

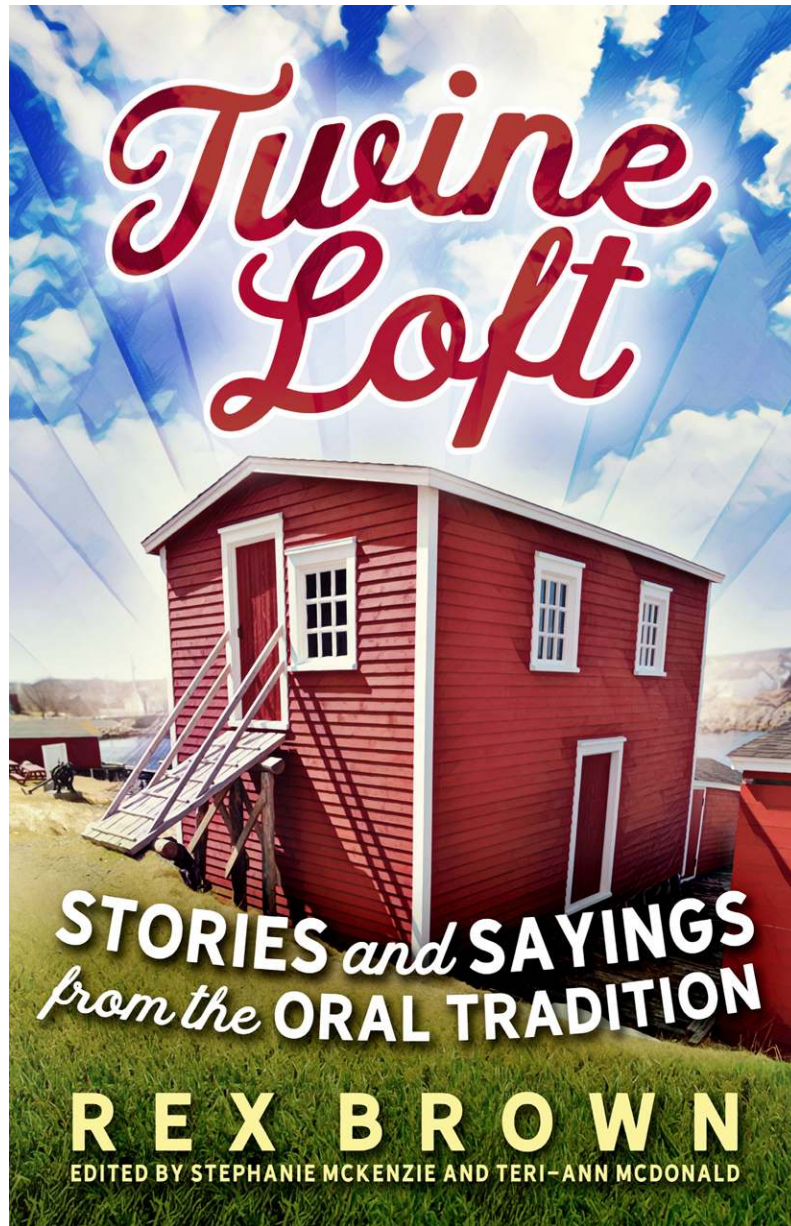
# Twine Loft

**STORIES and SAYINGS**  
*from the* **ORAL TRADITION**

**R E X B R O W N**

EDITED BY STEPHANIE MCKENZIE AND TERI-ANN MCDONALD





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## PRAISE FOR REX BROWN

### **Out from the Harbour**

*"Out from the Harbour* is a vivid description of life in Tack's Beach. The author goes into great detail to describe his beloved Tack's Beach so much so that you feel like you are actually walking on the beach."

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*"Out from the Harbour* is as enjoyable as it is educational."— THE ADVERTISER (GRAND FALLS)

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— THE GUARDIAN (PRINCE EDWARD ISLAND)

# Twine Loft: Stories and Sayings from the Oral Tradition

Rex Brown

Edited by Stephanie McKenzie and Teri-Ann McDonald

*Afterword by Stephanie McKenzie*

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TELEPHONE: (709) 739-4477 FAX: (709) 739-4420 TOLL-FREE: 1-866-739-4420

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For Jill and Jim, who appreciate their roots.

