

THE CHRISTMAS CAROLLING TRADITION OF GREEN'S HARBOUR, TRINITY BAY, NEWFOUNDLAND.

GORDON COX

Folklorists have provided little detailed discussion of Christmas carolling traditions, probably because of a suspicion that church-oriented activities are imposed on a culture, and are therefore not truly representative of it. To make matters worse, many carols in the popular repertoire are Christmas hymns, deriving from the nineteenth-century evangelical revival, and often composed by local church musicians. These suspicions, however, miss the point, underestimating the ability of people to make significant adaptations to an imposed culture. Furthermore, as Erik Routley points out, the evangelical revival and particularly the methods of the Wesleys, made the hymn into a sacred folksong.¹

This article describes a living tradition within the context of the community, and treats the carolling as a musical occasion. Marcia Herndon describes the musical occasion as "an isolatable segment of human behavior,"² having the following characteristics: a named event, an event with a beginning and an end, varying degrees of organization of activity, audience/performances, and location. As such the occasion will express some of the shared forms and values of a society, as well as some of its preoccupations.

Carolling takes place in several communities in the Trinity Bay South area of Newfoundland, and there have been reports of a similar tradition in the Notre Dame Bay region. One of the communities with the strongest tradition is Green's Harbour. Despite the present possessive form of the name it is likely that it was originally Green Harbour, referring to "the forests around the hills and ponds when the first settlers arrived there."³ These trees attracted people who came to cut wood for building their boats. The community has been settled for about 150 years, and today has a population approaching a thousand. Originally all the houses looked out onto the harbor, but today there is a considerable amount of building along the paved road passing through the community.

Until the Second World War, the occupations of the population were divided between lumbering and fishing. The war brought opportunities for construction and carpentry work on the American Bases, and the lumbermen in particular adapted to this work. Today there are only half a dozen fishermen left, the rest of the population being mostly involved in construction and service industries, some travelling 70 miles to St. John's, and some 60 miles to the oil refinery at Come by Chance.

Green's Harbour has always been considered particularly religious, and the three denominations – the United Church, the Anglican Church, and the Salvation Army – occupy commanding positions in the community. Their

¹Routley, E., *The English Carol* (London: Herbert Jenkins, 1958), pp. 144-45.

²Herndon, M., "The Cherokee Baalgame Cycle: An Ethnomusicologist's View," *Ethnomusicology*, 15, (1971), 339.

³Seary, E. R., *Place Names of the Avalon Peninsula of the Island of Newfoundland* (Toronto: University of Toronto, 1971), p. 97.

influence accounts for puritanical objections in the past to dancing and card playing. Although the churches are declining in strength, they are still important to the pre-Confederation generation, including those in their middle and late thirties.

In the past, musical entertainment took place in the churches, the Orange Lodge, and the hall of the Society of United Fishermen. Today the local school and newly arrived Lions Club have largely supplanted these. A few years ago the "times"⁴ would have an accordionist or fiddler present, but now these have been replaced by rock bands. There is an interesting continuation of tradition, however, in that when the official dance is over and the band has packed away the instruments, a few men get out their accordions, and a second dance starts, with a smaller crowd. The repertoire includes the old jigs, old hymns such as "O Boundless Salvation" and "In the Sweet Bye and Bye," and the latest Country and Western songs.

The singing of the Christmas carols on Christmas Eve is the most prized traditional activity still carried on in the community. It has been in existence for as long as anyone can remember, and it is taken for granted that the carols came over with the first settlers from England. There was a break in the tradition in the late 1950s and early '60s, significantly in the post-Confederation period, but it was then revived with the help of the present leader. Until a few years ago the group was made up exclusively of men from Crockers Cove, a small neighborhood separated by a short distance from the rest of the community. Today the carollers include some women, and most still come from Crockers Cove.

Knowing of my interest in the carols, and as a result of having lived in the community for a year, last year the carollers invited me to take part in the event. The organisation is very informal, depending on the number turning up, and on the general enthusiasm. The decision to go ahead is taken only about an hour before the start. A dozen of us gathered together, and at 11 p.m. on Christmas Eve we set off.

