

Rufus Guinhard and Emile Benoit:
two Newfoundland fiddlers

Evelyn Osborne

Excerpted from:

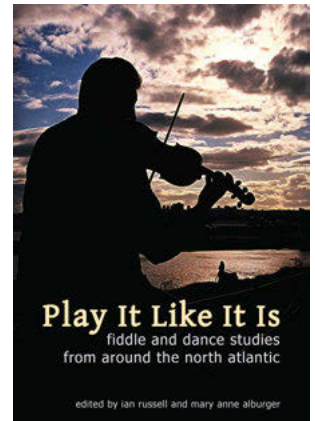
Play It Like It Is

Fiddle and Dance Studies from around the North Atlantic

Edited by Ian Russell and Mary Anne Alburger

First published in 2006 by The Elphinstone
Institute, University of Aberdeen, MacRobert
Building, King's College, Aberdeen, AB24 5UA

ISBN 0-9545682-3-0



About the author:

Evelyn Osborne is a PhD student in Ethnomusicology at Memorial University in St John's, Newfoundland, Canada. She holds a Bachelor of Music (Cum Laude) with a major in violin from the University of Ottawa and a MA (Canadian Studies) from Carleton University. A fiddler herself, her research centres around the instrumental music of Newfoundland and Labrador, specifically issues of style and the Celtic music revival. Other areas of research interest include childlore, folksong, popular culture, and pedagogy.

Copyright © 2006 the Elphinstone Institute and the contributors

While copyright in the volume as a whole is vested in the Elphinstone Institute, copyright in individual contributions remains with the contributors. The moral rights of the contributors to be identified as the authors of their work have been asserted in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>.



Rufus Guincharde and Emile Benoit: two Newfoundland fiddlers

EVELYN OSBORNE

Rufus Guincharde (1899–1990) and Emile Benoit (1913–1992) are perhaps the two most famous fiddlers from Newfoundland. Both men worked, lived, and played on the island's west coast until the 1970s when they were 'discovered' by the folk revival movement and brought to play in the capital, St John's.

The rocky island of Newfoundland lies in the North Atlantic as the most easterly land mass of North America (see Figure 1). Newfoundland was England's oldest colony and both Guincharde and Emile were born citizens of Newfoundland, as the island did not become part of Canada until 1949. Rowe states in *A History of Newfoundland and Labrador*, that there is evidence of habitation by native groups such as the Dorset and Thule Inuit, the Maritime Archaic, and then the Beothucks, dating back at least 4900 years.¹ He suggests that European visitations may have started as early as the fifth or sixth century AD with the voyages of the Irish Abbot St Brendan.² However, the first archaeological proof is a Viking settlement dating from about 1000 AD at L'Anse aux Meadows on the northern tip of the island ('L'Anse au Meadow' on map, see Figure 1).

Under the patronage of King Henry VII of England, John Cabot is the next recorded 'discoverer' of the island on 24 June 1497.³ Settlement by Europeans gradually ensued. The first European settlements, known as outports, were scattered along the rocky coastline. Many of these outports, ranging in population from perhaps fifty to a few hundred people, still exist. In general terms, the majority of the settlement on the Avalon Peninsula was Irish and English. The English also extended along the east coast in Trinity and Bonavista Bays as well as a little on the Great Northern Peninsula. Although the entire west coast was once known as the French Shore, the French primarily occupied the south coast, Placentia Bay and the lower west coast. The town of Placentia was, at one time, the French capital of Newfoundland. There is a small Scottish community in the Codroy Valley on the southern west coast. Today, descendants of the original English, Irish, and French settlers are spread all over the island. The result is that a French or English surname or place-name does not necessarily represent the greatest cultural influence on the person or community.



