

The Prairies and British Columbia

We have now reached the Canadian West, a huge region that divides naturally into the prairies and British Columbia. The two most comprehensive surveys of western traditional music, by Wesley Berg on the prairies¹ and by Norman Stanfield on British Columbia,² are both to be found in the impressive but very expensive *Garland Encyclopedia of World Music*. This very substantial tome does not seem to be available online and is out of print. It also has Beverly Diamond's useful piece on "Intercultural Traditions on the Canadian Prairies".³

For anyone without access to the *Garland Encyclopedia*, an alternative strategy is possible. Another older but useful introduction to the folk music of the Canadian West is an article from the 1973 *Canadian Journal for Traditional Music*: Michael Weiss's "Songs from Western Canada."⁴ This can be supplemented by Edith Fowke's early piece on "American Cowboy and Western Pioneer Songs in Canada."⁵ Despite beginning with items collected in eastern and central Canada, Fowke does eventually move westwards to discuss the folk songs of the prairie provinces. Also worth consulting is Bill Sarjeant's "Folk Music in the Canadian Prairies," in a 1978 issue of *Canada Folk Bulletin*.⁶ Together these articles provide an introductory overview of Western vernacular song, although they are by no means comprehensive in their coverage.

The primary sources of traditional music available from the prairie provinces are admittedly less rich than those from regions of Canada that were settled earlier, but we can nonetheless explore some of the songs that have been collected in Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Alberta. Vernacular songs from the prairies were collected by Barbara Cass-Beggs, Edith Fowke, Kenneth Peacock, and Philip Thomas, among others.

Margaret McLeod has assembled a set of *Songs of Old Manitoba*, although not many of these appear to be folksongs.⁷ More useful is Edith Fowke's "Songs of a Manitoba Family" in the 1975 issue of *Canadian Journal for Traditional Music*.⁸ Barbara Cass-Beggs published two small collections of Saskatchewan songs, titled *Eight Songs of Saskatchewan*⁹ and *Seven Métis Songs of Saskatchewan*.¹⁰ The most famous of all Métis songs from the prairies is the poignant poem written by Louis Riel himself on the eve of his judicial murder. Phil Thomas discussed this in two articles in *Canadian Journal for Traditional Music* titled "The 'Louis Riel Song': A Perspective"¹¹ and "La lettre de sang"/"Chanson de Louis Riel": Addenda."¹²

In Alberta we find a richer body of song, although nothing to rival that of Ontario, Quebec, the Maritimes or Newfoundland and Labrador. Tim Rogers even once inquired "Is There an Alberta Folk Music?," although his conclusion was correctly in the affirmative.¹³ A few years after Rogers' query, Cheryl Henrickson discussed "English Language Folk Music in Alberta" in the same periodical.¹⁴ In 1985 David Spalding reported (again in *Canadian Folk Music Journal*) the discovery of an important manuscript indicating the repertoire of traditional songs sung on an Alberta farm.¹⁵ These three articles help us obtain an overview of Alberta folk music and a sense of what particular songs may have been common among homesteaders and farmers before World War II and before the urbanization of the province. They are complemented by Philip Thomas's discussion in "Where the Rivers Flow" of the fruits of his collecting in the Peace Country of northwestern Alberta.¹⁶ Earlier short articles on Alberta folksong include V. Archer's 1967 "Alberta and its Folksongs"¹⁷ and Alan Grierson's "Folk Music in Alberta" in a 1978 issue of *Canada Folk Bulletin*.¹⁸

With Alberta, however, we run into a terminological issue which we have effectively avoided until now: that of the difference and overlap between folk song and vernacular song. George Lyon's interesting *Community Music in Alberta* strongly suggests that there was in historic Alberta a great deal of vernacular music (i.e., non-commercial music made by ordinary people for their own amusement) that we would perhaps hesitate to consider folk music.¹⁹ This included not only cowboy songs and aboriginal music, which would qualify, but also popular songs sung to piano accompaniment, community band music, and quite a variety of dance music.

