

Mr. G. K. Chesterton once defined humor as a perception of the comic or incongruous of a special sort; generally distinguished from wit, as being on the one side more subtle, or on the other side more vague. It is thus a term which not only refuses to be defined, but in a sense boasts of being undefinable; and it would commonly be regarded as a deficiency in humor to search for a definition of it.

Now ~~I can scarcely improve on that,~~ and I am not going to offer you here, tonight, a definition of Nova Scotia humor. It exists, it has existed for a long time, and it refreshes itself continually from something in our air, our forest and our sea which gives it, if not a distinctive form, certainly a tang of its own.

In Nova Scotia we have a population whose roots are ~~###~~ French, English, Irish, Scots ~~and Welsh~~, with a strong dash of German on one part of the coast. And we still have a considerable remnant of the country's original Indian population, and a certain number of negroes whose ancestors were slaves brought north in colonial times. From ~~an~~ each of these people^s a characteristic note has been drawn, modified by and adapted to the country itself, and blended to form what is known nowadays as Bluenose humor.

The first writer to call wide attention to the native humor of Nova Scotia was of course Haliburton, creator of the immortal Sam Slick. Into the mouth of his garrulous clockmaker Haliburton put a stream of wit and anecdote which he had in fact gathered in taverns and inns, in country stores, in the cabins of packet schooners, in snug little farm parlors, all the way from Cape Sable to Cape North. And he did it so successfully that his writings had a profound effect upon the whole trend of American humor for the next half century.

I am no Haliburton, alas, but for some years I have been gathering anecdotes of native flavor as he did, and I propose to offer some of them to you here tonight to illustrate the various origins and forms of Bluenose humor.

To begin at one end of the province -- Cape Breton, which was settled largely by Highland Scots, has a humor really all its own. Much of it depends upon a knowledge of the Gaelic, a language which lends itself to the double-meaning. My friend Stewart McCawley used to say that if you lived in Cape Breton and hadn't the Gaelic, you missed a thousand laughs a year. But here is one that is told in English.

A preacher of a small holy-roller sect was driving along one cold winter day with a horse and sleigh. The horse was a starved and decrepit thing, and the sleigh was held together with bits of wire. The preacher was muffled in an old buffalo coat and there was nothing to indicate the divinity of his calling. He paused to pass the time of day with a man on the road. There was some talk about the weather and the roads, and the prospects for next year's potato crop, and finally the Cape Bretoner ### asked, "Are you a farmer, yourself?"

Said the preacher with dignity, "No, my friend, I'm a follower of the Lord."

The Cape Bretoner took another look at the horse and sleigh. "I doubt you'll ever overtake him with a rig like that!"

The Scot, too, is master of the epigram. Old Doctor Pollock, of Pine Hill College, would never eat a ham sandwich, which proved an awkward matter for hostesses at tea parties and such-like festivities. He would say in a loud voice, "I never touch that Gadarene stuff. We are told on the best authority that devils went into the swine, and there is no evidence whatever that they ever came out!"

In Cape Breton, too, they tell the story of the train going down from Sydney to Point Tupper, where the ferry goes across the Strait of Canso. A drunken boor from Sydney had been goin up and down the cars, making a noisy nuisance of himself, and finally he approached a new victim, a quiet-looking old Highland gentleman from Strathlorne.

"Hey Mac!" he demanded. "Does this train stop at Point Tupper?"

"If she doesn't," said the old gentleman, without turning his head, "May the guid God almic'ty help us all!"

Now down at the other end of the province you find people of New England descent -- the Nova Scotia Yankees -- who have retained in many ways the characteristics of their ancestors in speech and physical appearance -- and in their humor. It is a dry, biting sort of humor. Let me tell you the true story of a preacher who encountered one of these Nova Scotia Yankees in a rather unexpected place, far up the St. John river in New Brunswick. It was told to me by the preacher himself, and I give it to you in his own words.

