

THE BLOOMING BRIGHT STAR OF BELLE ISLE: AMERICAN NATIVE OR IRISH IMMIGRANT?

JOHN MOULDEN

THE STAR OF BELLE ISLE*

Version A: Kenneth Peacock, *Songs of Newfoundland Outports*
(Ottawa: 1965): 598-99.

MS T11

Michael Aylward
King's Cove, July, 1952

Moderately slow



1. One evening for pleasure I rambled
To view the fair fields all alone,
It was down by the banks of Loch Erin
Where beauty and pleasure were known.
2. I spied a fair maid at her labor,
Which caused me to stay for awhile;
I thought her the goddess of beauty,
The blooming bright star of Belle Isle.
3. I humbled myself to her beauty:
"Fair maiden where do you belong?
Are you from the heavens descended
Abiding in Cupid's fair throng?"
4. "Young man, I will tell you a secret,
It's true I'm a maid that is poor,
And to part with my vows and my promises,
'Tis more than my poor heart can endure.
5. "Therefore I remain at my service,
And go through all hardship and toil,
And wait for the lad that do love me,
Alone on the banks of Belle Isle."

6. "Young maiden I wish not to banter,
It's true I came here in disguise;
I came to fulfill my last promise,
And hope to give you a surprise.
7. "I own you're the maid I love dearly,
You've been in my heart all the while;
For there's no other damsel in this wide world
Than my blooming bright star of Belle Isle."
8. This couple they both got married,
In wedlock and soft unity;
May the great God above them protect them,
And give them long life in the land.
9. May the great God above them protect them,
And loyalty be theirs all the while,
And honey may sweeten their comfort,
Along on the banks of Belle Isle.

It was G. Malcolm Laws Jr. who claimed that "The Blooming Bright Star of Belle Isle" "...is a Newfoundland product in the English or Anglo-Irish broadside tradition."¹ My first encounter with the song was in Edith Fowke and Richard Johnston's *Folk Songs of Canada*,² a version slightly abridged from that quoted above. It was obvious to me that the place-names would fit a north Irish locale as well, if not better, than the presumed Canadian one; for not only was there a Belle Isle in County Fermanagh, it was in Lough Erne, pronounced invariably by traditional singers, Lough *Erin*. I saw no reason, other than its exclusively Canadian provenance, why this should not be an Irish song; but who was I to quarrel with Authority?

However, those more versed in the Canadian tradition than Dr. Laws or myself had reservations also. Edith Fowke said, "It seems to be a local adaptation of an old Irish love song, 'Loch Erin's Sweet Riverside,' and it also resembles another Irish song, 'The Lass of Dunmore,' both of which Francis Bennett of Quyon, Quebec, sang to the same tune."³ Kenneth Peacock said, "This lovely lyric is generally considered to be of local origin, possibly because of its reference to Belle Isle. Although I have done no sleuthing, I would strongly suspect an Old World origin for this Newfoundland variant."⁴

In 1979, at Mrs. Fowke's request, I made some enquiries and discovered the existence of the version, collected in Fermanagh, which is cited below as version B. A taped copy was sent to her and, on December 10, 1979, she wrote, "I'm trying to discover whether this song, which we have always assumed was a localised Newfoundland version of an Irish song, is really an Irish song transported in its entirety."⁵ However, there was a problem about version B: the mention of St. John's, and where Mrs. Fowke "...had hoped it would prove the missing ancestor of the Newfoundland song,... the St. John's reference seems to indicate that it is a Newfoundland version somehow returned to Ireland."⁶ A few months later, another Irish text turned up, version C, but it too contained reference to St. John's, or so it seemed probable, for although the writer of the manuscript had written, "St. John" he had so uncertain a grasp on his literacy that missing letters and inconsistent orthography were pervasive.

Version B: Hugh Tracey, Boho, co. Fermanagh, Ireland; recorded by Len Graham, July 1972 (unpublished).

One evening as I strayed out for pleasure/Where beauty and love do resort
It was down by the banks of Lough Erne/I wandered for pleasure and sport
Where the maidens do sing at their labour/Through hardships and trouble and toil
There I met with a beautiful fair one/Called the lovely sweet Star of Belle Isle.

