

Chapter 1

Picking Up the Thread

Locating Irish Newfoundland Women in the Narrative of Migration and Settlement



The southern Avalon Peninsula of Newfoundland¹ is one of the oldest sites of



European endeavor in North America. English, Portuguese, Spanish, and French vessels fished along the coast from Bay Bulls to St. Mary's Bay throughout the sixteenth century, and a migratory fishery from the West of England, or West Country,² continued in the area in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Four English attempts at colonization also took place on this portion of the island in the early seventeenth century, although the patentees' ambitions did not come to fruition except, to a limited extent, at

Ferryland.³ Early census reports, however,

indicate that individual English *planter* (resident fisher) families were established in a number of harbors in the study area by the late 1600s. The southern Avalon was also one of the earliest destinations of Irish migration to North America. The Irish began arriving there in the late seventeenth century as cheap labor for West Country fishing ships and planter families, and their numbers increased with the development of a flourishing Ireland–Newfoundland trade in provisions and *passengers* in the eighteenth century. Overwhelmingly, they were Catholic migrants from the southeastern ports of Ireland and their hinterlands. In the early decades of the nineteenth century, there were further large waves of Irish migration to Newfoundland, particularly during the periods 1811-16 and 1825-33;⁴ by mid-century, a substantial population of Irish settlers, and particularly a vibrant Irish plebeian community (see Appendix A), had established itself along the southern Avalon. The following pages will explore Irish women's⁵ lives within this context, focusing on the period from the 1750s, with the first major influx of Irish migrants into the area, to 1860, when the transition to a family production unit in Irish fishing households was demonstrably complete.

Using gender as an category of analysis, refracted through the lenses of ethnicity and class, the discussion will concentrate on the female dynamics of immigration and community formation, attempting to discern the meanings that women ascribed to their experiences and the understandings of Irish Newfoundland

womanhood that were constructed within this New World environment. It is not my intention, however, to examine women's lives in terms of a separate women's culture, but rather to root them firmly within the family and community contexts in which they evolved. Nor will some essentialist "woman's experience" unfold in the following chapters—for women's lives on the southern Avalon were marked by difference as well as similarity. Finally, I do not mean to equate *gender* with *women*, or to suggest that understandings of masculinity within this historical setting are unproblematic and unchanging. Rather, the female-centered perspective of this study is meant to contribute to an ongoing and necessary corrective in two broad areas of historiography: the literature on early European settlement in Newfoundland and Canada, and the history of the Irish diaspora (the following is an abridgement of a fuller historiographical discussion, with citations, in Appendix B).

Early European Settlement in Newfoundland and Canada

Almost every family history here begins with "Two brothers came out from Ireland or England..."

—HE, resident of Ferryland, 20 July 1999⁶

This insight came from one of my oral informants as she tried to warn of the difficulties in mining the oral tradition for information about women's contribution to early community formation on the southern Avalon. She had certainly arrived at the crux of a methodological problem, for she was not only articulating the conventional opening for, but also identifying the main protagonists in most family histories in the Irish Newfoundland or English Newfoundland tradition. There are, of course, some departures from the formula: in one variation, an older brother remains in the home country while the younger leaves for Newfoundland; in another, a father and his sons cross the Atlantic to seek their fortune in the fishery. But in plot and focus, the stories are similar. The family narratives tell how those men carved a living out of relentless sea and barren soil, and how they bred large families in a mysterious process that, with its seeming absence of women, must surely have equaled the miracle of the Virgin Birth.⁷ The sagas continue to follow the male line: sons and grandsons are named, their lives chronicled, while daughters remain peripheral—sometimes numbered, rarely named, often ignored altogether.

While my informant was discussing the oral tradition, her comments could also have applied well to the traditional historiography on Newfoundland settlement, in which this male-centered focus resounds. Granted, this preoccupation was rooted in the nature of the main industry of Newfoundland—the cod fishery—which, until the second half of the eighteenth century, was largely migratory in aspect and carried out primarily by men, with a smattering of planters' wives and female

servants. Logically linking the course of settlement with the pursuit of the fishery and the vicissitudes of its migratory and sedentary branches, earlier writings either overlooked or vastly underplayed the one ingredient essential for the stabilization of the local population: the presence of women.

Traditional historiographical offerings explained settlement as a process that occurred within the context of conflict between inhabitant fishermen and avaricious merchants from the West of England, who controlled the migratory trade and effectively pressured successive governments to prohibit settlement, or at least to discourage it actively, in order to block the development of a competitive resident fishery. Hence, these historians argued, settlement in Newfoundland followed an erratic course, with resident fishermen relegated to marginal areas, their premises hidden in tiny coves or hanging precipitously off cliff faces—out of the way of the privileged migratory fishermen and out of the sight of visiting *fishing admirals* and naval authorities.