At Hartland, New Brunswick, where I once had a church, the St. John river is crossed by the longest covered bridge in the world -- or that is what I'm told. I loved to walk across the bridge in the early morning and look at the town across the river. One dewy morn I came upon a tall elderly man mowing hay, and as my habit is, I struck up a conversation by asking questions, mostly about his farm and himself. Finally I asked, "And what's your name?"

"Seeley", he said, and leaned on his scythe.

"A good name, a Nova Scotia name," I said.

"Ah!" said he. "But at one time the ^{whole} world was full of Seeleys."

"Well, well! And what became of them all?"

I could see that I had asked the right question. He ran his tongue around his cheek.

"T'was long before Moses and his commandments. When the world was full of Seeleys there was only one commandment -- 'Mind Your Own Business'. Every time a Seeley broke the commandment he lost his name and had to take another. I've still got mine."

In studying our native humor you soon find that every occupation brings forth its own variety. Thus the lumbermen lean towards the whimsy, or the humor of exaggeration. Sometimes it is short and sweet, like that remark of the logger from Tobetic.

"Them red pine up in the Tobetic country is so plaguey tall it takes two men to see the top of 'em." And of course you ask, "How's that?"

"Well, one feller looks up as fur as he can see, and t'other goes on from there."

But the best example of the lumberman's whimsy I know is the story of Eph Hunt and the owl. I'll give it to you

in his own words.

Once I had a camp up in the Shelburne River country cuttin' pine, an' one o' the men was a smart young feller that could imitate birds -- specially owls. One night he called up a whole bunch of owls and they sat in the pine trees around the camp and hooted and screeched at him and each other -- you know the way they do. Well, the old hands wanted to get to sleep, so they went out and chucked rocks and drove the owls away. But there was one big old horned owl that kep' comin' back. He'd set square on the camp ridge-pole an' let out them real deep hoots like the siren off a steamboat. Finally I said, "Gimme the lantern, boys, an' I'll fix the son-of-a-gun."

I took the lantern an' started walkin' easy round the camp -- clockways. You know how an owl will set still an' keep his face broad towards you by jest swivellin' his head? Well, I kep' goin' round an' round, walkin' faster'n faster, an' the owl swivellin' his head to foller the glimmer o' the lantern. Then I begun to run, an' after a time I was puffin' an' sweatin' an' begun to think maybe t'wouldn't work. But jest when I was ready to give up, off comes his head an' rolls down the roof! Yes, sir! It all come o' reasonin' an' patience. Everybody's walked round an owl once. But who ever done it fifty times? The secret is to move fast an' don't him time to unwind. Witnesses? ~~'Course there was witnesses! But truth an' science, boys, walks hand in hand, an' needs no witnesses!~~

And here is a sawmill tale. A few winters ago I had occasion to stop at a lumber camp for supper, and after the meal was finished my friend and I had a yarn with the cook. We noticed that his right arm was crooked, ~~and~~ that two fingers were missing from his right hand, and that he walked with a pronounced limp.

"How did that happen?" I asked, pointing to his arm.

"Oh, I've been through the mill," he said.

"Yes, yes," exclaimed my friend. "That is how we all suffer -- going through the mill -- but how did this happen, precisely?"

"Well," said the cook, "t'was like this. I learned to cook in fishin' vessels, out on the Banks, but I got fed up with the sea after some years and struck up into the Lunenburg County woods, lookin' fer a job. I got one, too,

in a sawmill. T'was one o' them li'l portable mills with a steam boiler that's fired with slabs, and all the machinery under a low shed, open at both ends. The fore end was towards the lake, where the logs floated an' come up to the saws on a chain. At the ~~west~~ stern end o' the shed was a planer. They put me to work on the planer.

