

IMMATERIA MEDICA: CHARMERS AND THEIR COMMUNITIES IN NEWFOUNDLAND

Martin Lovelace

This paper offers a typology of charmers in Newfoundland, Canada. The ability to charm may be transmitted, often cross-sex, or may be ascribed by the community and adopted as a role by an individual who falls into the recognized categories of being a posthumous child, or a woman who marries a man who shares her own family name. Seventh sons and priests are ascribed the widest range of healing competency and are at the apex of a conceptual pyramid of power. Material is drawn from fieldwork conducted in 2010 and a review of holdings on charming contained in MUNFLA, the Memorial University Folklore and Language Archive. It is argued that it may be premature to conclude that charmers have lost their healing and social roles in Newfoundland communities and that in the case of wart charming, and blood stopping, the tradition continues.

Key words: Ascribed healing roles, charming, folklore archives and appraisal of sources, Newfoundland, scarcity of verbal charms.

In 1994 the medical historian John Crellin declared that in contemporary Newfoundland “charmners have lost their health-care, as well as their social and community roles” (Crellin 1994: 111). He drew his evidence mainly by reading in the hundreds of student folklore collections in the Folklore and Language Archive of Memorial University (MUNFLA) which describe charming. These records begin in 1962 when the folklorists Herbert and Violetta Halpert started to encourage students to record folklore in their home communities as part of course work for degrees in English and, after 1968, in Folklore. The archive now holds thousands of collections on all aspects of folklore and folklife from almost every community in Newfoundland and Labrador. These sources, in manuscript and audio-recordings, have advantages and drawbacks: they can be naive, in that a student may not have known enough about the tradition to know what to ask, yet they often have the virtue of easy familiarity with the people being interviewed, who were often relatives or neighbours. This too can be problematic in that tacit, taken for granted, knowledge may not be made explicit for us—the readers over the shoulders of these students making their first attempts at ethnography. They were also generally in their teens or

twenties, often the first of their family to attend university, and very conscious of being part of a vast movement of modernization in which the old ways of life in rural Newfoundland seemed about to be swept away. They may, therefore have been more likely to describe charming as disappearing. As in all archival sources there are biases and sub-texts. They reflect what was and what was not talked about in class, and over time they reflect the academic fashions of their professors, some of whom emphasized change over continuity, but despite all these *caveats* the archival material shows that Newfoundland has had a very strong and widespread tradition of healing by means of charms. The discussion in this paper derives from my own reading of just over a hundred MUNFLA accessions, deposited in the Archive between 1963 and 1989. These vary greatly in length and detail, ranging from responses to questionnaires, paragraph-length accounts on eight by ten inch Folklore Survey cards, and longer term papers which often give the writer's personal experience with charmers and charming. Not too much should be made of the apparent "gap" in the rate of accessioning of new materials on charming between 1989 and 2010. Like all archives, MUNFLA has a backlog of cataloguing and, for a variety of reasons unconnected with the state of any particular folk tradition in Newfoundland, there has been a general decline in the amount of field-recorded material deposited in MUNFLA over the past twenty years. My review of archival sources was supplemented with interviews with three charmers which I conducted in February and June 2010, in two being accompanied by Barbara Rieti, whose own research and writing has shown so much about supernatural belief and narrative in Newfoundland (Rieti 1991, 2008).

The published folkloristic literature on charming in Newfoundland is remarkably scant. Beyond the medical historian John K. Crellin's treatment of charming among other forms of folk medicine in *Home Medicine: The Newfoundland Experience* (1994), and George Patterson's "Notes" on aspects of Newfoundland folklore appearing in *The Journal of American Folklore* in 1895, there is only the 1972 case-study by Michael Owen Jones of a Newfoundland seventh son which appeared as *Why Faith Healing?* There are scattered references to charming in other published sources, most interestingly in doctors' reminiscences of their outport work, in which attitudes toward charming range from patronizing (Wilfred Grenfell, in Kerr 1959) to open minded (Noel Murphy in his 2003 memoir), but a full account of charmers and their communities in Newfoundland remains to be written.

