

A Coal Mining Heritage: Reflections of a Miner's Son

Wilfred A. Gallant

In the town ...you don't sleep easy, often the earth will tremble and roll, when the earth is restless miners die, bone and blood is the price of coal." (Peggy Seeger & Ewan MacColl, "The Ballad of Springhill")

The coal mining industry in Cape Breton, Nova Scotia, has a most distinct history, culture, and solitary spirit. Part of this uniqueness arises out of the hardships of a miner's work. Cape Breton miners in particular are bonded by a distinct history of social and financial disadvantage.¹ Music has been a common way by which such disadvantage has been discussed and dealt with. Indeed, much of the music and poetry to originate from Cape Breton reflects the spirit of its mining communities and speaks to the courage and fortitude of its people. In particular, traditional songs commonly composed by its natives are used to recount the past, situate the present and forecast the future. Such songs are reflected in the hearts and minds of many a miner and their families who embrace and remain true to traditional songs throughout their lifetimes.² Traditional songs in Cape Breton are omnipresent. This is evidenced in their ubiquitous incorporation into personal, interpersonal, family, and the larger community events.

Traditional songs often reflect the lived experiences of the writer. Traditional coal mining songs are perfect examples of this, as they have served and continue to serve as a vehicle of personal and social expression. The Men of the Deeps and other local Cape Breton performers such as Rita McNeil, the Barra McNeils, the Rankins and John Allen Cameron have been important local agents in the dissemination of traditional song and the offering of a sense of culture and identity. Coal mining songs serve as a vehicle of personal and social expression, and this article conveys how music and lyrics mirror individual and collective mining experiences. This article presents songs aligned with and designed to promulgate rich traditional music written around the coal-mining industry. The songs reflect upon the historical, cultural and spiritual impacts of the coal mining industry on the lives of people in the coal mining town of New Waterford, Cape Breton, Nova Scotia. Specifically, I will demonstrate how the music and lyrics created by a coal-miner's son echo both an individual and a collective coal mining experience. At the end of the piece I offer four songs entitled: "The Wet, Dark, Dusty Seam" (past influence), "New Waterford's Calling" (present condition), "La Joie Du Paradis" ("The Joy of

Heavenly Bliss") (religious and spiritual context), and "Bringing up the Coal" (future hope).³ These compositions reflect my life as a miner's boy and they convey my thoughts about and feelings for the people of Cape Breton's mining communities.

As music is autobiographical, so is this article.⁴ I use the Acadian, Irish, Atlantic, country and gospel music that I was shaped by to illustrate a sense of the past, present and future coal mining life in Cape Breton. My aim here is to illustrate and express the ways in which traditional music influences the course of our lives. In particular, I am interested in capturing and underlining the interrelationship between traditional music and the art of helping others.⁵ Indeed, it has been my love of traditional music that has influenced my choice of career in social work and my use of music therapeutically within my social work practice. Many of my compositions relate to the people of the Maritimes and speak of happy times and of not so happy times. Yet, although reflective of Maritimes life, they also reflect universal themes and emotions. The songs are being offered here as a possible source of meaning and direction in life, and as a means by which listeners can use the spirit of music as a springboard for personal inspiration and as a way to help those in need of comfort and understanding.

Songs of Past and Present

The inhabitants of Cape Breton and Nova Scotia are accustomed to mine disasters such as the "Springhill Bump" of 1958, which was depicted in MacColl and Seeger's "Ballad of Springhill". There are mixed emotions about the present condition of the coal industry, as well as a reservation in the minds of some as to whether or not it is worth the risks involved to re-employ coal miners. Over the years many lives have been lost to black lung disease ("their lungs are worse than a smoker's"), and the damage to the environment created by fossil fuel is well known.⁶ A song by J. Handel, "Dust in the Air", vividly describes the medical implications: "Dust in the air, all through the mine, it's concrete on your lungs and you're old before your time."⁷ Indeed, my own family's experience reflects disaster, death, and

illness. For example, my grandfather broke his back in the coal mine. His 26-year-old son, who had a wife who was three months pregnant, was crushed to death by falling stones. My father ended up with silicosis as a result of the chilling burden of poisonous coal dust on his lungs. “Wet, Dark, Dusty Seam” captures these events. This song is dedicated to my father, a Cape Breton coal miner, and reflects my perception of his life in the mines and the admiration and affection I hold for him, his values and his commitment to family, life, community and the environment.