Figure 1 Newfoundland

Perhaps due to their isolation, the people of Newfoundland held onto many of the older traditions from the British Isles. Up until recently, the traditional *a cappella* songs were still very much alive. Several folk song collectors, including Maud Karpeles, visited the island and published song books.⁴ Kenneth Peacock, who visited the province throughout the 1950s and 1960s, published the largest work, a three-volume collection called *Songs of the Newfoundland Outports*.⁵

Music has long been an important part of Newfoundland life. During the winter months when there was less work, and frequent inclement weather, parties known as 'times' would be held informally in kitchens, or in the local school or community hall. A violinist or accordion player (both known as 'fiddlers') would be invited to play. This would sometimes involve him travelling several miles by foot, boat or even dogsled to another community. Dancing at the organized 'times' might start about nine o'clock, after a supper was served, and continue until the early hours of the morning. The fiddler would play all night with only short breaks between dances. If other musicians were present, they might 'spell' him or take over for a dance or two. Usually the fiddler was not paid. When remuneration was offered the going rate in the 1940s and early 1950s seems to have been about two

Canadian dollars. By the 1960s, Wallace Maynard, of Maynard's Hotel in Hawke's Bay, paid Rufus Guinchar twenty-five dollars a night for his regular performances.⁶ In winter, fiddlers were in high demand, often being called on to play several nights a week. Both Rufus Guinchar and Emile Benoit were popular local fiddlers who played regularly for their local 'times' and dances. It was not until the 1970s, when they were in their seventies and eighties respectively, that they became known outside their own regions.

Although both were from the west coast, the two fiddlers had different styles: Guinchar was known for his fast, driving style, while Benoit played with a more flowing feel. Kelly Russell stated that they often had a difficult time performing together as their repertoires and manners of playing were so disparate.⁷

Rufus Guinchar, or 'Uncle Ruf' as he was called, was born in September 1899 in Daniel's Harbour on the Great Northern Peninsula of Newfoundland, the oldest of eight children. Rufus married his first wife, Prudence, at age twenty-two and had eight children. Widowed in 1946, he married again three years later in Hawke's Bay to Carrie Ploughman, with whom he had three children.⁸ He worked in many different occupations over his lifetime including fishing, trapping, logging, carpentry, working on the mail boats, repairing sleds with Bowaters Paper Company, being a river warden and a cook with the Department of Highways. Kelly Russell, long-time friend and fellow musician, and author of *Rufus Guinchar: The Man and his Music*, mentions that Rufus had actually been aboard the mail boat *Ethie* in 1919, on her last voyage.⁹ Fortunately, he disembarked at Daniel's Harbour before the vessel continued down the coast and was wrecked off Sally's Cove. This incident inspired a now famous song, 'The Wreck of the Ethie'. In fact, Rufus has a connection with at least two other Newfoundland folk songs including 'The Heights of Alma', commemorating the Crimean War battle in which his grandfather fought, and an unpublished song collected by Kenneth Peacock in 1958 called 'Dance at Daniel's Harbour.' The latter song mentions 'the fiddler Rufus'.¹⁰

Rufus started to play fiddle at the age of eleven. I recall him recounting the well-known story of how he acquired his unique violin posture. He taught himself to play when alone in the house and would sit in the kitchen window looking out to his left to see if anyone was coming. This arrangement required that he hold his fiddle against his right shoulder with the instrument crossing in front of him. He told Trevor Bennett in 1969, 'I didn't want them to see me. I didn't want them to know I could do anything like that, see. Didn't want them to hear me, see. Until I was able to do what I thought was right, see'.¹¹ For the rest of his life he held his violin, tucked inside his shirt in this manner, and gripped the bow about halfway up. Rufus learnt his tunes by listening to the older men play. Robert Plowman, a Memorial University of Newfoundland student recorded him in 1978 as saying:

I learned a couple from father and I used to be listening to Len [Leonard] Payne and Uncle John Peter Payne playing so I picked up a few tunes from them. Then after that, after I got into playing, most of me tunes I learned from

old Uncle John Peter Payne. And he learned them from his old uncle, so there a lot of them I tell ya is getting a way back. Ah must be 150 years old perhaps more. . . Oh yes, I still plays some of them, most I plays is them.¹²