This theory of "retarded settlement" was roundly challenged by later writers, who argued that, although the Western Adventurers had briefly opposed settlement, many of them soon came to realize that the migratory and sedentary branches of the fishery could be complementary, and evolved into suppliers and marketers for the inhabitant fishery while maintaining their migratory interests into the eighteenth century. The home government, spurred by its desire to preserve a "nursery for seamen" through the traditional migratory ship fishery, did attempt to restrict settlement by delaying the development of governance and property ownership in Newfoundland. Ironically, they were forced to establish increasingly sophisticated agencies to enforce the restrictive laws they were passing and to maintain law and order between residents and visiting fishermen (Web Link). The scattered nature of fishing communities therefore reflected not a fear of discovery by officials or harassment by migratory fishermen, but rather the suitability of the sites for exploiting the inshore cod resource.

Yet as the historiographical debates on settlement in Newfoundland evolved, the movements of men were carefully traced and analyzed while the activities of women remained out of focus. Even though the Newfoundland fishery had been primarily (although not exclusively) a male enterprise up to the middle of the eighteenth century, in Newfoundland, as elsewhere, populations and communities did not stabilize until women were present in increasing numbers. But while the historical literature spoke of the rising supremacy of the resident fishery and the increasing stability of the population in the latter eighteenth century, women's experiences were absent, their voices muted. Occasional references appeared to fishermen's marrying "local women" (a term that generally referred to women of English or Irish, not aboriginal, descent)—as if their presence needed no further explanation, as if these women had somehow sprung from the ground. Like

Topsy, a character of nineteenth-century American fiction, they had apparently just "grow'd."⁸ Treating them as merely a factor in a demographic equation, the literature said little or nothing of their motives for emigrating, their lived experiences, or their role in early community formation.

By the late 1970s and early 1980s, feminist scholars outside the disciplines of history and historical geography were offering insights on women's roles in fishing families of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and questioning women's absence from historians' accounts of early Newfoundland communities. Whether coincidentally or in response to this critique, some necessary (if somewhat conservative) adjustments were made to the historiography in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Scholars began to include a section or a chapter about women in their writings about the settlement process; they also made the link between the presence of women and population growth, although they underplayed women's importance in terms of settlement continuity. But there was an assumption in these writings of an inexorable "evolution" towards a patrilineal, patrilocal, patriarchal society in which women's status and experiences were seen as secondary, diversionary, or anomalous.

In recent years, important contributions in the field of legal history have delved into the impact of both formal and customary legal practices on women in Newfoundland. Still, there are significant gaps in our understanding of how women's lives, especially in early fishing communities, played out on the ground. And there is still reluctance in the literature on early settlement to perceive gender in terms of a dynamic, ongoing process that did not follow a straight and uncontested "evolutionary" course towards patriarchy.⁹ But was the "march of patriarchy" as unproblematic in the Newfoundland context as much of the historiography has presupposed?

The paucity of scholarship on women in early Newfoundland communities corresponds with a traditional obscuring of the female experience in the Anglophone literature¹⁰ on early European immigration to the rest of the territory that today forms Canada.¹¹ Since the late 1980s, women's historians have been working towards a more balanced interpretation of immigration history that incorporates more gender-inclusive categories of analysis. But there is a late-nineteenth- and/or twentieth-century concentration in this literature and a focus on ethnic minorities and urban experiences. The history of women in earlier migrations from the British Isles to Canada has, until recently, remained largely unexplored terrain; in much of the literature, these women have remained part of an amorphous entity, *white settler society*, with little recognition of the gendered dynamics of their experiences or the ways in which dimensions of race, ethnicity, and class also affected their lives.

The Anglophone literature on colonial women in Canada has lagged behind its American counterpart, although some significant contributions have been made in the past two decades to our understanding of women's lives in the pre-confederation period. Yet many of these writings demonstrate a difficulty that is still pervasive in women's history—the problem of uncovering the experiences of women from marginalized groups. Evidence from the white colonial elite—statutes, newspapers, diaries, correspondence, prescriptive writings—dominates the historical record for the period of early settlement. We can see how hegemonic feminine ideals were constructed and have some insight into their impact on elite women, but we have much more limited access to the meanings they created for women of aboriginal societies, ethnic minorities, and working-class or plebeian cultures. We can read interpretations of the lives of women on the periphery, but they have been mediated by middle-class editors, clergymen, and officials and, occasionally, gentry women. But although the presence of plebeian women in *white settler society* is quite muted in the written records, historians are increasingly finding traces of their lives. This study will be a further contribution to that body of literature, although it is merely one small drop in a slowly filling well.

The Irish Diaspora in North America

The literature on Irish migrations to North America has traditionally been preoccupied with famine and post-famine migrations, resonating with motifs of disruption and alienation.¹² This concentration has had a profound impact on popular understandings of the diaspora on both sides of the Atlantic. There is a timeless sorrow, a lingering sense of mourning and loss, that clings to our perceptions of Irish movements to the New World. The very phrase *Irish emigration* evokes images of poverty and desperation—of suffering masses huddled in the dank holds of coffin ships, fleeing hunger, disease, and economic devastation in the home country. Such impressions emanate from one relatively brief but intensely poignant moment in the history of Irish emigration: the Great Famine and its immediate aftermath. But because of the magnitude of this mid-nineteenth-century trauma, such images linger in the popular consciousness as the essence of the Irish diaspora through time.

