

Survivors Make a Difference: Songs of Death from Newfoundland

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Newfoundland is an island of folk songs, many of which have become Canadian classics such as “I’s The B’y,” and “Squid Jiggin’ Ground” as well as songs about the many, often maritime, incidents when Newfoundlanders lost their lives. Some of these songs are about incidents without survivors, some about incidents when not everyone’s lives were lost. An examination of folk songs about these two types of incidents suggests songs about each are different. When it comes to composing folk songs, it seems survivors make a difference.

The logical explanation for these differences might appear to be that when everyone is lost no one knows what happened. In fact, in many of these cases there is a great deal of information that is ignored by song writers. Only when survivors live to tell their tales do song writers weave what happened into their lyrics.

This paper examines twelve songs from five incidents where there were survivors and thirteen songs from three incidents where there were no survivors. Most of the current scholarship on folk songs written about mass death incidents focuses on demonstrating whether

or not these songs reflect an accurate portrayal of the events. A review of the existing literature indicates that these scholars have disregarded the distinction that is the focus of this paper.

This paper will argue that songs written about incidents without survivors will differ from those written about incidents with survivors in three ways. The former will generate songs which generally focus on portraying the experience of those present during the incident while the latter will focus on the experience of the community the incident takes place in. Secondly, songs about incidents without survivors portray those who perished as brave and unafraid of death while those songs written about incidents with survivors portray them as terrified of their impending deaths. A final difference is that songs written about incidents without survivors consistently make a point within the song to ask what occurred at the event even though details are often known. Additionally the similarities between both songs written about incidents with and without survivors and songs written about Newfoundland incidents and military disasters will be examined.

The five incidents in which there were survivors are the loss of the *Anglo Saxon* in 1863 where 237 crew members perished and 208 survived, the loss of the *Florizel* in 1918 in which 94 died and 44 survived, the Burin Tsunami in 1929 which killed 28 people but most in the community survived, the loss of the two US warships, *Pollux* and *Truxton* with a combined loss of 203 people and approximately 118 survivors; and the loss of the Newfoundland ferry, the *S.S. Caribou* in 1942 in which 100 died and 137 of the crew survived. The three incidents which left no survivors are the loss of the *Southern Cross* in 1914 in which 174 people died, the loss of the oil rig *Ocean Ranger* in 1982 in which 84 men died, and the 1985 crash at Gander airport in Newfoundland of Arrow Air Flight 1285 in which 256 men died.

Six of these eight incidents occurred at sea or were the result of a sea-based event – a tsunami. This allows a fairly confident conclusion to be reached about the importance of survivors in the depictions of maritime and maritime related incidents. The one land based incident fits the pattern but obviously one incident is not sufficient to conclude that the pattern – survivors make a difference – always occurs on land.

Survivors Making a Difference

One of the greatest differences between songs written about an incident with survivors versus one without are the events that the song chooses to portray. The folksongs about the *Ocean Ranger*, an incident where there were no survivors, mostly give a narrative of the shorefront. For example the song “Ocean Ranger” by Mike Kennedy begins with the line, “word has come to Newfoundland, the *Ocean Ranger’s* down.” From this point on the song is clearly told from the perspective of someone on the shorefront hearing the news of sinking of the *Ocean Ranger* as it filters back to the shore. This is further reinforced later on in the song by the lines, “the word comes o’er the ship-to-shore,” and, “so, the news comes back to Newfoundland, the *Ocean Ranger’s* gone.”¹

The other songs written about the *Ocean Ranger* also exhibit this trend as is clear from the first line of “In Memoriam” by Jim Payne. The song begins, “it makes me very sad to hear about the last minutes of the *Ocean Ranger*.” With a subtle reference to how he knows about the incident, in this case hearing, Payne makes it clear that the perspective of his song is not on the oil rig as it went down but rather on the shore during the aftermath.

¹ “Ocean Ranger – Kennedy | Disaster Songs,” Disaster Songs, accessed April 10, 2015, <http://disastersongs.ca/ocean-ranger/>.

