

MIRAMICHI FOLKLORE

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"There is a whole culture here that you and I know nothing about."

MISS Louise Manny, a noted historian of the Miramichi, made this remark to me when I went to see her about some of the material for this article. Miss Manny very kindly gave over an afternoon and went with me to talk to some of the older residents of the Miramichi; and as I listened to these people—and to others as I continued my search—I began to realize the truth of her words. In the following paragraphs, I will attempt little more than to indicate the nature of this culture which lies beneath the daily life of the Miramichi Valley, Northumberland County, New Brunswick.

Belief in forerunners or signs is not confined to so small an area as the Miramichi. Rather is it true that, of all fields of folklore, this is the most universal—not only in principle, but also in detail.

The most prevalent forerunners or signs have some animal as an important element in the phenomena. When this was mentioned to one elderly gentleman, he offered an explanation that amounted to a firm conviction that animals are psychic.

"Now a cat hasn't got much psychic," he explained, "but animals like a horse or a dog do." He pointed out the fact that one seldom heard of a cow being psychic. It seems that the amount of "psychic" possessed by any type of animal is dependent upon its degree of association with human beings.

In the past, a certain girl called Mary had a lamb that followed her to school. As far as we are able to learn from this old nursery rhyme, the lamb's presence in school was occasion for a good deal of mirth on the part of Mary's fellow-pupils.

The folklore of the Miramichi contains no such record of studious lambs, but it does record several instances of religious cats and dogs, whose presence at church produced results quite other than the mirth created by Mary's lamb.

The record of one such event concerns a cat; and the grown daughter of the lady who told me the story vouched for its truth.

This lady's cat accompanied her to Mass one Sunday morning—a thing the cat had never done before. The following morning, the woman's grandson was killed on the high-

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way bridge over which she and the cat had crossed on the way to Mass.

Another similar story tells of a dog that went into church and lay down beneath one of the pews. Shortly afterwards, the gentleman who customarily occupied that pew died quite suddenly.

Not all such instances concerning animals are as clear as these. For example, there is no attempt to explain the fact that a horse would not pass a certain place on the road between Little Bartibogue and the old Fox place on the north shore of the Miramichi at night. When this place was reached the horse would froth at the mouth and balk.

On the other hand, there are stories of strange happenings, the meaning of which has been lost in the intervening years. A very interesting story of this sort was told me by a man who first heard it some forty years ago from an Irish woman with whom he was boarding at the time. As he remembers it, either this woman, or a relative of hers, had been driving along a country road over a blanket of new-fallen snow. The night was clear and the moon shone brightly. Suddenly the occupants of the sleigh became aware of a large, black dog trotting along beside them—the night was too clear to be mistaken. Closer examination, however, revealed that the dog left no foot prints in the snow.

The man who told me the story thinks the dog was a portent of something or other. However, I prefer Miss Manny's theory that the dog was some sort of protection. At least her theory is in accord with an ancient Russian folk-tale that is quite similar to this from the Miramichi.

While we have been speaking of animals as elements in forerunners or signs, they by no means have a monopoly on this field of folklore.

One woman said that she had often answered a knock at her door to find no one there. This phenomenon seems easily explicable, until it is pointed out that her dog was never disturbed by such knocks—as he would ordinarily have been—and furthermore, these occurrences were always followed by the death of one of this woman's relatives.

Another phenomenon of this sort, but more supernatural, is the passage of a flame—about the size of a candle-flame and some three feet from the ground—from one house to another. This is invariably followed by a death in each of the houses.

When I asked what these lights and knocks were, I was told, in effect, that they were audible and visual manifestations of the spirits of the dead warning those who are to follow them. It is particularly interesting to note at this point that, while these people persist in speaking of these as spirits rather than as souls, they do not seem to distinguish between them otherwise; this is common to Roman Catholic and Protestant alike.

These examples may strike the reader as rather morbid. However, for sheer horror, the following forerunner need take second place to none.

An old lady of Irish descent said that she had often seen her mother appear to her in broad daylight—yet, at the time of these appearances, the mother was alive and well. This phenomenon is common and wide-spread; the point of such appearances is that, if the 'person' is coming towards you, all is well; but, it is a sign of impending death if the 'person' turns and walks away.

Areas that were formerly occupied by the French or that are said to have been the scene of pirate activity seem to abound with apparently supernatural happenings.

Just below Newcastle, on the North shore of the Miramichi, there is a very deep cove called French Fort Cove because tradition tells that a French battery was situated there to command the sweep of the river. Miss Manny told me of a very obscure chart that seems to support this legend. However, French or no French, there have been strange happenings at the old bridge situated about one quarter of a mile above the present steel structure.

Many people passing that way at night have heard strange sounds, such as the rattling of chains; and while such noises may be explained, or at least explained away, it is not so easy to discredit the fact that responsible people tell of seeing a coffin being carried across the bridge late at night, on the shoulders of four men.

