

TED RUSSELL: STORYTELLER, PLAYWRIGHT AND BROADCASTER

Contessa Small

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From teacher to magistrate, politician to professor, Ted Russell (1904-1977) held many different occupations throughout his lifetime¹, but none were as artistically and culturally significant to Newfoundland than that of storyteller, playwright and broadcaster. Author of “The Smokeroom on the Kyle” and *The Holdin’ Ground*, Russell is also widely known for his radio monologues based on a fisherman named Uncle Mose, and the fictitious Newfoundland community Pigeon Inlet. From 1953 to 1961, Russell wrote and narrated a series for CBC radio called “The Chronicles of Uncle Mose”. **The provincial and national radio broadcasts of Russell’s monologues, radio plays and short stories made him a pioneer in creating an acknowledgement and awareness of Newfoundland’s distinct culture and society.** In fact, Russell’s work not only reached radio listening audiences but an adaption of his play, *The Holdin’ Ground*, was the first drama filmed for Newfoundland television in 1959 (Pigeon Inlet Project).

Russell brought Newfoundland culture and society center stage, and exposed listening and viewing audiences to outport values, traditional lifestyles and oral storytelling techniques. **Contributing to Russell’s success is the fact that his characters, situations, issues and humour still resonate and connect with people today**—issues primarily involving the fishery, but also including family, social relationships, economic uncertainty, poverty, co-operation, weather, work, recreation and technology. **As well, while Russell’s writing is based on local references, local people, local dialect, local environment and his own personal and**

¹ Russell worked as a teacher, magistrate, civil servant, politician, salesman, writer, broadcaster and university professor.

occupational experiences, his themes are universal. “He is recognized as one of the first and foremost writers to use Newfoundland outport settings and characters as personifications of themes which, while appearing to be local, are actually universal in their scope and appeal” (Riggs, 2000).

Russell’s broadcasts also helped unite his Newfoundland listening audience. **By writing about characters, experiences and situations familiar to Newfoundlanders, Russell gave listeners something they could connect and identify with.** Therefore, Russell’s stories helped form and validate Newfoundlanders’ distinct identity and cultural heritage. While Russell’s humour provided laughter during times of tension, the broadcasts helped Newfoundlanders make the transition from Pre to Post Confederation by openly discussing important issues of the day. Russell’s stories represent the environment, outport lifestyle and humour of a people, while his radio recordings preserve Newfoundland culture, society and oral storytelling tradition.

THE CHRONICLES OF UNCLE MOSE AND PIGEON INLET

“The Chronicles of Uncle Mose” present traditional Newfoundland culture, lifestyle and outport values. Using the persona of “Uncle Mose” Mitchell, a retired fisherman, Russell narrated monologues about the community and its people which epitomized “the traditional Newfoundland outport” (Miller, 175). The “Chronicles” were inspired by Russell’s own experiences in rural Newfoundland, and Pigeon Inlet was based on a combination of several Newfoundland communities Russell lived during his lifetime. Pigeon Inlet came to reflect all that was good and idyllic about outport life and the traditional Newfoundland lifestyle: “the humour, kindness, co-operative spirit, honest living, and love of an idealized Pigeon Inlet,” (Narváez, 206). He therefore took the opportunity to present more optimistic views of outport

life, and cautioned not to throw away the old Newfoundland lifestyle and values when faced with change. Russell ultimately believed that the values of outport life were worth preserving (Miller, 227).

Russell therefore based his stories on familiar Newfoundland outport characters, settings, lifestyles, and daily life events, and modeled many characters on notable residents. The plots of his stories were also inspired by his life and work experiences which his Newfoundland audience identified with. Russell “captured the richness of the many oral storytellers that he had encountered...” (Miller, 178) and appealed to his listeners with his familiar accent. He spoke “at a slow and deliberate pace with a distinctive Bay Roberts ‘r’ (softened after vowels and as a final consonant)” (Miller, 178). Russell flavoured his monologues with Newfoundland dialect, vocabulary and his “face-to-face and naturally conversational” approach and tone (Narváez).

Russell’s storytelling broadcasts brought provincial and national attention to Newfoundland’s rich cultural heritage and contributed to the view of Newfoundland culture as distinct and unique.