This trend also continues not only throughout Payne's song but also in "The Ocean Ranger" by Eddie Coffey and "Ocean Ranger" by Clayt Butt. This theme occurs additionally in songs about the *Southern Cross* and the crash of the Arrow Air Flight 1285. In the song "Southern Cross" either written by or first transcribed by Lizzie C. Rose, the songwriter comments that, "now the Southern Cross for twenty days she now is overdue / We hope please God she'll soon arrive and all her hearty crew, / So put your trust in Providence and trust to Him on high / To send the Southern Cross safe home and fill sad hearts with joy."² It is clear from these lines that the narrator of the song is on the shorefront as news of the incident filters back.

This perspective is contrasted with the one used for the majority of songs written about incidents in which there were survivors. The majority of these songs portray the incident as it happened, placing the narrator at the scene of the disaster. This is exemplified by the lyrics of "The S.S. Caribou" written by an unknown author. "Oh God, it was a fearful, terrible thing, / I'll never forget the sight, / Of people struggling for their lives."³ From just these three lines it is clear that the narrative of the song is first-person on the *Caribou* as the disaster occurred. Further on the author continues to describe events seen as an eye-witness on the ship. "They were tossed into the chilly seas / all bruised and numb with cold, / And struggling, the drifting boat / they managed to catch hold."⁴

This trend continues throughout the rest of the songs written about incidents with survivors. For example in the "Loss of the Anglo-Saxon," James Murphy sings about the events of the incident as it occurred: "Five hundred souls! Oh woeful plight! / From infancy to age /

² Shannon Ryan and Larry Small, *Haulin' Rope & Gaff: Songs and Poetry in the History of the Newfoundland Seal Fishery* (St. John's: Breakwater Books Limited, 1978), 99-100.

³ "The SS Caribou (traditional) with lyrics," WTV, accessed April 10, 2015, <http://www.wtv-zone.com/phyrst/audio/nfld/01/caribou.htm>.

⁴ Ibid.

Tossed by the boiling surges' might, / Now raised on high – now lost to sight / And swallowed in their rage!”⁵

Why the difference? The most obvious answer is that details from an incident that left no survivors are simply not known by anyone. Likewise, an incident with survivors allows a partial story of what occurred to be pieced together. This explanation however is only partially true. For example, several details of the 1982 sinking of the oil rig *Ocean Ranger* are known but they do not show up in folksongs about the event. The following is a basic timeline of events from the night of the disaster. At 9:00PM the *Ocean Ranger* confirmed that a window in the ballast control room had been broken by the waves of a storm but that the damage had been repaired. This was followed up at 11:30PM when the rig sent out an all clear signal. Next the rig began to list at 1:00AM and sent out a call for aid to the nearby *Seaforth Highlander* before finally issuing a Mayday call at 1:10 AM. The last message from the rig went out at 1:30 when the rig ordered the crew to lifeboats.

Although this timeline of events is limited it still allows one to piece together a chilling narrative of the events of February 15. The great swells of a storm broke the port light in the ballast control room and seawater got onto the control panel and, although it was not noticed immediately, caused damage to the controls. Several of the rig's valves began to open and close of their own accord which led to the rig beginning to list sometime between 11:30PM and 1:00AM. At 1:00AM those aboard the ship became aware of the listing and called a nearby vessel for aid. The listing began to dramatically worsen and amidst the commotion of attempting to escape to a lifeboat, the storm that had caused it all continued to rage outside. When the

⁵ Paul Mercer, *Newfoundland Songs and Ballads in Print, 1842-1974: A Title and First-Line Index*. Memorial University of Newfoundland Folklore and Language Publications. Bibliographical and Special Series No. 6 (St. John's: Memorial University of Newfoundland Press, 1979), 148.

Seaforth Highlander arrived on the scene the weather conditions were so bad as to make rescuing any of the few crew members who had made it to lifeboats impossible.