We had Billy Hanlon for shantyman too  
And all the Bay knows what Billy can do  
When he sings in the cove in the fall of the year  
All the gulls from Gull Island come out for to hear.

— “The Riverhead Launching,” 1935

**twine loft:** room or area of fishing premises in which nets are stored and repaired; NET n: ~ LOFT. 1917 Christmas Bells 15 Go down to the twine loft and give those fellows working there a dram, but mind you make them mix it with water. 1936 SMITH 181 And of course there were the traps to repair in the twine loft again.

—*Dictionary of Newfoundland English*

## Introduction

The odd person, while fully acknowledging that the past is “a bucket of ashes,” is still inclined to root among them, not to rekindle any flame but, rather, to celebrate that there are ashes to root through. For someone born in Newfoundland while we were still ourselves—not yet one distinct part of Canada—the rooting might be perceived as nostalgic or, worse still, nationalistic, but I think not. It has to do with attachment to place. And of course, there is no place without people. My hallowed Tack’s Head is scenery, endlessly duplicated across a wider, beautiful world. But it’s more than scenery to me. People wandered about once upon a time; their voices are ashes now, but I hear them still. I want to share what I hear, so I write.

There is something else, too—something that has little to do with place, or else it’s all to do with place. I speak of the oral tradition, the celebration of the spoken word. Spoken words that are meant to be heard, embraced by the mouth and the ear. This is somewhat out of fashion today, to be sure, when speaking within earshot plays a far lesser role than it once did; when listening to someone telling you a story is, for many, a challenge, maybe a bore; when what is told, not the telling, is paramount. True of most, but not

of those of us wired to be “out for to hear,” those inclined to listen for the echoes from the ashes, those inclined to share the voices that resonate still.

Articulating what is there among the ashes can take a number of forms. Writing history is one. Historical accounts tend to draw broad strokes that brush over the details many crave. Bernice Morgan wondered what ordinary folk in her Newfoundland past might be up to as they lived their day-to-day lives, so she imagined it for herself, writing *Random Passage* and *Waiting for Time*. Donna Butt features drama at Theatre in the Bight to bring people from the past to the fore for her Trinity patrons. David Blackwood paints his past for all to view.

Unlike Bernice and Donna, I steer clear of fiction. The approach to mining the ashes here is anecdotal—a collection of stories and sayings from one person who has listened all his life telling what he recalls. All is recalled, not imagined. All the people named are real people. I sincerely trust that I have not offended, in any way, even one. All, dead or alive, are as dear to me now as when they were within earshot. I shudder to think that a reader might emerge from my words with even a tinge of lessened impression of anyone. All stand tall in my world. My attachment to time and place is not sustainable without all who inhabit it fully on side.

Hopefully the words add up to allow the reader to hear echoes of voices



from the Newfoundland that no longer is and fill some of the details in for anyone out for to hear. I myself have had a lifelong fascination with spoken words and written words read aloud. I allow that I came by it honest. People all along the way from Tack's Beach to university to Corner Brook have influenced my fascination.

The Tack's Beach of my childhood and youth in the 1950s and early 1960s offers a rich source of ashes to mine. In Julia Bolt's kitchen "over round the shore," I heard Billy Bolt spin "Jack Tales." All ended the same way: "the last time I saw them they were all sitting around a tin table; had that tin table been stronger, my story would have been longer but that tin table bended and so my story has ended." A rhyme worthy of Mother Goose. Over in The Shop (the general store owned by Dad and two of his brothers), especially on windy/rainy days, men such as Charlie Hapgood and Aubrey Penney would gather to yarn, sometimes for an entire afternoon. I would be seen, but not heard, until closing time. Their delivery trumped what was said. Preachers would pale in their presence. Every Christmas Eve, Bill Warren showed up and sang words for my brother Howard, "John, Go Cut Your Whitens." One Christmas season, a young Victor Green sang "The Wild Colonial Boy"—still a favourite of mine well over sixty years on. And then there was Pop Brown, Grandfather's brother, who sang in Julia Bolt's kitchen,

in the pilothouse of the schooner *Anna V. Fagan*, and anywhere else where a drink might appear with ears around to hear. He sang for me for two summers as we beat about inner Placentia Bay in the longliner *Betty Kevin*. For him, one was audience enough. He scattered the occasional hymn in among “The Brule Song,” “The Black Velvet Band,” and dozens of others. Love at first hear.