Whatever we may think of these stories, we are bound to do some serious thinking about this story told me by Miss Manny. Tradition has it that gold was buried at French Cove in times past. That was enough to prompt a man employed about the Manny home to try his luck with the spade. Accordingly, one evening he began to dig in the 'dark of the moon', having first said some prescribed 'charm'. As luck would have it, his spade eventually struck something solid.

At the same moment, he was confronted by a white apparition. The following evening he returned to the scene of his labours. While it would be of interest to know whether he actually did strike a chest of treasure and while we may wonder about the exact nature of the apparition, these points assume less importance when we are confronted with the fact that there was absolutely no trace of the spade, which he had dropped in his headlong flight, nor of the hole that he had dug the previous evening.

An even more spectacular event that took place at the cove was told to me by one of the three men who witnessed it.

These three were walking home between twelve-thirty and one o'clock at night. As they crossed the old cove bridge, a large ball of fire, some three feet in diameter, rose into the air and three yells, like a woman's gasping screams, were heard from the midst of the flame before it dropped to earth again—Two of the men ran in terror, but the man who told me the story was too frightened to move.

He sought to explain away the phenomenon by saying that it was probably marsh gas. However, burning marsh gas would tend to rise like a tongue of flame and burn out rather than drop to the ground again. Moreover, his explanation does not account for the three yells that struck such terror into their hearts.

All these were isolated or infrequent incidents. A woman, however, who carried her head in her arms regularly confronted persons crossing the cove bridge at night and "offered one thousand pounds to any one who would take her head back to France."¹ At a later period, some one built a small place and lived at the cove. The woman took advantage of his presence and appeared so often to this man that he finally left the vicinity altogether.

On the opposite side of the river and some two miles farther down, there is another cove, less imposing than the rock-bound depths of French Fort Cove, known as Morrison's Cove. The apparently supernatural happenings there are attributed to the activities of Captain Kidd in that area; popular legend holds that he came to the river on at least one occasion. However, the Captain would have needed several times the normal life-span to have visited all the places that legend throughout the world claims he did. Nevertheless, Captain Kidd or not, range things have happened at Morrison's Cove.

As at French Fort Cove, a woman used to accost persons

1. The specific amount in English is probably a later embellishment.

crossing Morrison's Cove bridge and promise to make any one rich who would take her bones to France. Unlike her rival, this one was a nun and was not headless. It is also of interest to note that those who tell the stories speak of the woman at French Fort Cove as wanting her head returned to France, while the nun at Morrison's Cove wanted her bones taken there. This variation suggests that much is not told by these stories.

This nun was not the only woman connected with Morrison's Cove, for another stood on the end of the bridge at certain times and forbade people to cross.

Most folk were quite willing to do as she bade them, with no questions asked. However, one gentleman crossed in spite of her. As he walked past, she struck him with the ends of her fingers: from that day he bore the prints of her fingers on his head and his hair was snow-white at the five spots.

Another man, a Mr. Baldwin, also ignored her warning and attempted to cross the bridge. Part way over, his horse stopped and refused to go beyond that point. He left the horse and wagon on the bridge and went into a nearby house. Mr. Baldwin was not alive when he left that house.

During the summer of 1825, much of the Miramichi, including the town of Newcastle, was destroyed by what has come to be known as The Miramichi Fire. The folklore that has arisen out of this catastrophe would provide material for an article of greater scope than this present one. However, I am going to point out one or two rather interesting beliefs that have been accentuated by the evidence of the few homes that escaped the fire.

Two of the houses in Newcastle are said to have escaped destruction because of the presence of a corpse in each; and an old house at nearby Douglastown is said to have survived the flames for the same reason. So effective were these corpses as a protection against fire, that in one house, beset from without by the flames that were destroying the town, the candles on a table at either end of an infant's corpse within the house burned through the table, yet caused no other damage.

Another of the houses to escape The Miramichi Fire was known as the 'Ledden house' and was built sometime before the American Revolution. This house is said to have escaped the flames because of a caul that was supposed to have been buried within the foundations of the building. Whatever we may think of the efficacy of the caul as a protection against

fire, we have no good reason to doubt that a caul had been placed in the foundations.

The old Peabody house, built about 1848 at Chatham, was recently torn down. A small glass phial was found in the foundations. While it was impossible to identify its contents, it is probable that it contained a caul, thus indicating adherence to belief in such practice just a century ago and lending plausibility to the theory that local folklore, concerning the presence of a corpse or a caul as a protection against fire, arose out of what was originally a firm conviction in the minds of ordinary people.

Thus far I have been dealing with folklore as it is tinged with the supernatural. Yet, the reader must not conclude that the folklore of the Miramichi is confined entirely to this phase of human experience. There is a great mass of poetry and prose that deals with the more commonplace happenings in the lives of the residents of the Miramichi valley.² Much of this rose out of events that took place on homesteads, on fishing boats, in shipyards, in lumber camps, and on stream drives. Because the lumbermen seem to have been most prolific in this line, include two folk-tales that have come out of the lumbering industry and that show how incidents are woven into the folklore of the region. The one is what we might call a transition tale in that, while it is primarily a tale from the lumber camps, it deals with the supernatural; the other is a genuine folk-tale of the lumbermen in that it resulted from a very unsupernatural accident that took place on a stream drive.

