

**Cramp-Hand Cuffers:  
The Robert Bartlett Explorations**

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## ABSTRACT

*Cramp-Hand Cuffers* is a collection of semi-biopic prose poems about Captain Robert Bartlett written in a hybrid of Newfoundland dialect and standard English. The narrative begins with Bartlett at home in Newfoundland, anxious to get back out on the sea. He soon joins the ill-fated *Karluk* expedition which became jammed in heavy Arctic Sea ice and sunk in a largely unexplored region north of Siberia in 1914. Bartlett and his crew camped on the thick ice for months, and he was eventually forced to trek 700 miles over the rough, shifting ice and through Siberia to mount a rescue effort from Alaska. Despite his suffering, Bartlett maintains a humorous disposition, reflects on his life back in Brigus, and, when he finally arrives home safe, can't wait to get back out on the breakers again.

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“fadgin / Managing on Our Own” appears in *untethered*.

“schooner rigged / Nothing But Your Clothes” and “rally rally / Street Fight on the Ice” appear in *antilang*. My thanks to the editors of these literary magazines.

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## ARTIST'S STATEMENT

*Cramp-Hand Cuffers: The Robert Bartlett Explorations* is a collection of prose poems narrated by the Arctic explorer and seal hunter Captain Robert Bartlett from Brigus, Newfoundland. Bartlett is also my great-great-uncle. The title of this creative thesis roughly translates to standard English as “amusing, dialectal stories” and reflects the content of this collection: these poems are written largely in the Newfoundland dialect. The poems in *Cramp-Hand Cuffers* are rooted in Newfoundland regionalism written through a diasporic lens and merge history, biography, folklore, linguistics, and forms of oral storytelling that have thrived in Newfoundland for hundreds of years.

In 1913-1914, Bartlett was Captain of the ill-fated brigantine *Karluk* which became jammed in heavy ice in the Arctic sea, drifted across the Beaufort and Chukchi seas, and, in January 1914, was crushed and sank in a largely unknown region north of Siberia. The crew set up camp on the thick ice, and eventually, when the sun broke through the long Arctic night, Bartlett and his Inuk companion, Kataktovick, trekked 700 miles across the unstable, shifting floes and through Siberia to mount a rescue mission from Alaska. The poems of *Cramp-Hand Cuffers* are all narrated by Captain Bartlett and can be divided into two forms: ‘transnation’ poems and ‘newfound’ poems using the cutup technique.

I use the term ‘transnation’ to describe the poems that are written in impossibly thick Newfoundland English and accompanied by a standard English ‘translation’ on the facing page. Examples of this form include “forelaid vamp,” “hurt mash,” and “throttles.” I hesitate to call these pure translations for two reasons. First, I wrote both versions of the poem, whereas traditional translation involves translating someone else’s work. Erin Mouré states that “[t]ranslation involves choices, and choices are culturally driven” (McCance 7). Since I am acting as both writer and ‘translator,’ these choices and culture do not differ, so a fundamental part of the process is missing. Secondly, I am taking a text that I originally wrote in English and putting it into a language I don’t even fully understand and, in fact, doesn’t even exist

in the exaggerated form seen in *Cramp-Hand Cuffers*. I'm effectively inventing a language—derived from the Newfoundland dialect and using real vocabulary and expressions—and re-writing my own poems. These poems are more about Newfoundland than anything or anyone else—and so I'm translating the rhythms and cadence of a nation, borrowed from Bartlett's three memoirs, various encyclopedia entries, academic folklore research, nautical charts, and excerpts from the *Dictionary of Newfoundland English (DNE)*.

Interspersed between these translation pieces are poems that I've dubbed 'Newfound' poems which have been adapted from various sources, most notably the *DNE*. Examples of this form include "Uncle Admiral," "Come Chucky," and "Billy Rabbits." These *Newfound* poems are entirely fictional and serve to flesh out the characters and community of Bartlett's hometown, Brigus, and are composed using an amended form of found poetry called the cut-up technique, popularized by writers such as William S. Burroughs and Roland Barthes.