The present condition of Cape Breton coal mining is no less discouraging than its history. Recent years have brought a stripping of the mines and with it, a tumultuous restructuring of personal livelihood, family structure and community sustainability. For those of us who have grown up in mining communities, a cultural identity exists which colours our thoughts and feelings.⁸ This culture is rich in vivid reflections of the battles and unrest between the unions and the coal company. It is also forthright in assessing the current situation of the mines. The idleness which has befallen the people of Cape Breton and the shattering impact of the last coal mine closing have left many people with a sense of despair and no hope for any meaningful future in their native community. I composed “New Waterford’s Calling” in an attempt to convey these sentiments.

“New Waterford’s Calling” speaks of the sadness which comes from the closing of the last coal mine. It also expresses my personal yearning to return to my roots. Reflecting on the closure, I wrote the song following a concert by the Barra McNeils at the Windsor Casino in 2001, at which they sang Dougie MacLean’s beautiful and heart-wrenching “Caledonia”. The purpose of “New Waterford’s Calling” is to draw the listener back to his or her roots. The song has a tinge of nostalgia and an ache and craving to return home. It aims to capture the mood and spirit of the men who have mined the coal – their lives, their history and their future. The major themes include the scenic beauty of New Waterford experienced in four seasons, the warmth of summer air, dancing and music, recalling fond tales of the past and miner friends not to be forgotten, a thirst to go back to one’s roots, pride in one’s heritage, the excitement of return, renewal of friendships and acquaintances, discouragement at the closing of the mines and the loss of a “way of life”, and fear for the future. I hope that in the symbolism of the lyrics miners and their families may discover personal meaning.

Consolations of Religion

While recognising the appalling conditions which persist in Cape Breton, it is nonetheless important to bear witness to the influence which religion has exerted on its inhabitants, and, in particular, to the spiritual dimension of my own French Acadian heritage. The Acadians have always been known as a cohesive group, tightly bound by family and community, and strong in language, religion and spirit.⁹ Commitment to religion and a courageous spirit have enabled many francophones to survive severe historic and cultural hardships, including expulsion from Nova Scotia in the 1750s. My parents, with their strong sense of faith and loyalty, managed to survive the ordeal of the mines. I attribute this to their undying spiritual and religious values. When I left Nova Scotia for Ontario in 1973 to make a living as a university professor, I brought with me my religious roots and cultural heritage. This has helped me retain my sense of cultural identity as well as enabled me to cope with life away from my native land.

Drawing on this religious upbringing, I have composed several items that would fall under the category of “sacred songs” or musical pieces related to supernatural phenomena.¹⁰ One of them is a song entitled “La Joie du Paradis” (“The Joy of Heavenly Bliss”), which I composed for my mother and father in gratitude for the hardships they endured and the sacrifices they made on their children’s behalf.¹¹ They toiled to ensure that we would all have a decent post-secondary education. The origin of this song can be found in the spiritual richness of my parents’ lives, the influence that this had upon us when we were growing up, and the impact they still exert through their abiding belief in Judeo-Christian principles. This song refers to the French Acadian and Catholic belief that there is a reward for one’s labour, for those who trust in God and attempt to carry out God’s will in their daily lives. “La Joie du Paradis” thus celebrates the life of my parents and the pride and joy I have in being their child.