Geographically one might be justified in grouping the ranching and mining country of western Alberta, where the foothills suddenly turn into the Rocky Mountains, with the similar countryside and culture of interior British Columbia. The western fringe of Alberta has produced not only cowboy songs associated with ranching but lyrics and ballads expressing the dangers and hardships of coal mining in the Crows Nest Pass, the locale of both the infamous Frank slide and the Hillcrest mine disaster. A number of performances of homesteading, ranching, lumbering, mining, transportation, fishing, and other sea-songs from both Alberta and British Columbia are included on the Bartlett and Ruebsaat CD-ROM *Songs and Stories of Canada*.²⁰

We can examine the folk songs of British Columbia through the work of the dean of B.C. song-collectors, Phil Thomas. Thomas was the most important collector of western Canadian vernacular song. To introduce Thomas himself and his spare-time career as a musician and song-collector, we can turn to David Gregory's obituary "Philip J. Thomas, 1921-2007" in *Folk Music Journal*,²¹ Jon Bartlett's reflections on the man and his achievements in a 2007 issue of *Canadian Folk Music*,²² and Bartlett's earlier, brief but succinct, account of "The P. J. Thomas Collection of British Columbia Folk Songs" as an archival resource, in the 1976 *Canadian Folk Music Journal*.²³ A longer piece by David Gregory in *Canadian Folk Music* titled "Phil Thomas: An Odyssey in Song" goes beyond this introductory material and provides a more detailed overview of Thomas's life and his evolving fieldwork.²⁴ This can be supplemented with Rika Ruebsaat's "Phil Thomas: A Personal Memoir" in the same 2007 issue.²⁵

Thomas was a fairly frequent contributor to *Canadian Folk Music Bulletin*, and some of his brief articles in the periodical are worth reading. For example, "Are You from Bevan?" appeared in a 1979 issue,²⁶ "British Columbia [Railroad Songs]" in 1982²⁷ and "'D'ye Ken Sam Hughes?' and Two Other Songs from the Great War, 1914-1918" in 2003.²⁸ Two other important articles by Thomas are his early (1962) account of "B.C. Songs"²⁹ and "British Canadian Folk Music in B.C."³⁰

The obvious way to delve even deeper into British Columbia folksong through the Thomas collection is by means of his seminal publication, *Songs of the Pacific Northwest*, which has now been republished in an expanded edition edited by Jon Bartlett.³¹ The book does not include everything in the archival collection, but it nonetheless provides a wide-ranging illustration of the different kinds of song that Thomas found in his many travels through the length and breadth of British Columbia. *Songs of the Pacific Northwest* was a pioneering work in its methodology, integrating the social and musical history of British Columbia in a way that had not been attempted before. It is both a song collection and a work of cultural history, the B.C. equivalent to Roy Palmer's *The Sound of History*.³²

Thomas organized its contents in a roughly chronological fashion. There are a few songs dating from the early period of contact between the aboriginal peoples of the northwest coast and British and American ships, and also from the early Colonial period, when settlement was largely confined to Victoria and its environs. The Fraser River, Cariboo, and Klondike gold rushes left behind a small legacy of songs, including the hard-hitting and melancholy "Know Ye the Land?" with its beautiful melody. Po-

litical and military events such as Confederation and World War I also spurred B.C. songsmiths to create, the predominant sentiments being pro-Dominion but anti-war. And phenomena such as railway-building, prohibition, unionization and strike-busting by the police and military were not neglected.