This process, as set out by Tristan Tzara in his "Dada Manifesto," involves taking a newspaper article, physically cutting it up, and draw the words at random from a bag to form a poem (Tzara). My process is far more deliberate but still contains a strong element of randomness. I flick randomly through the *DNE* and jot down words and entries that I find intriguing, and then rearrange them to form a cohesive story. In an interview with *The Paris Review*, Burroughs states that "[a]ny... passage... is subject to any number of variations, all of which may be interesting and valid in their own right... Cutups establish new connections between images, and one's range of vision consequently expands" (Writers at Work).

It is this expansion of one's range of vision that interests me. It would be easy to question the necessity of a book like the *DNE* in a world where almost no one uses the words it defines, but I reject any such notion. *How does such a book have any relevance in today's world?* is one question I explored in the writing of this thesis, and I found that I am able to use the dictionary's outdated words and sentences to create new stories. This deep engagement with the *DNE* allows me to build on the voices of Newfoundlanders long dead and gone and continue their stories—even if their words appear in a vastly different form than they ever could

have imagined. In this sense, I'm taking a dying manner of speech and reinvigorating it into a living language.

Both forms of poetry found in *Cramp-Hand Cuffers* are greatly influenced by Mary Dalton's *Merrybegot* which is a collection of poems that centre around words and expressions from Newfoundland English. In Dalton's work, her dialectal lexicons can generally be understood given its context surrounded by standard English words which is often the case of my Newfoundland poems. However, the opposite sentiment occurs in my translation pieces where I've amped up the dialect so full comprehension is not feasible without the standard English counterparts. *Merrybegot*, akin to many collections of poetry, also lacks an over-arching narrative. Dalton's pieces are generally short and tend more towards the imagistic or vignette which she describes as "small monologues" (A Note on the Poems). I chose to lean more into the Newfoundland oral storytelling tradition and create a larger narrative that each piece (a complete narrative unto itself) fits into because, as Steven Heighon asserts, "[p]oetic writing... that relates a good story can add to the text's resonance and force" (47). To highlight this attention to narrative, I also chose to write a form of delineated poetry, referred to as prose poetry.

It is difficult to define prose poetry due to its variability and its seeming oxymoronic title, but its roots can be traced back as far as the Han Dynasty in China, The King James Version of the Bible, and, perhaps most explicitly, Charles Baudelaire from the early to mid-19<sup>th</sup> century.

The Oxford Dictionary defines prose as, "Plain or dull writing, discourse, or expression," and "Written or spoken language in its ordinary form" (Prose). I take exception to these definitions, and I believe even a cursory reading of a Cormac McCarthy novel, for example, would dismantle it.

One of my primary goals in the writing of *Cramp-Hand Cuffers* is to write in the opposite of an ordinary, plain, or dull form. And so, for the sake of simplicity, I will define prose as writing that lacks the lineation of traditional poetic forms such as the sonnet and haiku.

For this project, prose poetry refers to the organization of a poem into sentences and paragraphs as opposed to lines and stanzas typical of lineated poetry. Some poems have a lot of line breaks, some have few. The poems in *Cramp-Hand Cuffers* have no line breaks at all.

In his essay, “A Long Course,” Charles Simic attempts the overwhelming task of defining this genre and asserts that prose poetry is:

an impossible amalgamation of lyric poetry, anecdote, fairy tale, allegory, joke, journal entry, and many other kinds of prose... the culinary equivalent of peasant dishes, like paella and gumbo, which bring together a great variety of ingredients and flavors, and which in the end, thanks to the art of the cook, somehow blend. Except, the parallel is not exact. Prose poetry does not follow a recipe. The dishes it concocts are unpredictable and often vary from poem to poem (15).

Prose poetry’s versatility is one reason I chose this form. I started out writing *Cramp-Hand Cuffers* as lineated poetry, but I soon began incorporating different source material into my work and borrowed from a variety of different voices and writings on various subject matter. I began to intuitively feel that the line breaks were more of a distraction than a boon and began experimenting with prose blocks using various margins.