Rufus had a reputation for this older repertoire. Luke Payne, of Cow Head, remembers accompanying him on guitar and asking Rufus to play only tunes he knew. At some point during the evening, Rufus was sure to get a smile on his face and 'he'd brang one back from the Flintstones'¹³. Few of these tunes had titles, so Guinchard would draw from life around him when a name was required. Rufus often labelled tunes for the people from whom he had learned them. For example, the titles 'Uncle John Peter Payne's Tune', 'Jim Rumbolt's Tune', 'Father's Tune', and 'Sam Sinnicks Tune' all reflect this practice. Events inspired other titles such as 'Uncle Manuel Milks the Cow.' Russell states in his tune book that 'Rufus and Alec Bennett made up the verse after seeing Uncle Manuel Pierce milking the cow, usually the woman's job.'¹⁴ They followed that with a rhyme, 'Uncle Manuel milks the cow, Uncle Manuel milks the cow, Aunt Kate she's sick in bed and Uncle Manuel milks the cow'.¹⁵ Another example, 'Uncle Harry's Out of Shape,' was named for Uncle Harry Sutton, a school teacher in Hawke's Bay, who had trouble 'keeping up' with this tune at a dance'.¹⁶

Rufus also composed tunes including the 'Centennial Highway Reel', the 'Traveler's Reel', and a reel for the singer Stan Rogers. In his conversation with Plowman, Guinchard revealed the story and method behind the composition of the 'Centennial Highway Reel':

And the other one I made up when I was working with the Highways, 'Centennial Highway Reel', 1967. I was there looking after the camp on Christmas Day alone so I got the fiddle out and made up the jig and I didn't know what to call it after I got it made up, so I thought about [Canadian] Centennial year, ya know and I was working with the Highways so I said to myself now I'll call it the 'Centennial Highway Reel'. . . I was most of Christmas Day getting that together. Ya know it's a job getting a tune together. You've really got to play so much and see what it's doing and then you keep playing at that 'til ya know what is right then you gotta add onto it, a little more.¹⁷

Music played a big part in Rufus's life, as Bennett said to him, 'Rufus, we know you in our local circus as "Rufus the ready", because, eh, I think everyone is aware that you are always ready.'¹⁸ This comment referred to Guinchard's ability to work all day and then play all night. As Bennett, who grew up in Daniel's Harbour, scribbled down as we were listening to the 1969 tape, 'Rufus loved the fiddle so much that as children he would put down his tools and entertain us.'¹⁹ Unfortunately, as the popularity of clubs and recorded music rose, demand for Guinchard's music waned. One evening someone even turned on the juke box while he was playing. As he stated to Kelly Russell, 'That was the end of it, when the bands and juke boxes started up.'²⁰ However, he was 'discovered' by the folk revival in the 1970s, and so,

in his seventies, he travelled across Canada, to England, Japan, and Australia. He performed with several groups including the Breakwater Boys and released three albums. He also received numerous awards including the Order of Canada, one of the highest honours bestowed on Canadian citizens.

Approximately 200 kilometres by sea from Daniel's Harbour lies the Port au Port Peninsula and Black Duck Brook or L'Anse-à-Canards, where Emile Benoit was born in 1913. The Port au Port is one of the last remaining French areas of the Newfoundland, although most people there now speak English. Emile spoke only French for most of his childhood. Like Rufus, Emile had a big family of thirteen children. He married first at twenty-one and again at age thirty-seven.²¹ Benoit worked at many different jobs including fishing, farming, and carpentry. He also became the community dentist, veterinarian, and blacksmith. His wife, Rita, related how he neutered the local dogs and cats, castrated the horses, and made horseshoes at his forge in the back shed. She said that he always wished to become a doctor, but had only a grade three education.²²