The object of the carolling is to visit as many homes as possible, concentrating on those containing the elderly and the shut-ins. A conscious effort is made to include different sections of the community, and to go from one end of the harbor to the other.

The leader of the group is a small, wiry, energetic man, who was asked to take over the leadership which had previously been held by his uncle and great uncle. He is an active musician in the community, leading the local Salvation Army band, writing his own songs, and singing in rallies and services with his family. His functions as leader are to pitch the carols correctly and to lead the singing.

Most of the doors in the community are still left unlocked at night, and particularly on Christmas Eve. The carollers are eagerly awaited. The leader goes into the house first, starting to sing in the porch, and is followed into the kitchen by the rest of the group. They sing the four carols in their repertoire, always in the same order.

⁴For a discussion of the Newfoundland "time" see George J. Casey, Neil V. Rosenberg, and Wilfred W. Wareham, "Repertoire Categorization and Performer-Audience Relationships: Some Newfoundland Examples." *Ethnomusicology*, 16 (1972), 397-403.

WHILE SHEPHERDS WATCHED THEIR FLOCKS BY NIGHT



“Fear not” said they, for mighty dread
Had seized their troubled mind.
“Glad tidings of great joy I bring,
Glad tidings of great joy I bring
To you and all mankind.”

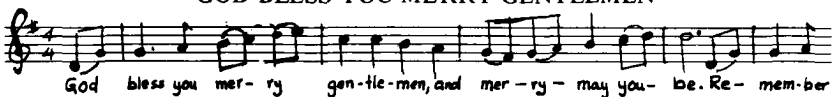
“To you in David’s town this day
Is born of David’s line
A saviour who is Christ the Lord,
A saviour who is Christ the Lord
And this shall be the sign.”

“The heavenly babe you there shall find
To human view displayed
All meanly wrapped in swaddling bands,
All meanly wrapped in swaddling bands
And in the manger laid.”

Up spake the Seraph and forthwith
Appeared a shining throng
Of angels praising God who thus,
Of angels praising God who thus
Addressed their joyful song.

“All glory be to God on high
And to the earth be peace,
Goodwill henceforth from heaven to men,
Goodwill henceforth from heaven to men
Begin and never cease.”

GOD BLESS YOU MERRY GENTLEMEN



It was from God our Father some blessed angels came
 Unto some lowly shepherds brought tidings of the same,
 Last night was born in Bethlehem the Son of God by name,
 Which brings tidings of comfort and joy.

The shepherds at the tidings were much rejoiced in mind,
 They left their flocks a-feeding in tempest, storm, and wind,
 Away they ran to Bethlehem, the blessed Babe to find,
 Which brings tidings of comfort and joy.

And when they came to Bethlehem where our dear Saviour was born
 They found Him in a manger, where oxen feed on corn,
 The Virgin Mary kneeling down, therefore we have no scorn,
 Which brings tidings of comfort and joy.

And when they came to the stable where our dear Saviour lay,
 They found Him in a manger where ox were fed on hay,
 The blessed Virgin kneeling down, unto our Lord to pray,
 Which brings tidings of comfort and joy.

God bless the ruler of this house, and all that dwell within,
 God bless his wife and family, that heaven they may win,
 God bless your love and kindred that live both far and near,
 And God send you a happy New Year.

THE VIRGIN WHOSE PURITY

The Vir- gin whose pu- ri- ty we en- dea- vour to tell, Brought forth- our —
 Sa- vior as — we have been told, for to be our — Re- deem- er from —
 Beth- le - hem came From Sa - tan's trans - gres - sions the au- thor of sin.

The musical score is written on three staves. The first staff begins with a treble clef, a key signature of one sharp (F#), and a 3/4 time signature. The melody consists of quarter and eighth notes. The second staff continues the melody with similar note values. The third staff features a change in time signature to 4/4, then 3/4, and finally 4/4. The lyrics are placed below the notes, with hyphens indicating syllables that span across multiple notes.

Near Bethlehem City, near Judah so fair,
 Great multitudes of people together were there,
 And they to be taxed, as the custom ran so,
 Both Caesars commanded that it should be so.

And just as we entered the city so fair,
 Joseph and Mary together were there.
 Their lodgings were simple, I beheld him no scorn,
 But the very next day our Saviour was born.