T'was cold weather and I wore a mackinaw and mittens. After I'd bin at it a coupla hours I felt like an old hand -- nothin' to it. Jist about then I stooped over the belt to pick up somethin' and the metal belt-lacin' caught in me sleeve. I was drug off me feet in a second and pulled along to the shaft quick as lightnin'. The shaft bored a hold on my mackinaw and whirled me round an' round like sixty, fetchin' me a thump ag'in one o' the roof joists every trip. Didn't have no breath to yell, an' the other fellers was all up at the fore end o' the mill, hoistin' out some more logs.

The spin o' the shaft bored through me mackinaw and took a-holt o' me other clo'es, even to me long underwear, and kep' twistin' an' twistin' till finally all my rig tore loose at once. Yes, sir, I was shucked out o' my clo'es like a skun rabbit, an' went flyin', restin' partly on the big belt, which hove me right over the pulley up for'ard, an' through the openin', an' smack into the midst o' the fellers on the haul-up. There I laid, with me right arm broke in two places, two fingers nigh tore off, me hip broke and some ribs cracked, besides which I was cut an' tore up somethin' scandalous, an' nothin' on but me boots an' socks.

After I got out o' hospital I went back to the woods -- but cookin' this time, like you see me now. Sometimes the boys come in from the choppin's an' say, ' Ah, cook, you sure got it soft, indoors in the warm all the time.'

And I say to 'em, ' Ah, yes, boys, but I bin through the mill in me time, boys, I bin slam-bang through the mill."

Seamen and fishermen can be whimsical too, in their own way. I remember an old salt telling me solemnly the fable of the gannet and the eel. Here it is in his own words:

Did you ever see a gannet? A gannet is a kind o' sea gul that ye find along the shore. Now a gannet's insides ain't all balled up in a knot like yours an' mine. A gannet's insides is all in one piece an' straight as a piece o' pipe. In fact a gannet is all straight -- straight beak, straight neck,

straight stummick, straight ... well, to get on with the story

One time I come upon a gannet about to swaller an eel. That gannet was three feet long from stem to stern. The eel was four feet long. He grabbed the eel's head an' swallered him down. Jest as he was swallerin' the last o' the tail, begosh, he seen the eel's head ag'in. So he grabbed the head an' begun ag'in. Well, sir, I watched that thing fer hours, that dam-fool bird swallerin' an' swallerin', an' the eel goin' round an' round like perpetual motion. I had to go home to supper at last, an' when I come back the pair of 'em was gone. I never did know which give up first -- the gannet or the eel.

That was a fable, of course. But here is a tale that is told along the ~~South~~ Shore of Nova Scotia, and every man who tells it swears by the great horn spoon that it's true:

Years ago, in a little place on the Bay of Fundy shore, a schooner lay on her beam ends on the flats, for it was low tide, and as you know in the Bay of Fundy the ebb tide goes clean out of sight. While she lay thus, the owner-skipper who lived nearby, sent an old fellow to caulk some of her bottom seams. He was a good caulker but a little too fond of the rum. Also he chewed tobacco and drooled at his work, so that his long bushy whiskers were stained a deep rich brown.

The skipper watched him tapping away under the Mary Ann for a time and then went off to his house on the shore. For a long time the steady tick-tack of the caulker's mallet and wedge drifted shoreward over the dry flats. Then it stopped. But nobody noticed.

After several hours the skipper looked out and saw that the tide was coming in, in fact it had covered the flats already with a thin bright sheet of water. He looked to his anchors and cables and saw them in order from where he stood. Evidently the caulker had finished his work and gone home.

But now the skipper heard a yell, faint and muffled. It seemed to come from the schooner. She lay careened still, for there wasn't more than an inch of water on the flats, and the steeply sloping deck faced towards the shore, with no sign of life about it. Again the yell. It was the caulker's voice ! *And it had a distinct note of distress.*

The skipper and his sons ran out on the flats in a hurry, and what do you think they found ? The caulker, flat on his back, with his face hard up against the ship's bottom,

and swearing fit to curdle the whole Atlantic. Do you know what that drunken old fool had done? He was lying on his back, hammering away at the bottom seams, and mistook his own whiskers for part of the handful of oakum, fixed them neat in the seam with his iron, and driven them home with the mallet. There he was, fast to the Mary Ann, unable to reach around and get his knife to cut the whiskers free -- and the Fundy tide already running down his neck.

