

French Songs in North American Oral Tradition

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The study of songs in oral tradition is a very specific research area more connected with ethnomusicology. Nonetheless, we could not ignore the presence, from the time of the French regime on, of these ancient songs imported from the Old Country. This is why we asked Conrad Laforte, who has devoted his life to the study of songs in oral tradition collected in Quebec and the comparison of these with their European sources, to provide us with a digest of the ideas he has developed in different articles published in the course of his long career.

É. Gallat-Morin and J.-P. Pinson.

The distinctive situation and history of the French in Canada has favoured the conservation and enrichment of the lyric heritage in oral tradition. From the foundation of Quebec in 1608 to the capitulation of Montreal in 1760 the French regime lasted 152 years, time enough for the population to acquire a certain homogeneity despite the diversity of the provinces from which the settlers originally came. During the French regime French ships brought newcomers each summer, together with royal directives and instructions, mail, merchandise, new, fashionable songs and dances, in fact all the novelties of Paris.

As we have had the opportunity to set out elsewhere, oral literature is made up of a body of works transmitted and recreated by the people, comprising stable elements from the past mingled with more recent localised variants, even, in certain cases, up-to-the-minute compositions utilising already familiar melodies. Unlike written literature, which did not emerge in French Canada till historical circumstances were favourable, in the case of song the flow was constant: there can be no question of a break in continuity. Let us not forget that while our ancestors preserved their traditional culture as much in Europe as in America, their ancestors were present in early France at the very time these orally transmitted songs were composed. Might they not even have had a hand in it? Would there not be descendants of the authors amongst the population of Quebec? Some of the songs composed in Canada, like “Bal chez Boulé” [“The Ball at Boulé’s”], “Les Raftsmen” [“The Raftsmen”], and “Vive la Canadienne” [“Long Live the Canadian Girl”], are actually in the purest medieval tradition. This is a cultural heritage which French Canadians possess in common with all countries of French-speaking origin.

While continuing to speak their language, the first French men and women who arrived in America

also sang, as in France, songs in the oral tradition as well as art songs. They went on contributing to the francophone repertoire, preserving and enriching it by a process so natural that no one thought of mentioning it. It was not till the nineteenth century that certain writers discovered this phenomenon, and only from 1853 that French writers began to be interested in orally transmitted songs.² Foreign visitors to Canada record hearing ‘voyageurs canadiens’ or boatmen, who sang to keep time with the strokes of their paddles and also to keep up their spirits. Tourists who came to Canada in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries thus bore witness to the presence of the old French songs at this time. Given the limitations of this chapter, I have chosen to describe the repertoire of the *voyageurs*, which was certainly representative of French-Canadian song in general.

Visitors’ accounts

Ample testimony exists as to Canadian *voyageur* songs; whole books have been written on the subject, notably by Grace Lee Nute and Marius Barbeau.³ The expression ‘voyageurs canadiens’ refers to the woodsmen employed by the big companies which once traded for furs with the American Indians on the North American continent, chiefly the Montreal merchants who bartered with the aboriginal tribes in the West. As the *voyageurs* could know any of the popular songs of their time, the repertoire heard by visitors provides a good sample of what the settlers brought from France. In addition, it might be expected that these same *voyageurs*, employed first in the fur trade and later as woodsmen (lumbermen, raftsmen), would sing of the hardships of their professions in songs they themselves composed, such as “Le Chrétien qui se détermine à voyager” [“The Christian who Decides to Travel”], “Le Voyage” [“The Jour-

ney”], “C’est un mariage” [“It’s a Wedding”], “La Plainte du coureur de bois” [“The Woodsman’s Complaint”], the famous “Complainte de Cadieux” [“Cadieux’s Lament”], and many more.⁴

All strangers passing through Canada seem to have admired the songs of the French Canadian boatmen as they kept time with their paddles. For example, from 1792 to 1796 we have the testimony of Lady Simcoe, wife of the first Lieutenant-Governor of Upper Canada,⁵ and of La Rochefoucault-Liancourt, a visitor to the United States and Canada between 1795 and 1797, who wrote: “The singing begins as soon as they pick up the oars and does not end till they lay them down”.⁶

Several visitors name in their accounts the songs they have heard. The Irish poet Thomas Moore, sailing from Kingston to Montreal in August 1804 and marvelling at the sight of these men paddling and singing in unison against the grandiose backdrop of the Saint Lawrence River, was inspired by the air to one song, “Les Trois Cavaliers fort bien montés” [“The Three Well-mounted Horsemen”], to compose his own “Canadian Boat Song”. During John Bradbury’s 1817 trip the boatmen sang “Trois Beaux Canards” [“Three Fine Ducks”].⁷ In the course of Captain John Franklin’s Arctic expedition, Lieutenant George Back collected several songs from Canadian *voyageurs*. He sent them in March 1823 to Edward Knight Jr., who composed a piano accompaniment, while George Soane and J. B. Planche substituted English words deemed more true to type than the originals, with a view to publishing them in London under the title *Canadian Airs*. And for his part, John Mactaggart drew attention to a twelve-couplet version of “La Fille au cresson” [“The Watercress Girl”].⁸ Before 1830, Edward Ermatinger, an English immigrant of Swiss/Italian ancestry, collected eleven complete boatmen’s songs with melodies and words. The nine songs in a manuscript signed by Edward M. Hopkins (1861) and preserved in the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto seem to have been copied from the Ermatinger manuscript. “À la claire fontaine” [“To the Clear Fountain”] was published as an anonymous work under the title “Original Canadian Boat Song”, French words and music with piano accompaniment, in the New York weekly *The Albion*, Saturday, November 19, 1836.⁹

We can also name Mme Jameson, James H. Lanman, Robert Michael Ballantyne, John Jeremiah Bigsby and Johann Georg Kohl amongst those who mentioned songs in their travel accounts between