The Future

When looking to the future of the coal mining industry in Cape Breton, one must pay close attention to the lessons of the past. A nation ignorant of its history is doomed to repeat it.¹² The price that was paid for coal in human suffering and death cannot be paid again. Yet there are some grounds for optimism. The danger of coal mining has now been reduced by the use of the mechanical miner, and the pollution of the mining towns by coal dust can be virtually eliminated.¹³ Though some are happy with the final

closure of the mines, there are others who would willingly go back down. Alistair MacLeod, world-renowned for his novel *No Great Mischief* and, for a brief time, a miner himself, speaks highly of miners who enjoy working in the mines. He suggests, with some authority, that if fifteen mines opened tomorrow in Cape Breton there would be a large pool of eager applicants.¹⁴ Such eagerness suggests an enduring spirit of the mines which draws generations of men and women to the industry.

There is a promise of a future role for coal as a valuable Canadian energy resource.¹⁵ The increasing price of gas and oil, a resulting emphasis on conversion from oil to coal, and the plentiful supply of coal in this region are currently fuelling efforts to bring the mines back to life. Most recently, Nova Scotia Premier John Hamm confirmed plans to revive mining in Cape Breton with its over 300 million tonnes of coal.¹⁶ With this comes a real sense of optimism for the comeback of the coal industry.¹⁷ Moreover, there is increasing confidence that the Cape Breton coal mining industry can viably compete in the world market. According to Stewart, there are a number of technologies that can produce an environment-friendly coal-powered plant free of harmful emissions.¹⁸ For example, the technology already used at Point Aconi substantially meets current emission standards, and the new Genesee 3 power plant is the most advanced coal-fired facility ever built in Canada. A \$90 million investment in clean air technologies cuts nitrogen oxide emissions in half, and stops 99.8 percent of fine particulate from reaching the atmosphere.¹⁹

This is good news for Cape Breton—and indeed, for the Cape Breton miners and their families. The revival of the coal industry will bring the much-needed infrastructure and economic stability that had previously been lost. It is to be hoped that this will also revive traditional song and prose as well as create the energy to bring forth new traditions. In the past music has served a variety of purposes in Cape Breton. Most commonly, it has been a source of inspiration and healing in the hardest moments of life. It has been bright and heartening, providing cheerfulness and levity to counteract the sources of gloom. Today there is need for the creation of new music which sings of hope for those who have

dedicated their lives to the coal industry and of promise for a new generation of miners involved in the resurgence of the industry. “Bringing up the Coal” was composed with the intent of providing an encouraging view of the future in Cape Breton while at the same time remaining respectful of past experience. It encourages the listener to anticipate a brighter future. With its witty lyrics and brisk style of delivery, this song might be classified under O’Donnell’s category of “humorous songs”.²⁰ It has been said that there exists a kernel of truth in all humour. The song is my tribute to the spirit of the miners, to the moral fibre of the families and individuals who with courage and determination hold on to hope for a better future in this economically depressed region.

Conclusion

As I have shared my songs with other Cape Bretoners, including sons and daughters, grandsons and granddaughters, nieces and nephews, they have commented that the words of these four songs echo their own sentiments, that of their own mining families, and those of countless others who struggled with the dangers and catastrophes of the mines. In the foregoing I have tried to show how newly-composed coal mining songs can serve, in the spirit of traditional music, as a medium of individual expression embedded in and mirroring the experience of growing up in a mining community. As a miner’s son reflecting on my roots, I have offered my understanding of the past, present and future of mining in Cape Breton as well as the spiritual influence of my Acadian heritage. I have tried to demonstrate how songs can depict the legacy of the past, the reality of the present, and a hope for the future. There is a rich symbolism in the body of music written about the mines and miners of Nova Scotia. Though it remains to be seen whether or not coal mining will be effectively revived in Cape Breton, it is nonetheless certain that islanders will continue to sing about their homeland and about the miners who have bravely weathered the storms of uncertainty and upheaval.

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Notes

¹ Cameron, 1992.

² Alvin, 1966, Benenson, 1981; O'Donnell, 1984.

³ These four songs are printed (with tunes) immediately following this article.

⁴ Gervais, 2005.

⁵ Gallant, Holosko & Gallant, 2002.

⁶ *Reader's Digest*, 2005, pp. 7 & 14.

⁷ Men of the Deeps, 2005.

⁸ Men of the Deeps, 2005.

