

BALLADS FROM DEVIL'S ISLAND

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AT the mouth of Halifax Harbour there lies, all unknown to many people, a little piece of land called "Devil's Island". Where it got its name is a matter of doubt, but there is an interesting tale which relates that one of the earliest inhabitants once saw the Devil on the "banking"¹ of a house, accosting him in the form of a halibut. The following day the unfortunate man was found in his boat returning from Halifax. For no accountable reason he was lying with his head over the gunwale in the water, and in this position he had been drowned. It was believed, of course, that the Devil had come to warn him of approaching death, and from this unhappy incident the island took its name. Other more plausible stories are told, but this is the most picturesque.

Devil's Island might go down through history unheralded except in times of danger, when storms lash it as they did two years ago when Mr. Ben Henneberry was nearly washed away in an attempt to rescue his own fishing boat. Such storms do not come very often; but the inhabitants know that help can reach them from no earthly source while the elements beat about their little stronghold. For Devil's Island is only one mile in circumference, and its highest elevation is eleven feet above sea level. It has hills and valleys in miniature, and reputed treasure sunk in a bottomless hole. There is a vale where a lake has been drained in the hope of finding treasure, but gold has not yet been discovered. It has a rock-bound coast, and a dangerous approach when seas run high. Yet unless treasure were actually found there, Devil's Island would still remain indefinitely an unknown spot where people actually live: although why they do so, those who have never visited the place cannot imagine. It happens, however, that it has a distinct and valid title to fame because of a treasure which is not to be computed by monetary values. For upon this little island and among its villagers there are songs sung of such antiquity as can seldom be found to-day.

The reason for this lies pretty much in the manner of lives which these fifty people lead. Here the inhabitants fish for their daily living, taking their catch in to Halifax for sale. A few have gone away to distant seas, but for the most part their lives are spent, and very happily too, in their own little community. In

1. On the island, seaweed is banked against the foundations of the houses to keep them warm in winter.

summer there is a growing interchange of visitors to and from the mainland. In winter the fishing boats run back and forth, selling their produce in Halifax, but their owners do not linger long in town. Winter waters are treacherous, and fishermen's boats are small. Consequently wise men plan to be home before darkness falls, and the result is that community life is all-important to the islanders. With such a paucity of outside communication, old customs have remained, and we to-day are to benefit through the survival of old songs.

The stock from which Devil's Island was populated is mostly Irish, and the predominant name is Henneberry. In the beginning of the nineteenth century some three hundred families immigrated from Ireland, and settled on McNab's Island in Halifax Harbour. The Henneberrys moved from there to Jeddore, a few miles further down the eastern coast. Later they found their way to Devil's Island, and here they have remained. Faulkner, DeYoung, and Edwards are other island names, but they are in the great minority. Strangely enough, there has been little intermarriage among them, for wives and husbands have usually been taken from the mainland.

Of all the island inhabitants there is none more interesting to the student of folk-songs than Mr. Ben Henneberry, coxswain of the lifeboat, and independent fisherman. Mr. Ben (so called to distinguish him from the numerous others of the name) has a most retentive memory, recalling as many as ninety songs, many of which are of extraordinary value. To him they are just old songs which he loves to sing.

He unconsciously feels the beauty of their poetry, and is not altogether surprised to learn of their actual worth. In this article, I propose to say little of the folk-songs which have come from him, from the lighthouse keeper Mr. Faulkner, and others, but to dwell principally upon the ballads which are still sung, beginning with that fine old piece, "The False Knight Upon the Road."

This is an excellent example of the riddle ballad. In remote days it sometimes happened that a clever lass won a crown by the solving of difficult riddles of State for her king. In this particular ballad a child meets a knight upon the road who puts various questions to her which she must answer to escape his treachery. For instance:

"What is rounder than a ring? What is higher than a king?"

Cried the false knight to the child on the road.

"The sun is rounder than a ring. God is higher than a king,"

Cried the pretty little child only seven years old.

Many variants of this have been found, including several from this continent, but none is as fine nor so complete as this which comes from Devil's Island. Many of the questions asked are found in *Riddles Wisely Expounded*, revealing a close relationship with the oldest type of riddle ballad.

In this day and generation with its countless diversions the finding of a ballad is something of an event, particularly when the song is complete. Yet on Devil's Island we do not need to be content with one such song. All in all, according to the authority, Professor Child, there are only some three hundred ballads in existence.

There are many old songs, many genuine folk-songs, ditties and many local songs which are spoken of as ballads, but the distinction is carefully defined. It is quite remarkable, then, that Devil's Island through its singer, Mr. Ben Henneberry, with the occasional assistance of Mr. William Faulkner and others, should contribute six, five of which are complete. These, of course, are variants of ballads found elsewhere; but where one is usually fortunate in picking up a stanza or two, the Devil's Islander recalls the full text.

