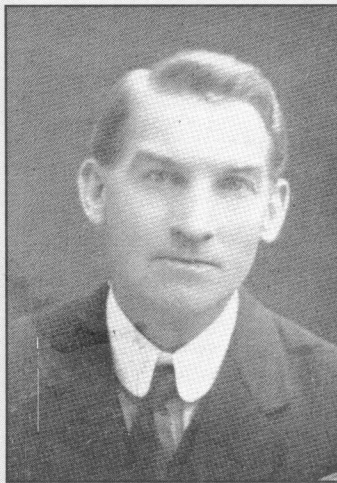


# BONAVISTA BAY PANEGRYISTS<sup>1</sup>

## SOL, ABE AND THE METAPHORS OF NEWFOUNDLAND LOVE

BY TOR FOSNAES



Solomon Samson. Photo from *A glimpse of Newfoundland (as it was and as it is) in Poetry and Pictures*, by Soloman Samson, edited by Dr. Robert Saunders, printed by J. Looke Ltd., Poole, England. 1959.



A.C. Wornell. Photo from *Newfoundland and Labrador Who's Who*, Centennial Edition 1967-68, Published by E. C. Boone Advertising Limited, St. John's, Newfoundland.

*Nationalist poetry rears its head in every nation and no less so in Newfoundland and Labrador. Its greatest poets are internationally renowned and its lesser poets and songwriters are held in local high esteem. This study compares two poets of modest output and varying quality whose lives and careers paralleled one another, albeit a generation apart.*

<sup>1</sup> Panegyrists are people who speak or write a laudatory or praising discourse.

**S**oloman Samson and Abel Wornell both hailed from small, Bonavista Bay islands; Samson (1888-1957) from Flat Islands (the main one of which is called Samson's Island); Abel Wornell (1914-2004) from Greenspond (once called the Capital of the North).

Flat Islands, Bonavista Bay, consists of Flat (or Samson's) Island, Berry Head, North Island and Coward Island. Settlement (starting in 1806) occurred on all four and three have enough soil to support subsistence agriculture.

The population was divided, half on Flat Island and a quarter each on North and Coward islands. The most southerly of the populated Bonavista Bay archipelago, they were permanently settled by 1830 and grew rapidly throughout the 1850s with the expansion of the Labrador fishery. The Samson and Samson cannery on Flat Island imported salmon from all over Bonavista Bay. The population declined to about 400 by 1950, mainly through out-migration.

Greenspond is the largest of a group of islands on the northwest side of Bonavista Bay, including Batterton and Ship islands, along with a number of small, uninhabited islands. None have suitable soil for gardening and Greenspond Harbour, while adequate, has only enough room for five or six fishing vessels. It was first settled in the 1690s and grew steadily for the next 200 years, reaching almost 2,000 in 1900. By 1980 the population dropped to about 400 through out-migration.<sup>2</sup>

Both Samson and Wornell published books of poetry: Samson's *Glimpses of Newfoundland in Poetry and Pictures* appeared originally untitled and self-printed in 1954 and was later re-published by Robert Saunders in 1959 and 1963, and Wornell's *Monarch of the Grump* came in 1951 and *Rhymes of a Newfoundlander* in 1958. A commemorative edition of *Rhymes* was published in 1997 after he discovered the Cabot celebrations had taken his *John Cabot, May 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1497* as overture to the pageant performed before Queen Elizabeth II in Bonavista.

Both had a great love for Newfoundland nature and the land, harsh or gentle, as experienced. Both trudged the barrens and bogs with rods and guns and both extolled the peace that comes from surrender to the wilderness, away from the hurry-scurry of towns and cities.

Both entered politics; Samson at 31, representing the Liberal Reform (a Liberal-Fishermen's Protective Union coalition) in 1919, after a short career as a

teacher; Wornell at 52, representing the Smallwood Liberals in 1966, after a lengthy career as a business manager. Both served only one term. Samson took a post in the Customs Department, which he held until retirement. Wornell eschewed further public service and in later years openly criticized government policies and personalities in topical verse printed in St. John's newspapers and in his unpublished collection.

Wornell called himself a satirist and much of his verse is pithy, directed at personalities in politics and public life; in other countries he would probably have been banned, exiled or worse. Samson wasn't as vocal about his disillusionment but some of his verse shows a dislike for political machination and increasing urbanity. The nearly 30-year difference in their history, coupled with Wornell's perseverance into the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, gave him a wealth of subject matter at which to point his pen; Samson died just at the advent of Newfoundland television.