Thomas, however, was as much if not more interested in what the songs he was collecting might reveal about the social history of B.C.—that is, the lives and thoughts of ordinary working people—and he organized what he found under six main headings. He discovered numerous songs about homesteading and ways of making a little cash to supplement the crops. Complementing the farming songs were those about ranching in the B.C. interior. The province's lakes and Pacific coast provided other ways of earning a living for its early inhabitants: fishing, of course, but also employment on the ferries, coastal steamers, and tugboats. Transportation on both land and sea was therefore another of Thomas's song categories. If shipping was an industry of growing significance in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century B.C., even more important was logging and sawmilling, the mainstay of the colony and of the province after it joined Canada. And equally valuable from an economic point of view was mining, both coal mining and hard rock mining for metals, an activity that could be found from Vancouver Island in the west to Kimberley in the east and near the Alaskan border in the north. In some ways the songs of British Columbia echo those of Newfoundland, the Maritimes and Ontario, since so many folk songs in all these regions reflect the struggles of ordinary people to find the livelihoods afforded by cultivable land, forests, rivers, and the sea.

Although Phil Thomas was the leading light among B.C. folklorists, he was not the only one to write about Western vernacular music. A handful of other articles are worth noting. Leaving aside for now the wealth of scholarship on the musics of ethnic minorities, we can focus on instrumental music and on song traditions that complement those recorded by Thomas. Roy Gibbons reported in 1982 on *Folk Fiddling in Prince George*³³ and Anne Lederman contributed to *Canadian Folk Music Bulletin* a survey of fiddling in Western Manitoba.³⁴ Children's songs have been collected in the Prairies, for example by Robert Cosbey, who summarised the fruits of his fieldwork in *Canadian Folk Music Journal* in an article titled "'Down the Okanagan': A Group of Skipping Songs from Regina."³⁵ And in 1972 T. G. Heath analyzed the heritage of "Protest Songs of Saskatchewan."³⁶ Lack of space unfortunately prevents an examination of the fairly extensive literature on cowboy songs.

