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The Banks of Newfoundland

Mabel Worcester

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“The Banks of Newfoundland” is the title of at least six different songs. These are not variations on a single tune, but entirely different songs with different airs and lyrics. All share a common theme – the dangers of fishing or sailing off the coast of Newfoundland – but none are very similar. Edith Fowke suggested this abundance of songs existed because the waters off Newfoundland are an interesting and dangerous place. The most popular of these songs was based on an old British song called “Van Dieman’s Land,” and told of the hardships suffered by convicts being transported to the penal colony of modern Tasmania. The version heard here, however, is not as widely collected, though it appears both in Maine and across the ocean in Ballycastle (at the northernmost tip of Ireland).

Though this song was clearly written about life at sea and was sung by sailors, it was also popular (in its many forms) in the woods tradition. Just as songs traveled freely across state and national borders, they also crossed the border of land and sea. In many cases, the words to songs changed, and thus “The Sailors’ Alphabet” became “The Lumberman’s Alphabet.” But in many cases the sea songs remained the same, telling stories of the dangerous ocean, brave sailors, and the women who loved them (and often dressed up like men to be with them). They were alternately comical and harrowing tales, and were certainly filled with themes lumbermen could relate to. The version of “Banks” heard here includes several of these features of traditional sea songs.

1. You’d ought to bless your happy lots, who live here safe on shore,
   Free from the storms and dangers that ‘round poor seamen roar;
   Free from both storms and hardships that we poor sailors stand
   For fourteen days and fourteen nights on the banks of Newfoundland.

2. Our vessel she had never crossed o’er the wild dashing sea;
   She was well rigged and fitted before she went away;
   She was built of green and unseasoned wood, and she could not very well stand
   The hurricane that struck her on the banks of Newfoundland.

3. We fasted for three days and nights, our provisions being out,
   And on the morning of the fourth we shoved the lots about.
   The lot fell on the captain’s son, thinking relief at hand,
   We spared him for another day, on the banks of Newfoundland.

4.
Early the next morning, we told him to prepare;  
We gave to him an hour to offer up a prayer;  
But providence proved kind to us, kept blood from every man,  
An English vessel hove in sight on the banks of Newfoundland.

5.  
And they took us from the wreck; we were more like ghosts than men,  
They fed us and they cooled us and brought us back again;  
We were all able seamen bold who did our vessel man,  
Our captain lost his feet by a frost on the banks of Newfoundland.