In terms of education, both were advantaged for their time; Samson as the son of a progressive, wealthy fish merchant, and Wornell as the son of a magistrate; and both were able to go beyond the Grade III of many of their contemporaries. Both had a natural turn of phrase, unlike the drier, academic verse of R.A. Parsons and E.J. Pratt.

### Give Me the Country

I long to go out in the country  
Far away from the dwellings of men,  
Surrounded with trees and with flowers  
In a little old shack in the glen.  
I like to be camped near a trout pond  
With a river or stream running by,  
A partner who is happy with me  
And a dog that is constantly nigh.

To sit in the shade in the forest,  
Hear the sound of the brook babble by,  
Harken to robins and sparrows  
As they sing their sweet songs to the sky.  
Listen to the hum of the insects  
And to study the ants at their task  
Or to gaze at the ways of the spider  
As its web to a tree it makes fast.

To rise with the sun in the morning,  
Watch the dewdrops dissolve in the air,  
Then to smell the wood smoke from the fire  
As breakfast time draws slowly near.

<sup>2</sup> With information from *Encyclopedia of Newfoundland and Labrador* entry on Greenspond.

I love to sit on the hill-top  
And watch the sun sink in the west,  
To behold the beautiful colours  
As our part of the world goes to rest.

'Tis nice to stay in on wet mornings  
Hear the patter of rain on the roof,  
Listen to the wind's gentle sighing  
And find that your shack's waterproof.  
Then after the storm has abated  
And the sun shines brightly again  
To inhale the aroma of forest  
Which cannot be excelled after rain.

To view the pale gentle moonlight  
On the smooth placid face of the pond  
To watch shadows of trees as reflected  
Like a mirror, where you gaze upon.  
To hear the sharp splash of the mud trout  
As he jumps for the late homing fly.  
Watch the ripples that gradually widen  
'Til they touch the lake shores that are dry.

Great God in Thy bounteous nature  
These gifts to mankind are divine,  
We are sorry for those of the nationalist  
Who perceiving them yet are so blind.  
Give to them the towns and the city  
With its hurry and shrieks and alarms.  
But for me, let me dwell close to nature,  
Enthralled by her pure, gentle charms.

*By Soloman Samson*

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#### **Daydream**

I sit in my chair in the corner  
While my old dog dreams on the floor  
My thoughts and his dreams I'll bet you  
Are of hunting days since gone before.

We are hunting the barrens in fancy  
My setter and I as we rest,  
At St. Shott's, Snows Pond or Chance Cove  
Catalina or Fisher's Ridge Crest.

In the years that are past, we once hunted  
Those barrens that now come to mind,  
O'er marshes and ridges we wandered  
And many a partridge did find.

I fancy I now see the sunrise  
Come blazingly out of the sea  
Drying the dew of the morning  
And shining o'er barren and lea.

Giving lustre to the green hilltops,  
Adding fire to the maple's red hue,  
Extolling the colours of autumn  
As no living artist could do.

The cool bracing air of the autumn,  
In fancy I breathe it again  
As I walk tirelessly after my setter,  
Up hill, across brook, marsh and glen.

But now we're too feeble for hunting,  
My heart and my mind are unsound,  
My dog half-blinded and cripple,  
Yet in fancy, is solace, now found.

*By Soloman Samson*

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#### **October Reverie**

At daylight, on a keen October morn,  
As o'er the gravel high-road sped their car,  
The Gordon Setter sat beside his master:  
His nostrils pressed against the window-vent,  
Sensed something in the frosty atmosphere  
Which made him tremble with expectancy.  
The gun beside him was symbolical  
Of past excitement...

When his master whispered:  
"Birds boy? Birds?" he whined impatiently.  
He knew his mission then, and in his eyes  
Shone evidence of mute intelligence.  
He thought of pungent partridge scent among  
The berry-bushes on the barren hills,  
And happy recollections thronged his brain.

Most thrilling of his reminiscences  
Was last year, when he had to hunt downwind  
One blust'ry day, while ranging far afield.  
With body low and tail between his legs,  
On cautious pads he weaved between the brush  
Until his nose picked up the ground-scent faint.  
Then all his hybrid instinct was engaged  
Outwitting birds which could outwit a fox;

For one unguarded pace too near the brood,  
Might flush the wily cock, whose cackling harsh  
Would signal swift departure of the flock,  
And merit from his master stern rebuke.