These shades and specters haunted the traditional historiography on Irish emigration. Up to the mid-1980s, the *Great Hunger* often cast its pall over discussions of other movements of Irish people: vestiges lingered in explanations of later relocations; its shadow also stretched back in time as historians used earlier migrations to set the stage for the famine exodus without considering that previous movements may have had dynamics of their own. When movements in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries were mentioned at all, they were usually presented as a prologue to the great Irish emigration drama of the

mid-nineteenth century, and images of exile and exclusion pervaded the texts.

This is particularly true of the works of historians of the American Irish, from William Forbes Adams to Kerby Miller, whose writings, until the past decade or so, have tended to dominate the literature on Irish immigration to North America.¹³ The perspectives they provide of the ghettoization of impoverished and unskilled Irish immigrants in urban landscapes do not supply useful models for understanding the experiences of Irish immigrants on the southern Avalon or in rural areas in general. Indeed, this portrayal of the Irish as predominantly disadvantaged urban dwellers has been roundly challenged by writers such as Donald Akenson, David Doyle, and Cecil Houston and William Smyth, who have effectively demonstrated that most of the Irish in North America ultimately fanned out into rural areas and were employed in primary industries, with a smaller but still significant number entering skilled trades and professions. This was especially true of pre-famine immigrants: the processes of urbanization, ghettoization, and proletarianization were a later phenomenon in the United States, and that model does not apply at all to Canadian experiences.¹⁴

In addition to his urban bias, Miller has also come under fire for his representation of Irish Catholics as a group handicapped by religious and cultural traditions in adapting to their new environments—casualties of modernization who clung to traditional goals and lifestyles. This examination of the southern Avalon Irish will challenge his findings, portraying a largely Catholic migrant group as responsive to opportunity and often upwardly mobile in their new communities.

Here, it will follow a major paradigm shift in the historiography since the late 1980s—a movement away from discourses of exile and alienation toward a view of Irish migration as a rational, adaptive strategy employed in response to changing social and economic conditions in Ireland and the demands of an increasingly international economy. A warning bell must be sounded, however, about the economic reductionism that often underscores this type of interpretation, with its tendency to portray emigration purely as a "transfer mechanism" while muting the negative aspects of the experience—the fragmentation of families and home communities, the re-mapping of social and political terrains. As Jim Mac Laughlin argues, this type of interpretation is an over-correction of the traditional literature and overly sanitizes the phenomenon of emigration.¹⁵

Furthermore, there has been a continuing reluctance among historians of Irish emigration—particularly quantitative historians, who rose to prominence in the latter part of the twentieth century—to delve too deeply into pre-famine experiences because of the lack of "hard" evidence on population sizes and emigration figures for the period. Even writings that draw more heavily from

qualitative sources, or use a combined methodology, rarely reach back further than the 1840s, particularly works dealing with movements beyond the British Isles. Discussions of earlier emigrant groups are usually preliminary and tentative. There is thus still a need for Irish migration studies that emphasize earlier movements and emigrant agency without underplaying the human costs or reducing the phenomenon to a purely economic response mechanism.

John Mannion's work on the Irish in Newfoundland follows more recent trends in the literature, emphasizing the influx of Irish servants into the Newfoundland fishery as an adaptive response to declining opportunities in the homeland.¹⁶ His writings, however, illustrate a further limitation of the historiography until recent years: a tendency to homogenize Irish emigration in terms of male experiences. As late as 1993, Akenson aptly noted that women in the Irish diaspora were still "the Great Unknown."¹⁷

The low visibility of Irish women in emigration studies reflected a deficiency in the broader corpus of Irish historical writings. Irish women's history in general had lagged behind its British and North American counterparts, although it has certainly come out of its pioneering stages with a growing body of research of increasing analytical rigor from the 1990s to present day. Still, the search for Irish women emigrants is doubly confounded by gender imbalance and a lack of attention to the pre-famine period. While the literature about Irish women emigrants has grown, most offerings have examined movements from the mid-nineteenth century and beyond, when the Great Famine had established a new set of parameters for Irish emigration. This concentration is understandable, for the demographic and economic changes of the famine years and their aftermath had particular impact on women and wrought a profound change in their status in Ireland. But few of these writings provide insight into the motivations and experiences of earlier women emigrants.

In looking for the Irish woman emigrant of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, we find ourselves staring down a historiographical funnel. As we shift our perspective from overseas Irish emigration in general to focus on Irish female emigration experiences in particular, and finally hone in on earlier movements, our viewing screen becomes increasingly constricted. The story of the Irish women who emigrated to North America before the 1840s can only be patched together from pieces and fragments of evidence of an emigration phenomenon that is, in itself, fragmentary in the literature.

Much of the information provided by historians about early women emigrants is statistical: a relentless array of sex ratios, average ages, marital categories, fertility rates, and occupational profiles, drawn from aggregate data for a broad range of destination areas and extended time periods. After parading out this

statistical data, many of these writers then allow the female emigrant of the pre-famine period to be once again eclipsed by male experiences.

