

# SHAKESPEARE IN NEWFOUNDLAND

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NEWFOUNDLAND was a landfall which gladdened Cabot's heart in 1497. Having changed less than most places since Cabot's time, it is a Paradise for collectors today. They go there for rare flora and fauna, for stamps and antiques. Curators of museums search the rocky shores for trilobites, and a very special kind of snail. Sportsmen go after caribou heads and the perfect fish story. Artists and photographers seek material; and a collector of something as intangible as words and atmosphere is also in his element there.

Idiom hunting is quite as exciting as any other sport; but except for parts of the southern States, now thoroughly combed by novelists, this continent offers limited opportunities for it. The hinterland of New England and the Maritime Provinces have managed to keep a few of the quaint turns of speech which came with their Pilgrim ancestors. But Newfoundland, being a sort of World's Fair "time capsule", has a whole unwritten vocabulary of old words, forgotten elsewhere, along with others coined and kept in the country.

The speech of a people bears a close relation to their temperament and environment. Newfoundland, being one of the bleak North countries, should have bred a grim, tight-lipped race. But, thanks to the Gulf Stream, it is not the true North. Its climate is more temperate than points much farther South, and its people are anything but dour. But with three thousand miles of coastline it knows something of high winds, fog and storms at sea—known locally as "weather". (When the sun shines in this part of the world, there is no "weather").

The people are of mixed stock; pre-Elizabethan, West Country English; a large element of Irish; and a sprinkling of Scottish, French, Spanish and Portuguese. Cobble-stoned Water Street, in Saint John's, is one of the oldest Main Streets in North America. It was well-trodden by fishermen, bartering their catch in various European languages, in Sir Humphrey Gilbert's day, and recorded then as "a place populous and much frequented." There were permanent settlements on Conception

Bay before Saint Augustine or Port Royal was ever thought of. But Newfoundland has always been sketchy about keeping records, and other places now claim the honours for age.

Newfoundlanders inherit a lively disposition from their composite ancestry, a quick wit and a sense of humour which, even in depression times, seldom deserts them. One typical expression, "comical-struck", for "thunderstruck", shows their inclination to see the funny side. Everything about the country is dramatic; the exciting story of its past; its scenery, with sheer cliffs, deep fiords, wide bays and processions of drifting icebergs each Spring; and even its weather, with sudden changes due to skirmishes off the coast between the Arctic Current and its sworn enemy, the Gulf Stream. No wonder the speech of the people is unusual!

The outports—fourteen hundred tiny, scattered settlements, strung along the coast, many on islands—have often no more communication with each other than with the outside world. So the language varies. Notre Dame Bay speaks a tongue familiar in Somerset or Devon many years ago. The South Shore has a broad Irish brogue. At least one family on Bonavista Bay has a dialect of its own, which no one outside the clan can understand. And every place cherishes expressions better known to Falstaff and Mistress Quickly, or even the Canterbury Pilgrims, than to us today.

It is difficult now to discover their origin, for no one knows about the spelling. The only attempt at a glossary is a recent one by P. K. Devine. It is a fascinating piece of work, though a Newfoundlander is slightly handicapped in a study of the dialect by too much familiarity with his subject. An outsider, on the other hand, even after living two years in the country, is still less qualified. But with Mr. Devine's help and that of others, including Chaucer, William Shakespeare and Noah Webster, I had an exciting time tracing some of the old words back to their beginnings.

The speech has, generally, a pronounced Irish flavour. "I'm after doing it" is a more common form than "I've just done it". "I now come from doing it", is another familiar way of putting it. The use of "sure" all over the island is purely Irish, and many other expressions. A number of words strange to us have an Irish sound, though they might not all be recognized in their own country today, like *boneen*, a young pig; *caubeen*, a cap; *shooneen*, a double dealer; *plawmosh*, flattery; and others. There are fewer from Scotland. *Crowdy* (oatmeal

and milk), *piggin*, a small wooden bucket, "glaum", to snatch (meaning, originally, to grope); "dene", a valley, all come from there. "Noggin", a small cup, is Gaelic. "A noggin o' scrape" is an interesting equivalent for a "peck of trouble."

Some of the early Spanish and Portuguese fishermen were among those who first ventured to remain in the country. Permanent settlements, subsidized on the mainland, were outlawed here because the West Country merchants wanted to control the wealth of the fisheries. But the men from Spain and Portugal hid themselves, with the other pioneers, in out of the way coves and harbours, and their descendants are easily recognized today by their features. They left many folkways and place names and a few words still in common use. "Caplin", the small fish that is peculiar to this coast and is one of the staples of diet in the outports, is the Portuguese *capelina*.