“The Chronicles of Uncle Mose” was a regular feature in a CBC radio program called the *Fishermen’s Broadcast*. The program was designed for the fisherman’s concerns such as fish prices and weather forecasts, and included interviews with real fishermen and regional folk songs performed by revival artists. Russell’s stories were designed to correlate with the content of the program by discussing occupationally relevant information and issues of the time. **“The Chronicles of Uncle Mose” provided Newfoundlanders throughout the province an opportunity to listen and, in turn, openly voice their own concerns and opinions with one another, and unite in their shared experiences and cultural identity.** Not only did the show reach provincial listeners, but it also reached national listeners through the CBC Sunday

afternoon national network program, “Come All Ye Round” (Miller, 177). During this eight year run, Russell wrote approximately 500 six-minute radio scripts (Miller, 177). Russell would also eventually write several radio plays including *The Holdin’ Ground* which was his most successful.

RUSSELL AS TEACHER, MAGISTRATE, CIVIL SERVANT AND POLITICAN

The fight for the common man is evident in Russell’s writing career as well as his teaching, magisterial, civil servant and political career. In 1920, at the age of sixteen, Russell began his teaching career on Pass Island, and eventually held positions in Harbour Breton, Fogo, Millertown and Channel Port-aux-Basque. He soon realized the dilapidated predicament of Newfoundland schools. In 1929, while teaching in Fogo, he witnessed the Great Depression bring Newfoundland to near economic collapse. He saw a “prosperous fishing settlement become a depressed and bewildered place” (Miller, 52). Fish prices drastically dropped from nine dollars to three dollars a quintal (Miller, 53). To avoid bankruptcy, the Squires government made cuts, and introduced the “dole” which gave each person, per day six cents” (Miller, 53).

In 1935, under the Commission of Government, Russell worked as a magistrate in Springdale. He heard stories, complaints, requests and court cases—some amusing (such as the case involving the theft of two ice holes in “Stealin’ the Holes”) and some indicative of the economic troubles and depravity of the people. During this time Russell saw first-hand the injustices of the merchants over the fishermen and the problems with issuing the dole. Russell understood the desperation of some people who had to hunt illegally to avoid starvation and therefore lowered the fine and jail sentences so that they could get their work done for the fall (Miller, 78). “...I had to levy fines depending on the circumstances of the individual. Justice

tempered with mercy.” Russell’s merciful approach came through in his writings which clearly stood up for the injustices imposed upon the common man.

Russell’s work as a civil servant centered on forming co-operative movements in Newfoundland. In 1943, he was offered a job as Director with the Co-operative Division, Department of Natural Resources, and became the first Newfoundlander to hold this position. “Russell saw in the co-operative movement an opportunity to address and perhaps even remedy the economic problems he had observed as a magistrate. It was also where Russell started his career in radio each week with ‘The Co-operative Programme’” (CBC, 2004). In 1943, the Co-operative movement was, for the most part, waning; however, Russell continued to believe in the principle of co-operation, as illustrated in many of his writings. For example, his poem “The Co-maker” tells how the formation of a co-operative united two bitter enemies (Miller, 106-7).

In the mid 1940s, Russell met Joey Smallwood and was swept into the world of politics. Russell ran as the Liberal candidate in the District of Bonavista-South in the first provincial elections, and held a Cabinet post as Minister of Natural Resources in 1949. He worked closely with Smallwood, but disagreed with him on government economic development policies such as the Employment Program and attempts to industrialize Newfoundland. He also disagreed with a number of Smallwood’s actions that he believed to be “an abuse of the power of Legislature” (Miller, 128), and therefore resigned in 1951. During his time as an MHA, Russell fought for two important issues—the Co-operatives and the Fishery. Russell said, “‘The fishery is worth more to the country than all other industries put together,’” (Miller, 123).

RADIO, TALL TALES AND IDENTITY

Radio recordings of Russell's work preserve Newfoundland culture, society and oral storytelling tradition. Russell, who was born on June 27, 1904, grew up in Coley's Point, Conception Bay, a small, rural fishing community where he was first introduced to oral storytelling. He was next influenced by traditions from Pass Island where he worked as a teacher. It was here that Russell heard traditional stories from John Touchings (Miller, 32).