Emile began playing fiddle before he ever held an instrument. When, aged eight, Emile expressed a desire to have a violin, his father fashioned a model fiddle from some wood and used thread for the strings.²³ Although his grandfather had played, his father only pretended, using two sticks while singing the tune. Emile imitated him and incorporated the singing into his style. This 'diddling' can be heard on recordings he made later in life. Colin Quigley states in his book *Music from the Heart: Compositions of a Folk Fiddler* that 'for two years Emile performed enthusiastically on his toy violin. . . it is clear that he was learning fundamentals of performance practice, musical style and playing technique'.²⁴ His uncle Jean, showed him some basic tunes on his own violin before making an instrument for his nephew. Emile told Quigley that, 'I usen't to eat [from playing so much]. . . Well, from that day, twelve years old [pause], I'm playin'.²⁵ Once Benoit began playing for dances, he found that his audiences appreciated new tunes. One night he started with his own composition, 'Farewell'. It was so well received that he played it for every dance that evening.²⁶ Russell states that, over the years Emile played the traditional repertoire less and less, preferring his own newly-composed tunes. Of the 152 pieces attributed to Emile, 95 are original compositions.²⁷

Whereas Guincharde would name tunes he already knew, Benoit would often decide first to compose a piece. According to Russell, Emile would 'name the tunes before he composed them. A lot of times he had the name before he had the tune. "Well, I'm going to compose a tune for you now." So he knew that this tune, as yet unwritten, would be called "Christina's Dream" or "Kelly Russell's Reel" or "Brian Tobin's Reel". He set out to make a tune for somebody.²⁸ At one point, a politician requested a composition. When Benoit finally made the tune he named it 'Steve Neary's Waiting for This'.²⁹ Other times the composition might just come to him, as he told Michael Whitely, a folklore student, about the tune 'Emile's Dream':

It wake me up, it wake me up. Got up, took my violin an' played it. Oh, I played it, s'pose half an hour, or sumthing like dat. An' den I had no tape recorder at

de time, jus' had it in de head. So I phone my sister, got 'er up, she wasn't too pleased. Anyway, she got de tape recorder an' I taped it. An when I went to bed again an' when I got up, I look for it an' I couldn't fine it; I don't know. So, I phone her jus' play a little few, you know jus' a little bit, a coupla notes, eh? So I said 'OK' so I took my violin an' I played it. Den after dat, never forgot it.³⁰

The landscape and events around him also inspired compositions. 'Flying Reel' was composed while aboard an aeroplane, and the medley of tunes 'Piccadilly Slant', 'West Bay Centre', and 'Making the Curve to Black Duck Brook' describe the trip across the Peninsula to his home.³¹ Political events prompted reels such as 'Free Trade', 'Gulf War', and 'Peace'.

Emile was an entertainer as well as a fiddler. When I asked fiddlers who knew him, they would say, 'Oh, we had a good time with him, b'y'.³² Ivan White, from Stephenville, told how Emile was quick to respond to situations. Once, at a dance, the stage collapsed beneath him and he dropped his bow. Instead of stopping, he immediately grabbed a strand of hair from a nearby girl and pretended to play with that as the bow.³³ He was also well known as a storyteller and gave workshops in the art. At one workshop, when running out of time, he gave a quick ending to his story. This prompted Dr Gerald Thomas, a Memorial University professor and friend, to remark: 'You think that was good! I've told him (Emile) stories in ten minutes and it has taken him seventy-five to tell it to someone else!'³⁴

Like Rufus, Emile was discovered by the folk revival in the 1970s when in his sixties. His music took him to the United States, Europe, Great Britain, and Norway, earning him many awards including the Newfoundland and Labrador Arts Council Lifetime Achievement Award. In 1992, he finally became Dr Benoit when he received an Honorary Doctorate of Laws from Memorial University of Newfoundland.

Newfoundland fiddling as a tradition was not in the public eye until Rufus Guincharde and Emile Benoit became internationally known through their performances, awards, and recordings. Since then, many young people in the St John's area have learned their tunes. Throughout the rest of the island, however, it is still the older generation who hold the tunes in hopes of passing them on. Few communities currently hold the 'times' to which this music has been tied, and so there is little chance for fiddlers to play in the traditional settings. However, summer folk festivals, showcasing Newfoundland music, have become popular and both Hawke's Bay and Black Duck Brook have held festivals in Guincharde's and Benoit's honour. I expect these two very different fiddlers will continue to be viewed as the 'Fathers of the Newfoundland Fiddle' and inspire others to continue playing.