Perhaps my first conscious introduction to prose poetry came via Sandra Cisneros’ *The House on Mango Street*. This book is a series of short prose poems that detail a young woman’s neighbourhood. I particularly liked the ease and clarity of Cisneros’ language and its attention to her community’s vernacular, coupled with her uncanny ability to grip the reader in her fictive dream. Each piece in this book is a standalone story or vignette, but they all culminate together as a type of mosaic to form a larger picture of the young narrator’s life—it is a goal of *Cramp-Hand Cuffers* to do the same.

Since the language of *Cramp-Hand Cuffers* strays from the plain and ordinary of everyday speech, I wanted a visual form that reflected this content. In his essay, “No Easy Out,” David Keplinger asserts, “[prose poetry] snubs its nose at traditions that preceded it, traditions that, incidentally, encouraged a rational chartering of emotional states (e.g. the

rigidly crafted Elizabethan sonnet)” (Keplinger). The poems of *Cramp-Hand Cuffers* subvert linguistic, formal, and visual expectations, and the prose poem is the perfect form to express this deviance from the norm.

I found confidence in this subversion through Anne Carson’s *Short Talks*, which is a difficult book to categorize but is essentially a collection of very short thoughts on a wide variety of subjects written in narrow prose columns, much like *Cramp-Hand Cuffers*. When I first read this book, I felt conflicting emotions: wonder, awe, confusion, and sometimes anger. I almost felt cheated at times because it was so unlike anything else I’d ever read. *What is this that I’m reading?* I asked myself. It defied most expectations I had surrounding what a book should be, but for some reason, I couldn’t put it down. I read it over and over, trying to figure it out. I didn’t realize then, but this is when I became hooked by the elusiveness of the prose poem.

Recognizing how difficult it is to pin down this form, Peter Johnson writes, “[j]ust as black humor straddles the fine line between comedy and tragedy, so the prose poem plants one foot in prose, the other in poetry, both heels resting precariously on banana peels” (6). It is this sense of slipperiness that draws me to the form. Given *Cramp-Hand Cuffers*’ peculiar language and surreal events, given that it straddles on the fine line between two languages, and dips into the imagery and associative thinking of poetry, while structured in the sentences and paragraphs of prose, it is only the prose poetry form that seems suitable for this project.

I believe that the way I formatted these poems—justified text in narrow blocks—helps to highlight the importance of narrative in these pieces. I want the language of my poems to be the focus, but I also want a strong narrative propelling them forward.

In this narrative tradition, I’m influenced by Michael Crummey’s *Hard Light* which contains a section consisting of thirty-two very short stories that are almost purely narrative-driven. Similar to *Cramp-Hand Cuffers*, Crummey’s thirty-two stories are also rooted in non-fiction as told to him by various family members, but, as he asserts, “liberties have been

taken” (A Note on the Text)—much as they have been in *Cramp-Hand Cuffers*. Incidentally, *Hard Light* also contains a section devoted to another Newfoundland seafarer, Captain John Froude. These poems are adapted from Froude’s memoir *On the High Seas*. Crummey asserts that, throughout this section of his book, he has “acted as much as editor as writer. But the sequence is not meant to be biography. Throughout I’ve been free with names, dates, places, and anything else I felt the poems required” (A Note on the Text). I share this sentiment with the writing of *Cramp-Hand Cuffers*. At times, words and phrases from my poems have been lifted out of various historical sources—placing them firmly in the tradition of found poetry, but I’ve also taken a lot of liberties.

John Steffler’s *The Grey Islands* was also a large influence for me: it is a collection of lined poetry and prose poems which follows the narrator who has exiled himself to an isolated island off of Newfoundland. There is a cohesive narrative to this book, similar to *Cramp-Hand Cuffers*, but there is also significant deviation of the narrator reflecting on the past and future, and a keen attention paid to local vernacular and folk tales which are two aspects that interest me.