Perhaps one of the most well-known proponents of quantitative over qualitative approaches in studying Irish migration is Donald Akenson, who has used aggregate data to provide a "yardstick"—based on average sex ratios and age, religious, and occupational profiles—against which Irish migrations to various parts of the English-speaking world can be measured. For the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, he also provides a breakdown of women emigrant "types" based on marital status and number of children. Again, however, his indices are based on data from the post-famine period to Partition. The pre-famine period remains veiled in mystery, he claims, although he does venture some aggregate findings and a periodization of women's migration from 1815 onwards.¹⁸

Akenson is trying to provide a tool to gauge the typicality of specific movements against a broad geographical and temporal canvas. Yet the problem in presenting the average as typical is that it overlooks the possibility that this statistical measurement may not reflect the actual experience of many, or even most, of the emigrants involved. In his effort to provide a template for the Irish diaspora worldwide, Akenson tends to blur the nuanced edges of specific migrations, seeming to imply that those experiences that do not fit the mold are irrelevant, or so anomalous as to be unworthy of historical examination other than as a curiosity. More troubling, his analysis leaves us with a series of unrelated, unexplained, and non-contextualized statements that provide little insight into migration experiences as they were actually lived by the people involved.¹⁹

Akenson's writings are representative of an increasing focus in the Irish historiography on quantitative analysis in the latter decades of the twentieth century, a shift which has led some critics to bemoan the predominance of cliometricians in the field. Nonetheless, these approaches have been quite useful in banishing stereotypes and blanket assumptions, and other historians have often been pleased to cite their findings (as I have done), secretly relieved that someone else has performed the task of crunching the numbers. But without context and anecdotal vitality, such analyses remain clinical and bleak; without interpretation, they are unsatisfying. They demonstrate little understanding of emigration as a movement of people, not just economic or demographic variables. And they provide little insight into the multi-layered dynamics of emigration: how gender, ethnicity, and class affected emigration experiences, or how emigration, in turn, affected the negotiation of gender, ethnicity, and class in the New World.

Hooking into the Past

My approach to uncovering the lives of Irish Newfoundland women combines elements of poststructuralism and empiricism—strange bedfellows indeed, given the tension that has existed between these two methods of accessing the past. Poststructuralists have struck at the very core of empiricists' methodology by positing that there can be no such thing as documentary objectivism, because the very language that supposedly reflects reality in documentary evidence is itself involved in the process of constructing experience and meaning. Furthermore, these meanings themselves are unstable—shifting and changing over time as they are contested and either legitimated or reconstructed.

Poststructuralists' critique of conventional readings of language has instilled in many empiricists a fear that they are bent on paralyzing all efforts at communication and debate. However, poststructuralism has opened up whole new avenues of exploration in history by challenging the traditional white, male, middle-class bias of the discipline. It has provoked a re-examination of the content, methods and epistemology of the discipline to determine how "knowledge" is constituted, how some people are assigned to the center of the historical narrative while others are relegated to the margins, how evidence is selected, verified, and transmitted to portray a particular vision of social reality, and how the silences in history speak as much about biases as the written text. Poststructuralists have deconstructed language to understand how gender, as a system of meaning, is used to legitimize power relations in society, and how gender intersects with other constructions of difference, such as race, class, ethnicity, and sexual orientation, in creating and maintaining strategies of domination and subordination.

Discourse analysis has proved to be an effective method of shaking the tree of conventional wisdom, and poststructuralist theory has strongly informed my thinking about the lives of Irish Newfoundland women. However, I do not concentrate exclusively on discourse analysis in retrieving understandings of the past, for therein lies the danger of abandoning experience altogether, to the extent that discourse itself becomes the sole focus of historical study. While it is useful and necessary to deconstruct language in order to understand the processes by which meaning was (and is) created, discourse must still be situated in the context of specific lived experiences—in terms of both the subjects and the objects of the discourse—in order to understand how these systems of meaning actually functioned. In short, it is essential to monitor the interplay between rhetoric and reality.

Thus, I have not abandoned the research methods of empiricism, for to do so would distract me from the agency of the women I had hoped to incorporate into the historical narrative. Irish Newfoundland women of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century left few texts in the historical record (even given the broader interpretation of that word to include many forms of cultural symbols),

and I do not wish to treat them as mere objects of the hegemonic discourses that attempted to shape their lives. In order to find the Irish Newfoundland woman as subject of the historical narrative, then, I have regarded her lived experiences as text. And in order to uncover this text, I have relied heavily on empirical research techniques, with all the problems and limitations they entail.