This traumatic chain of events lends itself quite easily to a song about the harrowing demise of the *Ocean Ranger*. Instead the songs choose to portray the crew as stoically facing a demise they do not fear as Kevin J. Arsenault does in his 1982 song “Sinking of the Ocean Ranger.” “To your stations men, we’re ailing / The rig has lost her hold / We’re leaning bad, we’re failing / Be fearless men, be bold / There’s little hope of help now / Well it looks as though we’re sold.”⁶ Again in “The Ocean Ranger” by Mary Garvey the events are portrayed in a similar fashion, “and the waves were far too high; / And each man knew that hope was gone, / It was his time to die.”⁷ Conversely, the crew aboard the sinking of the *S.S. Caribou*, which some survived is described as such by Fay Herridge and Michael T. Wall in their song “The S.S. Caribou:” “they discovered that some lifeboats had been smashed to useless wrecks, / As the swirling icy waters came a-sweeping o’er the decks; There was terror and great panic in the hearts of everyone.”⁸ This illustrates perfectly the next point; songs about incidents such as the *Ocean Ranger* or *Southern Cross* without survivors portray those who perished as brave and courageous, while those aboard ships during incidents in which people survived are portrayed as terrified and panicked.

Panic versus Reality

⁶ *The Sinking of the Ocean Ranger* by Kevin J. Arsenault, BandCamp, 3:09, accessed April 10, 2015, <http://kevinjarsenault.bandcamp.com/track/the-sinking-of-the-ocean-ranger>.

⁷ “The Ocean Ranger (Mary Garvey) with lyrics,” WTV, accessed April 10, 2015, <http://www.wtv-zone.com/phyrst/audio/nfld/01/oranger.htm>.

⁸ “The S.S. Caribou (Fay Herridge/Michael T. Wall) with lyrics,” WTV, accessed April 10, 2015, <http://www.wtv-zone.com/phyrst/audio/nfld/07/caribou.htm>.

Michael T. Wall in his 1982 song “Ocean Ranger Disaster” calls those aboard the rig, “brave men / Courageous, strong and true.”⁹ Again in Bruce Moss’s 1982 song “Your Last Goodbye” the same “eighty-four men true” are called a “gallant crew.”¹⁰ James Murphy describes in his song “Loss of the Anglo-Saxon,” the counterpart to this brave and gallant crew as, “the cowering infant madly torn / From off the mother’s breast, / Husband of wife and children shorn, / And youth and strength all swiftly borne / Like straws on the boiling crest.”¹¹ The 1942 sinking of the two American warships *Truxton* and *Pollux* is described by the band Simani in their song “Loss of the Truxton And Pollux” as: “the great ships beat on the raging reefs with sailors numbed and shocked, / And many who swam to grasp for life were dashed against the rocks; / While the black oil bleeding from the tanks blotted the raging tide, / And men in tearful agony cried out to God to die.”¹²

Again, the exact reason for this dramatic difference in the portrayal of the crews is not easily explained. The issue is obviously related to the fact that songwriters have less material to work with when writing about an incident without survivors. In scenarios where there were no survivors the exact details of what occurred must be invented by the songwriter. Although a timeline of events is sometimes available, it is never enough to infer the minute to minute actions of those on board during the incident, demonstrated by the extant information of the *Ocean Ranger*. However, when inventing details songwriters tend to write about terror and confusion aboard the ship. This suggests that when songwriters speculate about unknown events during the sinking of a ship they do not always paint the crew as gallant and brave. This apparent

⁹ Michael T. Wall, “Ocean Ranger”, on *Shake my Hand I’m From Newfoundland*, Compact Disc, Down Home Records and Tapes, RO 3374, 1982.

¹⁰ Bruce Moss, “Your Last Goodbye,” on *The Islander*, Compact Disc, Close Sound, CS 8072, 1982.

¹¹ Mercer, *Newfoundland Songs and Ballads in Print*, 148.

¹² Simani, “Loss of the Truxton and Pollux,” on *Outport & Sea*, Compact Disc, SWC Productions, 1986.

discrepancy in the attitudes of songwriters is better understood once these disasters are placed within the context of the Newfoundland maritime tradition.

