Heritage NL Fieldnotes Series, 014 February 2021

Community Development and Safeguarding Intangible Cultural Heritage in Newfoundland and Labrador

Heritage NL

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Introduction

This paper provides an overview of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) program developed by the Heritage Foundation of Newfoundland and Labrador (HFNL), Canada. It traces the early development of the program, and outlines the ICH Strategy and the shifting role of heritage work in Newfoundland and Labrador. It then provides an overview of two ongoing projects that explore, document, and encourage the continued safeguarding and sharing of ICH knowledge and skills: the Living Heritage Economy Case Study project, and the NL Heritage Craft at Risk project.

Background

Newfoundland and Labrador is the easternmost province of Canada. Situated in the country's Atlantic region, it incorporates the island of Newfoundland and mainland Labrador to the northwest. It has a combined area of 405,212 square kilometres, with a population of just over 514,000. Most of the population is concentrated on the eastern portion of the island of Newfoundland.

It is a province with a rich cultural heritage, with both native indigenous populations, and a colonist population of predominantly English and Irish ancestry. The island of Newfoundland has a long history associated with the North Atlantic cod fishery, and much of its local culture and flavour evolved in small fishing villages scattered along the island's long coastline. Linguistic, cultural, and social traditions persisted in many small isolated communities after they had faded or changed in the European communities where they were born. By 1992, once-plentiful codfish stocks had dwindled to near extinction. Fearing they would disappear entirely if the fisheries remained open, the federal government of the day instituted a moratorium on northern cod stocks. The moratorium abruptly ended a way of life that had endured for generations in many rural communities, leading to a decline of rural settlements throughout Newfoundland and Labrador.

Fig 1. Keels, Bonavista Bay, c2007.

In the small fishing community of Keels **[Fig 1]**, as one example, the population dropped from around 200 people in 1982 to close to 50 by

2012. An observer in that community notes that "residents have gradually moved away to seek work in places like Alberta, and the landscape of Keels has dramatically changed. Many buildings have been abandoned, some torn down, and a number of houses have been bought up by summer residents from Ontario or the United States" -- a post-moratorium story repeated over and over throughout much of the province (Pocius 2013:2).

Out-migration and unemployment impacted not only the physical landscape, but also the intangible cultural heritage tied to the fishery, and the pattern of life in small rural communities. The resulting movement of young people to urban areas or out of the province meant that cultural traditions were not being transmitted from generation to generation in the same way, or to the extent to which they had once been passed down. Researcher Kristin Lowitt (5) has noted this in her study on the changing fisheries and community food security on the west coast of Newfoundland, writing:

Although changes in the fishing industry are potentially making local seafood harder to access, changes at a household level, including a lack of food skills and increasing constraints on time for preparing food, may also be contributing to less seafood consumption. As fewer young families enter into fishing, the food skills for preserving and preparing seafood are also declining. Some young families described not having the skills to prepare fish and ate less fish for this reason.

In 2002, Dr. Gerald Pocius of Memorial University of Newfoundland's Department of Folklore represented Canada at a meeting of experts in Rio de Janeiro working on an early draft of UNESCO's Convention on Intangible Cultural Heritage. Twenty specialists from around the world debated a number of key issues that the Convention hoped to address. Pocius (2010:1) writes,

> I returned to Newfoundland that January inspired and enthusiastic, convinced that UNESCO's work in this field was of immense importance to our province and our culture. I was optimistic that the Government of Canada would support UNESCO's work, and soon I became involved in ICH policy discussions in Ottawa, working with the Department of Canadian Heritage. I was naturally disappointed when the Canadian government decided not to sign on to the final version of the Convention that was ratified in 2003. However, a number of us had begun work here in our province on ICH, believing that we could pursue many of the UNESCO policies here even though our federal government was not a signatory of the Convention.

Recognizing the potential negative impacts to local intangible culture, the province acted. In 2006, the Government of Newfoundland and Labrador released its Provincial Cultural Strategy, Creative Newfoundland and Labrador. It outlined the need for a strategy to safeguard Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH), and recommended to "over the longer term, create a public advisory committee with responsibility for the recognition and designation of provincial intangible cultural heritage" (Creative 35).

