

"I Love to Tell the Story"

Women in Outport Newfoundland Methodism

by Sandra Beardsall

Depuis plus de deux cent ans, un grand nombre de femmes de la région portuaire de Terre-Neuve sont attirées par les rites émotionnels et orientés vers la conversion de la religion méthodiste. Cet article examine l'attrait de ce mouvement.

Women have found in Methodism a unique opportunity to call one another to spiritual and moral account. The faith testimonies and prayers of women have carried as much weight as those of men.

*I love to tell the story, 'twill be my theme in glory,
to tell the old, old story of Jesus and his love.*

—from a hymn by Katherine Hankey, 1866

On 7 December 1788, John Stretton, an Irish fish merchant who had settled in Harbour Grace, Newfoundland, wrote to his spiritual mentor, his "Mother in the Gospel," Mrs. Eliza Bennis in Limerick, Ireland. Bennis was a powerful figure, the Irish mainstay of John Wesley's eighteenth-century revivalist movement, "Methodism." Stretton's letter to Bennis drips with despair over the declining fortunes of Newfoundland Methodism, then at their lowest ebb since the movement's introduction to the island in 1767. Stretton couldn't know that within 80 years Methodists would form 20 per cent of the entire Newfoundland population, soaring to a 30 per cent high in the 1920s, in almost a three-way tie with the Anglicans and the Roman Catholics (Statistics Canada 1991). Rather, he paints a bleak picture of "these troublesome times, with every possible discouragement, no friend or brother to assist, and reproach pouring down on the Methodist name" (Stretton 250).

What Stretton fails to mention to Bennis is that throughout these difficult years a group of "twelve or thirteen" women in his own outport community of Harbour Grace were meeting together in "class," a Methodist weekly gathering at which members, at the prompting of a "class leader," revealed their spiritual trials and blessings. A visiting Methodist superintendent noticed both this group of women and another women's class in nearby Carbonear in 1791, but, like Stretton, viewed them as insignificant to the advancement of the Methodist cause (United Church Archives, William Black Journal, 1791).

This early example typifies the contradictions women have faced throughout the history of Newfoundland

Methodism. On one hand, they have been spiritual guides and exemplars. From its inception women have found in Methodism a unique opportunity to meet together and to call one another to spiritual and moral account. In worship services the public faith testimonies and prayers of women have carried as much weight as those of men, even if the speakers have been poor and illiterate. On the other hand, Newfoundland Methodism has been generally unwilling to challenge male-dominated hierarchies, either within the church or in a colonial economy that until the mid-twentieth century kept its merchants wealthy and its labourers desperately poor, and which now faces the demise of the island's staple livelihood, the cod fishery.

Newfoundland women have lived with that paradox for more than two centuries, claiming Methodism at least as proudly as their male counterparts despite being unable to participate as fully. And like the stubborn moss that clings to Newfoundland's ancient rocks, they have refused to let conversion-centred, revivalist practices fade away.¹

As a United Church minister from the "mainland" working in outport congregations, I became a "participant observer" (Bogdan and Taylor) in the unfolding story of Newfoundland Methodism.² Its conversion-oriented piety, unlike anything I had experienced in the United Church in Ontario, both impressed and perplexed me. The tenacity of this spirituality, and the shape it gives to lives of those who practise it, inspires awe, but it can be predictable, and heavier with emotion than with content.

I decided to try to unlock Newfoundland Methodism, or as Dorothy Smith puts it, to "constitute its textuality" (106). The dominant "text" of Methodism for Newfoundland is not its written doctrine, but the faith practices themselves, for Newfoundland Methodism is "a way, but not a truth," as one theologian puts it (Kewley 9). I thus endeavoured to uncover these worship practices in archival material and in interviews with outport Newfoundlanders. Through this research I began to comprehend the power of Newfoundland Methodism for its practitioners, its textuality a weaving of text and context.

The context

The women who met together in class in Harbour Grace in the 1780s and '90s did not have an easy life. The crunching of continents and scraping of glaciers had produced an island of spectacular but treacherous cliffs, a jagged coastline, and a thin topsoil. The attraction of the "Rock" for voracious European business interests was the cod that teemed in the surrounding North Atlantic. The small First Nations population, the Beothuks, vanished after European contact through violence and disease.

English fish merchants preferred to keep their employees close to home, and so discouraged permanent settlement in their new-found colony. From the early 1600s however, until the mid-1800s, women and men, mostly from south-west England, and from the southern ports of Ireland, arrived to establish year-round fishing stations in

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the coves of eastern and southern Newfoundland.

