

Canadian Folk Song Revival: Beginnings to Boom

It is now time to explore the origins, early development and first three post-war decades of the Canadian Folk Music Revival to the end of the 1960s. The origins of folk music collecting in Canada are not well researched, so the beginnings of the vernacular song revival are, to say the least, somewhat murky. We can detect a few strands before the First World War, but it is anyone's guess how representative they are of what was really taking place. Nonetheless, we begin with the history of entrepreneurial and scholarly involvement with Canadian traditional music before World War II.

Curiously, the earliest known attempt to collect vernacular music in Canada was in the Arctic. Lieutenant George Back was on an early Franklin expedition to the Canadian North, and he recorded melodies that he heard there, presumably from aboriginal people encountered by the expedition. He published *Canadian Airs, collected by Lieutenant Back, R.N. during the late Arctic Expedition under Captain Franklin* in London in 1823.¹ This initiative, however, appears to have no sequel, and it was in Quebec that the serious business of song-collecting really began. In the earlier section on francophone song we have already noted the foundational contributions of Ernest Gagnon. His six-part *Chansons populaires du Canada* was published in 1865.² The fact that this was reprinted in 1880 suggests that there was already a growing interest in Canadian folksong in the Late Victorian era, as W.C.H. Wood's 1896 article in *Transactions of the Royal Society of Canada* confirms.³

In the United Kingdom the Edwardian era was the heyday of folksong collecting, featuring the extraordinary industry of Cecil Sharp, Ralph Vaughan Williams, Percy Grainger and the Hammond brothers (to name just a few), complementing the achievements of such earlier pioneer collectors as Lucy Broadwood, Frank Kidson and Sabine Baring-Gould. So we might expect some parallel collecting activity in Canada, but it seems likely that this was occurring only in a limited way, in Quebec, Nova Scotia, Newfoundland and British Columbia.

For Quebec we have Paul-Emile Provost's *Chansons canadiennes*⁴ and Julien Tiersot's *Forty-Four French Folksongs and Variants from Canada, Normandy, and Brittany*.⁵

In Nova Scotia the focus was on the Gaelic cultural heritage of Cape Breton, with Alexander Fraser's "The Gaelic Folk Songs of Canada."⁶ In Newfoundland a 1906 article in the St. John's *Evening Telegram* titled "Songs of Our Ancestors/Old Come-All-Ye's of Newfoundland" revealed that mixture of

patriotism and interest in the island's pioneer days that would be characteristic of the work of Gerard Doyle.⁷ Before then, however, James Murphy had already begun collecting and printing Newfoundland vernacular songs in such publications as his 1902 *Songs and Ballads of Newfoundland: Ancient and Modern*,⁸ his 1904 *Songs of Our Land*⁹ and his 1905 *Murphy's Sealers' Song Book*.¹⁰ Murphy continued with his compiling and publishing activities in the years before the outbreak of war, bringing out *Old Songs of Newfoundland* in 1912¹¹ and following this up with *Songs of Newfoundland by Various Authors* five years later.¹² As for British Columbia, folklorists seemed only interested in the musical culture of the Native peoples of the northern north-west coast. John Swanton's "Haida Songs"¹³ suggests this, as does Helen Roberts' and H. K. Haerberlin's "Some Songs of the Puget Sound Salish."¹⁴

Moving on to the interwar era, much of the collecting activity was again occurring in Newfoundland. Gerald Doyle,¹⁵ Elisabeth Greenleaf,¹⁶ Maud Karpeles¹⁷ and Joey Smallwood¹⁸ were the main protagonists, in approximately chronological order. We have already discussed their contributions in the earlier Newfoundland section. Newfoundland was not yet part of Canada at that time, but in the Dominion of Canada other important foundations were laid during the interwar decades, with John Murray Gibbon and Marius Barbeau among the key figures. Gibbon edited *Canadian Folk Songs, Old and New* in 1927¹⁹ and, with composer Sir Ernest MacMillan, a collection of French-Canadian songs.²⁰ He was also responsible for organizing festivals for the Canadian Pacific Railway that involved some folk music along with handicrafts and performances of art music. The articles on him and on the CPR Festivals in the *Encyclopedia of Canadian Music* provide a brief introduction to his activities.²¹ Maud Karpeles was a pioneer collector in Ontario, contributing "British Folk Songs from Canada."²² We should also remember that folk song collecting in the Maritimes was well underway in the 1920s, with William Roy Mackenzie's *The Quest of the Ballad* published in 1919²³ and his *Ballads and Sea Songs from Nova Scotia* in 1928,²⁴ while Helen Creighton's first book of songs that she had collected, *Songs and Ballads from Nova Scotia*, was published in Toronto in 1932.²⁵