NEWFOUNDLAND'S HISTORY AND ECONOMY—A ROUGH AND PARTIAL SKETCH

Newfoundland was England's most accidental and neglected North American colony. Visited by Vikings in the eleventh century, then by Basques, French, Spanish, Portuguese and English fishermen from the fifteenth century, the island was only effectively settled by English and Irish men and women recruited into the cod fishery by English West Country merchants in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Newfoundland became a province of Canada in 1949. At first it had been useful to England as a "great ship" moored near the Grand Banks in the Atlantic ocean which teemed with cod; it was a shoreline where fish could be salted and dried before being brought back to Europe. Settlement occurred sporadically, as crews were left to guard fishing premises against aboriginal people scavenging for iron nails and other artifacts, or to better hold a harbour against rival English fishers. These crews were recruited from the agricultural poor of south-west England and south-east Ireland, Protestant and Catholic respectively. In the eighteenth and nineteenth century, and even up to the Resettlement scheme of the 1960s, most Newfoundlanders lived in small communities (500 to 1000 people) scattered along thousands of miles of indented rocky coastline, the better to prosecute the cod fishery from small boats. Government services were few and reluctantly given; literacy was consequently low and health-care was poor, and often beyond the means of many families. Religious denominations treated Newfoundland as a site for missionary work; it was not until 1998 that the Newfoundland government allowed purely secular publicly-funded schools to appear when they abolished the separate Catholic, Protestant, and Pentecostal school systems which had allowed religious functionaries to hold sway over the appointment of teachers and aspects of the curriculum. Under the Resettlement plan, part of that omnipresent 1960s sense of modernization, the smallest most difficult to access communities were abandoned and their populations were persuaded, bribed, and coerced by the provincial government into moving to larger towns connected to the developing road system. In the early 1990s the fishery for cod collapsed, causing many younger families to leave the province; a moratorium on fishing for cod remains in place. Today rural Newfoundland continues to depopulate, as people move to the capital region on the Avalon peninsula to take part in the sudden prosperity delivered by offshore oil.

The resulting society in the outports of Newfoundland in the first half of the twentieth century—the period covered by the archive reports—was one in which a small upper class—merchants, clergy, the doctor, if any, and perhaps

teachers—sat like a thin skin on the surface of a deeper pool in which everyone else considered themselves approximately socially equal. While there were antipathies between sections of larger communities, and *blason populaire* rhymes and phrases played up religious and social divisions, the publicly stated ethos was egalitarian. This sense among the “ordinary” people of the community that they had their own values, their own ways of doing things that were independent of anything being done among their community’s elite, may have helped charming to continue long past its apparent decline in the home countries of Newfoundland’s settlers. Most communities had several charmers, some specializing more than others, and everyone in the village knew who they were and visited them freely, confident they would not be turned away, and that payment, thanks, and even the request for help in some traditions were not to be offered. In 1995 Barbara Rieti and I visited a charmer in Belleoram, in Fortune Bay on Newfoundland’s South Coast, who opened a kitchen drawer and gave us a handful of knotted string charms. He evidently kept these ready for all visitors. The informality of the charmer/patient relationship, and the absence of any financial obligation, were important in outport Newfoundland until the 1950s, or later, in that the organization of the fishery ensured that very little hard cash circulated in village economies. This cash-less economic system is well described in Herbert Halpert and J. D.A. Widdowson, *Folktales of Newfoundland*, p. 819:

Most Newfoundlanders fished for a living from late spring through to the fall when the ice brought fishing to a halt. The local merchant extended credit for fishing gear, clothing, and staple foods, and bought the “made” [i.e. salted] fish back from the fishermen. Little cash ever changed hands. Most of what the fishermen earned went to pay back the credit that had been extended. Each family had a garden or gardens to grow hay for the draught animals, and vegetables, like potatoes and turnips. Many families kept pigs. They bottled berries and vegetables, and sometimes meat. Meat and fish would also be salted or smoked. Hardy vegetables were carefully covered over and stored underground in the outdoor “cellar.” Other staples, such as flour and molasses, were purchased from the local merchant in the fall.