Men spent their days on the icy sea in their fishing boats in summer and in the forest cutting firewood in winter. Women bore a three-fold burden: all the household chores, including child care, the vegetable garden and any livestock, and all the land-based preparation of the cod, salting and drying it on timber “flakes” by the seashore. Fishing families sold all their salted cod in the fall to the fish merchant, bartering it for winter supplies of flour, sugar, lard, and dry goods. There were no town councils or public officers. Most outports had no schools until the mid-1800s, nor even rudimentary health care. Outport residents coped by developing their famed self-deprecating sense of humour, but also by resigning themselves to a difficult, even tragic existence.

The English settlers were predominantly Anglican, but the few Church of England clergy who did go to the island before the 1840s rarely ventured beyond St. John’s. Many outport residents, lacking any contact with the church, developed their own rituals for baptism, marriage, and burial. A few lay persons tried to lead regular Sunday services, using the Anglican Book of Common Prayer. Most outport communities, however, simply forgot how to worship.

The text engages the context

Given this neglect, the Methodist missionaries who arrived in the outports in the late 1700s and early 1800s found a ready welcome, for they brought outside contact and weekday schooling. But they also offered an invitation to a quest, a perilous journey through a sinful world toward a heavenly goal, a personal experience of salvation.

The key was “conversion,” a process that began with the recognition of one’s own sinfulness. The convert then

wrestled to feel the assurance of God’s love, and upon receiving it, made a joyous public declaration of redemption (Coughlan). Weeping, clapping, and “rejoicing,” by both women and men, indicated a genuine salvation experience. This 1898 description of a Newfoundland conversion describes the process well:

Conviction, so plainly discerned as the work of God on the hearts of the unregenerate, was stamped on several faces. The struggle was a hard one; but at last, after continued pleading, one dear sister fell prostrate at the cross.... As the light of life eternal fell upon her soul, she rose up joyfully, with calm peace pressed upon her countenance, and gave a happy testimony to the “old-time power” of the glorious Gospel. (*Methodist Monthly Greeting* 83)

Suddenly, faith was no longer an act of subjugation to the tragic, but an affair of the heart, a romance.³ This journey from a troubled world to a divine encounter, available to all regardless of gender or status, proved attractive to women whose lives were otherwise marked by hard labour and submission. Few of the women I interviewed had felt coerced into conversion. Some went spontaneously to the low wooden “rail” at the front of the church, beneath the pulpit, where penitents knelt to pray for salvation; others went after careful reflection. As one woman put it to me: “You enjoyed the service, and you was there in the church to worship God, and you’d think, I wants more than *this*, anyway. I wants part of *that*” (Pennell).

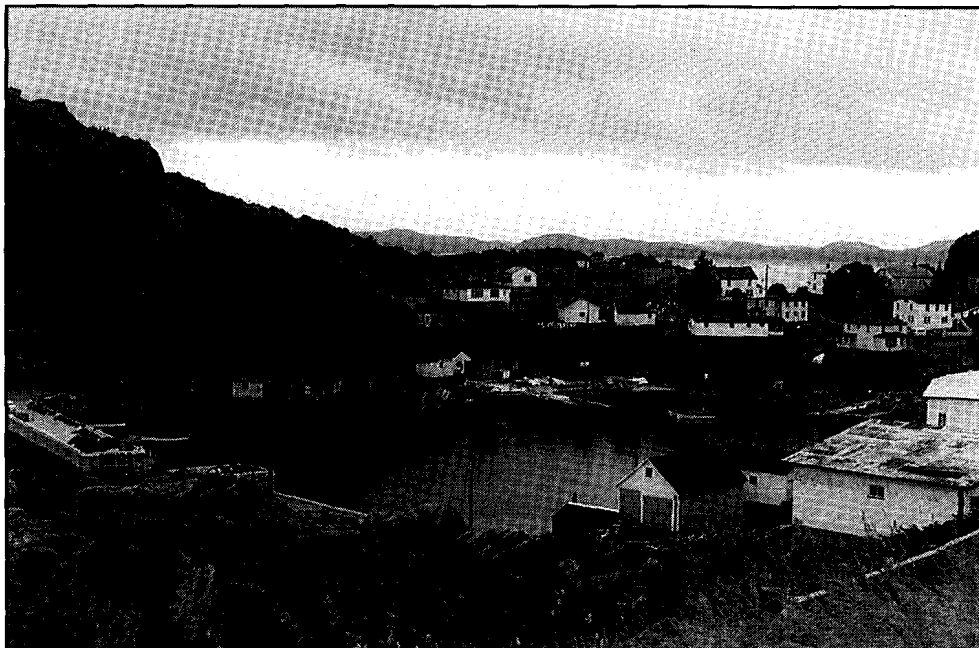
Once they had moved from “this” to “that” a whole world of activity opened before the converted. Along with three services of worship on Sunday there was the class meeting, mid-week prayer meetings, occasional “cottage meetings” in people’s homes, daily family prayer, and seasonal revival meetings, which became so emotionally charged that men and women began to jump around, flinging caps and muffs into the air. One man jumped from the church balcony in his eagerness to get to the rail (Hudson). Most importantly, however, the convert needed to make an ongoing public declaration of her redeemed state. While her actual conversion experience may have occurred in private, she knew that if she “didn’t acknowledge it publicly, it wouldn’t be any good to her” (Robbins).