An aim of *Cramp-Hand Cuffers* is to display the important moments in my character’s life with history lingering over everything, but with more focus on the inexactitude of memory which is manipulated for the sake of story. Another Newfoundland writer, Patrick Kavanagh, said that in the writing of his book “Paddy Boy: Growing up Irish in a Newfoundland Outport” he was trying to “get to the pith and substance of the remote world through sense and memory, with history hovering in the background” (Choyce). During my mentorship with Crummey, he often told me that poems, in order to evoke a sense of satisfaction in the reader, should have a sort of “click” at the end—some notion of “so what?” More often than not during the writing of this thesis, I had to invent that click—often at the expense of historical accuracy.

While *Cramp-Hand Cuffers* often deviates from historical truth, it does follow the true events of an historical figure, and so I’ve also been influenced by the works of various

biopic poetry collections. Michael Ondaatje's *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid: Left-Handed Poems* is written in different forms: lineated poems, prose poems, vignettes, and monologues. While every page of *Cramp-Hand Cuffers* maintains a consistent visual form of 2.5" columns, each piece explores new territory within that broad, flexible genre: some pieces tell complete stories ("Marry Too Far"), some are surreal ("wizard's charm"), some are lyrical ("pitch-paw's pitchipoll"), some are imagistic ("seine sack"), some are monologues ("raising for quarterdeck"), some are rants ("fadgin"), some are epistolary ("anderson, me auld trout").

Similar to *Billy the Kid*, *Cramp-Hand Cuffers* also lacks a clear linear time progression, and it's often hard to discern which events appear before and after each other. While *Cramp-Hand Cuffers* does, at its core, follow Bartlett through his struggles aboard the *Karluk*, there are significant reflections on the past interweaved through this plot, and events could easily be lifted from one section and placed into another without any disruption to the overall narrative.

Jeanette Lynes' *Bedlam Cowslip: the John Clare Poems* explores a historical poet from the 19<sup>th</sup> century but does so using an unsettling postmodern voice. It was an aim of *Cramp-Hand Cuffers* to tell the story of a historical figure, but, like *Bedlam Cowslip*, give him a contemporary voice using sounds and words that are fresh and surprising—a manner of speech the actual person would never have used. This is a way for me to bring this material firmly into the contemporary world and engage with the past and familial history on a new level, a way to transform Newfoundland English into a reinvigorated, living language.

While *Bedlam Cowslip* is concerned primarily with language, Randall Maggs' *Night Work: The Sawchuk Poems*, is another biopic poetry collection which features poetry that speaks in a more straightforward manner and relates stand-alone stories. This narrative form of poetry is especially influential of the *Newfound* poems in *Cramp-Hand Cuffers*. My poems' primary purpose is to relate compact, complete stories, but they are more linguistically concerned than *Night Work*. The *Newfound* poems lay somewhere in the middle of the spectrum on which Lynes' work (focus on language) rests at one extreme and Maggs' (focus on

narrative) at the other. *Cramp-Hand Cuffers* also shares similarities with *Night Work* in that they are both focused on a character who struggles with an old way of performing their work during a period of transition. *Night Work* focuses on Terry Sawchuk, a NHL goalkeeper who played from 1945-1970—an era which saw the incorporation of upper body protection such as the face mask. Bartlett was a sailor aboard wind-powered vessels as the age of steam was being introduced. These old ways of life were critical in moulding these men and were pivotal in the writing of the poems they influenced.

In addition to biopic poetry, several historical fiction novels have elucidated methods of weaving biography into a text. Notably, I drew inspiration from Michael Winter's *The Big Why*, and Wayne Johnston's *The Navigator of New York*. Both authors are from Newfoundland and both books contain Captain Bartlett as a character. *The Big Why* in particular uses some of the same source material that I used in the writing of this thesis, and I was shocked when I came across lines that I had already adapted from Bartlett's memoirs that also appear in Winter's novel. While Johnston's novel features Bartlett as a much less important figure, it deals extensively with the life of Arctic explorers in the early 20th century and provided excellent descriptive passages of the loneliness of being stranded far in the north, and the internal struggles these adventurers must have endured.