I instantly stepped it up to her/She approached me right there with a smile
Saying I am no lady of honour/But a poor working maid of Belle Isle
Oh Mary resign from your labours/And come to the town of St John's
'Tis there many pleasures await you/And servants all at your command

Oh, I'll not resign from my labours/Through hardships and troubles and toil
I'll wait for the lad that has left me/Here alone by the banks of Belle Isle
So now I've a story to tell you/I'm only a maid that is true
But to break the fond vows that I made him/Is a thing that I never will do

I ne'er thought that Cupid would win me/But beauty it did me beguile
For seven long years I've been wandering/For you lovely Star of Belle Isle
Now I heard that this couple got married/In wedlock they have joined their hands
For him she crossed over the ocean/Far away from the town of St John's

May the great King of Glory protect them/May liberty shine on their toil
May Johnny find comfort for ever/With his beautiful Star of Belle Isle

Version C: from the "Higgins manuscript": a County Down ms. of c. 1910 but which contains texts of songs that were probably learned by the singer-compiler about 1870. His identity is unknown. It was in the possession of Edward Higgins, Newcastle, Co. Down, Northern Ireland, at his death. Now in the writer's possession. It is hoped to publish a description and some texts shortly.

the lovlv swete star of Berlile

Transcribed literatim, the writer knew no punctuation, with glosses.

one evening as I roamed for pleasure
Where beauty and love do resort
O its Down by the banks of lohern
Where the youl find pleasur and sport
A young fael tha sang at her laibour
that caused me to stop for A while
and I found her a charming yong Creature
and the lovely swet star of Berlile

lough Erne
there
fael = female

I unbeled my self to her beauty
and ask here where did she resid
he says then elope from your perants
and Shortley ill make you my bride
She said im no laidy of fortune
aprosHING me then with A smile
She said im a plain Country girl
and A poor Servant maid from berlile

humbled

fortune

O mary resine your hard labour
 and Com to the town of saint Jon
 Where the flowers ar groing
 most charming
 and servants for you at Comand
 I cam to fulfil my last promes
 So let us have Brandy and wine
 and its now I embrace my old
 Charmer
 Shes the Lovely Swet (erasure) star of Berlile

It is not unusual for the Irish repertory to be affected by American influence⁷; several clearly Native American songs have been noted⁸ and several American versions of Irish songs have been returned and rerooted themselves in Irish tradition.⁹ "The Star of Belle Isle," so far as could be told, was either a Canadian song in Irish form which had been assimilated into the Irish repertory because of a coincidence of place-name or an Irish song which had been assimilated into the Canadian repertory for the same reason. Irish songs provide a considerable portion of the Canadian song tradition.¹⁰ The sole obstacle to a plainly Irish ascription is the mention of St. John's.

There is no town in Ireland called St. John's. Had there been, it would have been possible to say that, on the balance of probabilities: two Canadian texts¹¹ and two Irish ones with coincident place names, this was more likely to be an Irish song. There is in County Down, more than a hundred miles from Lough Erne and much too far away in the Irish scale of distance, St. John's Point and close to it St. John's Well; another St. John's Point lies on the north shore of Donegal Bay; there are nine Parishes of the name in Ireland; there is a small area called St. John's in each of Counties Tipperary, Meath, Kildare, and Wexford, but no town, and none of those named is close enough to the area we are concerned with. The only place in Ireland which might do is St. Johnstown, Co. Donegal, only sixty miles from Lough Erne. The temptation was great: by a small nominal transformation St. Johnstown could become the town of St. John's. But there were two contrary arguments. Sixty miles is a considerable distance on foot and is further psychologically, for in middle-nineteenth-century Ireland, when the compiler of the Higgins manuscript probably learned his songs, few people travelled more than ten miles from their birth-place during their lives. To make such a journey would need some compelling reason: a reason implicit in the song; a reason such as marriage, but the town of Enniskillen is only six miles from Belle Isle, co. Fermanagh, and would have been a much more organic destination. Yet, both Irish texts name St. John('s). For both to do so indicates that St. John's had a significance. What significance could it have if there is no such place in Ireland? Inescapably, reluctantly, it was only sensible to let the lady stay where she was, in Newfoundland. But neither Canadian text had St. John's, and there was every reason why the name should be there.

There seemed no way out of the conundrum. It was impossible to posit a set of transmissional circumstances that would allow a Canadian song to have been carried to Ireland and retain a place-name which had only Canadian significance while its Canadian sets lost it. The tendency

towards localisation is so strong that songs accrue local ascriptions; they do not lose them. The name St. John('s) had to have some Irish significance. A comparison of the three texts which are given above provided much needed clarification.

It is instructive to make a composite story from the three texts: A young man goes down to the banks of Lough Erne and meets the Star of Belle Isle. He asks her where she lives (versions A & C) or walks up to her (version B). He praises her beauty (A) or suggests that they elope (C) and she insists that she is only an ordinary girl. In A she affirms her intention to keep a promise despite being ordinary, and this version continues with her statement that she intends to wait for her former lover to whom she made the vow. Both the Irish versions suggest that she should give up her hard work and come to the town of St. John's (B) or St. John (C) and she will be a lady with servants. C then finishes with the young man saying that he is here to redeem a promise and he embraces his "old charmer." This non-conformity is only comprehensible in terms of the young lady's vow of constancy, occurring in A, and, at this point, where the young man has just offered her a life of ease, the girl makes her statement of faithful intent in text B. Both the remaining texts, the Irish one of Hugh Tracey, and the Canadian one, then have the young man disclose that he is the girl's former lover, absent for the standard seven years (B) and they marry in quick style and emigrate, "For him she crossed over the ocean/ Far away from the town of St. John's." (B). In A they simply marry, but both versions end with a prayer for their future contentment.