Despite the absence of money, it is hard to believe that *nothing* was given in return, especially as archival reports tell of blood stoppers being woken from their sleep to give an urgent charm to staunch a deadly flow of blood. Rural society in Newfoundland remains a finely calibrated system of favours given and repaid. Some way of giving compensation for charming would easily disappear within the myriad acts of assistance, like help with getting firewood, car

repairs, or sharing meat from a hunting trip, which continue in Newfoundland life to the present.

A TYPOLOGY OF CHARMERS

The most powerful category of charmer in Newfoundland was a *seventh son*: such individuals were believed to be able to cure the widest range of ailments attempted by any charmers, including warts, toothache, earache, eczema and other skin diseases, as well as setting bones and stopping blood. Almost every account of a seventh son in Newfoundland includes testimony to his ability to cause an earthworm to curl up, lie still, or die in one of his hands; in this hand lies the healing power. Most seventh sons seem to have laid their hands on their patients as part of the cure, even if they also spoke words, unintelligibly, or gave a charm in written form to be worn by the sufferer. There is one detailed description and analysis of a seventh son and his community by the American folklorist Michael Owen Jones in *Why Faith Healing?* (1972). This man had an exceptionally charismatic presence, attested to also by the English folklorist John Widdowson who visited him in 1964:

this Uncle Joe was a man who impressed me particularly because I expected a man who had healing powers to be somewhat of a braggart and extroverted perhaps. . . . he was . . . tall, gaunt, and about six feet three with a shock of white hair and extremely full of some sort of inner strength. Extremely impressive to the skeptic. (MUNFLA: Widdowson field report, 64–8, tape C24)

But Uncle Joe said very little, refusing to be recorded or photographed, though he used his wife as an intermediary, allowing her to tell stories testifying to his cures. There was an edge of danger about him too, however, and Widdowson recorded a story of his refusal to accept a bottle of whisky from two patients; he threatened they would “turn white and die like worms” (as worms did in his hand) if they persisted with offering the gift. Michael Owen Jones heard that he also “worked the Black Heart,” a term used in Newfoundland for aggressive magic performed by men (Rieti 2008: 62–70), and that he enjoyed his ambivalent reputation. He was well known over a long period, and probably over a wide area. While reading MUNFLA files on charming in June 2010 I mentioned my topic to another researcher, who by coincidence had grown up in this seventh son’s community; as a twelve-year old boy he had visited him for toothache around 1943. His father had told him “Go up and see Uncle Joe,” which is a very typical way of approaching a charmer in Newfoundland: a par-

ent takes, or if the child is older, sends the child to visit the charmer. I asked him if he had felt any apprehension, and he said he did; he was worried that he didn't believe strongly enough. There was no question of payment; it had to be free. The refusal of any reward for an act of charming is a point made by almost all Newfoundland charmers, often vociferously; even to suggest it is to risk being insulting. Uncle Joe may have changed his mind on this matter, however, since Widdowson also says that Joe's wife "collected any money or other handsones which were given." By 1964, and continuing when Michael Owen Jones visited him in 1968–9, Joe seems to have had something equivalent to a doctor's practice, with numerous patients calling on him. Widdowson notes: "While we were there he touched several people who came in, including a small child which had been covered with eczema and only had a small patch of it left." (MUNFLA: Widdowson field report, 64–8, tape C24). This ambivalent reputation for being able to work harm as well as healing parallels the roles of nineteenth century English cunning folk (Atkinson 1907: 108).

The large size of Newfoundland families, that was common until recently, made the occurrence of seventh sons, and daughters, less rare than in more developed countries. Widely reported is the idea that such individuals were natural doctors, and would make the best kind of orthodox medical practitioners too.