Notes

¹ Frederick W. Rowe, *A History of Newfoundland and Labrador* (Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson Press, 1980), p. 25.

² Rowe (1980), p. 31.

³ *Encyclopedia of Newfoundland and Labrador*, ed. by Joseph R. Smallwood and Robert D. W. Pitt (St John's: Newfoundland Book Publishers, 1981), p. 308.

- ⁴ Martin Lovelace, 'Unnatural Selection: Maud Karpeles's Newfoundland Diaries', in *Folk Song: Tradition, Revival, and Re-Creation*, ed. Ian Russell and David Atkinson (Aberdeen: Elphinstone Institute, University of Aberdeen, 2004), pp. 284–98.
- ⁵ Kenneth Peacock, ed., *Songs of the Newfoundland Outports*, 3 vols (Ottawa: R. Duhamel, Queen's Printer, 1965).
- ⁶ Wallace Maynard, Hawke's Bay, Newfoundland, Canada, personal interview, 10 July 2001.
- ⁷ Kelly Russell, St John's, Newfoundland, Canada, personal interview, tape 47, 17 July 2001.
- ⁸ Kelly Russell, *Rufus Guincharde: The Man and his Music* (St John's, Newfoundland: Harry Cuff Publications, 1982), pp. 9, 13.
- ⁹ Russell (1982), p. 10.
- ¹⁰ Kenneth Peacock, Tape 91, No. 738, Canadian Museum of Civilization, Ottawa, Canada.
- ¹¹ Guincharde Rufus, Daniel's Harbour, Newfoundland, Canada, personal interview by Trevor Bennett, 1969.
- ¹² Robert Pius Plowmann, 'Folklore in the Life of Rufus Guincharde, Newfoundland Fiddler', Memorial University of Newfoundland Folklore and Language Archive (MUNFLA), MS 78-153/C4544, unpublished research paper, Memorial University of Newfoundland, 1978.
- ¹³ Payne, Luke, Cow Head, Newfoundland, Canada, personal interview, tape 26, 7 July 2001.
- ¹⁴ Kelly Russell, *Kelly Russell's Collection: The Fiddle Music of Newfoundland and Labrador, Volume One: Rufus Guincharde and Emile Benoit* (St John's, Newfoundland: Pigeon Inlet Productions, 2000), p. 26.
- ¹⁵ Russell (2000), p. 26.
- ¹⁶ Russell (2000), p. 14.
- ¹⁷ Plowmann (1978).
- ¹⁸ Guincharde interview (1969).
- ¹⁹ Trevor Bennett, Steady Brook, Newfoundland, Canada, personal interview, 14 July 2001.
- ²⁰ Russell (1982), p. 16.
- ²¹ Colin Quigley, *Music from the Heart: Compositions of a Folk Fiddler* (Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 1995), p. 4.
- ²² Rita Benoit, Black Duck Brook, Newfoundland, Canada, personal interview, 13 July 2001.
- ²³ Quigley (1995), p. 9.
- ²⁴ Quigley (1995), p. 10.
- ²⁵ Quigley (1995), p. 11.
- ²⁶ Quigley (1995), p. 19.
- ²⁷ Russell (2000), p. vi.
- ²⁸ Kelly Russell, St John's, Newfoundland, Canada, personal interview, tape 47, 17 July 2001.
- ²⁹ Russell (2000), p. 54.
- ³⁰ Michael Whitley, 'Emile Benoit: The Musician and the Man: My Impressions (a Biography in his and my Words)', MUNFLA 83-11, unpublished research paper (Memorial University of Newfoundland, 1983), pp. 14, 15.
- ³¹ Russell (2000), p. 56.
- ³² Personal interview tapes, Newfoundland and Labrador, Canada, Summer 2001.
- ³³ Ivan White, Stephenville, Newfoundland, Canada, personal interview, tape 38, 13 July 2001.
- ³⁴ Plowmann (1978), pp. 16, 17.