In 2008, the Heritage Foundation of Newfoundland and Labrador (HFNL) established its ICH office in the city of St. John's, and began work to safeguard local traditions. The main purpose of the office is to further the work of the provincial ICH strategy, namely, to safeguard and sustain the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Newfoundland and Labrador for present and future generations everywhere, as a vital part of the identities of Newfoundlanders and Labradorians, and as a valuable collection of unique knowledge and customs. This is achieved through initiatives that celebrate, record, disseminate, and promote living heritage and help to build bridges between diverse cultural groups within and outside Newfoundland and Labrador.

Implementation of the ICH Strategy

The Newfoundland and Labrador ICH strategy has four goals: documentation, the work of inventorying; celebration, where we honour our

tradition-bearers; transmission, where we ensure that skills are passed from person to person, generation to generation, and community to community; and, cultural industry, where we build stronger communities using intangible cultural heritage as a tool (see Heritage 2008).

Two things became abundantly clear following the establishment of the Heritage Foundation of Newfoundland and Labrador's ICH office in 2008, and the completion of the provincial needs survey. The first was that local communities were interested and eager to begin the work of safeguarding intangible cultural heritage at the community level. The second was that they had very little knowledge or expertise on where to start. As a result, community training became one of the first areas of focus for implementation of the strategy.

Fig. 2 - Workshop conducted as part of the Mummers Festival, St. John's.

Training workshops fall roughly into two categories: training in ethnographic documentation and ICH safeguarding; and training in traditional skills and crafts. In the first category, HFNL has developed a number of workshops on cultural documentation and safeguarding, including: technical workshops on audio recording; interviewing techniques; oral history; folklife festival planning; Google mapping; and cemetery restoration. These workshops are largely designed for the training of ethnographic field workers, project leaders and planners, students, or community volunteers, and to develop ways of providing practical technical support and advice to local heritage and community organizations engaged in ICH initiatives.

In the second category, HFNL has offered or partnered on workshops related to: traditional square dancing; hobby horse making; instrument making; rug hooking; traditional weaving; and ethnic cooking.

"Genuine conservation depends first of all on understanding what you want to conserve," notes Dale Rosengarten. "Second, it requires coordinating diverse groups and individuals, whose interests are not always in accord." In order to make safeguarding programmes and other participatory heritage processes work and succeed, communities often require some type of experience guidance, facilitation, or collaboration. As elements of ICH, and communities themselves, shift and evolve, the role and approaches of mediators must adapt and shift to fit local circumstances and situations.

Community-based projects are the foundation of HFNL's safeguarding work. Essentially, a topic or community is identified, background research is conducted, and then fieldwork is undertaken to document living knowledge. Then, some sort of event or project is organized, utilizing the information collected, which allows for public participation in and/or celebration of the tradition under study. Everything is documented, and then added to a topic collection on the online ICH Inventory developed in partnership with Memorial University's Digital Archives Initiative. The training initiatives mentioned previously are inserted where they fit into the project, building capacity for future projects within the community.

The 2013 UNESCO convention on ICH maintains that communities (broadly defined) are at the heart of all ICH work. The preamble to the convention recognizes that "communities, in particular indigenous communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals, play an important role in the production, safeguarding, maintenance and re-creation of the intangible cultural heritage, thus helping to enrich cultural diversity and

human creativity" (Text). ICH is community-based; it can only be heritage when it is recognized as such by those who create, maintain, and transmit it. It is a democratization of heritage - communities get to pick for themselves which expressions or practices are their heritage and get their attention **[Fig. 3]**.

One challenge with HFNL's work is to balance the primary importance of community input with the community's own lack of safeguarding expertise. This, however, has been one of the most rewarding parts of our work - discovering what matters most to communities, and helping them develop the skills to safeguard it. As our approach to heritage safeguarding has changed, the people with whom we have conversations has changed as well. Former staff folklorist Lisa Wilson describes it thusly:

> There has been a major shift in communicating exclusively with organizations who are involved with heritage, and shifting that communication to the people in the community, and those people who live within these heritage districts -- the people who live in the buildings, the people who are from there, people who might not live there anymore but who grew up there and have memories of being there -- the people who find meaning in these places rather than organizations or town councils exclusively (Wilson).

While we still liaise and organize with historical societies and heritage advisory committees, a great deal of our work involves craft practitioners, tradition bearers, elders and seniors, volunteers, fire departments, market vendors, high school students and teachers – people who might not consider themselves part of the established "heritage" or museum community.