Sagacity that day was well-rewarded,  
For, like a thoroughbred, he kept his "point"  
Until his master ordered: "Flush 'em Boy!"...  
A ten foot dash that made the brush explode  
With rustling sounds which only partridge make  
The rigid wings fan furiously for height.  
An instant of suspense seemed minutes long,  
Before the gun was brought to aim on two  
Which crossed and folded simultaneously  
As shot from "Magnum" shells scored perfect hits.  
Another cartridge crashed, and to the right  
A third bird tumbled headlong in the bush...

Ah, that was sport! And well the Setter knew it:  
The greatest thrill that man and beast can share -  
But we debase a hunting dog, to say  
That it's a beast, on such occasions, when  
It shares a common instinct with a man.  
Upon the partridge-ground their hearts are one:  
The tragic separation in their speech!

*By Abel Wornell*

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#### **To Newfoundland**

O were I in the richest part  
Earth offers to a craving heart,  
The memories of pleasures grand,  
Which Nature placed in Newfoundland,  
Would neutralize the vaunted lure  
Of world-renowned resorts, I'm sure;  
For sights and sounds accounted rare  
Abound around me everywhere!

The deep ravines; the barren hills;  
The cheerful lilt of sparkling rills:  
The placid pools at eventide  
With Sunset's myriad colours dyed;  
The eerie call of mating loons;  
The wild, innumerable tunes  
By woodland choristers diffused: -  
On all of these my soul hath mused.

Thou art a land no man can tread  
Without partaking "living bread;"  
Where cliffs and roaring seas deride  
The claims of arrogance and pride;  
A land where even skeptic fools  
May see the face of God in pools,  
Or read, in Sunset's artistry,  
The promise of Eternity.

Thou art a land where sporting blood  
Is nourished with exciting food;  
Whose gullies, ponds, and rivers hold  
The anglers' pleasures manifold;  
Whose barrens, 'neath the Autumn sun,  
Resounds to many a huntsman's gun;  
'Tween Earth and Heav'n the gap is spanned  
For sportsmen here in Newfoundland.

O may the future hold for thee  
A fairer name in history;  
May fisher-folk be proud to boast  
Their heritage of rock-bound coast;  
May Commerce with industrious hand  
Distribute plenty o'er thy land,  
So that thy sons, on native sod,  
May praise the plenitude of God!

*By Abel Wornell*

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#### **Thrills and Disappointments**

If you have fished a salmon pool  
In the grey light of dawn  
And at the first cast of your fly  
A salmon gets hooked on.

You know the thrill, the jump, the splash,  
The fish strives to get free  
Your line like lightning unreels.  
It fights for liberty.

The fight goes on up pool and down  
Until that fish is spent  
And then you reel in to the bank  
Then land it in your net.

But you have fished a salmon pool,  
Dozens of fish you see,  
You cast until your arm is tired,  
Fish stem the tide calmly.

You're tired and stop to fill your pipe,  
Your fly sinks in the tide,  
When you lift it up to cast again  
A fish doth on it ride.

Without intent you've jigged a fish.  
Your ill luck you bewail,  
And as you try to land that fish  
You find it's by the tail.

Then as you bring it to the bank,  
You wish, with you it sank,  
For as you glance you clearly see  
The warden on the bank.

*By Soloman Samson*

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#### **My Island Home**

Oh Newfoundland! My Island Home!  
Is there a spot on Earth,  
Where men fought more on sea and shore,  
To win their rights of birth?

Your coastline's creased, rugged and torn,  
Made so by winds and seas,  
Aided by heavy Arctic ice  
Throughout the centuries.

We dearly love your hills and dales,  
Your barrens, rivers, lakes,  
Your bays, dotted with islands fair,  
Your forests, marshes, brakes.

Your winters are not very cold,  
Your springs are long and drear,  
Your summers short but excellent,  
Autumns, bright, brisk and clear.

For many years the old country,  
Through west merchants intrigue,  
Forced pioneers who fished out here,  
Return by ship and brig.

A few escaped to make their homes  
In hamlet, cove and bay;  
Slowly but sure the race increased  
Forced Britain mend her way.  
For many years the French, who then  
With Britain were at war,  
Often made raids upon our coast,  
Did colonizing mar.

Despite those various handicaps,  
Which history can trace,  
Out land, betimes, was settled by  
A rugged, friendly race.