The mention of St. John's is not the only element of the Irish texts which is absent from the Canadian ones. There is also the question of emigration. This is also hinted at in text B where, in stanza 4, line 2, "May liberty shine on their toil," we have the word "liberty"; song after song in the Irish tradition names America as "the land of liberty." If this is an emigration song, does it afford any way out of our dilemma? It is sensible to assume that St. John's is an emigrant's land-fall; that they are not going from the town of St. John's but to it? A point in favour is that it was *to* St. John's that the suggested elopement was to be. The matter can only be tested by an inquiry into the likelihood that a couple emigrating to America would possibly have gone to or through St. John's and how likely it would have been that the name would have been familiar in the area of Lough Erne.

The emigration ports nearest to Fermanagh were, from south to north: Sligo, Ballyshannon, Donegal Town, Killybegs, Londonderry. The last was probably too far for Fermanagh emigrants to have embarked there, but many emigrants went to Canada from there. In 1832, of 7643 emigrants leaving Londonderry, 2396 were bound for St. John, New Brunswick, 2607 for Quebec, and 2640 for the whole of the United States.¹² St. John, New Brunswick, was, we are told "...the cradle of Derry trade with North America and the destination of great numbers of emigrants for Canada or in transit to the United States."¹³ In 1847, the first great year of famine in Ireland, St. John received nine shiploads of emigrants from Londonderry (alias Derry): 2870 people. The town of St. John had also, in the same year, nine ships from Sligo with 2704 souls aboard, and one each from Ballyshannon (4 people), Donegal (135) and Killybags (presumably Killybegs) (50).¹⁴ A cursory glance at newspaper advertisements for emigrant ships¹⁵ reveals a widespread confusion between St. John and St. John's: "For St. John's, New Brunswick, The

fine fast-sailing brig Beaver, John Anderson, Commander.”¹⁶ There were, so far as I can discover, no sailings of emigrant vessels to St. John’s, Newfoundland. It seems beyond doubt that emigration from the area around Belle Isle, Co. Fermanagh, to St. John, New Brunswick, would have been common. That it was also well known as an emigrant destination is attested by several songs. These too are inclined to confuse St. John and St. John’s:

“The Loss of the Mount House Schooner”¹⁷: “From the Shamrock Shore, away we bore, for St. John’s we were bound.”

“North America, or the Flower of Enniskillen”¹⁸ (alias “You Lovers All”)¹⁹ — this one is set in exactly the right area for our study because Enniskillen is only six miles from Belle Isle — has the couple emigrate and settle in St. John(s): “They seem to be quite happy in the town of St. John’s”¹⁸ or in “St. John.”¹⁹

“The Shipwreck”²⁰ refers to a sailing in the opposite direction and to a different port from any we have considered but still serves to demonstrate that Irish singers would have been familiar with the name St. John(s): “For Limerick in the Francis from St. John’s we set sail.”

“Carnabane”²¹: “But when I’m landed in St. John’s I’ll fill my glass and grieve no more.”

“The Shamrock Shore”²²: “Fresh water there, near twenty tons, for passengers did store,/ Lest we should want going to St. John’s far, far from the Shamrock Shore.”

And are we entitled to add our two Irish versions of “The Blooming Bright Star of Belle Isle”? “Oh Mary resign from your labours/ And come to the town of Saint John(s), ’Tis there many pleasures await you And servants all at your command”; and from one of them the confusing, “For him she crossed over the ocean/ Far away from the town of St. John’s.” The confusion is resolved easily if “from” is allowed to be someone’s slip for “to.”

Is there more to be said? I feel that the point has been laboured but hesitate to present a less convincing argument in face of the statement in *Native American Balladry*. It is interesting to conjecture whether the Native American ascription would have been made had even one Irish text, no matter what complications its interpretation presented, been known at the time.

I cannot any longer see any reason to think of “The Blooming Bright Star of Belle Isle” as an American Native, or even a localised, variant of an Irish song. In 1851, 38,475 people lived in and around St. John, New Brunswick; 12,872 of them had been born in Ireland.²⁴ Among them was the Star of Belle Isle.²⁵ Would that they had all been as beautiful.