My examination of the construction of Irish Newfoundland womanhood is thus grounded in historical context and lived experiences as they can best be determined from available sources. I analyze the hegemonic discourses that attempted to set parameters for women on the southern Avalon, but I also present evidence that these discourses were slow to intrude into the day-to-day life of plebeian culture. This is not to dismiss the effects of the persistent legal, social, and political discrimination that permeated the environment in which women moved; indeed, much insightful literature has already been written in these areas. But, as Bridget Hill warns, it is important in women's history not to focus only on patriarchal mechanisms by which women have been oppressed, for such an approach distorts our understanding and misses "the subtlety of the complex interaction of the many other factors" that have shaped women's lives.²⁰ Irish Newfoundland women on the southern Avalon did exercise a significant degree of authority at the local level and reached beyond the boundaries of the prescribed gender roles of hegemonic culture in myriad ways. It is these phenomena I am most interested in exploring: how and why they deployed this informal power, despite increasing pressures from certain quarters to resign their authority, and how they manifested agency within the contours of family and community power relations.

This blending of methodologies may not find favor in all quarters. When Akenson speaks of women in the Irish diaspora as "the Great Unknown," for example, he urges historians to resist the temptation to reconstruct the past from bits and pieces of anecdotal evidence, calling for a systematic gathering of "hard" evidence on women emigrants. But this demonstrates a lack of sensitivity to the dilemma that confronts historians of women and other groups who have been marginalized by the keepers of the written record in earlier periods. If historians remain fixated on "hard" evidence, the absence of these groups from the historical narrative may never be corrected. If we limit ourselves to studying only those who are more easily traced in order to ensure the certainty of our conclusions, we are in danger of losing large segments of our past.

Decades of poring over statistical information have not lifted the veil of mystery from the history of early Irish women emigrants, and it is highly unlikely that a hidden stash of data lies waiting for discovery. Nor would such a cache, if it did exist, necessarily provide us with a perfect picture of the past. Qualitative material is necessary in order to contextualize and explain the phenomena that

the quantitative data reveal; anecdotal evidence is needed to help us understand the dynamics that shaped specific movements and the meanings that migrants derived from particular migration and settlement experiences.

This study provides a blend of quantitative and qualitative evidence, using a range of traditional historical sources, from census reports, parish records, business accounts, and estate records, to government correspondence, court records, missionaries' reports, newspapers, and diaries (see Appendix B). But most of this evidence was generated by middle-class administrators, clergymen, newspaper editors, and mercantile families. What are missing are the voices of the Irish women themselves. Most of these women would not have had the luxury of time, or likely the necessary literacy skills, to correspond or maintain journals; those pernicious silencers, time and illiteracy, have muffled the cadences of their daily lives.

Because I am attempting to reconstruct the past of a group so muted in the written record, I have used the oral tradition of the area to help flesh out information I found in documentary sources. Although this approach has gained considerable legitimacy as a means of retrieving the history of marginalized groups, it still requires justification to some. Indeed, with its increasing use by scholars in the social sciences and humanities in the 1960s and 1970s, the method quickly came under attack from traditional documentary historians, who warned of the indiscriminate acceptance of oral evidence at face value. Memory was unreliable, they argued, subject to the distortions of time and age, personal bias, and the impact of retrospective interpretations of the past. Oral historians countered with arguments that traditional documentary sources were also selective and biased; furthermore, they channeled thinking towards traditional methodologies and categories of understanding, thus reinforcing the continuing exclusion of certain groups from the historical narrative.²¹

Still, in response to concerns about the "accuracy" of oral history, an effort was made to lend "scientific rigor" to the gathering and evaluation of oral evidence: methodologies were devised to measure bias in oral evidence, to quantify oral responses and codify the results, and to corroborate oral testimony with written sources. By the 1980s, however, theorists were realizing that the subjective elements of oral history were not necessarily methodological flaws. Distortions and lapses in memory could actually provide insight into, not distraction from, the process of historical understanding and help scholars arrive at a more nuanced "truth" than the unidimensional accuracy of "facts." Practitioners were urged to deconstruct memory—to understand the process of remembering itself, the link between memory and identity, and the significance of memories to individuals and cultures. But as memory has become an object of study in its own right, the original intention of using oral history to retrieve information about the past of

minority groups has somewhat faded from view.²² And, as Michael Frisch has noted, rather than using theory to help interpret experiences, the experiences are being used to help make sense of theory.²³

This is not to dismiss the importance of the complex workings of memory, and, indeed, a study of the retrospective nature of collective memory and the ways in which Irish migration experiences to the southern Avalon have been imagined and remembered would reveal much about how such processes contribute to the negotiation of ethnic identity over time. But that is not the focus of this work. My use of oral history harks back to the original aim of recovering the history of a marginalized group—in this case, a group sidelined by gender, ethnicity, region, and class.

Oral history has been used effectively in other migration studies, although it should be noted that most practitioners have actually been able to interview the emigrant generation as well as succeeding generations about migration and settlement experiences. Interviewing informants about the more distant past, which they did not actually live through, but about which they have received (and adapted) collective cultural memories, is another matter. Nonetheless, others have tapped oral traditions successfully to recreate historical contexts and flesh out details that do not exist in the written record—for example, information about kinship ties, informal belief systems, or the rhythms of daily and seasonal work and leisure routines.²⁴ I too have found the oral tradition invaluable in recreating historical cultural landscapes and provoking insights about Irish Newfoundland womanhood that would never have emanated from a study of the documentary evidence alone.