Gabriel Fackre calls “the right to tell one’s own tale a weapon of the marginalized in the struggle against their cultural captors, or a preserve of identity in a world of uniformity” (347). Outport women were in some ways both: marginalized by an oppressive economic structure, and homogenized by the roles expected of them in their

tiny communities. The task of public witnessing thus held out the double promise of belonging and distinctiveness.

Testifying took place during mid-week prayer meetings and cottage meetings, at class meetings, and during the "after service," a time set apart after the Sunday evening service for hymn singing, praying, testifying, and making converts. The testimonies followed a common format. Outport Methodist testimonies were invariably positive, stressing God's goodness in saving and forgiving (Robbins). Most converts developed a "script," which they knew by heart and repeated at every service; it could be long and elaborate, or simply a hymn or Bible verse. Their recita-

work, generally benefitted women in the outports. Liquor was rarely available in most places, dances were few, and a day of rest granted a needed reprieve from hard labour. Smoking and card playing were male pursuits; abstention meant cleaner homes and freedom from noisy card parties, during which men crowded around the kitchen's only lamp, thwarting the women's night-time mending and knitting tasks (Moores). The more complicated sins of relationship—bitterness, jealousy, and pride—did not carry the same moral penalties. It was possible to be a good converted Methodist, and still despise one's bothersome neighbour.



Nipper's Harbour United Church, Newfoundland.

Photo: Sandra Beardsall

tions became so familiar that interviewees could remember, verbatim, testimonies they'd heard 40 years before (Norman). If the testimony went on too long, someone would begin to sing a hymn, and others would join, a practice known as "singing them down" (Fifield).

As well as testifying and praying aloud in worship, women often led family prayers and took leadership of class meetings. Generally the classes were segregated by gender, but there are records in the 1870s of women leading mixed-gender classes (United Church Archives, Grand Bank Circuit Book). Then there were the spontaneous moments: singing hymns around the wood stove (Ryan), or telling a Bible story to a child (Robbins). A 103 year-old woman recalls:

I saw my grandmother, in the house, she was just sewing one day, and all of a sudden she threw down her work and started to rejoice.... They were so happy they'd just start to rejoice everywhere, even in the kitchen. (Bishop)

Even the notorious taboos of Methodism: drinking, dancing, smoking, playing cards, swearing, and Sabbath

In oral testimony, in class leadership, and in other aspects of faith life, women found a story worth telling within the texts of Newfoundland Methodism. It was the tale of a quest for a blessing, available to all who would seek it. While its romantic nature does not excuse its obvious sexism, it does help to explain the paradox with which outport women were willing to live.

The romantic quest, as we have noted, is a perilous one. The seeker is therefore wary of the world, for it throws up all sorts of trials and temptations. At the same time, a romantic faith treasures above all evidence of a personal divine blessing. Thus Newfoundland Methodism remained cautiously hierarchical and male-led, anxious not to change reality, only to survive it. Meanwhile, its absolute dependence upon a personal, yet pub-

lic, experience of salvation granted a measure of equality and respect to the women who embraced it. In the practice of faith they found both earthly dignity and a glimpse of heaven, and these twin blessings gave many women strength and courage.

The context engages the text

The twentieth century brought changes so significant to the Newfoundland context that Methodism's text, its faith practices, could not remain untouched. On one hand, two new texts appeared to challenge the established Methodist church, and both these texts were borne by women. One was Captain Emma Churchill, a Newfoundlander who had joined the Salvation Army in Ontario, then returned to introduce it to Newfoundland in 1885. The Army, with its tambourines and drums, its lively singing and wild "joy-jigging" converts (Moyle 79–81) suddenly made Methodism appear pale and stodgy. Lively young female officers attracted both women and men to their services. The Salvation Army quickly gained a following, most of its members and officers (including

many women) defecting from the Methodist Church.

