

THE RENFREW BALLAD OF "YOUNG CONWAY"

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"Young Conway," a native North American ballad, originated in the Renfrew county region of Ontario. Edith Fowke included it in her book *Lumbering Songs From The Northern Woods*. It concerns a young Irishman who was heading up to the shanty, and for unknown reasons turned back to attend a Polish social gathering some twenty miles away. Feelings of national heritage began to run high at this function, together with a misunderstanding resulting from a joke, a fight broke out. Knives were drawn and as a direct result of a hit on the head from a hatchet, this young man died.

Mrs. Fowke collected four versions of this ballad: from Michael Cuddihy of Hull, Quebec, Emerson Woodcock of Peterborough, Ontario, Gertie Mercier of Foresters Falls, Ontario, and Mrs. John Matthews of Don Mills, Ontario. I have been able to add two more versions to these, one from Barney McCaffrey of Barry's Bay, who heard it from Cecil Kennedy of Chapeau, Quebec. The other version has been acquired from oral tradition within the Conway family of the Barry's Bay area. Uncles and cousins of mine have heard this version in the lumber shanty and it is this version which I will refer to.

All the versions have the same basic story line. However there are differences concerning the date of the murder, and the burial site which are immediately obvious. More background information has become available to me because of a family connection.

The ballad which was acquired from oral tradition is the most complete of all the versions, and it originates in a geographic area which is closer to the site of the murder than any of the others. This ballad is known as "Young Conway," or "The Renfrew Murder," as recorded by Mrs. Fowke. Mr. McCaffrey also called it "The Conway Murder." The ballad is a "come all ye" which is typical of songs of Irish origin. The date of departure given in the McCaffrey version is September 18, and the date in the family version is November 14. This does not refer to the date of the murder, but to the time Conway left his home to go up to the shanty.

Home for this young man, whose name was Michael Conway, was Douglas, a small town about ten miles from Renfrew. It is possible he left Douglas some time in November or September to head up to the shanty. The camp was supposed to be up above Pembroke, a larger community along the Ottawa River, twenty-five miles from Douglas. Shantymen went up to the camp whenever freeze-up came.

The Cuddihy, Woodcock, and family versions all say that Conway left home with his brother-in-law: "In company with his brother-in-law to the shanty they were going." According to family sources his brother-in-law was Tom McGee, who also lived in Douglas. While at Pembroke they decided to go back to Renfrew. It does not say how long they spent in Pembroke. Conway had relatives in Pembroke and their name was Mulvihill. It was here that Conway picked up Ned and Mick Mulvihill and with Tom McGee he went to the Polish spree in Renfrew.

According to Father Gravelle² a wedding took place in Renfrew, on January 17, 1886, with the festivities at the home of Matthew Dzonkoski, and it was that wedding that these four attended. There may have been a wedding on that day but it was not at this wedding Conway was killed; although it may have been this house.

Michael Conway died on Thursday, December 17, 1885, and was buried in Douglas. There is a family plot which shows Michael Conway dying on this date at the age of twenty-seven. To substantiate the validity of this ballad and the death of Conway, I went to the newspaper files of York University, and found this caption in *The Globe*, dated Friday, December 18, 1885, on the front page under "News Of The Day":

"A serious stabbing affray has occurred at Renfrew Station, and it is feared that two young men are fatally injured."

This article proves the event did take place, and it did happen in Renfrew. It further proves that the incident did occur on December 17, 1885, and all other dates as to this murder are incorrect. Furthermore it leaves no doubt as to the home of Michael Conway, and it shows that it was a Wednesday night that he went to the wedding.

In the versions by Cuddihey, Woodcock, and Mercier the place of burial was St. Mary's church in Douglas. According to church records the Catholic church in Douglas, where the grave site is located, is now and was always called St. Michael's, as it is in the family version and the McCaffrey version. St. Michael's became a parish in 1887, and previous to this it was a mission of the church in Eganville, the neighbouring town six miles away. The parish in Eganville was founded in 1859, and is and always was called St. James. The reason the name was confused is perhaps because St. Mary's is easier to sing than St. Michael's, or when the name got lost because Mary is such a common name for a church it was inserted.

Father Gravelle tells of a baby carriage which was brought to the bride as a gift, and was the joke which initiated the trouble. As far as family references go there is some indication that this is true, but that the response to the gift was unexpected. It seems Conway was noted for his jokes, which gave him a reputation.