In collecting and interpreting oral testimony,²⁵ I have treated it like all my other sources—trying to ascertain bias or hyperbole, and looking for corroboration (either oral or documentary) when available. Occasionally, the oral evidence roughly corresponds with the written record, which will placate traditional documentary historians (although missives begrudgingly penned by frustrated colonial civil servants and irate priests require careful scrutiny as well, and I could just as easily argue that the oral tradition corroborates the documentary evidence in these cases). If the material presented comes from oral sources alone, I identify it as such. Information introduced with phrases such as "according to the oral tradition" meet the following criteria: a large majority of my informants have provided me with the same information, and it passes the *common sense* test—that is, the crux of the material (minor hyperbole need not discredit the essence of the anecdote) makes sense within the context of other information I have gathered. I also use material provided by only one or two informants if it passes the common sense test, but I specify the more individual nature of the memory in the text or by endnote to differentiate it from broader collective

historical memories.



This lack of corroboration, however, does not diminish the significance of individual renderings in my eyes. Like Samuel Schragger, I acknowledge my oral informants to be "bearers of truth" in their telling of oral history in the sense that they are providing an interpretation (not necessarily a literal transcription) of processes or events based on their best understanding and knowledge of the matter, tempered by what they feel is significant and worth repeating to the interviewer. This does not mean that their renderings should not be problematized or contextualized like other types of sources, but simply that in the oral tradition, there is a difference in informants' attitudes towards the retelling of oral history and the retelling of a legend or tall tale.²⁶ With the retelling of their communal past, there is a deep-seated feeling that the information they are imparting is important: they want to *get it right*, and they want the historian to get it right as well.²⁷ And if there has been some refashioning of material in the process, so has there been in all historical accounts—written or oral, past or present. As Selma Leydesdorff, et al., point out, "no history reaches us unmediated."²⁸



Transition

In the current historiography on early Irish immigration and settlement in North America, Irish women are shadowy figures. They speak to us in sighs and whispers only from footnotes and after-thought chapters, mere helpmates to male migrants who are presented as the active shapers of New World experiences. This study will attempt to retrieve at least one group of these Irish women—the multi-generational group who settled in the southern Avalon up to the mid-nineteenth century—from the periphery of the record. Hopefully, it will encourage the custodians of the historical narrative—oral and written—to find a more gender-inclusive way of recounting early European settlement in the Americas than the conventional "Two brothers came out from Ireland or England..."

Notes:

Note 1: The term *southern Avalon* in this study incorporates the area from Bay Bulls to Dog Point in St. Mary's Bay, the latter being the cut-off point in early census material dealing with St. Mary's Bay. back

Note 2: The West of England, or West Country, was comprised of six counties on the southwestern corner of England: Devon, Dorset, Cornwall, Hampshire, Somerset, and Wiltshire. Devon, Dorset, Cornwall, and Hampshire were all involved in the Newfoundland

fishery, with Devon and Dorset having the longest and most significant involvement in the trade. The Channel Islands of Guernsey and Jersey also participated. back

Note 3: Several proprietary grants in the early 1600s incorporated the study area, including patents to Sir William Vaughan (primary site established at Renews, ca. 1617), Henry Carey, Lord Falkland (Renews, ca. 1623), George Calvert, Lord Baltimore (Ferryland, 1621), and Sir David Kirke (Ferryland, 1638). See: Gillian Cell, *English Enterprise in Newfoundland, 1577-1699* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1969); and Peter Pope, "The South Avalon Planters, 1630-1700" (Ph.D. diss., Memorial University of Newfoundland, 1992). back

Note 4: John J. Mannion, "Introduction," in *The Peopling of Newfoundland: Essays in Historical Geography*, ed. John J. Mannion, Social and Economic Papers, no. 8 (St. John's: Institute of Social and Economic Research [ISER], Memorial University of Newfoundland, 1977), 1-13. back

Note 5: The terms *Irish woman/women* and *Irish Newfoundland woman/women* apply to both Irish immigrant women and women within the multi-generational Irish ethnic group in Newfoundland (including those with mixed English-Irish ties) in the study area. Occasionally, Irish women in Ireland are discussed, but the context will make the distinction clear. back

Note 6: HE, interview by author, Ferryland, 20 July 1999. back

Note 7: The Christian belief that Jesus Christ was miraculously conceived in the womb of his mother, Mary, through the power of the Holy Spirit, without sexual intercourse with a man. back

Note 8: Topsy is a young female slave in Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. When quizzed about her parentage and where she has come from, Topsy has no knowledge of her background, but ventures an opinion nonetheless: "I spect I grow'd. Don't think nobody never made me." See Joan D. Hedrick, *The Oxford Harriet Beecher Stowe Reader* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 256. back