Marius Barbeau, of course, we have also met before, as the dean of Quebec song collectors. Suffice it to point out here that Barbeau's many contributions to the discovery and revival of vernacular song in Canada began as early as World War I, with his first scholarly article on "Folk Songs" in 1918.²⁶ To come

to terms with Barbeau one has to take into account three main aspects of his work: his collecting and editing of Quebecois folk song; his ethnographical research into aboriginal culture and collecting of Native song; and his substantial efforts, which went way beyond his duties at the National Museum, to promote the folk music and folk arts of many regions of Canada, including, of course, francophone song. During the interwar period his most important publications included *Chansons of Old French Canada* (published in 1920),²⁷ followed by a similar collection intended for a francophone audience, *Vieilles chansons françaises du Canada*.²⁸ His next edited selection, *Folk Songs of French Canada*, was a collaboration with Edward Sapir.²⁹ 1927 saw the publication of *Twelve Ancient French-Canadian Folk Songs*.³⁰ Barbeau then edited with composer Healey Willan a larger, two-volume selection titled *Chansons canadiennes (French-Canadian Folk Songs)*.³¹ In 1935 he published *Folk-songs of Old Quebec*, which he edited with Regina Shoelman,³² and two years later he found a Toronto publisher for his celebrated *Romancero du Canada*.³³ For more details, see the earlier section on francophone song in Quebec and Ontario. Barbeau, incidentally, also played an important role as an impresario, an activity discussed by Elaine Keillor in “Marius Barbeau and Musical Performers” in the 2004 issue of *Canadian Journal for Traditional Music*.³⁴

The decade and a half after the Second World War saw two important developments. One was an expansion of song collecting, particularly on behalf of the National Museum of Canada, with the use of new recording technology, the portable tape recorder.

Helen Creighton was perhaps the most prominent Canadian collector to enthusiastically embrace the tape recorder as an invaluable aid in fieldwork, although the songs in her 1950 book *Traditional Songs from Nova Scotia* had been collected by hand in tandem with Doreen Senior.³⁵ Working for Barbeau and the National Museum, she edited *Folklore of Lunenburg County, Nova Scotia*, which included her own chapter on “Dances, Games, and Songs.”³⁶ Another important article was “The Songs of Nathan Hatt” in 1953,³⁷ and she followed this with “Fiddles, Folksongs, and Fishermen’s Yarns” in 1955.³⁸ Marius Barbeau’s most important publications in the postwar decade included *Come A Singing! Canadian Folk-Songs*,³⁹ “Trois beaux canards (92 versions canadiennes)” (a tantalizing fruit of his grand project to collect Quebecois vernacular song which had yet to materialize in print)⁴⁰ and “Tsimshian Songs” (the fruit of his fieldwork among the coastal Indians of British Columbia).⁴¹ Then in the late ‘50s came “Totems and Songs,”⁴² “Indian Songs of the Northwest,”⁴³ *J’ai vu Québec*⁴⁴ and *Roundelays – Dansons à la ronde*.⁴⁵

The other critically important development in the late 1940s and 1950s was the emergence of home-grown folk groups and individual artists. This transformed the nature of the folk music revival, resulting in the emergence of contemporary folksong as a complement to traditional song. The most influential of these artists were the Travellers, Wade Hemsworth and Alan Mills in central Canada, and Omar Blondahl in Newfoundland. We can briefly canvass their contributions to the nascent movement in the early post-war years.

It is a great pity that the National Film Board has failed to make available on DVD their excellent retrospective video-cassette *The Travellers: This Land is Your Land*,⁴⁶ but the group did receive an article in *The Encyclopedia of Music in Canada*.⁴⁷ Wade Hemsworth’s legacy as a singer-songwriter can be approached through an *Encyclopedia of Music in Canada* article⁴⁸ and the obituary pieces by his son and Lorne Brown in *Canadian Folk Music*.⁴⁹ Alan Mills was certainly a major figure in the early revival, and an exploration of his career and contributions can begin with the *Encyclopedia of Music in Canada* piece on him,⁵⁰ together with Edith Fowke’s memoir in *Canadian Folk Music*.⁵¹ We badly need the biography that Lorne Brown is currently researching and writing. As for Omar Blondahl, Neil Rosenberg’s article in *Canadian Folk Music Journal*⁵² supplements the brief biography in the *Encyclopedia of Music in Canada*.⁵³

The post-war revival really took off in the mid-late 1950s, with Hemsworth and Mills continuing to play important roles. Radio shows on CBC were particularly important in this era. Other pioneers included H  l  ne Baillargeon, Oscar Brand, Jean Carignan, Tom Kines, Karen James, Derek Lamb, Jacques Lebreque, Ed McCurdy, and Joyce Sullivan. *Encyclopedia of Music in Canada* articles are available on Baillargeon, Carignan, Labrecque and McCurdy.⁵⁴ These were all leading figures as early as the early-mid ‘50s; others, such as Brand, Kines, James and Lamb, began their careers in the late ‘50s but had more of an impact on the folk scene in the subsequent decade.