⁹ Johah, 2004.

¹⁰ O'Donnell, 1984.

¹¹ This song was composed in French but the following translation is provided for the convenience of anglophone readers:

1. My father's testimony to life, my mother's courage, have been for me such a treasure.

They have provided us on our way a living example of Christ in the world.

2. Jesus, bread of life, food of the kingdom, for me such an amazing grace.

Give us this day comfort in our sorrow to enlighten our hearts.

REFRAIN: The joy of heavenly bliss, let us lift up our arms

And sing out all together the music sung by angels.

¹² Browne, 2003.

¹³ Stewart, 2004; EPCOR, 2005

¹⁴ MacDonald, 2005.

¹⁵ *Coal in Nova Scotia*, 2005.

¹⁶ *CBC News*, 2004.

¹⁷ Stewart, 2004; *Coal in Nova Scotia*, 2005.

¹⁸ Stewart, 2004.

¹⁹ EPCOR, 2005.

²⁰ O'Donnell, 1984.

[Editors' note: The songs on the following pages are reproduced exactly as submitted by Dr. W. Gallant. For technical reasons we were unable to add pagination or make minor editorial corrections.]

The Wet, Dark, Dusty Seam

(A Miner's Reflection on Reap'ing The Coal)

♩ = 63

Words and Music by Wilfred Gallant
Composed and Copyrighted 1998

The musical score is written in treble clef with a key signature of two sharps (F# and C#) and a common time signature (C). The tempo is marked as ♩ = 63. The score consists of seven staves of music, each with a corresponding line of lyrics. Chord symbols are placed above the notes: D, G, D, G, A, C7, D, A, A7, D, G, A7, D, A7, D, G, A, A7, D, E7, A, A7, D.

1 It's ear - ly in the morn - ing be - fore the break of
I lost my soul - mate bro - ther Joe to a fa - tal coal slime
With bea - ten brow, there's ho - nor and much more, 'mi - ner

4 dawn, our chil - dren snug - led warm - ly their blan - kets tight - ly
fall, my fa - ther's heart was bro - ken his own back crushed and
pride". Our dreams are in our chil - dren who take life in it's

8 drawn. Each day be - neath the o - cean down the cold steel
all. Yet fa - ther's still I'm called to dig the coal, 'midst pe - rils yet un -
stride. Through the hall of high - er lear - ning with chil - dren of their

12 road, we're dri - ven like our fa - thers were, the pick - spade coal to
told, where the box - car takes me on my way to/the wet, dark, dus - ty
own, we pray that God not lead them down the dark, black, dus - ty

16 load. As mi - ner men we're bro - thers strong, so
hole. My mo - ther knew the ha - zards her
stone. I would not trade this mi - ner life for

20 fond and close - ly tied. In the frost, chilled dar - kened coal mine, there are
faith was firm and sound. She could not hide the heart - aches of her
for - tune, wealth or fame. Just leave me with my mi - ner friends 'til my

24 tears we of - ten hide, and cov - 'ring tales of by gone days be -
pain deep un - der ground. In cou - rage brave she laid her son be -
light has lost its flame. We gave our lives in ser - vice in the

The Wet, Dark, Dusty Seam, (Continued, p. 2)

28 G C7 29 G A7 31 D

fore the sun - shine beams 'til the box - car takes us up a - bove from the
 side the cur - sed coal. The box - car took him to his rest from the
 dark for - sak - en mine. And God will cal me far be - yond from the

32 Em7 A7 33 D 34 35 F# G

wet, dark dus - ty seam. A vi - sion clear of sim - ple
 wet, dark, seam be - low.
 wet, dark, dus - ty brine.

36 D 37 Em7 38 A 39 D G

things, this seam is sil - ver streaked, through this coal we've made a

40 D 41 G A7 42 D 43 Em7 A

li - ving, it's pure dia - mond gold to me for what we've sown,

44 D/A 45 Em7 A7 46 D 47 Coda A7

we all will ful - ly reap. Yes!