One story has it that while at a picnic at what is now Cormac he pulled out a revolver, and fired it in order to emphasize a point. A priest who was present took possession of the gun for the remainder of the day. Upon returning it to Conway he said, to the effect, that there would come a day when he would have need of the gun and not have it. This indicates more meaning to the line, "Our hero being light-hearted for pleasure there he went," than first appeared. Father Gravelle pointed out that these gentlemen did not have invitations to the wedding. At that time it was customary for neighbours and the folk in general to show up without invitations. It was generally expected that if there was a dance or wedding at a certain place a gathering would follow. It was also true that a certain decorum was expected though. In all the versions a Polish 'spree' is mentioned and there seems to be some doubt as to this occasion being a wedding or a dance. It has been a Polish custom in the past to keep the wedding reception active until the eighth day. I believe that because these events took place in mid-week, an unlikely time to be married, together with Father Gravelle's explanation, it was a mid-week wedding celebration Conway attended. It was a common occurrence that

when Irishmen turned up at a Polish gathering, or vice versa, a "misunderstanding" was not unusual.

As well as detailing a particular event this ballad tells its listeners a great deal about the kind of men, and the kind of times these were. There seems to have been a good deal of drinking at these gatherings, probably because these men worked from morning until night most other days. It was an escape, a holiday, a time to be with your friends, and a time to act in a "manly" way.

Conway was a man of twenty-seven and a part-time school-teacher. He had a reputation for being strong and the ability to handle himself: "But Conway he being stout and strong his way up he did squeeze." Often men fought simply to find out which was "the better man." These bouts were usually quite heralded events, and sometimes pitted the best man of one camp against the best man of another. The on-the-spot settlement was the most common method, used without the promotion. There were rules to these matches which everyone knew and was expected to follow. The rules called for fists only to be used, no one was to interfere with the two combatants, and gangs were not formed for revenge on an individual. This ballad was written as a memorial to Conway, and is also meant to be a slur on the Polish. The lines "another Poland interfered," "they all turned on poor Conway," and "they stabbed him o'er and o'er," as well as being descriptive serve to show how this group, according to the author, did not abide by these rules.

Tom McGee also had a reputation, which included being a bit of a trouble-maker, as well as being handy with a knife. McGee was a good friend of Conway, coming from the same town, and they were related. When Conway saw McGee getting drunk he asked him to leave, which McGee did. It is said he later stated that if he had stayed with Conway there would have been more than one corpse taken from that house. There is a direct reference to this in the ballad, "And if poor Tom had of stayed this tale might not be so."

The family interpretation of the incident agrees with Father Gravelle by saying the Mulvihill brothers did not run away, but either went to get help, or went to get medical assistance, or both. Someone else must have been badly hurt as the newspaper clipping says two men were feared dead.

There is no evidence that Conway's body was ever removed from the house. Tradition has it that Conway lay dying in a pool of blood, and was in an unconscious condition when the law arrived. The law at the time was represented by one constable stationed in Renfrew; his name was Connelly. When he arrived, perhaps because he happened to be Irish, he encountered difficulty trying to investigate the situation. He took out his gun and fired shots and said that the next man who moved would be a sorry one.

Recently when a relative of mine was speaking to a resident of Renfrew of Polish origin, he informed him that he had moved into the house where this event took place. He said while renovating the house they found two slugs in the floor. There is a further story which says the blood stains on the floor where Conway lay would not come out. "And a blow from a tommyhawk on the head laid Conway on the floor,"/ "Our hero thus remained": these lines disagree with the Gravelle version, which says the body was thrown over a fence.

Conway's mother arrived before he died, apparently with the law. She was sixty-one years old at the time, by the gravestone which is located at the site. This is stated in the ballad, "His dear old mother she being there, it was hard to hear her cry."

Michael Conway's death was caused by a blow on the head with a hatchet, and he most likely bled to death because he remained on the floor overnight. In the course of constable Connelly's investigation it is said he received answers only in Polish, a language he could not understand. No charges were laid because it was impossible to determine who actually struck the fatal blow.

Conway's funeral was at St. Michael's Catholic church in Douglas, and he was buried in the cemetery. This religious influence is most obvious in the last verse of the family version. Conway is given the status of a martyr or a patriot, no doubt a result of Irish sentimentality. This ballad later proved to be an embarrassment to a number of Irish of the area, especially for the singers in the shanty. Mr. Cuddihey confirms what I have heard, that this ballad usually caused disagreements between the Polish and Irish shantymen, when sung in the camps. It is also of note that when I was trying to acquire details of this event, it was suggested that the best thing that could happen to this ballad would be for it to be forgotten.

Taking into account all the versions which have been collected, and the lore which has become available, I will speculate on what happened, and perhaps explain some of the reasons.