Down in Queens County we have a section that was settled by Irish folk, who still retain their ancient characteristics, not least the quick wit of the race.

One time an American lady tourist hired Pat Cannon to give her a trip around Kejumkujik Lake in his boat#. She was a retired school-ma'am by the sound of her, and she was parched with the thirst for information. She asked Pat the durnedest questions, and kept it up the blessed afternoon. At the end, when the boat was heading back for the lodge, she asked one too many.

It was a calm day. The lake was like a sheet of glass. But now the evening breeze began to stir, making dark streaks on the surface of the water here and there. It so happened that the boat was heading along a smooth # strip# with ruffled water on each side.

Said the lady, " Mr. Cannon, what makes this part of the lake so smooth, when the water on this side and that side is all ruffled.

"Och," said Paddy, " *This is* ~~that's~~ where Mike Donellan hauled his hay across the ice last winter."

Every village has its characters, and Len Seaman was a tall roaring grey-whiskered old fellow when I knew him in the village of Milton in the 1920's. He was a character and so was his wife Betsey, a big woman who smoked a pipe and paddled about the house in her bare feet. Len made his living as an ox-teamster, and one day an ox trod on Len's right foot and crushed it painfully.

Len didn't do anything about it for a day or two, but the foot kept swelling and finally Betsey spied Doctor Smith of Liverpool driving past in his little Model T Ford, and ran out and hailed him. In came the doctor and ordered Len to take off boot and sock. Len did so, and exhibited a foot

that was not merely swollen but badly in need of a bath.

"Len Seman !" snorted the doctor, " I bet that's the filthiest foot in Queens County ! "

" How much'll ye bet ? " snapped Len.

" I'll bet a dollar that's the filthiest foot in the county.

"Y' lose ! " roared Len -- and took boot and sock off the other foot. The hurt foot Betsey had daubed with a rag on the day of the accident. The other foot hadn't been washed in Len's whole life.

Doctor Smith paid up and departed chuckling, to tell the story on his rounds.

Another character on the Mersey River is my old friend Bill. Bill is a bachelor of seventy-odd who# lives in a shack all alone at Big Falls. He fishes and hunts and makes a very potent kind of moonshine to keep out the damp. Some of the lads went up there duck-hunting a fall or two ago, and this is the tale they told:

We picked up Bill at the Falls, and he brought his jug along. We sat in a brushwood blind by the stillwater below the falls and sat there watching our decoys and waiting for the birds to come along. Old Bill offered us a drink of his stuff but we couldn't stand the taste of it, so Bill kept sucking away at the jug all by himself.

The nights were quite cold about then, but after the sun got up the air turned mighty warm. You'd have thought it was May instead of October -- there were even blackflies, not the biting kind but the small kind that hang around in the Fall on warm days and keep crawling into your eyes and ears.

Well, sir, all of a sudden Bill roared, " Ducks ! Ducks ! Let 'em have it, boys ! "

We looked all round, this ^{way} and that -- couldn't see a duck anywhere.

" Where ? Where ? " we yelled, cocking our guns and staring up into the sky.

" All round ! " says Bill. " Can't ye see 'em ? Where's your eyes, boys ? Gimme a gun, somebody -- Gawd sakes, ain't seen so many birds sence '29 ! "

I started to pass him my gun -- and then I saw his ducks. Believe it or not, boys, twenty or thirty of those little blackflies were ~~#####~~ buzzing in front of Bill's nose, and crawling over his spectacles. Yes, sir, there

he was, drunk as an owl, seeing ducks wherever he looked, and cussing us for a lot of blind idjits.