Two other categories of charmers in Newfoundland appeared in far greater numbers, however, though here too their exceptional prominence in Newfoundland must owe something to the particular combination of high mortality rates and small population size. The two commonest named conditions for being a charmer in Newfoundland are: to be a *posthumous child*, someone "who never saw" his or her father; and to be a *woman who married a man of the same surname as her own*. In both cases the question of occupational choice so cogently raised by Michael Owen Jones also arises. Not all seventh sons become healers, and probably even greater numbers of posthumous children and women who did not "change their name" on marriage did not elect to take on the role that many in their communities may have expected them to. It was common for children to rub their warty hands in the clothing of a posthumous child, thereby tapping in to the healing power which the community had begun to ascribe to this oblivious child who would have been surprised and perhaps angry to know he or she was being used in this way. Whether communities pressured individuals with these qualifications into becoming charmers is impossible to determine from the MUNFLA records; it is simply not a question that student collectors asked. When I asked it, in February 2010, of a woman who married a man of the same surname as her own, and who began to prac-

tice as a charmer of warts shortly after her marriage, she said that the events were not related.

Beyond those charmers with an ascribed status are others who inherited the ability from a relative, or were specifically given the knowledge by another charmer. MUNFLA reports frequently mention the idea that a man must give the charm to a woman, and a woman to a man, in order for it to remain effective when passed on, though when a charm is transmitted within a family, including by in-laws, the cross-sex principle is not inevitable. There may not even be a specific act of transmission. One female charmer, whom I interviewed in June 2010, began to charm in the mid-1970s after the death of a beloved grandmother, who seems to have been her role model. Her grandmother had been a fisherman's wife in the Bonavista Bay outport of Greenspond and was "quiet, petite, and mild-mannered" as was the woman telling me this. She is a research assistant in Memorial University's stroke research laboratory and she occasionally charms warts, rubbing them with something biodegradable as well as counting them and making the equivalent number of crosses with chalk at the back of a wood stove or chimney pipe, where they can not easily be seen, and telling the patient to forget about them. There was also something else she did, in the act of charming, which she would not tell me about, and which was perhaps related to her own thought process. Charming makes her feel she is continuing something from her grandmother. She is not a conventionally religious person: "I believe in goodness," she said, and she stated her cynicism of organized religion. Neither of the two other charmers I interviewed in 2010 (one Roman Catholic and one Anglican) described herself as more religious than the average. While MUNFLA reports include a few which describe this or that charmer as an "outstanding Christian of the community," Newfoundland charmers do not seem to have been more religious than their patients.

Beyond those who might have identified themselves as charmers were those, probably mostly women, who used transference cures as effective, simple ways to rid their children, or anyone else, of warts. Take a snail, rub the slimy underside on the wart, pin the nail to a wooden post, and when the snail has withered to nothing the warts will have gone. Success brought these individuals a local reputation, and other neighbourhood children would present themselves in expectation of cure. Whether or not 83 year-old Hilda E., who told us in June 2010 how she had used this method on her daughter and grand-daughter, considered it qualitatively different from her other cures, such as rubbing goose grease into the chest for a severe cold, is not easy to say. Magical healing blends seamlessly into the continuum of household medicines, the majority of which were administered by women. It would be interesting to know if Hannah

March, known as “The Doctor” in the outpost of New Perlican, Trinity Bay, in the early 1900s, used charms in addition to the herbal remedies she gathered from the surrounding forest. Everyone is said to have resorted to her, there being no available medically-qualified doctor, or perhaps none that anyone could afford. Women provided the foundation for folk medicine in rural Newfoundland, especially as housewives, mothers and grandmothers, not all of whom charmed. Above them, in an imaginary pyramid, were the more specialized charmers, male and female, generally cautious not to attempt to charm any condition which they did not recognize as lying within their particular charm’s competence. At the apex of the pyramid were the seventh sons, who attempted to cure the widest range of illnesses, some of whom—as discussed above—had an aura of danger about them because of their rumoured access to the black arts.