In 1875, there was a lumber camp on the Dungarvon river. The young cook was reputed to have had a quantity of gold, which he carried in the money-belt about his waist. One evening the men returned to find the boss already in camp and the young cook dead. The boss said that the cook had died for no known reason; however, the men noted that the money-belt was missing.

It snowed so hard during the night that it was impossible to take the cook to town for a decent burial in a graveyard, so the body was buried by a small spring—since known as Whooper Spring—quite near the camp.

The following night the woods resounded with unearthly whoopings and shoutings. Despite the deep snow, the whole crew headed for town the next morning. The company sent in another crew, but they too left—as did a third crew.

Two years later, a well known lumberman, Paul King-

² Lord Beaverbrook and Miss Manny are presently organizing a collection of this material.

ston, was hauling supplies to another camp on the Dungarvon in the late afternoon. Hearing a whoop, which he took to be from some of the loggers, Paul answered. "Then all hell broke loose. There was a bedlam of sound—whoops and yells and shouts came from all sides. The horses plunged, reared, jumped, and broke all their rigging." At length the noise died down and Paul made his way to the camp. He was not the only one to hear the whooping, which took place at intervals over a period of thirty-seven years. Woodsmen were afraid to go into that section of the woods.

Finally, the matter became one of such concern that, in 1912, Father Murdoch, of Renous, took a party of men to Whooper Spring. They dug the bones of the cook out of their lonely grave and reburied them in the cemetery at Renous. Since that day the Dungarvon Whooper has not been heard. Michael Whalen, of Renous, gave the event a place in the written folklore of the Miramichi in his poem "The Dungarvon Whooper."

There is a hard and dangerous fall, the Esty, on the North Branch of the Sevogle, which, like the Dungarvon, eventually flows into the Miramichi River. Some years ago, a stream driver named Fabian Breau had a narrow escape on a log-jam at the falls. This incident is remembered in local folklore as the poem "Fabian Breau", which I reproduce here as a specimen of folk poetry.

The river was roaring, its limits ignoring,
 And a million of lumber was jammed in the falls.
 The drivers stood sound with pickpoles and peavies,
 Like sentinels on guard when reveille called.
 They had worked hard since morning, and now without warning
 The basin was cleared and it hung on the pitch.
 They well knew the danger to step on the lumber,
 Which now every moment would tremble and twitch.
 A man of great courage whom you could not discourage
 Stepped up to the foreman, who turned with a frown,
 "I'll chance it," he said as he shouldered his peavie.
 There was fear in our hearts as we watched him go down.
 The water was seething, the lumber was heaving|
 As he picked out a key log that butted the shore,
 The jam seemed to hold for one breath-taking second,
 And then hell broke loose with a rendering roar.
 The lumber was breaking, the ledges were shaking,
 As Breau tried his best to get back to the ledge;
 With logs breaking and cracking and dropping around him,
 His retreat was cut off, he went over the edge.

3. G. B. Johnson, *Miramichi Woodsman*.

Imagine our feeling as we watched it, now kneeling,
 Some men there I know had not prayed for years.
 It was moving to see them, their hearts full of anguish,
 Their lips forming prayers, their eyes full of tears.
 But our worry was needless as we prayed⁴ there, all heedless
 Of the cracking lumber in the torrent's great roar,
 Breau came to the surface, the current did guide him,
 And bore him safe to a wing that had formed on the shore.
 He had gone down with the lumber, and had quickly gone under,
 The undertow got him and bore him away.
 It bore him beyond the fall of lumber,
 Just how he escaped, of course, no one can say.
 All ragged and torn, almost nude as when borne,
 Except for the scapulars he held in his hand,
 They seemed somehow to completely enshroud him,
 They hung from his neck by a thin cotton band.
 Here's a toast of good health that is better than wealth,
 Here's health and good luck to young Fabian Bruea.

Finally, in this survey of the folklore of the Miramichi, we must note that some folk-tales deal with Poltergeists. Here is a humorous one.

The home of a rather prominent resident of Newcastle was the scene of strange tappings, opening doors, etc. Indeed the poltergeist, or poltergeists, that occupied this house was of such strength and persistence that a door would mysteriously swing open despite heavy door-stops.

In the course of time the house was sold to another gentleman in Newcastle who took no stock in poltergeists and who consistently denied hearing or seeing anything to suggest their presence. However, after some time, this gentleman asked the former owner to come and see him, saying that he had something to shew him. When the latter arrived, he was taken to the cellar, where the present owner shewed him a new concrete floor and sheepishly, but very seriously, remarked: "There, I guess that'll stop those ghosts."

4. Note the attitude toward prayer.