This attention to narrative is also indicative of the oral tradition that has been prevalent in Newfoundland for hundreds of years. I often use narrative discourse markers aimed at the audience to give the impression that an actual person is narrating these stories in an intimate setting. I've been influenced in this tradition by Ted Russell's *The Chronicles of Uncle Mose* which was written based on radio transcripts from the 1950s and published as a book in 1975. These oral stories follow a narrator named Uncle Mose who paints a vivid picture of a small, fictional Newfoundland outpost community. Throughout the stories, we meet various colourful characters who engage in the telling of tall tales.

In his essay "'Tall are the Tales that Fishermen Tell': Manifestations of the Tall Tale Impulse in Selected Example of Contemporary Newfoundland Writing," Pat Byrne loosely

defines tall tales as oral or written narrative told for entertainment of both the audience and the narrator, with humorous exaggerations which posture as the truth. Byrne states that tall tales function “as a means to deflect and deflate perceived threats... and to affirm an essentially optimistic viewpoint... as a means of coping with one’s environment” (313). In this sense, *Cramp-Hand Cuffers* often delves into the realm of tall tale.

One function of the poems in this thesis is to show Bartlett’s method of dealing with his unimaginable struggle of being stranded in the Arctic. While a lot of the content comes directly from historical records, there is always a sense of untruth lurking in the background, which opens up room to push into the world of exaggerations. I found several inconsistencies between Bartlett’s words and other historical documents regarding his lifestyle and other events, and a lot of the material surrounding polar exploration is almost impossible to verify given the limited number of sources available. I took these inconsistencies and used my creative license as a poet to make his stories more compelling and to deflect the constant threats surrounding him—these stories are his way of coping with his environment.

Byrne also states that tall tales function to express “attitudes of worldview or as a defence mechanism against the *blason populaire* imposed from outside the group” (313). While there are many *blason populaires* surrounding Newfoundlanders, two in particular interest me the most, possibly because I do not believe they apply to me or to the majority of people I know from Newfoundland. First, is the stereotype of the lazy, stupid Newfoundlander. These poems often push back against this idea as addressed directly in “fadgin” and by showing Bartlett and others hard at work such as in “by-boating,” “Northern Waters,” and “galley flanker rally.” At times, this stereotype is bolstered with sketches of drunken, mischievous, and/or lazy characters, as seen in “Paddy Rowsell” and “Joanie Magorey .2.” These conflicting ideas collide with the married couple in “Marry Too Far.”

The idea to focus on this theme of the hard-working, industrious Newfoundlander versus the lazy, stupid Newfoundlander struck me while reading the *DNE*. Without even consciously looking for such words, I came across a multitude of entries that describe how people

worked and behaved—both well and poorly. Just a few examples include angishore, buck-aloon, bucky, devil-ma-click, devil's pelt, dotterell, draw-latcher, futter, fess, gom, gommel, green hand, grum, gumphead, jack-easy, jackabaun, jader, jinker, jostler, laddio, lamp-lighter, land-crab, and mahone soldier.

It became clear to me that this dichotomy between hard worker and layabout was intrinsically important in Newfoundland English. This revelation highlighted the fact this dichotomy did, in fact, *exist*. I always knew that Newfoundlanders had an undeserved reputation for being stupid and not willing to work, and I now believe that this stems from the wide variety of ways we can express such notions. In *Cramp-Hand Cuffers* Bartlett is not only shown to be a hard worker through his actions, but he also tells stories about those around him who he views as incompetent or stupid as a way to subvert the notion that all Newfoundlanders are like this.

The second stereotype that interests me is the notion that all Newfoundlanders talk with a strange accent. I cannot fathom how many times, while traveling, people have said something to me like “You’re from Newfoundland? But you don’t have an accent! I can understand you!” The translation poems in *Cramp-Hand Cuffers* act to satirize this stereotype by leaning so hard into the Newfoundland accent and dialect that the narrator becomes unintelligible.