And presently after the people did spy
 Great multitudes of angels appeared in the sky.
 So sweetly they were singing, so sweetly did sing,
 All praise and great glory to our heavenly King.

And God sent an angel from heaven so high
 To give shepherds warning in the fields where they lie;
 Bade them to be merry, drive sorrow away;
 Our Saviour Christ Jesus was born on that day.

And now the great King of this world is come,
 Small stores of fine linen to wrap him so warm,
 When Mary had received her young son so sweet,
 Down in the ox manger where she laid him to sleep.

THE MOON SHINES BRIGHT



Awake, awake, good people all, } 2
 Awake and you shall hear }
 Our Lord our God died on the cross
 For us that he loveth so dear.

O teach you all your children man, } 2
 The while that you are here }
 And that will be better for your poor soul
 When your corpse lies on the bier.

Farewell, farewell, Jerusalem } 2
 When shall I come to thee? }
 When all our troubles are at an end
 The joys I soon shall see.

There's a talent at your head, young man, } 2
 And another at your feet, }
 When your good deeds and your bad ones
 Together they both shall meet.

My carol is sung and I must be gone, } 2
 I can stay no longer here, }
 God bless you all both great and small
 And send you a Happy New Year.

There used to be a fifth carol, sung third in sequence, and this was "Weeping Mary." It was excluded about forty years ago, on the grounds that it was an Easter carol. I managed to obtain the following fragment:

MARY LIES WEeping

The musical score is written on four staves of music. The first staff begins with a treble clef, a key signature of one sharp (F#), and a 4/4 time signature. The melody is simple and consists of quarter and eighth notes. The lyrics are: "Ma - ry lies weep - ing-, Ma - ry lies weep-ing-, Ma - ry - lies weep-ing and". The second staff continues the melody with the lyrics: "call - ing - for her Lord, And call-ing for her Lord, And- call-ing for her Lord. The". The third staff continues with the lyrics: "Jews, they cru - ci - fied my Lord, The Jews they cru - ci - fied my Lord, The Jews they cru - ci -". The fourth staff concludes the fragment with the lyrics: "fied my Lord and nailed - Him to the tree." and ends with a double bar line.

The four carols are sometimes shortened, and occasionally one of the middle ones is omitted, but the sequence is not changed. While they are sung, the members of the household are supposed to be upstairs in bed, in darkness, coming downstairs only on the last verse of the last carol. If they are not in bed, they usually listen to the carols in another room in darkness. On several occasions elderly men sat motionless in tears.

After singing the carols some refreshment would be available: syrup and cake, and sometimes a jug of homebrew. Each visit takes between twenty minutes and half an hour. By 4:30, in the morning the group was exhausted and went home, everyone agreeing that it had been a worthwhile night.

One of the most noticeable characteristics of the musical performance is the deliberately unaccompanied, unison style of singing. When the carols are sung at home or at a party, as happens frequently, they are accompanied, sometimes by accordions, sometimes by banjo and guitar, but one of the strong motivations of the Christmas Eve carol singing is to continue in the tradition of the past, and so no instruments are used on that occasion. The singing is always started by the leader singing the first line, and generally there is a uniformity of singing style behind the different carols. There are two decorative techniques, the glissando and the appoggiatura, both giving an extra emphasis.

The considerable age of the carols is a matter of pride to the carollers, and it is noteworthy that none of them are sung today in the local churches in these versions. The Green's Harbour version of "The Virgin whose purity," is very similar to the second tune of "A Virgin most Pure" in *The Oxford Book of Carols*.⁶

⁶Percy Dearmer, R. Vaughan Williams, M. Shaw, eds., *The Oxford Book of Carols* (London: Oxford University Press, 1928), p. 10.

The version of "God Bless You Merry Gentlemen" is more problematic, but there is a distant relationship with the Somerset carol tune "Come All Ye Worthy Gentlemen," particularly with the mixolydian nature of the last section.⁷

So far I have been unable to trace relations to the tunes of the other two carols.