In the mid- and late 1960s, childhood in Tack’s Beach gave way to my university days. Jimmy Gosse, from Spaniard’s Bay, introduced me to his grandfather, father, and uncle. Jim Smith, Bill Gosse, and Joe Lundrigan were master storytellers. “Great liars” was the compliment in that era (when “fish killer” was the praise heaped upon the highliner). They brought the coast and Labrador fishery alive; you couldn’t have gotten closer without the sea spray coming in over you. If a couple of them were about to play off each other, your heart soared. These were performances to be savoured. The stories, as with all classics, lost nothing in the retelling.

Storytelling continued to take pride of place during my twenty-five years hanging around Corner Brook with Al Pittman. Pittman with his passionate advocacy that words were meant to be heard. He arranged numerous informal and formal readings, not to highlight his poetry primarily but to give voice to established and emerging poets, writers, storytellers, actors,

and singers—anyone talented enough to deserve an audience. He established The March Hare; when The Hare needed an organizer, I became one. Over its thirty-two-year run, The Hare took the spoken word downtown, across the island, and abroad to Ireland, Halifax, Ontario, and New York. The Hare brought words I'd never even imagined in university, let alone in Tack's Beach.

The stories to follow span a lifetime. The Tack's Beach of my youth features prominently. The place is a page I cannot turn. So, too, resettlement keeps cropping up. Over fifty years on, I haven't moved on from whence I'd sprung. God willing, I never will. Once outport life was behind me, I tried my best to prosper on the mainland. It's been a wonderful fine run here on the island, rooted in Corner Brook. Along the way, a story or two worth telling made an appearance—stories mostly about people, people comparable to the heroes of my youth. It's my hope that you, the reader, will enjoy some of these stories at some level. Mixed among the stories, an essay or two may appear. Don't worry, I'm not trying to convince you of anything; I'm merely trying to untangle a thought or two so I don't lie awake as much. You never know, reading this stuff may help you nod off yourself!

Woven among the stories are a few of the many one-liners that have caught my ear over the decades. These sayings, some of which date as far

back as the mid-1950s, are not necessarily all original compositions. I attribute them to the person I first heard them from, where I vividly remember the speaker's voice. Lest you despair that only in the days of yore did anyone ever say anything anyway near clever, I've boldly included a couple of more recent vintage. It's only fair play, really, to aspire to be a little like the giants upon whose shoulders we stand—an "as loved our fathers, so we love" sort of thing.

Altogether, I've had a lifetime listening, a lifetime with an oral culture alive and thriving in my circle, whatever the cultural inclinations of the world about me. These words were stiff competition for any genre the mass media threw my way.

I joined in when the opportunity arose. Sad to say, no one has ever complimented me with "you're a great liar" or even "that was a fine song well sung." Fortunately, you can write all on your own. Over the years, I took to writing down a few words. Never without speaking each aloud in my mind's ear. Seldom without reading them to my wife, Elaine. Her tolerance for my words and all else was remarkable. I allow she viewed it part of the "for better or worse."

This book is meant to be read aloud, sort of like we used to do from our readers in class yesteryear. Maybe you, reader, can take turns reading to

friends and they to you, not to impress a teacher but to revel in the sound that spoken words make. Maybe you can imagine yourself in an outharbour twine loft, among men spinning yarns while mending their nets, or over in The Shop surrounded by people out for to hear. I allow, before too far along, you will want to weave your own words to say. Become a “great liar” yourself if you’re lucky.



*“God knows who’ll be king then”*

The phrase speaks to the uncertainty of the future. Things are the way they are for now, but with no guarantees for down the road. Bill Gosse probably brought the saying with him when he turned Canadian in 1949. The king’s policies greatly impacted Newfoundland for hundreds of years.