1838 and 1860.¹⁰ Kohl retells the legend of Cadieux, “Petit rocher de la haute montagne” [“Little Rock from the High Mountain”], quoting verses of the lament allegedly composed by the heroic Cadieux himself as he lay dying, the victim of an Iroquois attack in 1709. Among the foreigners who took note of this survival of folklore as they journeyed to Quebec we should mention French dignitaries like Alexis de Tocqueville, Alphonse de Puisbusque, Xavier Marmier, Jean-Jacques Ampère, etc. It is thanks to the extensive testimony of foreign travellers that we were ourselves able to establish our *Répertoire authentique des chansons d’aviron de nos anciens canotiers (voyageurs, engagés, coureurs de bois)*. [*Authentic Repertoire of Historic Boatmen’s Songs (Voyageurs, Company Employees, Woodsmen)*].¹¹ These rough-hewn workers adapted to the rhythm of the paddle songs derived from medieval dances which told chiefly stories of female misadventure. All the songs in oral tradition are necessarily anonymous: this means that they were composed prior to 1850, the date from which songwriters and their copyright were officially recognised and respected in France.¹²

The boatman’s life and the purpose of the songs

In order to establish the group of songs which really served this specific purpose, we will first examine the boatman’s profession and look for authentic testimony in the memoir-writers. First, it is important to obtain a clear idea of the profession followed by the Canadian *voyageurs*, who did not hesitate to cross the country and even the continent in extremely fragile vessels, the bark canoes. This profession, reserved for French Canadians, lasted almost two hundred years, and was practised under both the French and the English regimes, from the seventeenth century right up to the middle of the nineteenth century. The fragile bark canoe streaked through the country’s waterways;¹³ the Saint Lawrence River, the Saguenay, Saint-Maurice and Outaouais rivers, and others. The Outaouais river in particular was the great principal thoroughfare of the *voyageurs*, the route which led to the discovery of and commerce in furs. Expeditions left from Lachine (south of Montreal), proceeded up the Outaouais, the Mattawa river, and Lake Nipissing, then down French River as far as Georgian Bay, where they turned south past Michilimakinac or west and north by Sault Ste-Marie. Michilimakinac was the route for Illinois and Louisiana, Sault Ste-Marie



Voyageur Canoe Passing a Waterfall (Frances Anne Hopkins (1838 - 1919), National Gallery)

for Lake Superior, Grand-Portage, the Red River, the Assiniboines, the Mississippi, Hudson Bay, Lake Winnipeg and Athabasca.

The mode of transportation utilised by the Canadian *voyageurs* on these extremely dangerous waterways was the frail birchbark canoe,¹⁴ borrowed by the French from the American Indian Algonquin and Ojibway but improved to the point of becoming a sort of cargo-boat for transporting goods for barter and furs. The birchbark canoe could be eighteen, twenty-five or thirty-six feet long, known respectively as ‘canot de maître’, ‘canot de Montréal’, and ‘rabaska’ for the longest. Most were built at Trois-Rivières. The thirty-six foot long, six foot wide canoe had a carrying capacity of three metric tons, four with the addition of the crew. The commercial load was divided into sixty-five pieces. One piece was made up of a barrel or a sack made from animal hide containing ninety to one hundred pounds of merchandise. The freight had to be arranged in packages of the same size or weight to facilitate the portages. The principle of distribution was similar to that of a modern container, but on a smaller scale. Portages were so arduous that, to avoid them, *voyageurs* would make use of a pole or a tow-line to navigate the rapids at a less hectic pace. On the lakes, if the wind, ‘the old woman’, as the *voyageurs* called it, was favourable, the sails were hoisted.

Canoes loaded with trade goods required only three, four or six men to paddle. The ‘canots à lège’, destined to transport the well-to-do merchants to the trading posts, had to move faster. Consequently they

were operated by eighteen, twenty or even twenty-six men. In the trade boats the men may not always have sung, but in the ‘canots à lège’ it was a different matter. The songs of the Canadian *voyageurs* (as they were known even in English) had an international reputation at the time, and all who heard them praised them. In 1840 James Lanman wrote:

Who has not heard of the Canadian boat songs which have so often awakened the solitude of the western waters, and made ‘Uttawa’s tide’ almost as famous as the classic streams of Italy and Greece?¹⁵

John Bigsby tells us in *The Shoe and Canoe* how this skill was rewarded – “a good singer gets extra pay.”¹⁶ The German ethnographer J. Georg Kohl, carrying on research around Lake Superior from 1855 to 1857, tells us that Sir George Simpson, governor of the Hudson’s Bay Company and of the North-West Territories, used, in his annual journey of inspection, a bark ‘canot à lège’ operated by twenty or twenty-four oarsmen. According to the stock French expression, these were “hand-picked men! The best singers in the world!”¹⁷ displaying in this way the magnificence of the company. Swept along by the liveliest of songs, the governor’s canoe sped across the water like a bird on the wing, covering eight miles an hour, more than any contemporary steamship could achieve. It is reported that on reaching the shore after eighteen to twenty hours of rowing in this way some young men were unable to eat or sleep, due to overexcitement. The profession was so gruelling that Guillaume Dunn

has felt justified in calling our boatmen “singing galley-slaves”.¹⁸ Not so, in my opinion; the *voyageurs* were not compelled to perform this task; on the contrary, they were proud of what they did not only because of the high wages but, more especially, through a spirit of competition, since they had been chosen from amongst the best, like athletes or artists.

Can we now, more than one hundred years after the disappearance of this profession, recreate the authentic repertoire sung by our boatmen then to keep time with the strokes of their paddles? Eye-witnesses and listeners have left us excerpts. Visitors, explorers, Hudson’s Bay and North-West Company officials, strangers passing through Canada, all of whom had to travel by bark canoe, have left us accounts or travel diaries in which we find this testimony. We have created an inventory which, without being exhaustive, contains sixty boat songs; sometimes we have only fragments or recognisable titles to go on, sometimes we have only a text, other times words and music. We have referred here only to songs which are specifically described as boat songs: references for the sixty citations are given in the Notes.¹⁹

Characteristic features of boatmen’s songs

Within the sixty versions retrieved, there are twenty-eight song-types. Twenty-four of these employ the medieval epic verse structure *en laisse* and belong to the first of the six main categories in our *Catalogue de la chanson folklorique française* [*Catalogue of French Folksong*],²⁰ and four belong to the fourth category, of cumulative songs. This eliminates the four remaining categories: songs with verses, dialogue songs, short songs and songs without words. The *Catalogue* thus proves a valuable tool for identifying and analysing this repertoire.