Paralleling seventh sons in their healing abilities and atmosphere of supernatural danger were certain Roman Catholic priests. “The priest, by the power and will of God, could cure,” said an informant from the exclusively Catholic island of St. Brendan’s, Bonavista Bay (MUNFLA: 65–1, ms. 08). Narratives of healing by priests replicate those about acts of charming; first the clerical finger:

He put his finger inside [my father’s] mouth and touched the boil. He [the priest] hadn’t gone through the door one minute when the boil broke. The infection cured in no time. (MUNFLA: 79–358, ms. 37)

Now the charmer’s thumb:

He [the charmer] was on his way home from the wharf where he had been cleaning his fish. I had heard people say he was able to charm pains so I ran out to test him. I showed him which tooth it was, and he shoved his big dirty thumb in my mouth and placed it on the painful tooth. He told me to go into the house and it would be all right. Before I reached the house, the pain was gone, and I have never had a pain in this tooth since. (MUNFLA: FLCQ 69/70, #9)

Each story stresses the instantaneous effect of the healer’s touch, and testifies to the cure’s success. Prediction of cure is a common structural element in narratives of healing and it seems obvious that the narratives created a receptive frame of mind in those who sought healing from either priests or charmers. Several archival accounts show priests’ cures preferred over doctors’ medicines, and many tell of charmers succeeding where doctors have failed.

To return to John Crellin’s assertion that by 1994 charmers in Newfoundland had largely been abandoned by their communities as a health resource:

yes, in general, orthodox medicine is now preferred and is available to everyone under Canada's universal health care system, though the long distances rural patients must travel to obtain treatment still imposes costs. In the cases of the three charmers interviewed in 2010, all of whom lived within 100 km of St. John's, the provincial capital, Hilda, the eldest, has not "put away" a wart for anyone over the last twenty years. She has effectively ceased to practice as a charmer. The second, Shirley, is of the post-modernization generation, university-educated and working at the highest level of orthodox medicine in a research laboratory. Nevertheless she is very interested in complementary forms of health care, which is where she suggested charming might take on further life. In both cases their community might be described as family, friends and colleagues (Shirley charmed warts from the child of a doctor she works with). Her practice is current, but infrequent. The third charmer, Bride, a widow aged 63, when interviewed in February 2010 was confidently predicting that once the local swimming pool opened for the summer her phone would be ringing frequently with requests to charm the plantar warts which children would inevitably pick up. In her case there is a definite continuity of relationship between charmer and community, adapted to modernity. She said that the local health clinic also refers wart sufferers to her.

While wart charming is continuing I have not been able to meet any charmers who stop blood or cure toothache. Bride told me of a man in a nearby community to her own who charms blood but she did not want me to try to contact him as she said he would know that she was the one who had told me about him. Likewise an undergraduate in my Newfoundland Folklore course in Winter 2010 had offered to introduce me to a male relative in the Trinity Bay area who charmed blood, but she eventually told me that she could not arrange it, which I take to reflect a refusal by him. Why am I excluded? Is it because with my university affiliation and non-practical interest I am manifestly not within the charmer's community? If I had slashed my wrist in Bride's kitchen, would a blood-stopper have been called on the phone? Being too cautious to attempt this "induced natural context," in order to gain proof, I will simply assert that blood-stopping does continue.

Why are so few texts available of verbal or written charms in the Newfoundland archival collections on charming? I found fewer than ten, two being Biblical verses: John 9: 32–34, "And a soldier with a sword pierced his side and forthwith came out blood and water," cited in two accounts of blood-stopping; and Ezekiel 16: 6 (as rendered in a questionnaire response): "And when I passed by and saw thee polluted in thine own, I said unto thee, when thou wast in thy blood, Live; Yea, I said unto thee, when thou wast in thy blood, in thy blood

live” (MUNFLA, Q 69/70, A3, p.15). An apocryphal narrative was used as part of a cure for a child’s “fits”:

In Bethlehem Jesus was born,
John baptized him in the river,
As he baptized him the waters stood still,
In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit
I order this child’s fits to cease. (MUNFLA, Q 70A-35, p.2)

Despite the depth of religious faith suggested by the content of these verbal charms, it would be wise to make no assumptions about the extent to which Newfoundland charmers were religious: Louisa Torraville, born in 1887 and recorded by a folklore student in 1978, said that the charmers she had known on Fogo Island, off the north-east coast of Newfoundland, were “not very religious,” they were “ordinary people, not bad people . . . do no bad to anybody, just ordinary people.” They were “old, kinda ignorant people, not with the learning they got today” MUNFLA: 70–346, ms. 41–42).

