

Do You Mind the Time?

Them Times, by David Weale. Island Studies Series no. 4. Charlottetown: Institute of Island Studies, 1992, 120pp, paper (ISBN 0-919013-15-5).

Review by Ian Johnston

Them Times is a recent contribution in the Institute of Island Studies series pertaining to the culture and environment of Prince Edward Island. The purpose of the series is to reach a broad audience consisting of both academics and general readers. David Weale's monograph is directed more towards the latter, which is apparent in his statement of intent. This book is for the Islanders who have directly experienced what he and some folklorists refer to as "the break," as well as the young people who can hardly imagine life in "them times." According to Weale, "the break" was a period of great change for the province which occurred shortly after World War II. The author attempts to provide the younger reader with a sense of what it was like to live in a period with no shortage of hard work and few conveniences, while at the same time enabling older Islanders, who have lived in two contrasting eras, to reflect on the vast cultural changes that have occurred in their lifetime. Weale makes it clear in the introduction, and within the text, that his objective is not to idealize "them times," but to make it known that it was a period in which Islanders felt a sense of pride and accomplishment. Indeed, it was not an easy life, but at least people worked for themselves. Although the standard of living was low in modern terms and there was little money, the quality of life may have surpassed that of the late twentieth century.

The book is based on David Weale's CBC radio presentations, and consists of short stories about the customs and traditions of the people of P.E.I. It is a readable and interesting selection of local folklore, but the absence of precise documentation with regard to names, facts, and times and dates of interviews, questions its historical accuracy. It is apparent to the reader, however, that Weale's research, with the assistance of his students, was by no means superficial. They interviewed people in various parts of the province, ranging from those who have never left the Island to the "hippies" who came in search of a return to a self-sufficient existence.

What makes this work unique is that it contains Weale's personal reflections, as a resident of the Island who grew up during "the break." The essay entitled "Leapo" is a personal account of the simplistic, but exciting, game he played in a one-room schoolhouse as a child. In "them times" all

children needed was a ball and a building in order to entertain themselves. Notwithstanding the hardships, there was no shortage of personal fulfillment. In a few instances throughout the book, Weale refers to diary excerpts in order to provide the reader with additional insight into the lives and mannerisms of Islanders of that bygone time.

One story, called "Happy as a Clam," contains folk language that may be of interest to oral researchers. This language provides a creative outlet which can reveal characteristics of a distinct society. The author provides several examples of unique phrases that were often passed down from one Island generation to another. For instance, one of the people he interviewed described a boat that was "as tight as a cup." One of the drawbacks for researchers, however, is that it is difficult to determine the origins of folk expressions.

The use of language was an art form and, as David Weale indicates, storytellers created the community. It was a popular form of entertainment and recreation, but more importantly, it was a matter of identity. The stories reflected a sense of shared experience that was "closely connected to the actual processes of daily life." Storytelling lost its significance in Island society after "the break", or more precisely, as Weale suggests, with the introduction of radio into Island homes. From that point onward, he argues, the stories were no longer the Islanders' own. In a poem at the end, he mentions other sources of change, but does not refer to the impact of television on community life. This device has practically displaced traditional family gatherings and negatively affected community cohesiveness. Weale asked people who lived during "the break" what was the biggest change that had taken place in their lifetime. The responses included the introduction of the automobile and the breakdown of community life. One woman's pragmatic reply was "Getting a wringer washer." Neither the people interviewed nor Weale connected television with cultural disintegration.

Them Times was not intended to be an historical analysis. It is a popularized version of a way of life that has largely disappeared. The stories are entertaining, but do not leave the reader wanting more at the end. This book will be of interest to Weale's intended audience, but will probably not be of much assistance to the historical researcher. Yet, even though Weale does not idealize life in "them times," one comes away from this book with a sense that there was something really special about "the good old days." The author's approach is unique and enables one to realize that people's experiences are an important source of information.

Ian Johnston, a native of Prince Edward Island, has an MA in Atlantic Canada Studies from Saint Mary's University and is now proceeding to doctoral studies at Memorial University.