The boatmen might sing any type of song, but for paddling they used either *chansons en laisse* or cumulative songs. Why these two categories and no others? Because they both possess the characteristics essential for a boat song. First of all, boat songs must be answer songs: all witnesses agree on this. Soloist and chorus alternate; that is, the steersman or the helmsman sings a line and the rest of the crew respond. As it happens, *chansons en laisse* as well as most cumulative songs are, by their very structure, answer songs.

Secondly, all witnesses agree that the songs served to regulate the rhythm in such a way that each stroke of the paddle occurred in unison. As for time signatures, Kohl distinguishes three kinds of song: songs for paddles, songs for oars, and songs for the

‘canot à lège’,²¹ but as he is not a musician, he cannot be more precise. To obtain irrefutable evidence the boatmen would have to have been recorded in action, an impossibility at the time; a pity, since now that recording devices are available the boatman’s profession has disappeared. As it happens, Ernest Gagnon was not content to note down melodies with his usual attention to detail; he actually goes so far as to illustrate with examples the specific melodic and rhythmic features of his paddling and rowing songs. “Each stroke of the paddle,” he writes, “marks the first beat of each bar.” Elsewhere he adds: “without worrying in the slightest whether it is an upbeat or a downbeat”,²² that is, without worrying about the song’s words. This constitutes the sole piece of scientific testimony we have that comes from a musician, since in Gagnon’s lifetime there were still boatmen.

If we also examine the eleven paddle songs, words and music, noted by Edward Ermatinger (before 1830, let us remember), we can see that the time signature of the melodies is generally two/four or six/eight. We can therefore conclude that all *chansons en laisse* or cumulative songs with this time signature could have been used. *Chansons en laisse* were originally dance tunes. Thus the boatmen instinctively changed the tempo to provide slower rowing songs and quicker paddle songs, depending on the exigencies of the stroke.

The two technical benchmarks of alternating phrases and time signature are thus sufficient to identify boat songs. But we know from elsewhere that these songs also served to boost the morale and spirit of the *voyageurs*. Washington Irving tells us:

The steersman often sings an old French song ending with a refrain which everyone repeats in unison, keeping time with their oars. If at any time the crew become disheartened or reduce their efforts he has only to strike up a song of this type to restore their good humour and energy.²³

Subject-matter and typology of *chansons en laisse*

An analysis of scenarios, themes and motifs collated from the seventeen categories of *chansons en laisse* will help us to obtain a clear picture of the type of song capable of restoring good humour and energy to the boatmen and to understand the behaviour of these men suffering from loneliness and pining for their relatives, their ‘fair one’ or fiancée, their father and mother, their village. The distribution of subjects can be listed as follows:

Classification of *chansons en laisse* by subject-matter (*Catalogue de la chanson folklorique française, I*)

A	Religious subject	0
B	Epic adventures	4
C	Mock-heroic	0
D	Wedding nights and mismatched brides	1
E	Jealousy and cuckolds	0
F	Joys of marriage	1
G	Bouquet	2
H	Gathering fruit or flowers	3
I	Birds	3
J	Shepherds and shepherdesses	1
K	Courting songs	1
L	Mischance	2
M	Marriageable girls	2
N	Suitors	3
O	Erotic fantasies	0
P	Burlesque fantasies	1
Q	Festivals and occupations	0
Total		<u>24</u>

Among the twenty-four examples, not one has a religious subject, and this is understandable. However, four songs with an epic character have been noted: “Les trois beaux canards” [“The Three Fine Ducks”], “La Belle Française” [“Lovely Française”], “Le Prisonnier de Nantes” [“The Prisoner of Nantes”], and “Le Déserteur pendu” [“The Hanged Deserter”].

The wonderful story of “Trois beaux canards” is symbolic and very feminine. “La Belle Française” is based on the theme of leave-taking, when the ‘fair one’ weeps. “Le Prisonnier de Nantes” is released by the jailer’s daughter. “Le Déserteur pendu” tells of the soldier who suffers this fate after deserting for the love of a young girl. In these four songs the feminine element is dominant, if not in first place.

No mock-heroic songs have been recorded. This category usually places authority figures, such as the king, nobles, priests and lawyers, in comic situations. We may wonder if perhaps the *voyageurs* dared not sing these songs in the presence of the well-to-do, or if the latter, who are usually our witnesses, preferred not to record them.

In group D, *Wedding nights and mismatched brides*, Ermatinger noted “La Mariée battue” [“The Beaten Bride”]. However, the bride in this song is beaten with a stick made from a “green apple-tree”. Do we need to consult a dictionary of slang to understand the desires and actions of this worthy but still capable old man? The mismatched bride warns him:

Mon bon vieillard, si vous m’battez,
Je m’en irai au bois jouer

Avec ces gentils écoliers.
Ils m’apprendront, j’ leur apprendrai,
Le jeu de cartes, aussi de dés,
Le jeu de dames après souper,
Le jeu des nouveaux mariés.²⁴

[My good old man, if you beat me
I shall run away to the woods to play
With those nice students.
They’ll teach me, I’ll teach them
Cards, dice,
After supper, checkers,
And the game played by newly-weds.]

The refrain warns us:

Tu n’entends pas l’usage
[You don’t know what’s done]

and is followed by a well-worn adage:

Oh! qu’il est malaisé
D’être amoureux et sage!

[Oh! how difficult it is
To be in love and to be good!]

As for songs about jealousy and cuckolds (group E) these were probably not to the boatmen’s taste; so none were heard.