As a coastal province Newfoundland has a long history of drawing its livelihood from the sea, originally from fishing now more from oil. The people of Newfoundland therefore have a unique relationship with the unpredictable and often dangerous sea. This relationship is evident in several of these songs. For example in “The Ocean Ranger” by Mary Garvey the relationship of Newfoundlanders to the sea is described: “Like their sons who follow after, / And their fathers gone before, / Our men must earn their living / On that wild and treacherous shore; / And whether they’re hunting fish, / Or seals, whales, or crude oil, / They must endure and persevere / In hardship and in toil.”¹³ Therefore victims of the sea in this context become martyrs, idolized for their sacrifice.

What has Happened?

Yet another difference between songs with survivors versus those without is the fixation of the latter on rhetorically asking what exactly occurred during the incident or what happened to the crew. For example Gary Calahan’s song “What happened to the Southern Cross?” opens with: “What happened to the Southern Cross? / In the same storm she was lost; / With a loss of a hundred and seventy-three, / To add to this terrible tragedy.”¹⁴ This same thing occurs in Michael T. Wall’s song “Ocean Ranger Disaster” wherein he asks “Where is the Ocean Ranger? / Oh, God, what will we do?”¹⁵

¹³ “The Ocean Ranger (Mary Garvey) with lyrics.”

¹⁴ Gary Callahan, “What Happened to the Southern Cross”, on *Death on the Ice, The Ultimate Price*, Compact Disc, Newsflash Sounds, 775020003545, 1996.

¹⁵ Michael T. Wall, “Ocean Ranger.”

The questioning of what occurred at an event that left no survivors is not odd in and of itself. What is interesting is that songwriters take the fact that no one knows for certain what occurred at these incidents both to rhetorically ask what happened and to attribute emotions and actions to the crew that are as impossible to verify as they are to disprove. Another facet of these songs mostly being told from the perspective of an individual on the shorefront is the literary device of rhetorically demanding to know what occurred to all those who perished. At the time of writing their songs many of the songwriters were in fact aware of many of the details of the disaster they were writing about. However, they chose not to comment on this, instead writing their song from the perspective of an individual on the shore, including all of the questions and emotions that this would entail.

The tendency of songwriters to portray the crews of ships in shining terminology when not a single person survived can now easily be understood as the effect of the entire ship's crew being martyred for what is perceived as a sacrifice on behalf of all Newfoundlanders. The men who perished were the sons, brothers, fathers, husbands, and friends of countless Newfoundlanders. And it is these individuals who compose these songs, often as forms of tribute towards the dead men.

The extent to which those who perish at sea become in the eyes of Newfoundlanders sacrificed martyrs is shown in the song "Ocean Ranger" by Mike Kennedy wherein he speaks using common language of the sacrifices both of soldiers fighting their country's wars and of men working the sea. "Some men are bound to sea, they fish or hunt the whale / Some are bound to snow or ice, and some to storm or gale / Other men are sent to sea to fight their country's wars

/ Beneath the hell of shot and shell the gray seas wait for more.”¹⁶ The description of sailors in these songs with language more commonly used to describe soldiers fallen in combat is understood only when the exact relationship Newfoundlanders have with the sea is made clear. Fighting against the sea in order to win a livelihood for their friends and families the crews of these downed ships are soldiers in the eyes of their fellow Newfoundlanders. This connection is even better illustrated by how similar language is used to describe the crews of the two maritime incidents without survivors, the *Ocean Ranger* and the *Southern Cross*, and the passengers of Arrow Air Flight 1285 almost all of whom were members of the American 101st Airborne Division. The members of the 101st and the crews of the downed ships are all seen as soldiers to the Newfoundlanders, fighting on their behalf.

For all of the differences between songs based on incidents without survivors versus those with there remains a few notable similarities. The greatest feature these two types of songs have is that they are both methods for remembrance and mourning used by those who wrote them and those who sing them. While it has been argued that the existence of survivors has a significant impact on how an incident is remembered by the community this should not be taken to mean that the extent to which it is remembered is different. Although the language and terminology used to describe the crews of the *Ocean Ranger* and the *SS Caribou* are different the function is the same. The songs are a community’s mechanism for coping with an incident or disaster that has afflicted the community. This is true not only of the incidents examined for this paper but also of the vast majority of songs written about incidents or disasters. A further similarity between the two is the degree to which the songs are an accurate depiction of the events.

¹⁶ “Ocean Ranger – Kennedy | Disaster Songs.”