Following close upon the heels of "The False Knight Upon the Road", the ballad of "The Cruel Mother" comes as second in importance. As we compare the wording of variants from different sources, many interesting features appear. Here the mother does away with her infant children, piercing their hearts with her pen-knife, and according to the Nova Scotia variant, the knife will not be washed clean since innocent blood has been shed upon it. This is an old superstition which Shakespeare uses in the sleep-walking scene in *Macbeth*. The magic stain caused by blood shed by a murderer's hand cannot be diminished by any amount of scouring. In Barry's variant from Maine this legend is given, and also in Sharp's from the Appalachians; but the Nova Scotia text includes another superstition, the combination of which is unusual. In referring to the incriminating knife the ballad says:

Then she threw it far away,
All alone and a-loney,
The farther she threw it the nearer it came,
Down by the greenwood siding.

Another interesting phase of this ballad is found in the seven-year penances which the mother is to endure. These penances belong properly to the ballad of "The Maid and the Palmer", which is the story of Our Lord's meeting with the Woman of Samaria.

Then again, it is strange to find Robin Hood ballads sung on Devil's Island. Where did Mr. Ben get them in the first instance,

and how does it come that he can sing them to-day as apparently nobody else on this continent can sing them? At least to the present time no collection appears to have published it, yet "The Bold Pedlar and Robin Hood" is sung *in toto* by Mr. Ben, with an additional stanza at the end taken from another of the Robin Hood ballads, "Little John Goes A-Begging." His only ballad imperfectly remembered is "Robin Hood's Progress to Nottingham", of which only two stanzas and the chorus can be recalled.

Then comes The "Farmer's Curst Wife", probably the most widely current of all the old ballads, the legend of the old wife whom not even the Devil would take, being well known in the Orient and in Europe. Finally comes "Katherine Jaffray", which is the only doubtful piece in Mr. Ben's repertoire. It is evidently a much later variant of the old ballad which Scott used as the basis of his poem "Young Lochinvar". Whether it should actually be included among the genuine English and Scottish ballads is doubtful, but it is given the benefit of the doubt and added to the list. It bears a close resemblance to a variant in the Child collection.

Devil's Island is not the only source in Halifax County for ballad singing, but it seems to be the one most prolific. A few others have been found elsewhere, as well as many interesting folk-songs. On the mainland at South-East Passage, close to the spot where a boat is taken for the Island, there is a small community of people, Hartlen by name, whose progenitors were German. The present generation recalls little of the old German, but the deceased father and uncle seem to have retained much of the old country customs and speech, including an interesting superstition which dispensed with witches. When these unwelcome visitors came, the old uncle used to take nine letters from the German Bible and write on a board which he placed above the door. It was believed that the witch could pass over the door but not under, and as there was no access above the door the family was left in peace.

It is rather difficult to discover just how it was that these German settlers, who came to Nova Scotia when Lunenburg was founded in 1750 and later moved up here, should be the singers of old songs of British origin. Yet many very good songs have been discovered here and two ballads, namely "Captain Wedderburn's Courtship" and "The Sweet Trinity". The former, like "The False Knight Upon the Road", is a riddle ballad. In this the hero wins his wife by answering difficult questions, a frequent custom in the old days. For instance;

Oh it's for my breakfast you must get me chickens without bones,
And for my dinner you must get me cherries without stones.

to which the man replies,

Oh when a chicken is in the egg I'm sure it has no bones,
 And when a cherry's in blossom I'm sure it has no stones:

and so forth.

Other interesting ballads in the author's collection are "Lord Thomas and Fair Ellinor", "Little Musgrave and Lady Barnard", and "Sir Hugh; or The Jew's Daughter." The first is too well known to all students of the subject to be discussed in detail, except to say that Child considers Bishop Percy's variant the most beautiful of all ballads. The second is unfortunately remembered only in part. The third is extremely interesting not only for the text but for the story which lies behind it.

This ballad of "Sir Hugh; or The Jew's Daughter" was probably built upon some Italian legend, and bears a close resemblance to Chaucer's Prioress's Tale. For over a thousand years it had been believed that the Jews crucified children in contempt of Christ, enticing them into their homes for that purpose, although both Child and Percy absolutely discredit the legend. However, the story is a popular one, and the ballad is quite universal. It has even been heard sung by children on the streets of New York, and also by American negroes. One stanza of the Nova Scotia variant describing the wiles of the Jewish girl runs:

She gave him an apple green as the grass,
 She gave him a gay gold ring,
 She gave him a chery as red as the blood
 Until she enticed him in.

The singer of these three ballads is Mrs. William MacNab, a Scottish lady whose family settled in Musquodoboit many years ago. She is living in Halifax now, and recalls still further a "Henery" one which is a variant of that charming ballad, "Lord Randal".