Amongst *Joys of Marriage* we should especially note “Le Bal chez Boulé” [The Ball at Boulé’s], given its resemblance to “La Belle femme au bal” [“The Beautiful Woman at the Ball”]. La Rue presents it as a paddle song. We think it was probably a version composed by *voyageurs*, because it takes pleasure in ridiculing the *habitant* [farmer].²⁵

The eight following groups of *chansons en laisse* are well represented: those preferred by the boatmen privilege themes and motifs which describe the behaviour of young men and women in love: the *bouquet*, gathering flowers, birds, shepherdesses, courting, girls in trouble, marriageable girls, suitors. The most widespread example, “À la claire fontaine” [“At the Clear Fountain”], connects to the Middle Ages through its images of the clear fountain, the sympathetic nightingale, the oak, the bouquet of flowers, all aspects of the finest medieval custom relating to lovers. A girl, woman or man picks flowers to make a crown called a *chapelet* (a *bouquet*, as the custom developed). With this *chapelet* or *capet* (hat), one crowned one’s sweetheart.²⁶ Moreover, be it noted that the boatmen’s favourite version had the refrain

Il y a longtemps que je t’aime
Jamais je ne t’oublierai

[I have loved you for a long time
Never will I forget you]

thus proclaiming their loyalty to their 'fair one' or spouse throughout all the rivers and lakes of the continent.

"La Fille aux Oranges" ["The Orange Seller"] gathers this symbolic fruit to sell at the market, where she is tricked by a lawyer's son. In the same vein there are "La Fille au cresson" ["The Watercress Girl"], "L'Embarquement de Cécilia" ["The Embarkation of Cécilia"], "Les Moutons égarés" ["The Straying Sheep"], "La Robe trop courte par derrière" ["The Dress Too Short at the Back"], "La Fille qui se noie" ["The Drowning Girl"], "Le Passage du bois" ["The Way Through the Woods"], "La Fille bonne à marier" ["The Girl Fit to Marry"], etc. We can see that the boatmen's preferred themes and motifs were female adventure and misadventure, or, more exactly, encounters of various kinds between young men and young women.

Cumulative songs

As for the four cumulative songs, an example would be "Les Noces du pinson et de l'alouette" ["The Wedding of the Finch and the Lark"], about a ridiculous wedding where there is nothing with which to celebrate and it is the guests who have to bear the cost. "La Perdriole" lists the gorgeous presents given by the young man to his beloved. "Métamorphoses" ["Transformations"] tells the marvellous story of a courtship followed by flight and pursuit featuring magic shape-changing. And finally, "Ah! si mon moine voulait danser" ["Ah! If Only My Monk Would Dance"] is a mock-heroic, comic story which would normally be sung by a woman offering gifts to the monk to persuade him to dance. All these songs exude an atmosphere of *joie de vivre* and good living.

"La Belle Rose" ["The Lovely Rose"]

The ethnographer Kohl enumerated the technical elements unique to these songs without always fully understanding them. These elements are characteristic of the admirable but little appreciated art of the *chanson en laisse*. In 1855 the discovery of folksong was in its infancy and the structure of the *chanson en laisse* was as yet unknown. Kohl provides as an example a few verses from the song titled "La Belle Rose", which is made up of lines of equal length, fourteen metrical feet with an epic caesura and uni-

form assonant endings in *-an*. We know of 149 extant versions, of which fifty-nine were collected in Canada and eighty-two in France. The earliest reference goes back to 1633.²⁷ It tells a charming story which cannot be understood outside its historical context, since it refers to a medieval custom in which a young girl or woman gathered flowers to signal her choice of a lover. In the Middle Ages there existed a whole symbolic language of flowers. If a young girl picked a white rose (also called *la belle rose* or *la rose à cent feuilles* [the rose with 100 leaves]), her choice signified that this was her first love affair.²⁸ Here is "La Belle Rose", in Gagnon's version:

J'ai cueilli la belle rose qui pendait au rosier blanc,
La belle rose qui pendait au rosier blanc,
La belle rose du rosier blanc.
Je l'ai cueillie feuille à feuille, mise dans mon tablier blanc.
Je l'ai portée chez mon père entre Paris et Rouen.
Je n'ai trouvé personne...que le rossignol chantant,
Qui me dit dans son langage:
Mari'toi, car il est temps.
Comment veux-tu que j'm'y marie? mon père en est pas content,
Ni mon père, ni ma mère, ni aucun de mes parents.
Je m'en irai en service, en service pour un an.
Combien gagnez-vous, la belle, combien gagnez-vous par an?²⁹

[I have picked the lovely rose which grew on the white rose-tree
The lovely rose which grew on the white rose-tree,
The lovely rose from the white rose-tree.
I picked it leaf by leaf, placed it in my white apron.
I carried it to my father, between Paris and Rouen.
I found no one...but the singing nightingale,
Who told me in his language –
Get married, it is time.
How can I marry? My father does not approve,
Not my father, nor my mother, nor any of my kin.
I shall go into service, into service for a year.
How much will you earn, pretty one, what will you earn in a year?]

So the young man asks her to be his mistress, but she refuses. This song has twelve to fifteen verses, but Kohl quotes only five (or more precisely, four and a half). The singer introduces the prepositions *to, with, of, for* into the refrain, *la belle rose*. This creativity leads to an unexpected alteration, since the female protagonist gradually becomes male, thus radically changing the song's meaning.

Kohl, who claims that the boat songs were composed by the boatmen themselves, believes that this composition is by a Canadian poet of melancholy

humour wandering in the forest; he provides this text where the female protagonist becomes a man:

Mais je n'ai trouvé personne
Que le rossignol, chantant la belle rose,
La belle rose du rosier blanc!
Qui me dit dans son langage
Marie-toi, car il est temps, à la belle rose,
À la belle rose du rosier blanc!
Comment veux-tu que je me marie *avec* la belle
rose,
La belle rose du rosier blanc!
Mon père n'est pas content *de* la belle rose,
De la belle rose du rosier blanc!
Ni mon père nani ma mère
Je m'en irai en service *pour* la belle rose,
La belle rose du rosier blanc!
En service pour un an, *pour ma* belle rose
Ma belle rose du rosier blanc.³⁰

[But I found no one
But the nightingale, singing of the lovely rose,
The lovely rose on the white rose-tree!
Telling me in his language
Get married, for it is time, *to* the lovely rose,
To the lovely rose on the white rose-tree!
How can I marry *with* the lovely rose,
With the lovely rose on the white rose-tree!
Neither my father nor my mother
I shall go into service *for* the lovely rose,
The lovely rose on the white rose-tree!
Into service for a year, *for my* lovely rose,
My lovely rose on the white rose-tree!]