Accuracy of Songs

The majority of the research previously done on folksongs written about incidents focusses on whether or not the songs are factually correct. Generally speaking, folksongs accurately portray the incidents they are written about. This is contrasted with accounts of incidents from non-fiction novels, the media, and movies, which often misrepresent or distort the incidents. None of the songs examined in this paper have gross factual inaccuracies; it seems with or without survivors, folksongs tend to be accurate. An interesting example to examine when looking into factual accuracies are the four songs written about the 1929 Burin Tsunami.

At 5:02pm on November 18th 1929 an earthquake registering 7.2 on the Richter scale occurred out on the Grand Banks of Newfoundland, resulting in three successive waves crashing into the shore. In total 28 people were killed with hundreds more left homeless and a grand total of over one million dollars in damage done. The song “Tidal Wave at Burin” reports that the earthquake occurred at some point “between four and five o’clock.” After this minor inaccuracy the song correctly states that, “the waves came in with power, / going forty miles an hour.” What is interesting is how the song next states that “sixteen previous loved ones have met a watery grave.”¹⁷

This lends weight to the argument that most inaccuracies are inadvertent rather than a deliberate distortion of facts. Rosalee Peppard’s song “The Tidal Wave” correctly stated that there were three successive waves.¹⁸ “1929 Tidal Wave” by Fay Herride and Michael T. Wall is correct in stating that the earthquake registered 7.2 on the Richter scale and that there were three

¹⁷ “MacEdward Leach and the Songs of Atlantic Canada – Tidal Wave at Burin,” Memorial University of Newfoundland, accessed April 10, 2015, <http://www.mun.ca/folklore/leach/songs/NFLD1/5-05.htm>.

¹⁸ Rosalee Peppard, “The Tidal Wave,” on *No Place Like Home*, Compact Disc, Mayflower Music, 654367026304, 2001.

waves, however it incorrectly reports that, “The ocean demanded, humanity gave, / For thirty-six lives had been claimed by the waves.”¹⁹ The final song written about the incident, “Lives and Property Carried Away By the Tidal Wave” by Johnny Burke gets the time of the earthquake correct within an hour, but states that twenty-six individuals died as opposed to the correct number, twenty-eight.²⁰

John Ashton in his article “Truth in Folksong,” came to the conclusion that a folksong can be true not only by reporting the events of an incident factually, but also by representing correctly the experience of those involved.²¹ Using the four songs concerning the Burin Tsunami as an example, all are true even with their minor factual inaccuracies because they all accurately portray the sorrow and sense of despair felt by those who were affected directly or indirectly by the incident. It should be noted that the incidents with survivors more often generate songs that are factually accurate while those written about incidents which did not leave any survivors generate songs more accurate to the experience of those left behind.

This paper has shown the many differences between songs generated from incidents without survivors versus those with survivors. It has been shown that the former generally focus on the events of the incident itself while the latter portrays the community from which the deceased crew is from. Additionally the former will portray the deceased crew as brave and accepting of death, while the former portrays them as terrified and panicked of their impending demise. Finally songs written about incidents without survivors commonly make use of the rhetorical device of demanding of fate what occurred at the event even though many details are

¹⁹ 1929 Tidal Wave (Fay Herridge / Michael T. Wall) with lyrics,” WTV, accessed April 10, 2015, <http://www.wtv-zone.com/phyrst/audio/nfld/07/1929wave.htm>.

²⁰ John White, compiler, *Burke's Ballads* (St. John's: Long Brothers, 1929), 1.

²¹ John Ashton, “Truth in Folksong: Some Developments and Applications,” *Canadian Folk Music Journal*, 6 (1977): 12-17.

known at the time of writing. This paper has also shown the similarities in the language used in songs of remembrance between songs written about Newfoundland maritime incidents and songs about military personnel and soldiers. Additionally, this paper also shed light on how the maritime tradition of Newfoundland impacts how Newfoundlanders conceptualize their relationship with the sea. Finally it has shown that whether or not an incident had survivors does not change the fact that it will conform to the currently accepted theory that folksongs are an accurate account of the incidents they portray.

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