✕ There are no better seamen in the world than the Lunenburg fishermen, many of whom still speak with the old Dutch accent. They are jolly good fellows and over a glass of Nelson's Blood they can tell you tales of their own to split your sides. One that always seemed to me to strike the authentic note of the Lunenburg fleet was the tale of Willy Corkum's baby. *(Jack Finn)*

✕ The schooner had run into hard luck and hard weather on her spring trip, but she had a good fare of fish at last and she was rolling home when she sighted a Lunenburg vessel# outward bound on the summer trip to the Banks. The skipper ran close to the outcomer and hailed him for the latest news of home. The other skipper roared back a budget of small talk about barns shingled and somebody sick and a new lawyer in town and so on, and finally, " Oh, yes, und Villy Corkum's wife had a baby, it's a boy !"

✕ Willy leaped to the rail, all excitement. " How much did it veigh, skippuh ? "

" Chust ofer fife pounds, Villy."

" Gott ! " said Willy. " Iss dat all ? "

Back came the answering hail from the schooner. " Yass, Villy -- dittent hardly mort'n git your bait back, dit you ? "

Now a while ago I said that Nova Scotia humor has a tang that comes from its own earth and sea and air. If you want any proof you can find it in our oldest inhabitants, the Indians. All over the rest of the continent the Indian is found to be solemn, stoical, capable of laughter it is true but devoid of what we should call a sense of humor. But here in Nova Scotia our Micmac Indians know the true meaning of laughter and have a very pretty wit as well. It is evident in their oldest tales, which have to do with Gluskap their god, an uproarious sort of fellow who created Minas Basin to make a pond for his beavers, threw a hunk of the North Mountain into the Bay for an island, and generally set a pace for people like you engineers and for tellers of tales like me.

Sometimes the Micmac's humor comes in the quick unconscio

way that we usually associate with the Irish. Thus it was a Micmac Indian who made the classic remark which is quoted still wherever good fellows get together:

" Too much rum -- jes' nuff ! "

And there is the case of old Joe Jeremy who married a young widow.

"Joe," said a passing lumberman, " I hear you got a new wi
" Not new. Used some."

✕ And there is the case of old Katie who, on being ~~reproached~~ reproached for the behaviour of her daughters remarked with dignity, " My gals good gals. On'y trouble with my gals, they're too 'bligin'."

✕ Katie herself when young was very obliging, according to the tales, and one of the tales concerns the occasion when she was caught in a snowstorm while out in the woods cutting basket material, and took refuge in a small lumber camp.

✕ There were half a dozen men in the camp, all steadygoing married men, and they were hospitable as lumbermen always are. They made a place for Katie at the table, and after a hearty supper the foreman motioned Katie to take an empty bunk near the door. Katie walked over there and undressed. She undressed ^{for young girls and} with a thoroughness that made some of the men gasp, and she sat on the edge of the bunk looking about her with the pleased and expectant air of a cat in a dairy.

The men were a little amused at her lack of modesty but they were tired with the day's work and torpid after the heavy supper, and they lost no time in taking off their boots and rolling into their blankets. By the time the foreman blew out the lantern most of them were snoring.

~~After~~ After a little time the foreman heard sounds of movement near the door and he sat up and struck a match -- and there stood Katie in the doorway, fully dressed, and with her bundle of basket-wood on her back.

"Where you goin' ?" said the foreman.

" Home."

"What's the matter ?"

Katie cast a scornful glance about the camp and made ~~the~~ a remark which the dove of peace must be repeating today at that European conference. "All these beeg strong men,
-- and me -- and no wantum ! "

Speaking of Indians, some years ago there lived in Queens County an old Micmac named Louis Labrador. He was always dressed in malodorous rags, he was never known to wash either himself or his clothes, and he made his living in devious ways. He had suffered from smallpox in his youth, which left him with a complexion like a nutmeg-grater, and so he was known as Scabby Lou. Many tales are told of Scabby Lou.