Broadening the discussion to include wider community concerns is shifting our relationship with intangible cultural heritage away from an object to be protected or conserved towards being a tool which can be used for local community development. It is a similar approach to that espoused by Young et al. (20) as a new model for historic house museums, having them "working with neighbors to identify agreed-upon community needs, then lending institutional leadership and support to collaborative efforts that make a difference."

Fig. 3 - Community mapping workshop in New Perlican, 2019.

Current Approaches

A decade into the enactment of the strategy, the ICH office hosted a 2-day Forum on Adapting NL's Intangible Cultural Heritage, in St. John's, in October 2017. This included a "strategy cafe" which allowed participants to converse with fellow heritage professionals, students, and enthusiasts about the future of intangible cultural heritage, to establish the needs and desires of local organizations, and brainstorm how best to achieve these goals. At the end of the session, participants were asked to dream about the future of the province's intangible cultural heritage strategy (see Harvey & Jarvis).

Out of this came a number of recommendations, including one to develop further processes for incubating traditional skill sets in communities, and to assist in removing barriers to enterprise development. Following the Forum, the ICH Committee met and decided to move forward with a series of "Living Heritage Economy Case Studies" which would look at building cultural businesses based on aspects of our intangible cultural heritage.

Newfoundland and Labrador has long been building cultural businesses based on aspects of our intangible heritage. Traditional crafts such as hooked mats, tea dolls, carvings, knitted goods, and boots and slippers made from animal skins are on display in heritage and craft shops all over the province. Traditional music is the backbone of the province's music industry. Heritage theatre presentations and "Times" interpreting our history and incorporating traditional forms of music and dance abound. The most successful of these enterprises have involved the whole community.

Started in 2018, the "Living Heritage Economy" series is an ongoing series of pdf-format case studies examining the links between intangible cultural heritage, traditionality, entrepreneurism, and community economic development. The publication of these ICH-based business case studies is meant to demonstrate the link between ICH and sustainable community development, and to inspire tradition bearers to explore business opportunities related to ICH. The series, as of 2021, includes seven cases studies covering the following topics and themes: folklore and craft; traditional patterns as business; the *économusée* model; revitalization of old traditions; traditional skills and social enterprise; and local knowledge as cultural tourism. This paper will explore the first three completed studies.

The first case study focuses on the work of textile artist Janet Peter, and how she incorporates traditional figures from local calendar customs and folk beliefs into her designs.

She formalized that love of creativity in the 1990s when she went to the College of the North Atlantic in Stephenville and earned a diploma in visual arts. After graduating, she moved back to St. John's. As she thought about how best to apply her training, a friend suggested that she make mummers, the disguised house-visitors of local Christmas customs. At that point, there were only a few people making mummers for the craft market, a situation which has changed drastically since the late '90s.

Fig. 4 - Felted mermaid, photo courtesy of J. Peter.

Peter is not afraid to delve into the darker aspects of Newfoundland and Labrador folklore and legend. It is her exploration of folk motifs and supernatural belief that makes her work stand out in the local craft scene. She explains,

> The thing that got the mummers started were stories from people who had experienced the tradition as children. Their perspective of having these hooded masked people coming into the house -- who were loud, drinking, falling over, causing chaos -- was terrifying for many of them. That was my inspiration. It wasn't

> 'We had a grand kitchen party, and everybody danced, and they went home,' it was the terror aspect. That has been the seam running through most of the work I create. I always had an interest in the paranormal and the creepy, and darker things: things like fairies and fairy lore, being dark, luring people away, the idea of the changeling. Obviously there is an appeal there for that whole idea of trying to kick away the darkness that creeps into our lives. It is something that has always interested me; I think it has always been there. Even when I was a kid, people were into that sort of thing. It allows me to tap into a generation before, because it is a consistent thing that doesn't seem to be going away (*qtd in* LHECS001 3).

The second case studies features the work of another textile artist, a heritage knitter Christine LeGrow. A life-long knitter, her company Spindrift Handknits produces over 30 regular hand-knit wool products across a diverse product line. The business is supported by rural knitters throughout the island who make extensive use of traditional patterns **[Fig. 5]** that have been handed down through generations.

Fig. 5 - Traditional NL knitting patterns.