I chose to push deep into this linguistic territory after having read (and written) some unpublished work which uses contemporary Newfoundland expressions. To me, throwing in simple, contemporary, dialectal phrases such as “Yes, b’y” and “Best kind” surrounded by ordinary standard English came across as bromidic—as though the writer is reaching for a sentimentality that isn’t evident to the reader—even to me, someone born and raised around these expressions that I heard and used myself every day. Ironically, it was this grasping for authenticity that came across as entirely inauthentic.

It was this desire to avoid inauthenticity which led me to create poems which are, paradoxically, inauthentic. I believe that *Cramp-Hand Cuffers* pushes so hard into this dialect

that it becomes wholly unexpected and, because of that, truly novel. This is not the type of language anyone would expect to hear—on or off the island of Newfoundland. Steven Heighton posits that “[t]he essence of good prose is the same as the essence of good poetry: a refusal to flow along with the default patterns of daily language. Good prose... defies conventional diction and phrasing... jolting readers into new frames of feeling” (46).

The very language of *Cramp-Hand Cuffers* is a form of tall tale: it is exaggerated to humorous effect and is Bartlett’s “defence mechanism against the *blason populaire* imposed from outside the group.” As a product of Newfoundland diaspora, this language is another way he copes with the people in his environment and is a way for me to subvert expectations of what a Newfoundlander ‘should’ sound like.

Language is the most notable way that *Cramp-Hand Cuffers* strays from its influencers. While books such as *Hard Light* and *Uncles Mose* occasionally utilize vernacular that is likely unfamiliar to most mainland Canadians, they are mostly written in normal, everyday English, whereas *Cramp-Hand Cuffers* delves into an unsettling world of the colourful, imaginative Newfoundland English.

I draw linguistic inspiration from Anthony Burgess’ *A Clockwork Orange*, which is a novel written largely in an invented language, Nadsat. One interesting thing about this book is that the reader learns a whole new vocabulary as the book progresses. Many words are repeated throughout so comprehension becomes easier with each page. This is an intended by-product of my poetry—to expose the reader to a wide array of Newfoundland English words and, through repetition as the poems unfold, familiarize them with a new set of vocabulary.

As an extension, these poems act as an intangible cultural heritage project aiming to invigorate a dying manner of speech brought about by increasing globalization coupled with the collapse of the fishing industry in Newfoundland and the subsequent abandonment of outport communities. Because of these economic hardships, Newfoundland has experienced a steady trend of emigration, from its citizens going to Toronto and the north-east of the

USA in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, to more recent trends of working on the oil sands of Alberta. Even Bartlett, born in 1875, asserts that his hometown of Brigus experienced its Golden Age during his parent's lives, and describes how it and all of Newfoundland changed just within his life:

As a youngster I can remember the long lines of vessels berthed along the wharves of Brigus, their masts towering, their yards and rigging a fine marine forest, the very salt smell of them a beckoning lure for any small boy living there right at the edge of the sea. In those fine days the shipping brought the far places of the world close to our little port... and now, there's not a sailing vessel hails from all of Conception Bay. And Brigus, a sacrifice to the age of steam, is scarce an echo of its proud yesteryears (*Log* 32).

Due to the lack of economic opportunities in Newfoundland, Bartlett started working on boats as a teenager and soon began travelling to far-flung parts of the world such as Brazil, the Caribbean, Europe, the US, and the Arctic, to make a living. He died as an American citizen in New York City.

This thesis is a way for me to engage in the unique language of Newfoundland and interact with my heritage despite having spent the majority of my adult life physically distant from it. As Erin Mouré states, “the play between languages is very important to me, for it shows up the gaps in my own language and expression. Lets me make English go where it won't naturally go” (McCance 7). *Cramp-Hand Cuffers* is a way for me to transform Newfoundland's language from an old relic of our history into a new, energized living language. This linguistic foray refuses to go along with the default patterns of either Newfoundland or standard English, it is less about restoration and more about reinvigoration and reinvention, a way to show up the gaps and push both languages to places where they won't naturally go.

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DEDICATION

for Newfoundland

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