Note 9: This lack is discussed in "Editors' Note: Women, the Migratory Fishery and Settlement," in *Their Lives and Times: Women in Newfoundland and Labrador: A Collage*, ed. Carmelita McGrath, Barbara Neis, and Marilyn Porter (St. John's: Killick Press, 1995), 22-26. back

Note 10: I confess my unfamiliarity with the Francophone literature on this period. back

Note 11: The confederation of Canada took place in 1867, when Canada West (Ontario), Canada East (Quebec), Nova Scotia, and New Brunswick tentatively joined forces (with little in common, some have argued, but debt and the fear of American expansionism). By 1905, all remaining provinces and territories had been brought into the union with the exception of Newfoundland, which entered the confederation in 1949. back

Note 12: Although Ireland experienced a number of local crop failures and some widespread famines in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the famine that is the focus of much of the historical literature on Irish emigration in that period is the Great Famine, which occurred in the late 1840s through the early 1850s. The term *famine* in this discussion refers to that mid-century disaster, unless the context specifically indicates otherwise. back

Note 13: See, for example, William Forbes Adams, *Ireland and Irish Emigration to the New World from 1815 to the Famine* (1932; reprint, New York: Russell and Russell, 1967); Oscar Handlin, *Boston's Immigrants* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1941); William V. Shannon, *The American Irish* (New York: Macmillan, 1963); Lawrence J. McCaffrey, *The Irish Diaspora in America* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1976); Kerby A. Miller, "Emigrants and Exiles: Irish Cultures and Irish Emigration to North America, 1790-1922," *Irish Historical Studies* 22, no. 86 (September 1980): 97-125; Miller, *Emigrants and Exiles: Ireland and the Irish Exodus to North America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985); and Miller, "Emigration, Capitalism, and Ideology in Post-famine Ireland," in *Migrations: The Irish at Home and Abroad*, ed. Richard Kearney (Dublin: Wolfhound Press, 1990), 91-108. back

Note 14: See Donald H. Akenson: *Being Had: Historians, Evidence, and the Irish in North America* (Don Mills, ON: P. D. Meany, 1985), 40-42, 69-72, and 84-85; and *Small Differences: Irish Catholics and Irish Protestants, 1815-1922: An International Perspective* (Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1988), 102-3. See also Cecil J. Houston and William J. Smyth: *Irish Emigration and Canadian Settlement: Patterns, Links, and Settlers* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990), 21; and "The Irish Diaspora: Emigration to the New World, 1720-1920," in *An Historical Geography of Ireland*, ed. B. J. Graham and L. J. Proudfoot (London: Academic Press, 1993), 338-65, particularly 353. See also David Doyle, "The Irish in North America, 1776-1845," in *A New History of Ireland*, ed. W. E. Vaughan, vol. 5 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), 706. back

Note 15: Jim Mac Laughlin: *Historical and Recent Irish Emigration: A Critique of Core-Periphery and Behavioural Models* (London: University of North London Press, 1994), 9-11 and 45-46; and "Emigration and the Construction of Nationalist Hegemony in Ireland: The Historical Background to 'New Wave' Irish Emigration," in *Location and Dislocation in Contemporary Irish Society: Emigration and Irish Identities*, ed. Jim Mac Laughlin (Cork: Cork University Press, 1997), 5-35. back

Note 16: See, for example: John Mannion, Mannion, *Irish Settlements in Eastern Canada: A Study of Cultural Transfer and Adaptation* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1974); Mannion, "The Impact of Newfoundland on Waterford and Its Hinterland in the Eighteenth Century" (paper presented at the Annual Conference of Irish Geographers, University College, Galway, 22 April 1977); Mannion, "Tracing the Irish: A Geographical Guide," *The Newfoundland Ancestor* 9, no. 1 (spring 1993): 4-18; and John Mannion and Fidelma Maddock, "Old World Antecedents, New World Applications: Inistioige Immigrants in Newfoundland," in *Kilkenny: History and Society-Interdisciplinary Essays on the History of an Irish County*, ed. William Nolan and Kevin Whelan (Dublin: Geography Publications, 1990), 345-404. For a more extensive list of Mannion's writings, see Appendix B and the Bibliography. back

Note 17: Donald Akenson, *The Irish Diaspora: A Primer* (Toronto: P. D. Meaney, 1993). The quotation comes from the title of chap. 7: "Women and the Irish Diaspora: The Great Unknown." back

Note 18: Akenson, *Primer*, particularly chap. 7. back

Note 19: Akenson's study of the Irish in Ontario is an exception, although it focuses primarily on men's experiences. See Akenson, *The Irish in Ontario: A Study in Rural History*, 2nd ed. (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1999). back

Note 20: Bridget Hill, "Women's History: A Study in Change, Continuity, or Standing Still?" in *Women's Work: The English Experience, 1650-1914*, ed. Pamela Sharpe (London: Arnold, 1998), 42-58, particularly 55. back

Note 21: Katherine Jensen, "Oral Histories of Rural Western American Women: Can They Contribute to Quantitative Studies?" *International Journal of Oral History* 5, no. 3 (November 1984): 159-67; quotation from 160. back