Portrush, Northern Ireland

NOTES

- 1 G. Malcolm Laws, Jr., *Native American Balladry* (Philadelphia: American Folklore Society, 1960) 243.
- 2 Edith Fowke and Richard Johnston, *Folk Songs of Canada* (Waterloo, Ont.: Waterloo Music, 1954).
- 3 Edith Fowke, *The Penguin Book of Canadian Folk Songs* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973) 204.
- 4 Kenneth Peacock, *Songs of the Newfoundland Outports* (Ottawa: National Museum, 1965) 598-99.
- 5 Letter to the present writer.
- 6 Letter dated 8 Feb. 1980, to the present writer.

7. D. K. Wilgus has surveyed an aspect of this in "American Ballads in Ireland" in *Folklore Today: A festschrift for Richard M. Dorson* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ., 1976), ed. Linda Degh et al. 507-23.
8. The major north Irish published collection, Sam Henry's "Songs of the People," in the Coleraine, County Londonderry, *The Northern Constitution* from 1923-39, includes at least six songs of American origin, including "The Lakes of Ponchartrain" (Laws H9), "The Little Mohea" (Laws H8), and "The Farmer's Son and the Shanty Boy" (Laws, 277). (For details see the present writer's *Songs of the People: Selections from the Sam Henry Collection, Part One*, Belfast, 1979.)
9. Examples are "Lovin' Hannah (Alan Lomax, *Folk Songs of North America* [New York, 1960] 209, a derivative of "Going to Mass Last Sunday" (Peter Kennedy, *Folksongs of Britain and Ireland* [London, 1975], No. 155. "Lovin' Hannah is presently being Irished by singers in all parts of the country, having been introduced by the Longford singer Dave Brennan who learned it in England. "The Cowboy of Loreto" (Henry, No. 680), a derivative of "The Unfortunate Rake," in The American form most commonly "The Streets of Loredo," has been changed to Loreto. It is interesting that there was and is a Loreto Convent in Coleraine where Henry lived.
10. When attempting to clarify an obscurity in a song collected in Ireland I most often find that there is a more substantial set among the collections of Helen Creighton, Kenneth Peacock, Edith Fowke, MacEdward Leach, or their predecessors, in the Canadian field.
11. The first was in Gerald S. Doyle, *Old-Time Songs and Poetry of Newfoundland* (St. John's, 1928), given as a text only, which is reprinted with an independently collected tune in Elisabeth B. Greenleaf and Grace Y. Mansfield, *Ballads and Sea Songs of Newfoundland* (Cambridge, MA, 1963), cited with one stanza in Laws (H29); the second collected by Peacock and cited as version A.
12. Sholto Cooke, *The Maiden City and the Western Ocean* (Dublin, n.d. but c. 1955) 50. (The Maiden City is a poetic appellation for Londonderry.)
13. Cooke 9.
14. J. Elizabeth Cushing, Teresa Casey, and Monica Robertson, *A Chronicle of Irish Emigration to Saint John, New Brunswick, 1847* (St. John, 1979) 66.
15. *Londonderry Journal* or Belfast Newsletter files from 1820 onwards.
16. *Londonderry Journal*, 7 March 1826.
17. Madden Collection at Cambridge University Library, England, Vol. 24:443. This collection of ballad sheets (Vol. 24 mainly from Cork imprints and Vol. 25 mainly Dublin imprints, assembled by Sir Frederic Madden from c. 1835) is listed by title in *Catalogue of the Bradshaw Collection*, Vol. 3, Cambridge, 1916, cols 1355-1384.
18. Madden Collection, Vol. 24, no. 556.
19. Henry, No. 525.
20. Madden Collection, Vol. 25, no. 79.
21. Henry, No. 100.
22. Henry, No. 192.
23. Cushing et al. 4.
14. This statement is not to be taken as a serious attempt at dating though I would be reasonably sure that the song did emigrate at about that time. The loss of the references to St. John in the Canadian sets probably resulted from the song's arrival. Having got to St. John there was no longer any point in retaining reference to going there. While the name Belle Isle is not evidence of Native North American status, the coincidence of the place-name played a major part in the song's survival in the New World.

Resumé: John Moulden, qui s'intéresse à la chanson folklorique irlandaise, décrit la méthodologie qui l'a mené à la conclusion que "The Blooming Bright Star of Belle Isle," autrefois considérée comme adaptation terreneuvienne d'une chanson irlandaise, était, en fait, importée directement de l'Irlande. On trouve les noms de lieux "Belle Isle" et "Lough Erne" en Irlande, où l'on a recueilli deux versions de la chanson. Ces deux textes mentionnent le port de St-Jean (Terre-Neuve), port bien connu par les immigrants irlandais.