This method of inserting a preposition between the refrain and the verse is not unique; we have noticed it several times in our Canadian research, but it is very rare in France.

It frequently happened that this procedure resulted in comic or risqué juxtapositions. Our boatmen cared little if they rendered the songs rabelaisian. Those officials who were not too familiar with the French tongue understood nothing, but La Rochefoucauld-Liancourt, a French visitor, caught the slightest allusion or play on words. He wrote that “the songs are lively, often more than lively; they are interrupted only by the guffaws to which they give rise.”³¹ The comic effect often came from a situation, a play on words, an absurd juxtaposition, a double meaning or a use of language at once symbolic and erotic. Nevertheless, no visitor recorded hearing a frankly erotic song.

When you think that these boatmen led a rough and perilous life, separated from their dear ones, it is easy to concede that they had to avoid thinking about their work if they were to win the battle against dis-

couragement. We know from eye-witnesses that they frequently laughed. These sturdy fellows practised a kind of escapism by way of the imagination. Their songs told uncomplicated stories of love which enabled them to forget the daily grind and which presented to them a simple everyday life such as takes place in tranquil villages.

We can confidently state that the boatmen's songs are archaic in structure, themes and motifs. Ultimately derived from the medieval *laisse*, they are answer songs and take the rondeau form characteristic of carols, *branles* and round dances. Their themes and motifs are those found in the poetry of the Middle Ages - the clear fountain, the nightingale, the bouquet, the language of flowers, the gathering of flowers, damsels in distress, courtship—all familiar themes in medieval pastoral poetry.

All these technical and thematic characteristics derived from our sixty sample songs allow us to identify other songs which may have been sung to keep time with the paddles; and there are many. We have to acknowledge that the boatmen did not compose songs to keep time with their paddles; instead they dug deep into the old traditional French heritage which had always provided material to put rhythm into dancing, marching and other activities performed in unison. In this case, an appropriate adaptation led to boat songs.

We feel much admiration for the ‘voyageurs canadiens’ who had the good taste to select from the many French traditional songs the most archaic and perhaps the finest. Thanks chiefly to them, Quebec owns one of the richest repositories of lyric poetry in French oral tradition.

A list of boatmen's songs at the time of the fur trade can be found in an appendix to this article. In addition, teachers interested in the text and music of boatmen's songs will find them in various other works,³² including my own collection comprising one example of each of the *chansons en laisse* which have been collected in France, Canada, Belgium and Switzerland from the mid-nineteenth century to the present day.³³

Dialect and songs: the case of “Catherinette”

French-Canadian writers, like those in France at the same period, frequently situated the songs they quoted within a context providing some local colour. European writers did this to bring the peasantry to life; in Canada the songs more often helped to depict woodsmen and *voyageurs* from the high country.³⁴

At the time that Canada was discovered and colonised by the French, each French province had its own dialect, and even sailors had their special language. According to Archange Godbout,³⁵ settlers came to Canada from every province in France (Normandy providing the greatest number), resulting in French Canada in an unequal mélange of provincial newcomers, mixing dialects and customs, oral traditions and legends, stories and songs. The cumulative song “Catherinette” is a good example of this phenomenon.

It should be explained that Catherinette is a girl twenty-five years or older who is not married and who is celebrating Saint Catherine’s Day; young people often call her ‘the old maid’. There are different ways of celebrating; young people have a round which tells of the martyrdom of the saint. Saint Catherine is also the patron saint of philosophers, who honour her solemnly every year; in fine, custom decrees that in France and on the banks of the Saint Lawrence River young people should honour the old maid, the ‘Catherinette’. On this occasion “Catherinette” is sung (it is a cumulative song with repetition and recapitulation, in the category of songs which enumerate the limbs and different parts of the human body).

We have made an inventory of fifty-three versions (two in Belgium, twenty-nine in Canada and the United States, twenty-two in France). Catherinette’s other names are Catelinette, Marguerite, Margoton, Janneton, Lison, etc. In France the lead singer begins with the question: “Catherinette comment a le pied?” [“What is Catherinette’s foot like?”] The chorus reply:

le pied petiton *ma dondaine*,
le pied petiton *ma dondon*.

[a very little foot *ma dondaine*,
a very little foot *ma dondon*.]

All parts of the body are listed, from the feet to the hair. In the reply the part of the body can be beautiful or ugly; in the same version some parts are beautiful, others ugly. The leader doesn’t always ask a question; he may commence directly with

Catherinette a le pied petiton [Catherinette has a very small foot]

the chorus replying:

son pied petiton *ma dondaine*,
son pied petiton *ma dondon*.

[her very small foot *ma dondaine*,
her very small foot *ma dondon*.]

In Canada most versions do not pose a question and are distinguished from all French versions from France by the words:

Catherinette a mal au pied
[Catherinette has hurt her foot]
le pied petiton *ma dondaine*
le pied petiton *ma dondé*

I think we are dealing here with a phenomenon caused by a mixture of dialects. We have a version originating in the south of France which became popular throughout America in colonial times. Here is the version from the province of Guyenne published by Félix Arnaudin:³⁶

Catrinote coum a lou pé (bis)
Lou pé petitoun,
Lé doundène,
Lou pé petitoun,
Lé doundoun.

[What is Catrinote’s foot like? (twice)
A very small foot,
Lé doundène,
A very small foot,
Lé doundoun.]

In Arnaudin’s translation:

Catherinette comment a-t-elle le pied?
Le pied petitet, lé dondaine,
Le pied petitet, lé dondon.

[What is Catherinette’s foot like?
A very small foot, lé dondaine,
A very small foot, lé dondon.]

Immigrants from other French provinces heard: “Catrinote cou[m a l]ou pé?” and mentally translated it as “Catherinette qu’a mal au pied” [Catherinette who has hurt her foot].