One possible reason for the absence of any historical record of verbal and written charms in Newfoundland is simply that unlike Europe, where antiquarians compiled large collections of verbal charms, there were few antiquarian scholars in nineteenth century Newfoundland interested to record such things. One exception was Judge Bennett of Harbour Grace who, in the 1890s, told the visiting Nova Scotian folklorist George Patterson a version of the *super petram* charm for toothache which he had probably found locally (Patterson 1895: 287). A similar version was recorded in 1972:

St. Peter sat on a marble stone
Our Saviour passed him by alone
“What ails thee, Peter?”
“Master, I am troubled with the toothache.”
“Arise, Peter, and follow me.” (MUNFLA 72–90, ms. p.11)

It is not to be taken for granted that those Newfoundland charmers who wrote out charms for their patients, sometimes to be worn in a cloth bag about the neck, were writing out full texts; some MUNFLA reports state that merely the word “charm” was written and enclosed, or the word “toothache” was written on paper and plugged into a tree. Sometimes written charms were scribbled over to preserve their secrecy. Archival accounts typically stress that verbal charms were not intended to be understood by patients: “it sounded something like a prayer in Latin,” reported one woman, recalling her visit to a seventh son in the 1950s.

The scarcity of charm texts may also be due to the conviction with which charmers held the belief that these words must be kept secret. It may be that—contrary to the impression that belief in charming was declining in the 1970s—charms were considered too valuable as a health resource to be jeopardized by telling them to some callow twenty year-old with a university exercise to complete. The fact that non-healing charms, such as the prayer to St. Anthony for the finding of lost objects, or the White Paternoster, for protection during sleep, can easily be recorded in contemporary Newfoundland suggests that it was their users' insistence on secrecy that doomed the verbal and written texts of healing charms to disappearance. They have either not been passed on, dying with their possessors, or they have been transmitted to people who continue to maintain the traditions of secrecy, though perhaps using them less and less often as their communities fragment through out-migration.

I have offered some evidence that charming in Newfoundland is still a living tradition, at least in the case of warts and perhaps also in blood-stopping. Many questions remain for further research, however. Where charming continues can it be seen as resistance to authority, as the narrative motif of the "charmer succeeding where doctors have failed" may suggest? Would a trust in charming indicate a preference for local solutions? Is it an expression of that self-reliance on which many rural Newfoundlanders pride themselves? Is it simply a more elegant and effective treatment for a few conditions, especially warts, than physicians' remedies? Much more extensive and determined fieldwork will be necessary, but that should go without saying, for surely it should take at least as much fieldwork to pronounce a tradition dead, as it does to show that it is living?

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INTRODUCTION

Welcome to the first issue of *Incantatio*. This peer-reviewed journal is the natural outcome of the recent upsurge in charms studies, as illustrated, for example, by the activities of the International Society for Folk Narrative Research's Committee on Charms, Charmers, and Charming (<http://www.isfnr.org>). It is intended that *Incantatio* will be a lively forum for charms studies from a wide variety of traditions and scholarly approaches rather in the manner that *Proverbium* fulfills this role in paremological studies. Some of the range we hope to cover will be indicated by the contents of this our first issue, where we have articles on both medieval and (near-)contemporary charms, both European and North American material, and both close readings and theoretical interventions. Alongside such articles, we intend to published reports of conferences (or conference sessions) and reviews of books which touch on charms, charmers and charming.

The general editor of *Incantatio* is Mare Kõiva (mare@folklore.ee), who is also editor of the *Electronic Journal of Folklore* (<http://www.folklore.ee/folklore>). In addition, each issue will have a guest editor. For this first issue this role is being played by Jonathan Roper. We look forward to informative and productive developments in charms studies appearing the pages of *Incantatio*.

Mare Kõiva and Jonathan Roper