French words are more numerous. The French came for centuries to fish, and until 1904 they had exclusive fishing rights on the part known as the French Shore. One expression used by fishermen in speaking of dried codfish of mediocre quality is "talqual". This is credited rightly to the Jerseymen, for it is obviously the French *tel quel* ("such as it is"). "Angishore", a weak, miserable person, must be from *angoisseux*, distressing. "Gauches", quips or jokes, may have come through *gauche* and *gaucherie*. "Vandu", a sale, is from *vendue*. A "goulds", in local dialect, is a valley with wooded sides. *Goulee*, a funnel-like opening, must answer for that. The epithet, "rames", applied to a thin person, may be from *rame*, a stick or pole.

Fish are washed in a "ramshorn", a box with slatted sides. This name is said to come from Jersey, and may be a corruption of *rincer*, to rinse. The "vang", so much relished on boiled codfish, is pork fat, and may come from *suc de viande*, which is gravy. The small, white berry of the plant, maidenhair, is so plentiful in Newfoundland that it is used for jam and known altogether by its French name, *capillaire*.

All berries native to the country have their own names. The high bush cranberry is the "squashberry"; the rock cranberry the "partridge berry". One species of bog cranberry is the "marshberry". If someone rings your doorbell in St. John's and asks if you would like any "hurts", you might be inclined to say "No"! very firmly. But you are being offered nothing more dangerous than blueberries. The local name is from the English "whortle-berry", *via* "whorts". The amber cloudberry, most plentiful and delicious, is called "bakeapple". That seems

to have every one baffled. One spelling is "bay kappel". The nearest guess I can make is that the French, to whom it would be strange, may have called it "baie capillaire."

The foreign influence is strong in place-names. Bay Despair is a local rendering of Baie d'Espoir (hope). The group of islands called the Rams would be also from *rame*. But these names are a study in themselves. Besides those which are unrecognizably altered, there are many which still proclaim their origin, like Port aux Basques (Placentia, the old French capital, still has 17th century Basque tombstones); Portugal Cove, Biscay Bay, Spaniard's Bay, Harbour Breton and many more, including even Turk's Gut.

Some of the words brought by the English are as foreign now as any. A "crannic", or "cronnic", is a common name for a dead tree root or stump. No explanation of that suited me till I found the old Celtic word *crannog*, a tree. *Basse*, to kiss, is pure Old English. So is *brewis*. This is one of the island's typical dishes and very palatable, made by soaking and boiling "hard-bread"—which is something like hardtack. Dafoe, using it in *Robinson Crusoe*, many years after it may have reached Newfoundland, spells it "brews". *Hansel*, free gift, or a premium, is an Anglo-Saxon word too charming to have been lost. Herrick was one of the last to use it in English literature. *Frenne*, a stranger, is another as ancient.

Any shack in the woods in this country or Labrador is called by its old English name, a *tilt*. A *tolt* is a common name for a hill, but no one knows why. *Tor*, the Anglo-Saxon word used in place-names in England, is heard here. *Drung*, a narrow lane, is from the West Country. *Rinde*, the bark of a tree, is Chaucerian. A man going over the hills "with a fardel of rinds on his back" is a familiar sight. In many parts of the island there is no other way of getting out wood, unless one happens to have dogs broken to harness. *Fardel* is Old French for bundle. Shakespeare uses it in *Hamlet*. A "backload" of wood is also a *knitchet*, an obsolete word from "knit".

Some archaic forms are still in use; *afeared* (Chaucer's *aferd*); *anigh* or *anighst*; *amain*; *apast*; and *alond* (an expression of degree). *Aflore* is a long-forgotten word for "froze". *Drave* remains the past tense of "drive". *Liveyer*, an inhabitant, is an interesting old term. A liveyer-out is a servant who sleeps out. A Gladyer a joker. Chaucer used *gladder*, with the same meaning. The Shakesperean "tis" and "twill" are heard more

frequently everywhere than the modern forms. And "So do!" is polite conversation.

West Country dialects have always confused tenses and pronouns. With such a mixture of dialects the confusion is accentuated here. *Un* is an additional objective pronoun, used for any gender. The fisherman may say, "I seed un", meaning "him"; or (of a wrecked ship), "She'm gone!" He may explain grumblingly, "'E wouldn't do it for I, but I be going' to do it for 'e."