This explains why in Canadian versions of this song Catherinette has hurt her foot, her leg, her knee, and so on up to her hair. What remains striking is that no one proposes a remedy to heal her foot and the other parts of her body. But they are described in turn as beautiful or ugly. We are here in the presence of a dialect version from the south of France modified by immigrants from other provinces. An entire study could be made on this subject, covering versions of all the songs collected in Belgium, Canada, Switzerland and, indeed, the provinces of France itself. Each

song has its story, its onward path enriching it with a human past reflecting former civilisations in each of the ancient provinces. Song-variants in oral tradition are not always vulgar contaminations, but rather testimony to their journey across space and time.

Survival

Under the English regime, from 1760 until the arrival of *La Capricieuse* in 1855, the French population in Canada had no official contact with France. Almost one hundred years could not erase from a people's memory its language, songs and customs. On the contrary, the phenomenon of distance became a factor enabling better conservation than in the country of origin; ethnologists have indeed observed that populations at a distance from their place of origin are better at preserving their traditional songs and customs.

The same songs which have been collected in Canada and Europe from 1853 to the present day can be found in ancient handwritten³⁷ and printed collections edited and published in Europe before 1760. This is proof that the French Canadians did not learn their traditional songs in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries; they already knew them before arriving in New France. We are therefore not only the witnesses and trustees of this survival, but also its heirs by the same title as the French in France, Belgium and Switzerland. And all the more so, since it was in America that there developed a mixture of oral traditions from not just one, but all, the provinces of France.

Appendix

Boatmen's songs at the time of the fur trade with the number of identified versions.

For manuscripts we have indicated the century and for printed matter the date of publication. The classification numbers are those of the *Catalogue de la chanson folklorique française [The Catalogue of French Folksong]*.

I. Chansons en laisse

- B-7. "Trois beaux canards" ["Three Fine Ducks"]. Identified versions: 344 (Canada 263, United States 3, France 78), 18th century (*Chansons de facture médiévale [Songs of medieval origin]*, p.130; Barbeau, AF, vol.2, p.97-138).
- B-9. "La belle Française" ["Lovely Française"]. 113 (Canada + United States 87, France 36) 1597, Carles Tessier (CFM, p.136; Gagnon, p.8-9).
- B-17. "Le prisonnier de Nantes" ["The Prisoner of Nantes"]. (CFM, p.159-160; Gagnon, p.26-30).
- B-19. "Le déserteur pendu" ["The Hanged Deserter"]. (CFM, p.163; Ermatinger, JAF, vol. 67, no. 264, p.153).
- D-27. "La mariée battue" ["The Beaten Bride"]. 72 (Belgium 1, Canada 19, France 51, Italy 1), 15th century (CFM, p.314; Ermatinger, JAF, vol. 67, p.155).
- F-5. "Le bal chez Boulé" ["The Ball at Boulé's"]. 19 (Canada); composed on the model of F-6, "La belle femme au bal" ["The Beautiful Woman at the Ball"]. Identified versions: 4 (France). (CFM, p.366; Gagnon, p.117).
- G-8. "La belle rose" ["The Lovely Rose"]. 147 (Belgium 3, Canada + United States 60, France 82, Italy 1, Switzerland 1), 16th century; (CFM, p.423; Gagnon, p.87-89).
- G-10. "À la claire fontaine" ["At the Clear Fountain"]. 349 (Belgium 4, Canada 215, France 127, Switzerland 3), 17th century, 1696 (CFM, p.430; Gagnon, p.2-3).
- H-1. "La fille aux oranges" ["The Orange Seller"]. 165 (Belgium 5, Canada + United States 86, Spain 1, France 70, Switzerland 3), 16th century (CFM, p.461; Ermatinger, JAF, vol.67, p.157; Gagnon, p.54).
- H-3. "La pomme" ["The Apple"]. (CFM, p.468).
- H-4. "La fille au cresson" ["The Watercress Girl"]. 343 (research 2, Belgium 5, Canada + United States 192, France 139, Switzerland 4), 1696 and 1711 (CFM, p.470; Ermatinger, p.154).
- I-2. "Par derrière chez ma tante" ["Behind My Aunt's Place"]. 176 (Belgium 1, Canada 97, France 75, Italy 1, Switzerland 2), 16th century (CFM, p.506; Gagnon, p.41).
- I-9. "La chasse au perdreau" ["Hunting the Partridge"]. 3 (Canada 2, France 1), 17th century (CFM, p.524; Ermatinger, p.158-159).
- I-17. "L'embarquement de Cécilia" ["The Embarkation of Cecilia"]. 168 (Belgium 4, Canada + United States 141, France 23) (CFM, p.540; Gagnon, p.31-34).
- J-1. "Les moutons égarés" ["The Straying Sheep"]. 100 (Belgium 5, Canada + United States 42, France 53), 1548 (CFM, p.553; Ermatinger, p.155).
- K-7. "Le passage du bois" ["The Way Through the Woods"]. 97 (Belgium 6, Canada + United

- States 51, France 40), 15th century (CFM, p.606).
- L-1. “La fille qui se noie” [“The Drowning Girl”]. (CFM, p.633-634; Ermatinger, p.160).
- L-3. “La robe trop courte par derrière” [“The Dress Too Short at the Back”]. 79 (Belgium 2, Canada + United States 58, France 18, Switzerland 1), 1576 (CFM, p.640; Ermatinger, p.158).
- M-3. “La fille bonne à marier” [“The Marriageable Girl”]. 49 (Belgium 2, Canada 38, France 9), 1628 (CFM, p.667).
- M-16. “Vive la canadienne” [“Long Live the Canadian Girl”]. (CFM, p.697; Gagnon, p.4-7).
- N-1. “Le pommier doux” [“The Sweet Apple Tree”]. 114 (research 1, Belgium 5, Canada + United States 69, France 37, Switzerland 2), 1715 (CFM, p.699; Gagnon, p.4-6).
- N-7. “Voici le printemps” [“Spring Has Come”]. (CFM, p.717).
- N-11. “Mon père a fait bâtir maison” [“My Father Has Built a House”]. 154 (research 1, Canada 122, France 30, Switzerland 1), 1615 (CFM, p.732; Ermatinger, p.159).
- P-1. “Trois cavaliers fort bien montés” [“Three Well-mounted Horsemen”]. (CFM, p.829; Ermatinger, p.153).