One of the most popular and integral Newfoundland storytelling traditions Russell learned was **the tall tale** or "yarn". Russell used tall tales and tall tale exaggeration as means to capture the attention of his audience, and deceive or "fool" them with an exaggeration or lie while maintaining a straight face and unwavering tone. Tall tales were also often told at community gatherings and parties. For example, one of Russell's most famous stories, "The Smokeroom on the Kyle" (which describes the extreme plenty of squid) was actually told to Russell in the 1930s by Allan Bishop at a party. Bishop had first heard the tale from a man in Joe Batt's Arm. Therefore, Russell's stories were variants of traditional Newfoundland tall tale narratives—passed down orally through the generations, preserved, and retold to a mass listening audience over the radio. In essence, Russell contributed to both preserving (via radio recordings) and popularizing the tall tale oral tradition across the region. The transmission of Russell's monologues educated and entertained Newfoundlanders, it also helped to define their identity through a popular 20th century communication medium—the radio.

The radio itself is of particular significance to the success of Russell's stories. The radio was in its infancy; however, Russell immediately recognized the potential of the medium. He witnessed its power during Smallwood's Confederation campaign when the radio was instrumental in victory. Russell said, "The day the microphones went in—that's the day we got

Confederation” (Miller, 113). **Most importantly, Russell’s radio monologues united Newfoundland listeners all over the province, as one, in their shared common experiences and distinct cultural identity.**

TRADITIONAL HUMOUR

While Russell’s monologues did indeed educate Newfoundlanders, first and foremost, “The Chronicles of Uncle Mose” entertained them. Russell’s stories are filled with a **unique humour** which fit the mood of his listening post-Confederation audience—it did not ridicule, but relied “on the effects of isolation on a small fishing village, with the consequent naïveté, lack of understanding and sophistication, and general mistakes based on false assumptions. We laugh, not in ridicule but with an understanding heart, at many of the residents of Pigeon Inlet and the situations in which they find themselves in” (Miller, 208-9). Russell knew well the hardships and change Newfoundlanders were living with during his work as a teacher, magistrate, civil servant and politician, such as isolation, travel limitations, poverty, poor school rooms, “deplorable sanitation, prevalence of disease, poor educational services, and the like” (Miller, 226). **Russell’s humour balanced the frustration Newfoundlanders were experiencing during times of economic hardship and the rapidly changing environment of the Post-Confederation era.** Russell said,

Newfoundland in 1954 was in a period of great transition. Confederation with Canada in 1949, while it undoubtedly brought to us numerous benefits, resulted in social upheaval. Increased emphasis on welfare benefits, coupled with a de-emphasis on the inshore fishery in favour of industrialization, was threatening a whole way of life unique to this island. I could see this trend being established back then. (Miller, 223).

Russell therefore used humour as a means to openly discuss hot topics such as Confederation, unemployment insurance, family allowance, the old age pension and resettlement.

TED RUSSELL'S INFLUENCE AND LASTING LEGACY

While most of Russell's plays were broadcast in the 1950s and 60s, his work was not published until the 1970s. **His first published collection, *The Chronicles of Uncle Mose* (1975) became a Canadian best-seller within weeks of its introduction** (Miller, 227).

Russell's work was also produced for television exposing him to the viewing public and a new generation of fans. Along with the television adaption of *The Holdin' Ground* in 1959, CBC TV in Newfoundland produced *Tales of Pigeon Inlet* in the 1970s, as well as a television series called "Yarns from Pigeon Inlet" in the 1980s, adapted by Tom Cahill. Russell's plays have also been performed onstage by Newfoundland theatre companies such as Rising Tide Theatre.

Ted Russell's son, Kelly, created Pigeon Inlet Productions, producing sound recordings of his father's broadcasts; and in 2004 recordings of Russell's stories also became available on an interactive CBC website "Uncle Mose: A Timeless Legacy" which was created for the 50th anniversary of "The Chronicles of Uncle Mose." Special archival collections can also be found at Memorial University of Newfoundland Folklore and Language Archive (MUNFLA), and Centre for Newfoundland Studies Archives (CNS), Memorial University of Newfoundland. The "Ted and Dora Russell Papers" at the CNS houses approximately 350 scripts for the "Chronicles" as well as manuscripts for the radio plays.