Possibly no place is left in the world which remembers so many Elizabethan words. Many go back to Chaucer, such as *empt*, empty; *nonce*, occasion; *more*, the root of a tree; *maugre*, in spite of (also employed by Shakespeare). *Drieth*, drought, is an expression of Tyndale's. Spenser uses *younker* for youngster, and *frow* for brittle. His *bawn*, an enclosure for cattle, has become on the South Coast "the wide expanse of foreshore on which fish are spread to dry". "Other parts of the country dry fish on wooden racks or flakes, so a *bawn* is also called "Nature's flake". To "swodge", in Newfoundland, has the same meaning as "tasswage" in *The Shepherds Calender*.

*Dout*, to put out a light, is from Shakespeare. So is *dozey*, a sweetheart, *ean*, a young lamb, *draft*, rubbish, *fadge*, to succeed, *firk*, to bustle about, *cam* crooked, *sconce*, a head. *Flaw* was Hamlet's word for a gust of wind. A loaf of bread which moulds is said to *fust*, (from the same source). *Skirr* is to hurry around the country, according to *Macbeth*. Spleen, a word on which Shakespearean commentators differ, means "melancholy" or "despondency" in this country. The French, who got it from England in the 17th century, use it in the same way, so it must have been the accepted meaning then. In most cases where Shakespeare uses it ambiguously, "melancholy" suits as well as anything else.

Some other words which have changed their meaning still keep to the original in this country. "Wonderful" is, literally, to excite wonder. You may hear of a "wonderful gale" or a "wonderful pain". "Measles are very *brief* around the Bay", means "rife". "Right" means "thoroughly". Ships coming in without any catch have a "hungry" look, which compares with Shakespeare's usage. "Clever" has various meanings, none of them having anything to do with "skilful". If your mother is well, she may be *clever*. You may have a *clever* cow, meaning a *good* one, or a *clever* pair of boots. "Heave" is also

a very useful word. You may hear, "Do you want your tea hove up now?" or "I'll wait till your mother hoves in."

No one splits kindlings in Newfoundland. He *cleaves* the *splits* and knocks them abroad. A piece of wood thrown on the fire is either a *chunk* or a *billet*—the latter from Shakespeare. "Are you married or are you a maid?" is a civil question in the outports. *Ye* is used to give emphasis, as, "This one is for *ye*." The "heel of the day" is, of course, near sundown. "Clum", as in the West Country, means "clung". *Darbies*, for "hand-cuffs", sounded to me like the slang of an early period. I found it had come down through the Songs of Solomon. Scott used it, and Gascoigne, in 1576, refers to "father Derbies bands".

To *drawlatch* is to loiter, and *gally*, to exhaust. Anything delicate is *nesh*, and a fretful child is *froppish*. *Grum* is an expression of Arbuthnot's for "surly". A jug of liquor is a *jorum* and the stopper of a bottle is a *stopple*. A *gobbet*, as in Wyclif's day, is a large morsel. A *gollop* is a larger mouthful. A *fetch* is an apparition; a *mort*, a great quantity.

An idle fellow is a *footer*. Chaucer spelled it *fautoir*. A *gaffer* is a boy who helps with the fishing. A term of reproach for a girl is a "brazen fagot". "Ye baygle" is another epithet, dating back to the days when a beagle was a spy or constable. A *sawney* is also uncomplimentary. It was applied by the English to the Scots when there was no love lost between them. It is a corruption of "Saundy".

*Prog* is an almost extinct name for food, although I have heard it in New Brunswick. *Duff* is a boiled pudding. Salt pork, which has not kept well, is *smatchy*. Grounds left in a coffee-cup are *grouts*. It is much more interesting to "storm the kettle" than to boil it. Spenser uses "storm" in the sense of creating a tempest. A child comes into the world without a *screed* on him, meaning a "shred". When you go into a shop, even in St. John's, to buy knitting needles, you ask for *skivers* (from *skewers*) and they appear as *skivers* on your bill.

You meet flocks of goats in the outports with wooden yokes on *spancels* on their necks, to keep them out of gardens. There are also spancelled hens and ducks. A *windle* is a redwing, a *stime*, a ray of light. *Wap*, a blow, goes back to Mallory. The *marge* of a lake is the border. *Leal* and *lissome* are two other poetic words put to everyday use here. A *droke* is a valley with steep sides—as in Cornwall and Somersetshire. And if you are *moidered*, you are merely much disturbed.

A country which has drawn its living for centuries from the sea is bound to have plenty of nautical terms. A vicious man is a *barnacle*. A *bogie* is nothing more fearsome than a small stove used in fo'castles. It was an old custom to put the birch broom, used for sweeping her, at the top of a schooner's mast, instead of a "for sale" advertisement. So a vessel is *broomed* when her master wants to sell her. A *catamaran* is an East Indian boat, which for some strange reason has given its name to a kind of sled in Newfoundland. A low sled is a *slide*, or, in Notre Dame Bay and farther North, a *komatik*, from the Eskimo.