Our forebears came from England's shores  
Some from the Emerald Isle,  
From Channel Isles, Scilly and Wales  
Some from old Scotland's soil.

Cradled annext the ocean bed  
They're small boat men from birth.  
No seamen can excel this breed  
Anywhere in this earth.

But now we are Canadians  
Yet Newfoundlanders still.  
Treat us right you mainlanders  
Don't forget our goodwill.

*By Soloman Samson*

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#### **Give Not Get**

It's what we give, not what we get  
That makes our lives worth while,  
Which gives to us contented minds,  
Lessens excessive bile.

The world is in a sorry plight  
We labour, worry, fret,  
Because the folks of every class  
Want - not to give but get.

However rich or poor we are  
There's much that we can give  
In wages, service, charity  
To help our fellows live.

However lofty is your task  
Or lowly be your station,  
Give of the best that you possess  
To folks of every nation.

Christ taught this lesson when on earth,  
He would not us deceive  
He said: "It was better by far  
To give than to receive."

*By Soloman Samson*

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### Outdoor Pleasures

Although some people like to encrust  
Themselves with a town's filthy dust,  
Just let me be where  
I can breath the fresh air  
In communication with things I can trust.

Through others may aspire to be seen  
In a gambling-house or a shebeen,  
I'd much rather be  
Where the drinking is free:-  
Of atmosphere pure and serene.

Let folk go their various ways  
Expending their half-holidays;  
I'll still be the fool  
Knee deep in a pool  
Awaiting that wonderful "raise".

Or else I will trudge o'er the hills  
Imbibing the soul-stirring thrills  
Which fill a man's heart  
Until he feels part  
Of the mountains, the trees and the rills.

Good fellowship sometimes is found  
In clubs where refreshments go round;  
But I'll find my fun  
With a dog and a gun  
On the barrens where partridge abound!

*By Abel Wornell*

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### Song of the Angler

O I have tramped with eager feet  
Down forest trails the dawn to greet,  
And seen the sable drapes of night  
Recede before the morning light.

I've breathed the fragrant dew-fresh air  
And heard rejoicing everywhere  
As Nature heralded the sun  
Upon its daily course begun.

O I have seen the mists of morn  
Rise from the lake, like fleece new-shorn;  
And heard (as daylight grew before us)  
The birds begin their cheering chorus.

I've often waded in the cool  
And froth-flecked shallows of a pool,  
And seen its surface shattered by  
A sea-trout rising to a fly:

Then in that brief, hypnotic hush  
I've felt the "strike," the "tug," the "rush,"  
While spinning reel and curving rod  
Evoke unuttered thanks to God.

Though some may wealth and pomp adore,  
And crave for luxuries galore,  
I'll realize my fondest dreams  
To soothe the soul and cleanse the mind.

Yes, I have sensed the thrills supreme  
At dawn beside a forest stream;  
And while this Earth such joys can give  
I'll find it ever good to live!

*By Abel Wornell*

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### Whither Tending Newfoundlander (Pre-Confederation) Feb. 1948

Whither tending Newfoundland?  
What hath fate in store?  
Undecided now you stand  
By an open door  
Which you spurned before.

Whither tending Newfoundland?  
What will be your story?  
Will it be an epic grand?  
Can your head so hoary  
Don a borrowed glory?

Whither tending, Newfoundland?  
What hath Destiny  
By the secret ballot planned?  
Will Democracy  
Free or fetter thee?

Are electors qualified  
For the task so great?  
They must decide,  
From the "great debate"\*  
What will be your fate!

Right or wrong, in any land,  
Democracy is still  
Depending on the Voter's hand  
Which, for good or ill,  
Marks the people's will.

\* National Convention

By Abel Wornell

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### Utopia

O happy world where men  
May trust each other, when  
No clashing ideologies,  
Nor smug sectarian bigotries,  
Nor class distinction reigns;  
When nought shall mar the harmonies  
'Tween human hearts and brains!

By Abel Wornell

Saunders breaks (but not in the table of contents) Samson's 40 poems into themes of Newfoundland (7 poems), The Seasons! (7), Down to Nature! (6), Peeps of Men at Work (7), Patriotism in Newfoundland (3), and The Philosophy of Solomon Samson (10). Wornell's *Rhymes* has Part I: Dealing with Newfoundland (37) and Part II: In Sundry Moods (29).