A new generation of the Russell family has continued to keep Ted's stories, plays and broadcasts alive and available to the public. Russell's daughter, former professor of English at

Memorial University of Newfoundland and Dracula scholar, **Dr. Elizabeth Miller** edited all of the Uncle Mose Chronicles, some of his plays, and wrote two biographical books based on her father's life (1981, 2005). Russell's son, **Kelly**, an internationally recognized traditional musician, not only created Pigeon Inlet Productions, but is a storyteller and tradition bearer. Kelly has been performing his father's stories since 1975, with a recent solo show called "Tunes and Tales". Kelly also created "A Time in Pigeon Inlet"—a summer show presented by the Bay Roberts Cultural Foundation and consists of a traditional scoff, recitations and enactments of Russell's works, traditional musical performances, and traditional dance. This show is performed by Kelly and The Pigeon Inlet Players—a group of young performers, including Ted's grandchildren, who act, sing, dance and play musical instruments. These interactive, cultural projects are supported by The Bay Roberts Pigeon Inlet Project whose mandate is to celebrate and preserve "the traditions, values, spirit, and kind-hearted humour of our communities, as illustrated in the writings of Ted Russell" (The Pigeon Inlet Project).

Many amateur and professional storytellers, actors and writers cite Russell's artistic and cultural influence. For example, humorist **Al Clouston** often performed, and even recorded, Russell's "Eelskins". Teacher **Bruce Stagg** from Clarenville also writes and performs stories about "Roaring Cove" citing Russell as an influence.² Also, actor-dramatist **Andy Jones** created monologues for the *Fishermen's Broadcast*, "based on the musing of a character similar to Uncle Mose, a retired fisherman living in St. John's, 'Uncle Val'" (Narváez, 212). These monologues eventually led Jones to produce a one-man show called "An Evening with Uncle Val". Jones' script was then published as an audio book in 2006 by Rattling Books called, "Letters from Uncle Val"; and in 2008, Jones toured his show, continuing performances across Canada in 2009.

² Email correspondence with Kelly Russell, 2009.

Newfoundland students continue to be influenced by Ted Russell's storytelling and writing. His works are part of several **Newfoundland Department of Education curriculums** including: English Language Arts (*The Holdin' Ground, Groundswell*), Theatre Arts (*The Chronicles of Uncle Mose*), Newfoundland and Labrador History (*Uncle Mose: The Life of Ted Russell*), and Newfoundland and Labrador Studies (Artist Profile, *The Smokeroom on the Kyle, Stealin' the Holes*).

CONCLUSION

As a storyteller and playwright, **Ted Russell was a pioneer in bringing provincial and national attention to Newfoundland cultural heritage and outport values. His work contributed to the acknowledgement of a distinct and valuable Newfoundland culture and society, and united Newfoundlanders in their shared experiences by providing stories and characters they could identify with and be proud of.**

As a teacher, magistrate, civil servant, politician, salesman, writer, broadcaster and university professor, Russell contributed to the educational, political, social and cultural landscape of Newfoundland. He participated in almost every major mid-20th century political and contemporary issue and event in Newfoundland. His many jobs also provided him with various experiences, materials and situations that inspired the content of his monologues and plays.

Contributing to Russell's popularity and success is the fact that his stories, humour, characters and issues still resonate today, and his themes are both local and universal in scope and appeal. He was devoted to the average, hard-working Newfoundlander and fought the injustices committed against them. Russell's stories provided entertainment, education, an

outlet for frustration, a validation of cultural traditions, beliefs and values, and a forum for the expression of common concerns and issues. His work also helped Newfoundlander's deal with times of transition during Confederation by bringing attention to important issues of the day.

Through the medium of the radio, Russell popularized and preserved Newfoundland culture, society, oral storytelling traditions and outport values. At the same time, he provided narratives that influenced and united Newfoundlanders in their shared experiences and identity. One of Russell's final honours came in 1973 when Memorial University conferred upon him the Degree of Doctor of Letters for his contribution to Newfoundland (Miller, 243). As Russell's daughter, Elizabeth, wrote "...all who knew the man agree on the one essential point, that Ted Russell has left an indelible mark on the history and culture of Newfoundland" (Miller, 247). **Because his work is still performed, is readily available in book and audio forms, is found on websites and in archives, and is established in the Newfoundland and Labrador Educational curriculum, Ted Russell will, without doubt, continue to influence students, storytellers, writers and performers.**

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