LeGrow sees knitting as a very important part of Newfoundland history, and the survival of early settlers on the island:

> I think hand knits, particularly out of sheep wool, is very important for protecting the story of our survival in a really cold, damp climate, and how important those one or two sheep that somebody owned back in the 1800s were to keeping hands and feet and bodies warm. That was getting lost, people were forgetting about the actual roots of knitted goods, and how important it was our survival in this cold, rocky place. In Newfoundland a couple hundred years ago, I don't think the population would have survived here without wool from sheep to keep their bodies protected from the cold (*qtd in* LHECS002 4).

Since 2015, LeGrow has expanded her business to include her take on traditional knitting patterns. Her best seller is the "Some Warm Mittens" package, a series of four mitten patterns developed in collaboration between Spindrift and "Shirl the Purl" -- Shirley Scott, author of Canada Knits: Craft and Comfort in a Northern Land.

LeGrow and Scott's most recent collaboration is their 2018 book, Saltwater Mittens from the Island of Newfoundland: More than 20 Heritage Designs to Knit published by Boulder Publications, an independent Canadian book publishing company headquartered in Newfoundland and Labrador. Recognizing the value of traditional patterns, the duo have expertly and painstakingly recreated more than 20 heritage patterns for today's knitter. The patterns are rated by difficulty and varied in style, including trigger mitts, wristers, five-finger mittens (a.k.a. gloves), thumbless mitts for children, and classic mittens. The goal of their book is to encourage the transmission and celebration of this heritage art form. By making these traditional patterns accessible, they are encouraging the spread of skills, knowledge, and experimentation.

The third completed case study looks at the Tea Rose Eatery & Livyers' Lot Économusée. The Livyers' Lot Économusée was established to provide a venue for local craftspeople to demonstrate their skills and products, and to improve their options in terms of craft sales **[Fig. 6]**. The name comes from a set of Newfoundland words which classified fishermen as either "livyers"—those who lived in the places where they fished, and "stationers"–those who migrated with the fishery. Organizer Elizabeth Ann Murphy explains:

> With the site that we have, we have such a full picture. You can go in the old house that is kept the way it was 80 years ago. It was moved in from Port Elizabeth, Flat Islands. It was brought from there to Red Harbour. Flat Islands people resettled as a collective and went to Red Island. They made a community there, they built the roads, structured the community, and they brought their houses in there. We had it moved from Red Harbour to the site. People can go upstairs, see the old patchwork quilts with the scattered hole in them on the beds, and then go in the craft shop and see more modern day patchwork available for sale. They can see the old time, woolen stockings hung up over the stove, and then they can go in the Tea House and order salt fish with drawn butter. It's a full experience (*qtd in* LHECS003 2)

An ÉCONOMUSÉE® is an experiential tourism destination. The concept of the économusée was born in 1992 in Quebec, with a mandate to allow artisans and craft enterprises to develop and promote in situ traditionally-inspired crafts and knowledge, in order to offer the public a high-quality cultural tourism product:

> It is an independent business that operates in the craft or agri-food sector which utilizes some form of authentic traditional know-how in the production of its products. Each member site opens its doors to the public to showcase what they do and, in many cases, offers a hands-on component for the visitor to try. Each one has an on-site boutique (Artisans).

Fig. 6 - Stove and hooked rug inside the museum.

The Placentia West Heritage Committee had been around in one form or another since 1983, while craft work and mat-making had been a regional development initiative dating back to the 1970s, and the site was not accredited by the international économusée network until the 2000s. The case study provides a model for local craft networks and producers to work together to form a social enterprise.

The three case studies described here are completed and online as of August 2019, with two more in preparation. The first will focus on the use of traditional blacksmithing skills in developing a not-for-profit enterprise. The second will look at the incorporation of traditional folk beliefs around the supernatural creatures known as fairies or

"little people" in cultural tourism products. From these examples, HFNL is attempting to demonstrate this idea that ICH is a tool which can be used, carefully, for community and individual development, sustainability and "quality of life" issues.

There is a cautionary note that must be added here. While ICH skills and knowledge have the potential to aid local sustainability or personal income, practitioners must learn to balance the intrinsic values of local ICH with the pressures that can accompany a quickly developing marketable product. ICH is, at its heart, community based, and control over local ICH must remain at the community level.

As researcher Janice Francis-Lindsay (165) notes, "...in order to develop heritage tourisms that reflect society's way of life, customs and traditions, local populations will have to be lead marketers, promoters and conveyors of the messages." Over-commercialization of traditional craft can create more problems than benefits, with a demand for increased production resulting in a lowering of quality, or a loss of the traditional knowledge behind the craft.