The other text was Pentecostalism, brought first to Newfoundland by Alice Belle Garrigus, an American school teacher who had been swept away by the nascent charismatic movement. She began to lead services in St. John's in 1911, promoting especially baptism by the Holy Spirit, speaking in tongues, and spiritual healing. Although her own mission remained small and local, Garrigus and her Pentecostal doctrine found a following among some Methodist businessmen, and with their financing began to reach into all corners of the colony, again drawing members from the Methodist, then United, Church. As with the Salvation Army, women found in the Pentecostal Assemblies possibilities for a preaching ministry, although men soon took and retained control of the upper level leadership (Janes).

The greatest challenge to the Methodist text, however, came from within its own ranks. World War II, and then Confederation with Canada in 1949 changed the very fabric of Newfoundland society. Young Newfoundlanders began training as teachers, nurses, engineers, and civil servants, and then returning to the outports to work. As they gained the tools of analysis and critique, they observed cracks in the veneer of the conversion theology of their parents. "Good" people testified in church, then went home to back-stab others (Norman). The "altar call" for conversion now felt "manipulative" (Nicolle). A student minister lent one woman a book of biblical scholarship which sought to demythologize Biblical texts, and she experienced a life-change as dramatic as an old-fashioned conversion:

I got about half way through the book, and I said to myself, if I get through it I won't have a prop left, not one prop left. So I put the book down for perhaps two or three weeks.... Anyway, I got up the courage, and I got through it. That was the turning point for me. By the time I got finished, it hit home. And I said to myself, I've got to use my brains. I haven't got to go on tradition, I've got to reason things out.... From there on, I took a different view. (Robbins)

After nearly two centuries of being engaged by the text of Methodism, the context had spoken back. In the two decades after 1949, nearly half of the United churches in Newfoundland replaced conversion with "membership classes" as the norm for Christian commitment (United Church Archives, Newfoundland Conference Minutes) and by the 1990s two-thirds of United churches had ceased to hold "after services" (Beardsall). Women began to serve as lay preachers, and ordained women now serve in urban and rural congregations, and in regional administrative roles. Slowly, the church is shifting its focus toward the social and economic issues so crucial to the sustainability of Newfoundland's outports, towns, and cities.⁴

The textuality of Newfoundland Methodism now must

contend with both the vocabulary of the romantic conversion quest, and the language of a secular realism. Whatever their differences, both are faith languages grounded not in a merely individualistic spirituality, but in community and mutual accountability. As the women of Harbour Grace came together in difficult times in the 1790s to work out their faith, so women in the 1990s will need to do the same. In the struggle to tell one another the story, they may discover, as did their grandmothers, the grace, courage, and hope of a better world.

Sandra Beardsall, a minister in the United Church of Canada, lives in Cardiff, Ontario. Her recent doctoral dissertation was "Methodist Religious Practices in Outport Newfoundland."

¹Results of a written survey I conducted in 1992 of worship practices in all United Churches in Newfoundland, indicate that almost a third of congregations still hold services for extemporaneous prayer and testimony, practices long abandoned in most United Churches elsewhere in Canada.

²Newfoundland Methodism followed its parent Canadian Methodist Church into the Protestant union of 1925 which formed the United Church of Canada. Methodists were the only group to participate in the union in Newfoundland; thus, for local congregations, the only immediate effect was a change of name.

³I am indebted to James Hopewell for applying Northrop Frye's literary category of "romance" to a conversionist expression of faith.

⁴In the last decade the United Church has tackled, for example, low-level flying, violence against women, and the "Cod Moratorium."

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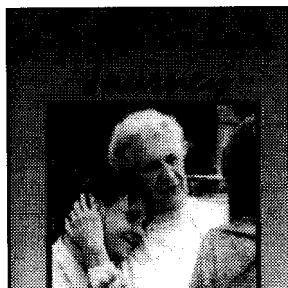
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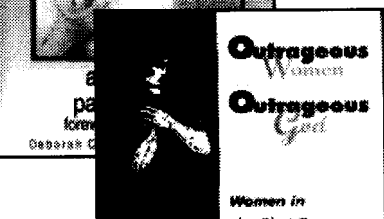


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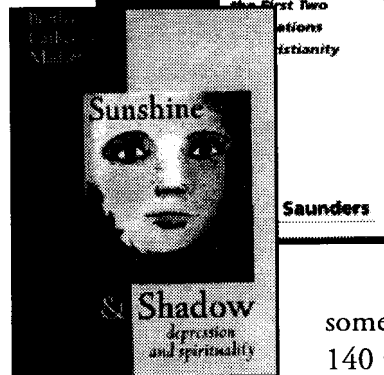
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