Michael Conway left Douglas with his brother-in-law Tom McGee, with the intention of going to a lumber shanty, somewhere north of Pembroke. This was in December a few days before his death. While in Pembroke he heard of this particular wedding in Renfrew. It is even possible that Conway or McGee knew some of the people involved in the wedding party. Conway, along with Mick and Ned Mulvihill and McGee, decided to go and bring along a baby carriage as a gift, for a joke, with the idea of being able to take care of themselves if any trouble did develop. I do not think this joke was meant to start a brawl, but it was perhaps intended to antagonize. They were apparently the only non-Polish guests. They did not have invitations but I feel this was a factor leading to hostilities. A fist fight between two of the guests began, and this was the first step. Then for whatever reasons, either because someone interfered, or because someone pulled a knife, the situation became immediately uncontrollable. This already volatile situation was undoubtedly enhanced by the consumption of alcohol. There is reference to this in the ballad. McGee left because he was drunk, and I feel there is no doubt that the two Mulvihills barely escaped with their lives. After Conway was rendered unconscious by a blow on the head with a hatchet, no one moved until the law arrived. With the law came Conway's mother. They found him on the floor, where he died a short time later; it was now the next day. Michael Conway's death occurred on Thursday, December 17, 1885, in Renfrew.

This ballad was written a short time later by someone in the Douglas area, and was often sung with rousing effect in the lumber shanties.

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NOTES

1. Edith Fowke, *Lumbering Songs from the Northern Woods* (Austin: Univ. of Texas Press, 1970 rpt. Toronto: NC Press, 1985), 150-53.
2. Letter in *Renfrew Advance*, Nov. 18, 1965, quoted in Fowke 152.

THE RENFREW MURDER or THE CONWAY MURDER

Barney McCaffrey, from Cecil Kennedy

On the eighteenth of September we left our happy home,
Accompanied by two Mulvihills to the shanty they did roam.
They changed their minds in Pembroke and there they turned around;
They headed back to Renfrew it was their favorite town.

On a Tuesday night in Renfrew they went to a Poland spree
Accompanied by two Mulvihills likewise young Tom McGee.
McGee quite loud, says Conway you're also on the tight.
He asked McGee if he'd go home for fear he'd start a fight.

Ned Mulvihill and a Poland got into a little fuss;
They jostled around quite manfully 'til Ned gave him the worst.
Another Poland interfered, Mich Mulvihill hit him,
But he no sooner had struck the blow than the slaughter it did begin.

Our hero he was sitting there a crying out for peace.
He sprang upon those cowardly dogs his comrades to release.
Those cowardly dogs were angry, blood was their delight;
They all piled on to Conway, it was a dreadful fight.

Now seven to one it was not fair; they fought him to his knees,
But Conway young and manfully he fought then to displease.
The second time they caught him they stabbed him o'er and o'er,
And then a blow from a tomahawk laid Conway on the floor.

From nine o'clock that evening 'til six o'clock next day
His body lay upon the floor; it was as cold as clay.
They carried him to St. Michael's Church; they laid him in the ground,
And of the friends who were gathered there not a dry eye could be found.

YOUNG CONWAY

Oral Tradition

Come all you true born Irishmen and list while I relate
'Tis of a cruel murder that happened here of late
When one of our brave heroes met with a cruel fate.

On the fourteenth of November he left his happy home,
In company with his brother-in-law to the shanty they were going.
They changed their minds in Pembroke and there they turned around
And all set sail for Renfrew, it being his favorite town.

On Tuesday night in Renfrew he went to a Poland spree
In company with two Mulvihills and likewise Tom McGee.
Our hero he being light-hearted for pleasure there he went;
To spend a quiet and peaceful night was Conway's whole intent.

Our hero studied for a while his friends being on the tight;
He asked McGee if he'd go home for fear he'd start a fight.
McGee being true to Conway it's homeward he did go
And if poor Tom he had of stayed this tale might not be so.

Ned Mulvihill and a Poland they raised a little fuss;
They jostled round quite manfully till Ned gave him the worst.
Another Poland interfered, Mick Mulvihill struck him;
The blow was scarcely given till a battle did begin.

Our hero he being sitting down and calling out for peace,
He sprang into the Poland midst his comrades to release.
These cowardly dogs being angry and blood was their delight,
They all turned on poor Conway and his comrades took to flight.

Now ten to one 'twas hardly fair, they brought him to his knees,
But Conway he being stout and strong his way up he did squeeze.
The second time they knocked him down, they stabbed him o'er and o'er,
And the blow from a tomahawk on the head laid Conway on the floor.

From three o'clock that morning till four o'clock next day
Our hero thus remained a terrible sight to see.
At half past four he passed away, brought tears from every eye;
His dear old mother she being there it was hard to hear her cry.

He had the largest funeral that ever through Douglas came.
There were four and twenty young men and they all dressed the same.
They conveyed him to St. Michael's church and there they laid him low;
A tear did fall from every eye did this young Conway know

Now for his brave and manly deeds his enemies were but few
With the exception of this Polands; I hope they'll be put through.
I hope God will forgive him and grant him this request
That when he reaches the eternal shore *in heaven he may find rest.*

Résumé: Larry Reynolds discute la ballade «Young Conway», chanson qui traite de l'histoire d'un jeune homme assassiné à Renfrew, et qui était très populaire parmi les bûcherons en Ontario. Il présente une version reçue de la famille de Conway qui clarifie beaucoup des détails inexacts contenus dans d'autres versions de cette histoire en vers.