Both share common themes in their "philosophical" works, including blindness, goodness, utopia, loveliness, beauty and human variety, and the seal

fishery (three poems each). Samson uses, as subjects, Elizabeth Windsor (as Princess and as Queen), George VI, Capt. John Blackmore, a (possibly) fictitious uncle John, and one unnamed sealer. Wornell uses Winston Churchill, Don Jameison, Capt. Bob Bartlett, an Aunt Emily, his wife (unnamed), a fictitious Uncle Jarge, and several fishing buddies. And, as seen in the selections, both feature their hunting dogs.

R. A. Parsons (R.A.P.)<sup>3</sup> introduces Samson, detailing his education, noting he was "a trifle bookish and got little more schooling than the average boy of Flat Island" and that as a "bedlamer boy" he went to school at St. John's with his parents' blessing. His teaching career lasted from his late teens until he was 31, first at Greenspond, then at Catalina, where he fell under Coaker's spell. Wornell was managing the Petites' enterprises in Hermitage Bay when he was enchanted by Smallwood.

Disillusionment with (political) public life was featured in both men. R.A.P. says Samson "disliked the subterfuge and recourse to expediency that seems to be required of the politician. He was perhaps too forthright to make a successful politician." Wornell, in *In the Interest of Good Government*, wrote:

Don't let your mind be swayed by tricky speeches,  
Or promises impossible to keep;  
For seldom will one [a politician] practice what  
one preaches;  
And people sow what politicians reap.

In later life, he told people he disliked politics because it necessitated making "unpalatable compromises."

This view, jaded and prominent in Wornell, partly hidden in Samson, perhaps grew from their great love of Newfoundland, and in particular the Newfoundland geography and its hunting and fishing pleasures. R.A.P. on Samson fits both men to a tee: "He was an ardent angler and gunner of wide reputation...His knowledge of his whereabouts in storm or fog was to me...amazing; but I think it came from his keenness of observation and the fondness he bore for the rugged land that nurtured him."

Parsons' first volume, *Reflections*, came out in 1954,

<sup>3</sup> Richard Augustus Parsons (1893-1981) was a Newfoundland lawyer and poet. He was a young teacher and school principal in Greenspond between 1909 and 1914, and served with the Newfoundland Regiment in Europe before getting his law degree from McGill. He was clerk of the Legislative Council of Newfoundland from 1924 to 1932 and, upon attaining King's Counsel, he practiced law in St. John's. Parsons published 12 poetry collections featuring Newfoundland's outport life and natural beauty. Parsons and Saunders were closely associated.

coincidentally the year Samson wrote Saunders: "I have collected a few of my writings during the years and had the printer put them up in book form. Enclosed is my complimentary copy to you..." This volume, apparently printed privately, became the basis for *Glimpses of Newfoundland*, and included Parsons' Introduction.

A.B. Perlin, writing as Wayfarer in 1960, praises Saunders as "a surviving admirer" of Samson. In his notice of the 1959 edition (presented in the second edition in 1963), Perlin spends considerably more time on Saunders than Samson, but admits to knowing Samson well: "We wondered in those days when we were newspaper reporters in the House of Assembly, how one so gentle in his way could ever have entered the political arena in its most turbulent period...But not until some time after his retirement [from politics?], when he came to bring us a copy of a book of verse he had written, did we realize that he had sought self-expression through this particular medium." Wornell, in his frontispiece, writes:

These verses are not to be classed  
With glittering lyrical gems of the past:

In them, the inquisitive critic may find  
Some metrical words for a musical mind;  
Not wisdom profound, nor a flawless technique;  
Nor proof of my knowledge of Latin or Greek;  
But rhythmical stanzas composed in my leisure  
When moments of solitude fashioned a measure.

In *An Editorial: Three sonnets "in my fashion"*, Wornell, (reacting to a lashing criticism of local sonnet writing by A.C. Hunter; possibly some were by Wornell himself) writes:

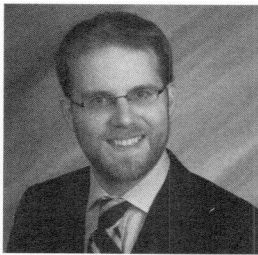
No, here's a rhymer who will never pour  
Effeminate effusions from his pen to satiate a  
critic's appetite.  
Virility should author what we write;  
And through it prove to classic dupes a bore,  
At least 'twill not embarrass common men.

Sentiments Samson would, no doubt, have stood behind had he not died some 16 months before. **NQ**

*Tor Fosnaes is President of Mobilewords Limited. He lives in Mobile.*

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