When the sea is rough, it has a "lop" on. There may be a link here with the Anglo-Saxon *lop*, a flea; or the old word *lope*, meaning to leap or dance. A *yaffle* is an armful of dried fish. A *spillar*, from "spilliard", is a net to catch mackerel. A *bultow* is a fish trawl, and a fine *putt* of fish is a catch ready to go on the splitting table. The *offer ground* is the distant fishing ledges.

The sealing ships have their own vocabulary. A seal is always a *swile* or *sile*, to the men who "go to the ice". They themselves are *swilers*. A *swatch* is a spot of open water in an icefield, and the men who lie in wait to shoot seals in it are *swatching*. A *dotard* is an old seal; a *bedlamer* (*bête de la mer*, Anglicized) is a two-year-old harp seal. Killing scattered seals is *quintering*. The seal's *flippers* or forepaws, which are peddled up and down the steep streets of St. John's as soon as the first of the fleet comes home, are a rare delicacy. The ice coming down from the north in the early spring, filling the harbours, is *slob ice*. A small iceberg, mostly under water, is a *growler*; a conical piece, standing out prominently, a *pinnacle*. When the cook on a schooner runs out of fresh water, he rows over to a berg, chips off a piece (which is, of course, not salt) and brings it back to fill the kettle for a pot of "pinnacle tea."

Many of Newfoundland's words have a good dictionary background. Others, possibly coined in the country, are self-explaining. It is easy to see why a person whose teeth chatter is said to *bivver*. A beating is a *latitat*. Bits of crisply fried fat pork (*fatback*) are *crunchin's*. *Sish* is fine broken ice, near the shore, washing with the tide. A *levener* is a snack anyone enjoys around eleven in the morning. "Falling weather" means any sort of precipitation. A schooner making slow time is said to be "soaking" along. And "It's a *jacket* colder tonight", clearly conveys the change in temperature.

*Gomerel*, a stupid person, is a Scottish folk-word which emigrated to this side with the early settlers. *Starrigan*, a



dead tree-root is in everyday speech, but no one knows how it got there. Frank Parker Day found it in Lunenburg County, Nova Scotia, and uses it in his novel *Rockbound*. *Tickle*, a purely native term for a narrow strait or passage, may come from *stickle*, an obsolete English word, meaning a shallow rapid in a river. There is at least one "tickle" in Nova Scotia (in Canso), but it is pronounced "tittle". But what are the antecedents of *dwy*, a snow-flurry? Why are piles of salt fish, ready to dry, called *waterhorse*, when horses are unknown in many parts of the island? *Kilcorn*, or *keekarn*, means "larynx". A patient tells the doctor, "I've got such a pain in me kilcorn I can't *glutch* (swallow)". So far, its origin has eluded me. *Isses*, local name for earthworms, has a Cornish sound, and may come from these creatures' frequent resemblance to the letter S.

Newfoundland has any number of colorful phrases. "Something to veer and haul on", is a picturesque way of saying "something to come and go on". "As fine a man as ever hove a gallus over his shoulder" is a neat compliment (*gallus* meaning suspender). "A good man from anchor to anchor" is one who does his part throughout the voyage, or from first to last under any circumstances. An efficient person is one who "can't be jammed". The sealers used it originally of a ship too strong to be caught in an ice-floe.

"Long may your job draw!" is a characteristic salutation. "God bless your work!" sounds like an old European greeting. "Don't make strange!" means "Make yourself at home!" "The fish is eatin' the rocks", implies that they are ready to take the bait, or, in plain speech, a lost opportunity. A man who "sits at one end of a tilt and burns the other" is a good picture of extravagance. When the wind changes frequently, it is "up and down the mast"; so is a vacillating person. A thing individual is "all skin and grief". "An honest man when there's only anchors on the shore" is a doubtful compliment. "A warm flaw" (with Shakespeare's meaning) is an expressive description of one without much force.

The out-harbours have some delightful similes. "As slow as the Saint Barbe count" must have an interesting local background, Saint Barbe being a bay on the north-east tip of the island. In "as foolish as a mazed caplin", *mazed* is from Chaucer. *Mid-maze*, confusion, is also an old word here. To "smoke like a winter tilt"; "as hard to know as the mind of a gull"; "as salt as Lot's wife"; "as proud as a top-sawyer"; and "as far as ever a puffin flew" are other typical examples. "There's



a slippery stone at the gentleman's door" may be a useful proverb in a country where there are still gentlemen and common people. "Spare the rod and spoil the fish"! and "A spare oar, a spared life" are succinct and practical.