One year the hunting was very poor and old Lou came into a butcher's shop in Liverpool. The butcher was rather a skinflint, and Scabby Lou was rather an infrequent customer, so he sold the Indian a piece of beef which looked all right from the outside but which in fact contained a huge bone. Off went Lou with his meat to Two Mile Hill and the butcher didn't see him again till spring.

One day in late March Lou came into the store, this time with something to sell -- a dozen great square slabs of maple sugar a good two inches thick. The butcher knew good maple sugar when he saw it, and after beating the Indian down on the price he bought the lot. Off went Scabby Lou with the money.

Pretty soon a customer drifted into the store, spotted the maple sugar and bought a whole slab at the butcher's very stiff price. Then came another, and another. In half an hour the sugar was gone and the butcher had a handsome profit. But soon after the last of the customers went out of the store, the first was back in a rage. He planked the sugar ~~down in front of the~~, now broken, in front of the butcher and demanded his money back. The butcher took a single look at the stuff, swallowed hard -- and paid up. By that time the next customer was back with his sugar, and the butcher had to refund again. So it went.

Scabby Lou kept out of town for a long time after that, but one day in the summer the butcher spotted the old Indian shuffling along the sidewalk in his old worn moccasins. He rushed out and grabbed Lou's ragged shoulder.

"Labrador, you scoundrel, what about that maple sugar you sold me ? "

"Somethin' wrong weeth sugar ? "

"You know very well what was wrong with it. It was only half sugar, and the rest was -- well you know what it was. The whole town knows what it was. That's adulteration of food, my friend. It's against the law."

The old Micmac drew himself up to his full height.

"Bones in meat, ain't it ? "

" Yes."

" So ! H'all right ! ~~Bones in sugar, too !~~ Same bones in sugar, too ! "

One hot summer day the water bucket and mug in Bell's blacksmith shop in Milton were in great demand, not only by the smith and his partner but by teamsters, lumberjacks and others who had business in the forge or chanced to pass along the dusty road.

In mid-afternoon several men came trooping into the forge and made straight for the water bucket. As their eyes became adjusted to the cool gloom of the forge they saw Scabby Lou sitting right beside the bucket, a most unsanitary object with his filthy rags, his long tangle of hair and his grimy pockmarked face.

Each man picked up the mug, took a look at Lou, and was careful not to put his mouth to the more obvious parts of the rim. When they were finished, old Lou spoke up in his reedy monotone.

" 'At's right, boys -- dreenk by d'hundle. Good pla-ace, dreenk by hundle. Always dreenk by hundle -- me ! "

But I could go on like this for half the night, and humor is a thing which should be taken a little at a time or the true savor is lost. I hope I have shown you in these tales which are actually told in the crossroads forge, the lumber camp and the schooner's cabin, something of the instinct for laughter which comes from our very sea and soil, which brightens our winter and our long muddy spring, which lightens our toil, which makes the Nova Scotian see his fellow man as another traveller on the long ~~hard~~ road, which can be shortened for them both by a smile.

Tale of John Francis

Years ago old Phil Kempton, of the lumber firm of Harlow & Kempton, wanted to get John Francis, the Indian, to go and work in one of his camps for the winter. He knew it was of no use to approach John in December, with the Christmas festivities just ahead and the New Year's drinking to be done.

So on the second day of January he went up to Two Mile Hill and found John sitting in his shack.

John didn't want to go logging and he said so. Phil used all his powers of persuasion. Finally John shook his head and said, "Too late."

"What d'you mean, too late?" snorted Phil.

John shook his head again. " Well, here's January near 'bout gone ... Feb'ry ... Febry's on'y a li'l month .. and March ... you can't 'pend on March now'days ... No sir, too late to go to work this winter."

The next year Phil approached John early in the Fall, and John was short of beer-money so he went to work in a camp on Broad River. After he'd been working there for six weeks it occurred to him that it was time he asked one or two questions. He said to one of the other loggers, "What's wages 'ere?"

"Seventeen dollars a month"

" I ain' comin'."