A more balanced approach might follow what Cohen (165) calls "rehabilitative commercialization" which may, in his words "also help to keep alive moribund crafts, or revive half-forgotten old techniques, or even whole crafts which have disappeared in the past. The growing demand for marketable craft products may even, in some instances, give an impetus for the training of additional producers, who have never before been involved in craft production for an internal audience."

As work on the Living Heritage Economy case studies progresses, a complimentary project is underway in parallel with it. This is the "NL Heritage Craft at Risk" survey project, developed in cooperation with the Craft Council of NL. The Craft Council of NL is the provincial industry association for craft, and a membership organization representing craft producers, which works to develop the provincial craft industry both for the benefit of its members and the industry as a whole (see Craft Strategic Plan). Using the average sales per craftsperson in 2016, the Council estimates that total craft industry sales in 2016 were $36 million. It is also estimated that there are approximately 760 craftspeople/businesses in the province (Craft Industry 3).

Fig. 7 - Crafts for sale at Livyers' Lot Économusée.

"Living in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean our craft producers have spent years using their heritage of English, Irish, French, and Indigenous ancestors to grow their creativity and developed a true sense of place that is one of a kind," says Rowena House, Executive Director of the Craft Council of NL.

"Newfoundland and Labrador has such a unique and diverse range of craft skills that supports some of the best craftspeople in the world," she adds. "These skills will only survive if they continue to be taught through each generation. They provide a tangible link to our roots, and they are part of our shared heritage."

The Survey aims to assess the current viability of traditional heritage crafts in NL, and to identify those crafts which are most at risk of disappearing. The project also aims to create a list of heritage crafts in NL, accompanied by information about each craft and whom may practice it. It is inspired by the UK Heritage Crafts Association's "Red List of Endangered Crafts," first published in 2017. The Heritage Crafts Association (HCA) is the only UK UNESCO-

accredited NGO working primarily in the domain of traditional craftsmanship, and the Red List "was the first report of its kind to rank traditional crafts by the likelihood they would survive to the next generation, based on intangible cultural heritage safeguarding principles" (Carpenter 1).

The Red List was designed specifically to give a voice to those previously excluded from public debates around heritage, which rarely were allowed to stray beyond the preservation of museum artefacts and historic buildings. It focuses on the realm of the lived experiences of working people. Red List Project Manager, Daniel Carpenter (3), notes,

> ...for me the Red List isn't an uncritical demand for preservation. It's about being attentive to cultural change and, through this attentiveness, opening up opportunities yet to be discovered; opportunities for society to have a debate about which parts of our culture we want to carry with us into the future, and for individuals to use these repositories of knowledge to create rewarding livelihoods for themselves in ways we might not yet even be able to imagine.

NL's Heritage Craft at Risk project follows a similar philosophical approach. The survey component, currently underway, asks craft producers, makers, and builders to provide feedback on the current state of the heritage craft form they are most familiar with in Newfoundland and Labrador.

The survey covers topics such as the number of makers currently practising specific skills, and issues limiting the health of craft in NL. The survey component is a preliminary groundwork project, leading to further focused documentation, then ultimately to policies that will stimulate and support deeper transmission initiatives, such as intensive workshops and mentor/apprentice-type programs.

The use of "Craft at Risk" as a title focuses attention on specific craft skills, but the long-term goal is to enhance individual and community identity and build a stronger, healthier society.

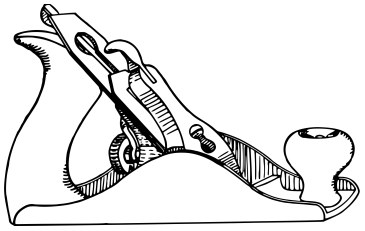
Fig. 8 - Boat building workshop, photo courtesy of Wooden Boat Museum of NL.

Conclusion

In the words of ethnomusicologist Dr. Kristin Harris Walsh (34), "tradition needs to breathe and grow in order for it to remain relevant in the years to come." Working on ICH projects is a means of providing a link from our past, through the present, and into our future. It also fosters a sense of responsibility and, hopefully, action.

A healthy, living, vibrant heritage is one that is always adapting. Heritage shifts, and moves, and shuttles back and forth, it weaves in and out of our daily life, and has always done so.

The ways in which we safeguard heritage must then also be flexible. These safeguarding measures to document and transmit skills can also provide social or economic opportunities to people in their everyday life.



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