"The Moon Shines Bright" has been used in its long history as both a May and a Christmas carol. The Green's Harbour version has a local variant in verse five, referring to talents placed at the head and feet of the corpse. The usual version substitutes "turf." The leader of the carollers interprets his version as referring to the Biblical notion of talents, but I learned that he got the words from a friend in Toronto, who came from Green's Harbour. The copy was very dog-eared and not all the words were decipherable, so some were changed or made up.

My impressions from participating in the event were of the seriousness with which it is approached, and the fact that it is hard work, although neither of these precludes humor. In conversation the leader compared the carolling to a vigil, and it is surely no accident that the first carol refers to the shepherds' vigil, and the last exhorts us to "watch and to pray." This feeling is underlined by the stress the carollers lay on the desirability of hearing the carols in the dark. The insistence on the set sequence and on the traditional style of unaccompanied, unison singing gives an added feeling of ritual.

The religious motivation is important to the carollers, and leads to the social responsibility they have in visiting the elderly and the sick. Any suggestions making the visiting more discriminatory have been opposed.

It is difficult to disentangle different functions of the event, because many are interrelated. For example, religious motivation is regarded as one of the determining characteristics of the old days; therefore the keeping of the religious custom keeps the community in touch with the past. This relationship to the past is a meaningful way for the carollers to help maintain their own identity.

In talking to people who have grown up in the community, I heard constant reference to past visits on Christmas Eve, when, in the middle of the night when everyone was asleep, the magnificent sound of the men singing the carols would be heard. The visits today are an emotional experience, particularly for the elderly, a reversal to childhood when communal ties were closer, and people visited one another with greater freedom. Behaviour becomes childlike and spontaneous, the older men in tears. This nostalgia for the past and for a more communal way of life is generally expressed in the community.

The social function is emphasized by the giving of food in houses where the carols are sung, and a little food or drink is accepted in each house in order not to offend.

The carolling provides an interesting parallel to the Orangemen's Parade on New Year's Day, which marches from one end of the harbor to the other,

⁷*Ibid.*, p. 18.

the carollers trying to get as far round as they can before sunrise. There are also similarities in behaviour and function to the Mumming tradition which is still quite active in the community.⁸ All three events emphasize solidarity and have an integrative function.

The entertainment aspect of the tradition should not be overlooked, providing, as it does, opportunities to sing, to visit, to eat, and to drink.

The validity of approaching a religious occasion from a folkloric point of view should be apparent. What was once a church-directed event has been fashioned into a distinctive form by the group, in order to express certain values and to fulfil important functions. Although some of the carols started out as hymns, they are now the folk songs of this particular group.

The functions that have been outlined show that the tradition is associated with the old values, including religion, close family and communal ties, and an identification with the community. The new values associated with the young include the loosening of religious and family ties along with greater mobility and affluence. There is a certain adaptation to the new values in the carol singing, including the addition of women, and the use of accompanying instruments in the privacy of the home. Any other change is unthinkable: the order has to remain the same, on Christmas Eve no instruments are used, and the carols have to be sung in the same style and at the same pitch as they have always been sung.

It might appear doubtful that a tradition relying on memories of the past and the enthusiasm of one man will last, but there is a more positive way of looking at it. If it is regarded as a "revitalization movement,"⁹ it becomes a conscious effort on the part of a few to create a more satisfying culture, and to control the acculturative process.

However the tradition is regarded, this study has shown how central to the life of a community such a tradition can be. As a musical occasion with a deliberate structure and organisation, with audience and performer relationships in a set location, it reflects the community's concepts and concerns. Specifically it values the religious event, both in terms of itself, and as a symbol of the past, bringing with it an emotional release through its reminder of childhood, creating a time when adults can react with the immediacy of children. By reinforcing communal ties it strengthens solidarity, or at least reminds the community of what was once thought to be important.

*Memorial University,
St. John's, Newfoundland*

⁸See Halpert, and G. M. Story, eds., *Christmas Mumming in Newfoundland* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1969).

⁹Wallace, A.F.C., "Revitalization Movements", *American Anthropologist* 58 (April 1965), 264-281.

Resumé: *Gordon Cox décrit une tradition folklorique: l'interprétation de chants de Noël dans la communauté de Green's Harbour, Terre-Neuve. Il explique la manière dont ces chants sont interprétés et présente les textes et les mélodies en relation avec quatre chants de Noël traditionnellement chantés.*