

Folksong at FSAC

Our sister society, the Folklore Studies Association of Canada, held its annual conference this Spring at Dalhousie University, Halifax. We at CSTM are always interested to see what Canadian folklorists are saying about traditional song and dance. Moreover FSAC conferences are sometimes wonderful occasions for traditional music - we recall with great pleasure the Singers' Circle after the banquet at last year's FSAC conference in Sudbury. Although the occasional paper delivered at the conference included musical examples, this year there was unfortunately no such opportunity provided for the informal performance of traditional music. That was a great pity since one of the delegates was Anita Best and it would have been a joy to hear her sing Newfoundland versions of Child and broadside ballads. Sheldon Posen was there too, and I remember him being in fine voice at Sudbury. The 2004 FSAC conference will most likely be held at the University of Winnipeg and will be organized by CSTM member Pauline Greenhill, who is the FSAC Secretary/Treasurer. We have faith that Pauline will include a Singers' Circle in the schedule, and will also make sure that the papers on traditional music are not placed in concurrent sessions, as regrettably happened at Halifax.

One of the conference highlights was the presentation to Anita Best and Phil Thomas of richly deserved Marius Barbeau medals (the Barbeau medal is FSAC's special award honouring exceptional contributions to Canadian folklore studies). This is the English-language version of the tribute that appeared in the FSAC *Bulletin* (Vol 27) distributed at the conference:

"This year we honour two individuals who have much in common, although they come from different ends of the country: Anita Best and Phil Thomas. Both have published major song-collections, both have worked long and well outside the academic establishment (although their work is well respected in university circles), and both are singers and well-known public advocates for traditional song.

Anita Best's involvement in folklore and ethnology in Canada has encompassed a range of activities – as performer, collector, archivist, scholar, teacher, and advocate for Newfoundland traditions. Few if any have attained her range of activities, yet in each category she has made contributions that equal or better the work of those who have specialized in those areas. To the general public she is best known as a singer who has appeared on CBC television with Pamela Morgan, broadcast on provincial and national radio shows, and made several fine recordings currently available on CD. These include *The Colour of Amber* (with Pamela Morgan), a solo unaccompanied album entitled *Cross-Handed*, and a collaboration as featured soloist with the Newfoundland Symphony Youth Choir (*Rock within the Sea: Folksongs of Newfoundland*). She is a regular performer at folk festivals both within and outside her native province. Her Amber Music label has performed the valuable service of

reissuing, among others, the albums made by the celebrated Newfoundland group Figgy Duff. Ms. Best has also been instrumental in creating and hosting radio programs featuring Newfoundland traditional music, and in organizing and mounting various successful festivals celebrating Newfoundland culture and song. Her activity as a collector of Newfoundland story and song is best known though her joint publication with Genevieve Lehr, *Come and I Will Sing You: A Newfoundland Songbook* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1985), but more of her fieldwork can be consulted in the Memorial University Folklore Archives. MUNFLA is only one of several archives where, as a professional archivist, she has done valuable work documenting and organizing collections of Newfoundland folklore. Her own research on Newfoundland folksongs, and on the tale tradition of Mr. Pius Power Sr., is a model of sensitivity and informed interpretation. More recently she has begun teaching traditional Newfoundland music at the School of Music at Memorial University, passing on her knowledge to a new generation of Newfoundlanders.

Phil Thomas has been called both "the Cecil Sharp of British Columbia" and "the B.C. Pete Seeger". The former phrase pays tribute to his role as the industrious pioneer of folksong collecting in the province, the latter to his ubiquitous presence in clubs and schools and on campuses, toting his long-necked banjo and popularizing Canadian traditional song. He began collecting at the age of thirty in 1951, and for the next twenty-five years laboured to rescue from the brink of extinction an invaluable legacy of British Columbia and Western Canadian song. Combining social history and folklore, his *Songs of the Pacific Northwest* (Saanichton: Hancock House 1979) reflected in its comprehensive notes the pioneer spirit of the working people of British Columbia. It was a landmark in the effort to recover and study the history of popular music in the province. Mr. Thomas is currently working on a second, enlarged edition of *Songs of the Pacific Northwest*. His collection of field-tapes is now deposited in the BC Aural History Archives in Victoria, and his collection of folksong books (now exceeding 6,000 items and unique in Western Canada) has been donated to the Special Collections library of his alma mater, the University of British Columbia, where it bears his name. Over the course of a long and productive life he has made his mark in several fields. He was awarded the G.A. Fergusson Prize, the highest honour the BC Teachers Federation can award, for creative work in art and drama. In 1959 he was a founder and is now an Honorary Life Member of the country's longest running folk club, the Vancouver Folk Song Society. He has served as President, Corresponding Secretary, and in various other capacities on the Board of Directors of the Canadian Society for Traditional Music, and is now Honorary President and Life Member. He has also been an active and longstanding member of the British Columbia Folklore Society, one of the several organizations and individuals that nominated him for the Barbeau Medal. This award recognizes and celebrates Mr. Thomas' fifty years of involvement in the collection and publication of Canadian vernacular song, and his groundbreaking work in preserving, contextualizing, and popularizing the traditional music of his native province."