When the search for ballads and songs began, it was thought that a very wide field would have to be explored, many disappointments met, and countless discouragements faced. Such is usually the case, so it was really an excellent piece of good fortune that Devil's Island was so soon discovered with its adjoining district of German settlers. For in these remote districts where singing survives—and it is not every community that possesses its singers—the ballad singer is regarded still as a being apart from his fellows. He is looked up to as he was in the days of old when people gathered at one another's homes and through necessity provided their own entertainment, consisting very largely in the singing of old songs. Radio is coming even to the remoter districts now, and modern interests are creeping in; yet much remains still of old-time customs in Nova Scotia. When Mr. Ben Henneberry sings, his children,

grandchildren and friends, all gather about him with the same fascination their fathers felt towards the ballad singers of their day.

It is not the quality of Mr. Henneberry's voice that is so appealing, but his songs are all so interesting. Frequently he sings melodies which the listeners have heard before. This gives a pleasant sense of familiarity, since Mr. Ben never repeats himself to the extent of growing tiresome. On the other hand, he very often sings songs which they have never heard before. His companions who fish with him say that he is always singing in his boat, and even they who see him every day are constantly surprised when they hear him sing some new song. By "new" I mean new to them. Mr. Ben does not sing modern songs. Neither he nor other ballad singers can have any respect for them. His songs are all genuine old-timers.

It is sometimes curious, however, to find that something quite modern has crept in among the old stock. For example, Mr. Henneberry sings one song which is a highly technical piece of sea literature. Apparently somebody had read Walter F. Mitchell's poem, "The Tacking of a Full-Rigged Ship Off Shore" and had liked the sea phraseology it contained. At all events a tune was set to it and the dignified poem became a song. The first stanza, as it comes from Devil's Island, runs:

The weather leach out topsails shiver,
Bowline strain our lea shroud slack,
Our braces taut and the least boom quivers,
The waves was a-coming storm cloud black.

The same was done with a poem by Frederick William Wallace, the authorship of which has been credited locally to a mythical figure at Chezzetcook. Again the poem appealed to the reader, who adopted a tune and so set in motion a rollicking Nova Scotia sea song. It makes an excellent song, and the author has kindly given permission for its inclusion in the collection. The opening stanza runs:

Come all you hearty haddockers
Who winter fishing go,
And brave the seas upon the Banks
In stormy winds and snow,
And ye who love hard driving
Come listen to my lay
Of the run we made from Portland
In the *Mary L. Mackay*.

Melodies accompany all these songs, but of course can not be given here. Suffice it is to say that the tune to which the above is sung is one of the brightest and most singable in the collection.

These two songs are instances of adaptability, but there is no originality among folk-singers. From the collector's point of view, this is a good thing, because all wording remains as heard in the first instance. This is always a matter of wonder. Surely it would be much easier to substitute wording of one's own than to recall a forgotten phrase, but the ballad singer does not do this. He is extremely conscientious, and feels almost as if he were desecrating a sacred trust if he does not repeat a song exactly as his father or his grandfather sang it to him. He is very sensitive upon this subject. Occasionally other variants come to him, and he is quite disgusted when a line is sung differently from the way he has always heard it. A conventionalist is our ballad singer and it is well that it is so.

Love songs, sea songs, nursery songs, indigenous songs, all are sung at Devil's Island and its environs, not only by Mr. Ben and the Hartlans, but by others as well. Probably to Nova Scotians the local songs will be found to hold a particular interest for reasons both historical and romantic. Frequently sea tragedies and outstanding sea exploits have been perpetuated in song. A fisherman possibly has heard a thrilling tale. His imagination is fired, and he composes a ballad, so called, to describe the incident in such a way that it will not soon be forgotten. The melody is probably one he knows which fits nicely into his wording, or more probably he words his song with a particular melody in mind. It is a story which he sings and spreads widely. In the old days it was no idle boast that a song needed to be heard only once to be remembered.

From a literary standpoint, the song "Peter Rambelay" is probably the most interesting, one stanza being very reminiscent of the ballad of "Mary Hamilton". Others are valuable for local interest, and some for their historic value. For instance, there are three songs of the "Saladin" mutiny which give the last dying thoughts of three of the four men who were hanged for the horrible murders perpetrated on that ill-fated vessel, giving an account of events which led to the tragedies in detail. There is an interesting Newfoundland song of exposure to cold in a small dory from which two men were rescued. There is a delightfully frank song about a not too popular Halifax sea captain. There is a sad tale of two little girls lost in the woods near Preston, and another of the Tangier Gold Mines in the days of their prosperity. One might go on indefinitely.

One of the most interesting things about these local songs is that they are still being composed. Fortunately there are not many hangings in Halifax to-day; but whenever one takes place,

a "ballad" is sure to be written about it. Sea tragedies are still honoured by song, and it looks as if the art will be continued for some time. Eventually these will no doubt find their way to Devil's Island to be added to the repertoire of Mr. Henneberry. So this modest little island rises from its obscurity, and through its singers becomes a place of foremost interest in the Province of Nova Scotia.