IV. Cumulative songs

- Ma-13. “Les noces du pinson et de l’alouette” [“The Wedding of the Finch and the Lark”]. (Ermatinger, p.156).
- Bb-5. “La perdriole” (Gagnon, p.82-86).
- Ea-3. “Ah! si mon moine voulait danser” [“Ah! If Only My Monk Would Dance”]. (Gagnon, p.129-130).
- Ma-7. “Les métamorphoses” [“The Transformations”]. (Gagnon, p.80-81).

Notes

¹ This article by Conrad Laforte is a translation by Rosaleen M. Gregory of chapter 12, “Chansons françaises de tradition orale en Amérique du Nord” in Élisabeth Gallat-Morin et Jean-Pierre Pinson, *La Vie musicale en Nouvelle-France* (Sillery, Québec: Éditions du Septentrion, 2003), 427-440.

² See Conrad Laforte, “Musique folklorique canadienne-française”, *Encyclopédie de la musique au Canada*, 2nd edition, Montréal, Fides, 1993, vol.2, p.2347-2358.

³ Grace Lee Nute, *The Voyageur*, Saint-Paul, [1931], Reprint ed. Minnesota Historical Society, 1955, p.103-154, music; Marius Barbeau, “Voyageur Songs”, *The Beaver*, a

Magazine of the North. Outfit 273, June 1942, p.15-19; Marius Barbeau, “The Ermatinger Collection of Voyageur Songs [ca. 1830], *Journal of American Folklore*, vol. 67, no. 164, April-June 1954, p.147-161, music.

⁴The repertoire of these songs has been presented in the recent work by Madeleine Béland and Lorraine Carrier-Aubin, *Chansons des voyageurs, coureurs de bois et forestiers*, Québec, Les presses de l’Université Laval, 1982 (Ethnologie de l’Amérique française), music.

⁵ Elizabeth Simcoe, *The Diary of Mrs John Graves Simcoe Wife of the First Lieutenant Governor of the Province of Upper Canada, 1792-61*, Toronto, William Briggs, 1911, p.92-93 (facsimile edition Coles Publishing Company, Toronto, 1973).

⁶ François Alexandre de La Rochefoucault-Liancourt, *Voyage dans les États-Unis d’Amérique*, 1799, vol.2, p.178.

⁷ John Bradbury, *Travels in the Interior of America, in the Years 1809, 1810 and 1811*, London, 1817, 2nd edition 1819, p.20-21.

⁸ John Mactaggart, *Three Years in Canada*, London, 1829, vol.II, p.255-256.

⁹To understand the significance of the discovery of orally transmitted song, see Conrad Laforte, *La Chanson de tradition orale, une découverte des écrivains du XIXe siècle (en France et au Québec)*, 2nd edition, Montréal, Les Éditions Triptyque, 1995. This work describes how writers viewed these songs. It includes a history of the Committee of French language, history and the arts which set in motion expeditions to collect orally transmitted songs in the French provinces, Belgium, Switzerland and Quebec (French Canada). For a better grasp of the technical aspects of these anonymous songs that were thought to have been composed solely by peasants and ordinary people, we have also published *Poétiques de la chanson traditionnelle française*, 2nd edition, 1993, Sainte-Foy, Les Presses de l’Université Laval (Les Archives de folklore, 26).

¹⁰ Mme Jameson, *Winter Studies and Summer Rambles in Canada*, London, 1838, vol.III, p.111-113; James H. Lanman, “The American Fur Trade”, *The Merchant’s Magazine and Commercial Review*, New York, September 1840, vol.3, p.189; Robert Michael Ballantyne, *Hudson’s Bay: Or Every-Day Life in the Wilds of North America*, Edinburgh, 1848; John Jeremiah Bigsby, *The Shoe and Canoe*, London, 1850, vol.II, p.81. 321-322; and Johann Georg Kohl, *Kitchi-Gami: Wanderings Round Lake Superior*, London, Chapman and Hall, 1860.

¹¹ C. Laforte, “Le répertoire authentique des chansons d’aviron de nos anciens canotiers (voyageurs, engagés, coureurs de bois)”, *Présentation à la Société royale du Canada*, 1982-1983, p.145-159.

¹² See France Vernillat and Jacques Charpentreau, *Dictionnaire de la chanson française*, Paris, Librairie Larousse, 1968 (Les Dictionnaires de l’homme du XXe siècle), p.229.

¹³ See Eric W. Morse, *Les Routes des voyageurs: hier et aujourd’hui*, preface by Pierre E. Trudeau, Ottawa, Impri-merie de la Reine, 1969.

¹⁴ On canoes see Edwin Tappan Adney and Howard Chappelle, *The Bark Canoes and Skin Boats of North America*, [1964] (United States National Museum, Bulletin, 230).

¹⁵ J.H.Lanman, "The American Fur Trade", *Hunt's Merchants' Magazine and Commercial Review*, vol.3, p.189.

¹⁶ J.J.Bigsby, *The Shoe and Canoe*, vol.1, p.131 and following. Translation by G.Dunn p.33.

¹⁷ J.G.Kohl, *Kitchi-Gami*, p.256.

¹⁸ Guillaume Dunn, *Les Forts de l'Outaouais*, Montréal, Éd. du Jour, 1975, p.30.