Much of these singers’ traditional repertoire came from such songbooks as Edith Fowke and Richard Johnston’s *Folk Songs of Canada*⁵⁵ and Alan Mills’ *Songs of Newfoundland*,⁵⁶ as well as from early publications by such collectors as Barbeau, MacKenzie, Creighton and Greenleaf.

Although it was an American company with its headquarters in New York, Moses Asch’s record label *Folkways* documented on LP some aspects of the folk music revival in Canada in the 1950s, and it would continue to do so during the next decade. Sam Gesser was Asch’s Canadian assistant, and he recorded such revival singers as Alan Mills and H  l  ne

Baillargeon. He also made contact with the folklorists and ethnomusicologists who were recording folk music from informants in the field, with the result that selections from the field recordings of Marius Barbeau, Helen Creighton, Edith Fowke, and Ida Halpern, among others, were issued on Folkways Records. There is as yet no comprehensive account of Gesser and his work, but there is an *Encyclopedia of Music in Canada* article on him.⁵⁷ Lorne Brown wrote a short piece in *Canadian Folk Music* titled “The ‘Classic’ Series from Smithsonian Folkways,”⁵⁸ and Michael Asch contributed a retrospective review of his father’s aims and achievements in a 2008 article in *Canadian Folk Music* titled “Folkways Records and the Ethics of Collecting: Some Personal Reflections.”⁵⁹

In terms of audience popularity and the number of young people picking up guitars and singing folk songs, the post-war folk music revival really took off in the early-mid 1960s and continued at full speed into the next decade. It quickly divided into two streams: traditional folk music and contemporary folk music.

Traditional folk music remained a major component of the post-war revival. It involved continued fieldwork by folklorists and ethnomusicologists, and new publications that presented the fruits of their findings to the growing audience for their work. These included Helen Creighton’s *Maritime Folk Songs*,⁶⁰ Omar Blondahl’s *Newfoundlanders Sing!*,⁶¹ Louise Manny and James Willson’s *Songs of Miramichi*,⁶² Kenneth Peacock’s *Songs of the Newfoundland Outports*,⁶³ and three new songbooks co-edited by Edith Fowke: *Canada’s Story in Song*,⁶⁴ *Songs of Work and Freedom*,⁶⁵ and *More Folk Songs of Canada*.⁶⁶ These (and earlier) publications were the main sources for performances of traditional songs and instrumental tunes by so-called “revival singers.”

Contemporary folk music included topical and protest songs, and here American influences were strong because of the powerful songs created south of the border by such figures as Woody Guthrie, Pete Seeger, Bob Dylan, and Phil Ochs. It also reflected the emergence of a new breed of singer-songwriters using acoustic instruments and a playing style similar to that of their more traditional counterparts. Coffee houses, folk clubs, and folk festivals were among the vehicles for performances by folk artists of both kinds. Even here, the folk festivals tended to divide into those such as the Miramichi Festival that featured traditional music and amateur performers and those such as Mariposa that catered to singer-songwriters and larger audiences.

One way to begin understanding the fundamental split that gradually emerged in the sixties revival is to study the difference between Mariposa and Miramichi, which is evident when one reads the *Encyclo-*

pedia of Music in Canada articles on the two festivals.⁶⁷ Aspects of the Mariposa festival are discussed in Usher and Page-Harpa’s *Stories from Mariposa*,⁶⁸ while Susan Butler wrote an account of the Miramichi festival in a 1986 issue of *Canadian Folk Music Bulletin*.⁶⁹ This complements Jim Stewart’s earlier “Retrospective: Miramichi Folk Song Festival” in the same periodical.⁷⁰

A similar divergence can be easily seen in the careers of the leading artists playing and singing what was all counted as “folk music.” There were quite a number of important figures on the more traditional side of the revival in the ‘60s, artists who sang and recorded traditional songs or self-penned items that were clearly “in the tradition.” Some had already emerged to prominence during the previous decade, while others flourished primarily during the 1960s. They included O.J. Abbott, Omar Blondahl, Oscar Brand, LaRena Clarke, Marie Hare, Tom Kines, Alan Mills, Stan Triggs, David Wiffen, the group 3’s a Crowd and even, in his own idiosyncratic way, Stompin’ Tom Connors.