The names of certain men have crept into the people's speech. Pork-and-duff day, on schooners from Cape Race to Labrador, is known as "Solomon Gosse's birthday". The legend is that some early cook, serving the fishermen's favourite meal out of schedule, blamed the extravagance on Solomon Gosse (said to have been a Conception Bay man) having a birthday which must be celebrated. "Remember when Nofty lost the pork!" is a proverb that has grown out of the story of Nofty, a man who was an expert at cards, once losing his bet.

"Uncle Phil" is another mythical person. Some skipper, it appears, was in the habit of reserving a portion of the fish brought from Labrador, for an imaginary silent partner, "Uncle Phil", and the crew were deprived of the proceeds. Now when anyone is caught reserving a double share of fish or cod oil for himself on any pretext, it is called a case of "Phil's fish".

Superstitions always thrive near the sea, and Newfoundland has drawn on the store of the Irish, the Spanish and the Portuguese. The "little people" are very real on parts of the South Shore, and there are fantastic stories like that of the siren rock, "Mad Moll", on White Bay, with seaweed tresses, luring vessels to their doom. Since the weather is all-important to the men going out in boats, many of the current beliefs (superstitious and otherwise) relate to it. If caplin or cod, when caught, are found to have "taken on ballast"—swallowed sand or pebbles—there is rough weather coming. A codfish with bloated eyes tells the same. Squid, porpoises, herring and sea-birds are all weather prophets. Even the goats, which are kept generally instead of cows, know all the signs:

"If your goats come home in files,  
Get your fish in covered piles."

(The codfish, drying on the flakes, must be covered with pieces of sailcloth in wet weather.)

The kind of luck the fisherman will have is his great concern. He has plenty of ways of foreseeing that. If the caplin have red eyes, they are leaving the coast. When the codfish are seen jumping and playing in the Bay, they are also planning to go. If the first fish taken in the season is a small-nosed one, the voy-

age will be good. "When the snipe bawls, the lobster crawls" is useful knowledge for lobstermen.

Newfoundland's isolated position is the chief reason why she has been able to preserve so many vigorous words which the language has lost elsewhere, and to keep her speech distinctive. But there is a quality of directness, even bluntness, about the people which goes with forceful speech. And only an original and imaginative race could have chosen the place names which are in the country today. Heart's Desire, Heart's Delight, Happy Adventure, show the optimism of the early settlers. Famish Gut is more realistic. Come-by Chance, Seldom-come-by, Pushthrough and Cuckold's Cove are characteristic examples. A group of the highest mountains in the country are the Fore Topsail, the Main Topsail, the Gaff Topsail and the Mizzen Topsail.

The people's names are original too. Cake, Courage, Dearlove, Pretty, Coveyduck, Rabbits and Sweetapple are a few common surnames. The outports still have the old-fashioned religion, and Biblical names are popular. Small boys may answer to anything in the Old Testament or the New, from Nimshi to Ananias—which suggests either a questionable ambition on the parents' part or some ignorance of the Scriptures. "Virtue" is a favourite girl's name, and I heard of one who, without benefit of Katherine Mansfield, had been christened "Pearl Button".

Change comes slowly in Newfoundland, but it does come, and already some of the old words and folkways are beginning to disappear. But it will take some time to lose them all, for there are so many of them. Some expressions are familiar only in certain bays—the island's natural divisions are bays, not counties. Others are known everywhere. One thing which will help to keep them alive is the genuine pride of all classes in anything native to the country. Many young Newfoundlanders are sent to the best schools on this continent or in England, and it is common in St. John's to hear people with accents acquired at Cheltenham or Harrow, at Oxford or Yale, taking pains to say that a car door is *plimmed* (swollen with dampness); or that *blastie-boughs* (dead spruce boughs dried brown) make a good fire on a picnic. No one would say "up North" where "down" is correct. "Up-along" means, of course, Canada, or the mainland. And last summer *Punch* had some fun at the expense of a Newfoundland expression. "Judge Browne", it quoted from a St. John's paper, "is spending a vacation at the bottom of Conception Bay", and headed the item with "No

room left on top?" When a bay is approached from the sea, as bays are in this country, the head of it is logically the "bottom".

This is a country which takes hold of even the casual visitor. And everyone born in it is always conscious, wherever he may be, of having his roots solidly planted in his rocky, salt-flavoured little homeland. As long as he continues to have the intelligence to appreciate its picturesque ways, there is no immediate danger of Britain's oldest colony becoming standardized.