Notes

- ¹Berg, Wesley, et al. "Prairies," *The United States and Canada*, ed. Ellen Koskoff. *Garland Encyclopedia of World Music*, Vol. 3, 1223-51. New York and London: Garland, 2001.
- ²Stanfield, Norman, et al. "British Columbia," *Garland Encyclopedia*, Vol. 3., 1253-71.
- ³Diamond, Beverley. "Intercultural Traditions on the Canadian Prairies," *Garland Encyclopedia*, Vol. 3, 342-45.
- ⁴Weiss, Michael J. "Songs from Western Canada," *Canadian Journal for Traditional Music* 1 (1973), 38-45.
- ⁵Fowke, Edith. "American Cowboy and Western Pioneer Songs in Canada," *Western Folklore* 21 (1962), 247-256.
- ⁶Sarjeant, William A. S. "Folk Music in the Canadian Prairies," *Folk Review* 5: 7 (1967), 4-7; revised version in *Canada Folk Bulletin* 1: 5 (September-October 1978), 3-10.
- ⁷MacLeod, Margaret. *Songs of Old Manitoba*. Toronto: Ryerson, 1959.
- ⁸Fowke, Edith. "Songs of a Manitoba Family," *Canadian Journal for Traditional Music* 3 (1975), 35-46.
- ⁹Cass-Beggs, Barbara, ed. *Eight Songs of Saskatchewan*. Toronto: Canadian Music Sales, 1963.
- ¹⁰Cass-Beggs, Barbara, ed. *Seven Métis Songs of Saskatchewan*. Toronto: BMI Canada, 1967.
- ¹¹Thomas, Philip J. "The 'Louis Riel Song': A Perspective," *Canadian Journal for Traditional Music* 21 (1993), 12-18.
- ¹²Thomas, Philip J. "'La lettre de sang'/'Chanson de Louis Riel': Addenda," *Canadian Journal for Traditional Music* 24 (1996), 56-60.
- ¹³Rogers, Tim B. "Is There an Alberta Folk Music?" *Canadian Journal for Traditional Music* 6 (1978), 23-29.
- ¹⁴Henrickson, Cheryl J. "English Language Folk Music in Alberta," *Canadian Journal for Traditional Music* 10 (1982), 34-39.
- ¹⁵Spalding, David A. E. "What We Sang Down On the Farm: A Forgotten Manuscript on Western Canadian Singing Traditions," *Canadian Folk Music Journal*, 13 (1985), 37-40.
- ¹⁶Thomas, Philip J. "Where the Rivers Flow," *Canadian Journal for Traditional Music* 3 (1975), 47-55.
- ¹⁷Archer, V. "Alberta and its Folksongs," *Canadian Folk Music Society Newsletter* 2 (1967), 45-55.
- ¹⁸Grierson, Alan. "Folk Music in Alberta," *Canada Folk Bulletin* 1: 3 (May-June 1978), 3-8.
- ¹⁹Lyon, George W. *Community Music in Alberta: Some Good Schoolhouse Stuff!* Calgary: University of Alberta Press, 1999.
- ²⁰Bartlett, Jon and Rika Ruebsaat. *Songs and Stories of Canada*. CD-ROM. New Westminster, BC: Bartlett-Ruebsaat, 2004.
- ²¹Gregory, E. David. "Philip J. Thomas, 1921-2007," *Folk Music Journal*, Vol. 9, No. 3 (2008), 492-494.
- ²²Bartlett, Jon. "Phil Thomas – An Appreciation," *Canadian Folk Music/Musique folklorique canadienne*. Vol. 41, No. 1 (Spring 2007), 1-4.
- ²³Bartlett, Jon. "The P. J. Thomas Collection of British Columbia Folk Songs," *Canadian Folk Music Journal*, Vol. 4 (1976), 29-30.
- ²⁴Gregory, E. David. "Phil Thomas: An Odyssey in Song," *Canadian Folk Music/Musique folklorique canadienne*. Vol. 41, No. 1 (Spring 2007), 5-40.
- ²⁵Ruebsaat, Rika. "Phil Thomas: A Personal Memoir," *Canadian Folk Music/Musique folklorique canadienne* 41:1 (Spring 2007), 3-4.
- ²⁶Thomas, Philip J. "Are You from Bevan?" *Canada Folk Bulletin* 2: 3 (May-June 1979), 29-33.
- ²⁷Thomas, Philip J. "British Columbia [Railroad Songs]," *Canadian Folk Music/Bulletin de musique folklorique canadienne* 16: 2 (April 1982), 18-19.
- ²⁸Thomas, Philip J. "'D'ye Ken Sam Hughes?' and Two Other Songs from the Great War, 1914-1918," *Canadian Folk Music/Bulletin de musique folklorique canadienne*, 37: 4 (Winter 2003), 10-15.
- ²⁹Thomas, Philip J. "B. C. Songs," *British Columbia Library Quarterly* 26 (1962), 15-29.
- ³⁰Thomas, Philip J. "British Canadian Folk Music in B.C.," *British Columbia Music Educator* 18 (Spring 1975); reprinted in *Come All Ye* 4 (1975), 210-214.
- ³¹Thomas, Philip J. and Jon Bartlett, eds. *Songs of the Pacific Northwest*. Revised edition. Surrey, BC and Blaine, WA: Hancock House, 2006.
- ³²Palmer, Roy. *The Sound of History: Song and Social Comment*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1988.
- ³³Gibbons, Roy. *As It Comes: Folk Fiddling in Prince George, British Columbia*. Ottawa: National Museum, Canadian Centre for Folk Culture Studies, Mercury Series 42, 1982.
- ³⁴Lederman, Anne. "Fiddling in Western Manitoba: A Preliminary Report," *Canadian Folk Music Bulletin de musique folklorique canadienne* 19: 3 (September 1985), 26-28.
- ³⁵Cosbey, Robert C. "'Down the Okanagan': A Group of Skipping Songs from Regina," *Canadian Folk Music Journal* 1 (1973), 31-32.
- ³⁶Heath, T. G. "Protest Songs of Saskatchewan," *Saskatchewan History* 25 (1972), 81-91.