Note 22: Alistair Thomson, "Tales of the Century: Biennial National Conference of the Oral History Association of Australia, 2-5 September 1999, State Library of Victoria, Melbourne," *Oral History* 28, no. 1 (spring 2000): 25-27. back

Note 23: For a discussion of some of the debates in the field, see: Alistair Thomson, Michael Frisch, and Paula Hamilton, "The Memory and History Debates: Some International Perspectives," *Oral History* 22, no. 2 (autumn 1994): 33-43; Jensen, "Oral Histories"; Rebecca Sharpless, "The Numbers Game: Oral History Compared with Quantitative Methodology," *International Journal of Oral History* 7, no. 2 (June 1986): 93-108; Joan Sangster, "Telling Our Stories: Feminist Debates and the Use of Oral History," *Women's History Review* 3, no. 1 (1994): 5-28; Selma Leydesdorff, Luisa Passerini, and Paul Tompson, eds., *Gender and Memory*, International Yearbook of Oral History and Life Stories, vol. 4 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996); and Anna Green and Kathleen Troup, eds., *The Houses of History: A Critical Reader in Twentieth-Century History and Theory* (New York: New York University Press, 1999), 230-38. back

Note 24: See, for example: Gerald L. Pocius, *A Place to Belong: Community Order and Everyday Space in Calvert, Newfoundland* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1991); Thomas Nemec, "Trepassey, 1505-1840 A.D.: The Emergence of an Anglo-Irish

Newfoundland Outport," *Newfoundland Quarterly* 69, no. 4 (1973): 17-28; Nemeč, "Trepassey, 1840-1900: An Ethnohistorical Reconstruction of an Anglo-Irish Outport Society," in *Through a Mirror Dimly: Essays on Newfoundland Society and Culture*, ed. Maura Hanrahan (St. John's: Breakwater, 1993), 145-62; Nemeč, "An Ethnohistorical and Ethnographic Study of the Cod Fishery at St. Shott's, Newfoundland" (Ph.D. diss., University of Michigan, 1980); Margaret MacKay, "Nineteenth Century Tíree Emigrant Communities in Ontario," *Oral History* 9, no. 2 (autumn 1981): 49-60; and Alistair Thomson, "Moving Stories: Oral History and Migration Studies," *Oral History* 27, no. 1 (spring 1999): 24-37. back

Note 25: The oral testimony presented here is drawn primarily from interviews conducted from 1999-2001 with twenty-one male and female informants from seven communities in the study area: Brigus South, Cape Broyle, Calvert, Ferryland, Renew's, Trepassey, and St. Mary's. Several of the interviewees had moved from their home communities in adulthood, but all had spent their childhood and early adulthood on the southern Avalon and all have roots in the plebeian fishing community of the area. Because a number of them did not wish to be identified, I refer to all informants throughout this study by initials that I have assigned to preserve their anonymity.

The informants were advised of the general subject areas to be covered in the interview either in an advance meeting or by correspondence. A questionnaire with broad, open-ended questions was used in the actual interviews, but only to give the interviews shape and flow, not for statistical purposes. The interviewing process itself was as interactive and open as possible. My original intent was to audio-record as many interviews as possible; however, most informants were quite dismayed by the sight of the recorder, and in order to maintain a more relaxed and productive atmosphere, I often resorted to careful note-taking only. (All interview notes remain in my possession.) Because I was seeking historical context rather than personal narratives, this method was not problematic. As a result, however, the only direct quotations that appear in the text are short and those of which I am certain of the accuracy of the wording. This recent interview material has been supplemented by oral material that I gathered as an undergraduate in the early 1970s (see Bibliography), as well as by a small amount of material collected in the study area by other interviewers that is housed at the Memorial University of Newfoundland Folklore and Language Archive (MUNFLA) and several undergraduate student papers using oral history (including one of my own) that were prepared for anthropology, geography, or history courses in the 1970s and are available at the Maritime History Archives, Memorial University of Newfoundland (MHA).

Of the audio clips presented in this work, two are actually my retelling of anecdotes that I had collected from several informants who were reluctant to be recorded. I have done this because the oral retelling is so much more effective than a written version. I feel that this decision is further justified by the fact that I have maternal roots on the southern Avalon and have spent much of my life there, so I am a legitimate bearer of the oral tradition of the area. One of the two anecdotes relates to Mrs. Clancy (at the end of this section), and the other, to a widow's curse (Chapter 5). back

Note 26: Samuel Schrager, "What is Social in Oral History?" *International Journal of Oral History* 4, no. 2 (June 1983): 76-98, particularly 78. In only one interview did I feel that the informant was not making this distinction, and I have used his information minimally and with due caution. back

Note 27: I am aware, here, of my own participation in shaping the interview—that, despite the flexible nature of the interview, my research interests have taken priority in the selection of subject matter for discussion. I also realize that this selection process, in itself, may have affected the processes of collective historical memory and the way the material may be remembered and retold in the future. back

Note 28: Introduction to *Gender and Memory*, ed. Leydesdorff, Passerini, and Tompson, 12. back