There are brief articles on several of these figures in the *Encyclopedia of Music in Canada*.⁷¹ For O. J. Abbott, also see Henry Hadeed’s “The Songs of Mr. O. J. Abbott: A Survey of Tune Types”⁷² and Vikar and Panagapka’s *Songs of the North Woods*.⁷³ On Omar Blondahl there is Neil Rosenberg’s “Omar Blondahl’s Contribution to the Newfoundland Folk-song Canon” in the 1991 issue of *Canadian Folk Music Journal*.⁷⁴ LaRena Clarke was the subject of Edith Fowke’s *A Family Heritage: The Story and Songs of LaRena Clark*⁷⁵ and, as we saw earlier, a series of analytic articles by Jay Rahn.⁷⁶

Sandy Ives and Louise Manny edited a selection of the traditional songs from the Miramichi sung by Marie Hare.⁷⁷ Edith Fowke wrote an obituary of Tom Kines in *Canadian Folk Music Journal*⁷⁸ and Paula Conlon introduced the “Thomas Kines Collection at Carleton” in the same periodical.⁷⁹ Like Kines, Alan Mills was appreciated retrospectively by Edith Fowke in her *Canadian Folk Music* article “Alan Mills: Collaborator and Friend”,⁸⁰ and she also wrote an obituary of him in *Canadian Folk Music Journal*,⁸¹ which can be supplemented by a set of four reminiscences of Mills’ life and music by Vera Johnson, Michael Taft, Bram Morrison and Edith Fowke titled “Alan Mills Remembered”, which appeared in a 1996 issue of *Canadian Folk Music Bulletin*.⁸² On Stan Triggs one can consult Phil Thomas’ retrospective “Both ‘Stanley G. Triggs’: A Recollection” in a 1996 issue of *Canadian Folk Music*.⁸³ More recently Mike Tod has written “Stanley G. Triggs: Some Bunkhouse Music from British Columbia” in the same periodical.⁸⁴

As for Stompin’ Tom, there is an *Encyclopedia of Music in Canada* article on him,⁸⁵ and one can also

consult William Echard's "Inventing to Preserve: Novelty and Traditionalism in the Work of Stompin' Tom Connors" in the 1994 issue of *Canadian Folk Music Journal*.⁸⁶ Richard Flohil's "Stompin' Tom: Canada's Unlikely National Symbol" is also of some interest.⁸⁷ Moreover, Connors has also written his autobiography in two volumes: *Before the Fame*⁸⁸ takes the story into the sixties and *Stompin' Tom and the Connors Tone* carries on from 1967.⁸⁹ Some might deny that Stompin' Tom is a folksinger "in the tradition," but he has certainly written a considerable number of vernacular songs that are recognized and sung by hundreds of thousands of Canadians, including some that are definitely 'national' songs (songs that encapsulate the 'spirit' of Canada), and he has strongly influenced younger artists who are also attempting to capture Canada in song. Since he has achieved a certain degree of commercial success through his albums and personal appearances, we can see him as a transitional figure who might equally well be included in our last category, the select group of singer-songwriters who went on to become famous names in the world of commercial popular music.

During the sixties, such figures as Gordon Lightfoot, Ian and Sylvia Tyson, Buffy Sainte-Marie, Leonard Cohen, and Joni Mitchell (among others) were normally classified as folk singers, and several of them retained their basic "folk" style of performance throughout their long careers. Their early work was usually indebted to Canadian traditional music as well as to the parallel folk revivals in Britain and the USA. Because they became popular music celebrities, it is easy to find biographical and discographical information on them in *Wikipedia*, *Canadian Encyclopedia Online*, *Oxford Music Online* and elsewhere on the internet. In the main, contributors to *Canadian Folk Music Bulletin* and *Canadian Folk Music Journal* ignored them, so you will not find much about them in the back pages of CSTM publications. There is a particularly large secondary literature on Cohen and Mitchell, from which one might select Nancy Wetherell's "Leonard Cohen: Poems Set to Music"⁹⁰ and Lloyd Whitesell's "Harmonic Palette in Early Joni Mitchell."⁹¹ To go beyond, one simply has to follow up the bibliographical references in the sources cited above.

Notes

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