¹⁹ References to the sixty works cited are, in chronological order: John Bradbury, *Travels in the Interior of America in the Years 1809, 1810 and 1811*, Liverpool, 1817, Reprint, Ann Arbor, University microfilms [1966], p.12-13 (March of America facsimile series, 59); *Canadian Airs*, Collected by Lieutenant George Back [...] with Symphonies and accompaniments by Edward Knight, The Words by George Soane, London, J. Power, [1823], 73 p. music (see preface); Napoléon Aubin, "Une chanson, un sonnet, un baiser", *La Minerve*, 13 July 1835; [Anonymous], "Original Canadian Boat Song", *The Albion, or British, Colonial and Foreign weekly gazette*, New York, new series, vol.4, no.47, Saturday, November 19, 1836, p.376, music; J.H.Lanman, "The American Fur Trade", *Hunt's Merchants' Magazine*, September 1840, vol.3, p.189; Guillaume Lévesque, *Voeux accomplis*, in *Album littéraire et musical de la Revue canadienne*, Montréal, 1847, vol.2, p.14-23; *La Lyre canadienne*, Québec, William Cowan et Fils, 1847, p.5-7, 31-33, 48-50, 106-109, 156-158; James Huston, *Répertoire national*, Montréal, Lowell et Gibson, 1848, vol.1, p.1; vol.3: Patrice Lacombe, "La Terre paternelle" (1846), p.351-375; L.-A. Olivier, "Le débiteur fidèle" (1845), p.246; Alphonse Poitras, "Histoire de mon oncle" (1845), p.230; R.M.Ballantyne, *Hudson's Bay*, 1848, p.222; *Recueil de chansons canadiennes et françaises divisé en deux parties*, Montréal, J. Lovell, 1849, p.11, 12, 68 and 84-85; J.J.Bigsby, *The Shoe and Canoe*, 1850, vol.2, p.81 and 321-324; J. Mactaggart, *Three Years in Canada*, 1829, vol.1, p.255-256; J.G.Kohl, *Kitchi-Gami*, 1860, p.258-259; F.-A. Hubert LaRue, "Les Chansons populaires et historiques du Canada", *Le Foyer canadien*, Québec, 1863, vol.1, p.360; Thomas Moore, *Poetical Words*, London, New York, 1865, p.190-191; Ernest Gagnon, *Chansons populaires du Canada*, Québec, R. Morgan, 1880, p.26-30, 54, 63-64, 90-93, 181-182; P.-J. O. Chauveau, *Charles Guérin*, Montréal, J. Lowell, 1882, p.351; Nicholas Garry, "Diary of Nicholas Garry (1821)", *Proceedings and Transactions of the Royal Society of Canada*, Second series, vol.6, section 2, 1900, p.159-161 and 194; Elizabeth Simcoe, *The Diary*, 1911, p.93; A.B.M.Jameson, *Winter Studies and Summer Rambles in Canada, 1836-37*, New York, Veley de Putman, [1923], vol.2, p.316-317; Marius Barbeau, "The Ermatinger Collection (c1830)", *Journal of American folklore*, vol.67, no.264, April-June 1954, p.147-161, music; the songs also appeared in M. Barbeau, *En roulant ma boule*, [Ottawa], Musée national de l'Homme, [1982], p.153-179, music; Edward Hopkins, "The Hopkins Book of Canoe Songs", *The Beaver, Magazine of the North*, published by the Hud-

son's Bay Company, Winnipeg, Autumn 1971, p.54-57, ill., music.

²⁰ C. Laforte, *Catalogue de la chanson folklorique française*, Québec, Les Presses de l'Université Laval, 1977-1987, 6 vol. (Les Archives de folklore, 18-23): I. *Chansons en laisse*, 1977; II. *Chansons strophiques*, 1981; III. *Chansons en forme de dialogue*, 1982; IV. *Chansons énumératives*, 1979; V. *Chansons brèves (Les enfantines)*, 1987; VI. *Chansons sur des timbres*, 1983.

²¹ J.G.Kohl, *Kitchi-Gami*, p.255.

²² Ernest Gagnon, *Chansons*, p.26-30.

²³ Washington Irving, *Astoria, voyages au-delà des montagnes Rocheuses*, translated from the English by P.N.Grolier, Paris, 1843, vol.1, p.58.

²⁴ M. Barbeau, "The Ermatinger Collection", p.155-156, music.

²⁵ Conrad Laforte, *La Chanson folklorique et les écrivains du XIXe siècle en France et au Québec*, Montréal, Éd. Hurtubise HMH, 1973, p.103-124.

²⁶ C. Laforte, *Survivances médiévales dans la chanson folklorique*, Québec, Les Presses de l'Université Laval, 1981, p.189-203. See also C. Laforte, "La coutume antique et médiévale des couronnes de fleurs retrouvée dans les chansons de tradition orale", *Canadian folklore canadien*, 1994, vol.16, 2, p.89-101.

²⁷ C. Laforte, *Catalogue de la chanson folklorique française*, I-G-8.

²⁸ C. Laforte, *Survivances*, p.194-196.

²⁹ E. Gagnon, *Chansons*, p.87-89.

³⁰ J.G.Kohl, *Kitchi-Gami*, p.258-259.

³¹ La Rochefoucault-Liancourt, *Voyage*, vol.2, p.178.

³² C. Laforte, *Chansons de facture médiévale retrouvées dans la tradition orale*, Sainte-Foy, Nuit blanche éditeur, 1997, 2. Vol., words and music. Répertoire collected from 1852 to the present. Preceded by an analysis of the Canadian melodies of the *chansons en laisse* by Robert Kehler; Marius Barbeau, *Les Archives de folklore*, Université Laval, 1947, vol.2; M. Barbeau, "The Ermatinger collection"; E. Gagnon, *Chansons*.

³³ See C. Laforte, *Chansons de facture médiévale*, 1997.

³⁴ To understand this aspect of orally transmitted song, see our work *La Chanson de tradition orale: une découverte des écrivains du XIXe siècle (en France et au Québec)*, 1995. It also includes a history of the French Committee of language, history and the arts which, in 1853, set in motion research into orally transmitted song in France, Canada, Belgium and Switzerland.

³⁵ Archange Godbout, *Les Archives de folklore*, 1946, Montréal, Fides, vol.1, p.26-40.

³⁶ Félix Arnaudin, *Chants populaires de la Grande-Lande et régions voisines*, Paris, Honoré Champion, 1912, p.153-157, music.

³⁷ On the subject of manuscript sources, see Jay Rahn, "'M'en revenant de la jolî' Rochelle': a song from ca. 1500 in the current French-Canadian repertoire", *Canadian Folk Music Journal*, no. 16, 1988, p.16-31. The song whose evolution Rahn chose to study is represented in C. Laforte's *Catalogue* under the classification number K-4.