was growing up. It was only used in hymns and Bible reading in church.

IN A MANNER OF SPEAKING

Many older expressions have been lost; some are retained. I heard my daughter exclaim to her young son: "That's the heights of foolishness!" I knew then that she had been taught well. A few grains of a metaphorical past had stuck.

COMMONLY USED EXPRESSIONS AND EXPLANATIONS

- You have a head, but so does a pin. ~ There's more of a prick than a brain in you.
- To take to one's scrappers. ~ To take to one's heels.
- Every way's (way is) likely. ~ Anything can happen.
- A tongue like a gurried guernsey. ~ A dirty tongue.
- A fear nor care rascal. ~ Someone who cares for nothing and fears nothing.
- Reel in your line for the last time. ~ To die.
- He's right staggy. ~ He's unsteady.
- To die in one's health. ~ To die unexpectedly.
- Take a gander. ~ Take a look.
- He won't climb Spreadeagle Peak tomorrow (the highest point of land on the Avalon Peninsula). ~ He's not very energetic.
- Torn up in one's mind. ~ Confused.
- Not that struck on something. ~ Not caring about it.
- To get a kick out of someone. ~ To enjoy and laugh at something he did or said.
- Right from the start. ~ At the beginning.
- To work out. ~ To obtain a product by working off its costs.
- To lite. ~ To settle in a place.
- He has the heaves and skutters. ~ He is vomiting at one end and squirting at the other end.



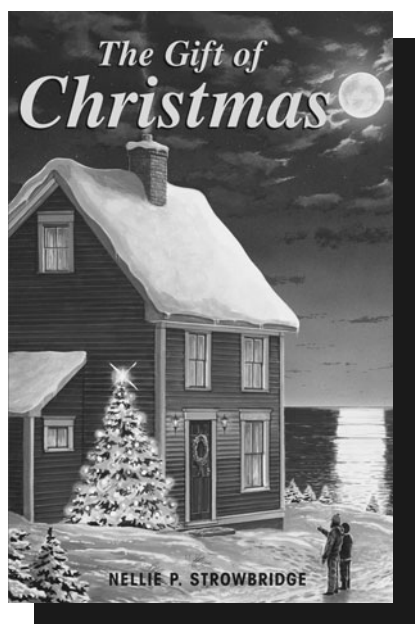
Clarissa, eleven, has been orphaned by a disease that has kept her far from home for as long as she can remember. Despite the many inmates in Dr. Grenfell's Children's Home on Newfoundland's northern tip, she lives a lonely life. She longs to be able to do something as simple as pushing her feet into boots in a blink and skipping down the road holding hands with Cora, her best friend.

Will Clarissa get to go home? If so, what will she discover about her past that will help her understand why she spent her childhood at the orphanage? There are times when she is not sure if she wants to go home. What if she doesn't like anyone there? Worse—what if no one likes her?

The story begins in 1924 at St. Anthony, with flashbacks to earlier times. One bright memory is folded in a blue handkerchief, which is given to her by a kind nurse and carried to the end like a security blanket.

Shortlisted for the 2006 Newfoundland and Labrador Historic Sites Heritage and History Award.

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The Gift of Christmas is an unforgettable volume of Christmas stories and poetry set in modern-day Newfoundland. While drawing on her own memories of growing up in outport Newfoundland, Nellie Strowbridge recaptures sights and sounds of the festive season that will fascinate and tantalize even readers from afar with nostalgic reverie. As an added treat, contained herein are her poems and musings on the true meaning of Christmas. This book is a gift of love from an author who holds dear to her heart the time-honoured values of family and home. As well, it is a gift that promises to touch the lives of all who wish to share in her fondest memories of this most magical time of year. *The Gift of Christmas* is a collection that will warm the hearts and stir the souls of young and old alike.

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