

Larry Gorman and “Monaghan’s Raffle”

by Robert A. Rankin

It may seem peculiar to some that Larry Gorman, the notorious nineteenth-century Island songmaker, is as well remembered in his native Prince County as the Yeos, Popes, Myricks, Holmans, and other contemporary figures who occupied real positions of economic and political power over that part of Prince Edward Island. Upon close examination, however, this should come as no surprise, given the power of spontaneous satirical verse which Gorman possessed. One of his songs, a previously unpublished fragment known as “Monaghan’s Raffle,” illustrates precisely the reasons for his notoriety.

Gorman was born in 1846 at Trout River, Lot 13, the son of Irish Roman Catholic parents who worked one hundred acres of land on the Bideford Road. He became a wanderer at an early age, joining the seasonal migration of Islanders to the New Brunswick lumberwoods while still in his teens. Always ready to try his hand at most anything, Gorman became a travelling poet who chronicled in song the uniqueness of local personalities and events as he went from place to place. The folk poet died in poverty and relative obscurity at Brewer, Maine in 1917.

The “legend” of Larry Gorman springs from the fact that almost all his characterizations of people are character assassinations — at the very least insulting. Indeed, it is still said that his authorship of the caustic ballad “The

Gull Decoy” was the main reason the song-writer never returned to take up permanent residence on the Island. Nevertheless, the social historian can be thankful for the vivid descriptions of local life in songs such as “The Shan Van Vogh,” “Michael O’Brien,” and “The Spree at Summer Hill.”

“Monaghan’s Raffle” was recited for me by Mrs. Mary Cousins of Campbellton, Lot 4, perhaps the most knowledgeable of West Prince traditional folksingers. The song bears testimony to the fact that not even Larry’s relatives or close friends escaped his derision. The air is not known.

One of Gorman’s sisters, Bridget, had married a neighbouring farmer by the name of Michael Monaghan. But Monaghan was not completely acceptable as a brother-in-law, for he had been married twice before and was much older than Bridget. Larry soon nicknamed him “Brigham,” after the American Mormon leader Brigham Young. A connation of bigamy was intended.

The first stanza of the song sets the stage. Ned Ellis is alleged to have operated a “bootlegging” establishment in the Bideford area.

First to Ned Ellis’ shanty
And then to the raffle did steer
Myself, Johnny Grant and white
Sandy,
Determined to get on the beer.

Larry soon had reason to put his talents to work.

I was sitting alone in the shanty
Never thinking of anything wrong,
When a piece of a brick
hit me square in the neck,
And I vowed that I would make a
song.

The last two stanzas collected describe the raffle, a lottery event where prizes are won by persons buying chances. Raffles were popular social events in rural Prince Edward Island and frequently music and dancing accompanied the “draw.” Gorman, in one of the stanzas that follows, manages with a single blow to insult his sister, Monaghan, Silas Ford’s daughter, and poor Tom Dunn (called the shadow because of his slightness of build).

In came a heifer of Silie’s
All dressed in her lustre so fine,
And her and the shadow
they danced a four-hander
With Brigham and his concubine.

The quilt was a beautiful article,
Most anyone it would entice,
For the outside was all artificial
And the inside was covered with lice.



Trout River, Lot 13, in 1880.