48 49 D 50 Em7 51 A D

Leave me with my mi - ner friends near the peace - ful o - cean stream when

52 G A7 53 G/D D Em7 54 A7 55 D 56

God will call me far be - yond from the wet, dark, dus - ty seam

New Waterford's Calling

♩. = 66

Words and Music by: Melanie and Wilfred Gallant
Composed and Copyrighted June, 2001

The musical score is written in 3/4 time with a tempo of quarter note = 66. It consists of six systems of music, each with a vocal line and a piano accompaniment line. The key signature is one flat (F major/D minor). The score includes 22 numbered measures with corresponding chord symbols (F, C, G, G7) placed above the vocal line. The lyrics are: "Call me home to my roots, oh New Waterford's calling. Call me back near the mines stretched far 'neath the sea. On the rocks of the shore splash the waves of the ocean, it's a beauty that's dear to my".

1 F 2 C 3 G 4 C 5 6 G

7 C 8 9 C 10 F

11 12 C 13

14 15 C 16 G

17 C 18 19 F

20 C 21 22 G⁷

Call me home to my roots, oh New
Wa - ter - ford's cal - ling. Call me back near the
mines stretched far 'neath the sea. On the
rocks of the shore splash the waves of the
o - cean, it's a bea - ty that's dear to my

New Waterford's Callaig (Continued p. 2)

23 C 24 25 F

heart. 1. The
2. Please
3. The
4. Can't

wa - ter like
call me in
pit head is
wait for the

26 C 27 G 28 C

1. dia - monds they mir - ror the moon and
2. spring - time when buds break through, in/the
3. closed now all min - ers have gone. They've
4. day to go back to my town and

29 30 D7 31 G 32

1. dance like the stars in the sky What
2. warmth of a fresh sum - me breeze. Or
3. shut all the mines near the sea. I'm
4. I'll spend my last days by shore. I'm

33 34 35

1. mar - vel - lous sto - ries of old I re -
2. once in the au - tumn when leaves turn to -
3. yearn - ing to go back to New Wa - ter -
4. long - ing to be home in New Wa - ter -

For Each Verse Go to Interlude, then to Refrain.

36 C 37 38 G 39 C

1. call of my min - er friends home by the sea.
2. gold or when old mines are shel - tered with snow.
3. ford, where the tales of the mines will be told.
4. ford where I'll spend my last days be - fore dawn.

La Joi Du Paradis

Words and Music by Wilfred A. Gallant
 Composed and Copyrighted Aug. 29, 1997
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♩ = 100

1. La vie de mon pere, le cou - rage de ma mere pour
 2. Je - sus pain vi - vant nou - ri - ture du ray - aume pour

1. moi si grand tre - sor. _____ Ils nous ont don -
 2. moi une grace en - tiere. _____ Don - ne nous i -

1. ne sur no - tre che - min, l'ex - em - ple du Sei -
 2. ci se - cour en dou - leur pour sou - la - ger nos

1. gneur. _____ La Joie du pa - ra -
 2. coeurs. _____

dis _____ en - le - vons donc nos lar -

mes et chan - tons tous en - sem - ble la mu

- sique que jou - sant les anges. _____

Bringing Up The Coal

Dedicated to the Miners of Cape Breton Island
 Music and Lyrics by: Dr. Wilfred A. Gallant
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 Adapted from the song: I'm Happy, Yes So Happy
 Copyright 2000

♩ = 120

1 ^D 2 ^G 3 ^D 4 ^{A7}

Now I'm hap - py, yes so hap - py, that they're bring - ing min - ing back our fos - sil fuel. Oh I'm

5 ^D 6 ^G 7 ^D 8 ^{A7} ^D

hap - py, yes so hap - py, that all min - ers have a fu - ture with this jewel. They all
 Now the
 There's no
 Coal mine

9 ^D ^{A7} 10 ^G ^{A7} 11 ^D 12 ^{A7}

say: "The mines are down; there's no use to hang a - round. but I have faith and hope and trust be - yond com - pare. I will
 young can laugh and play and most kin with pick and spade can un - earth the dia - mond coal that's down be - low. There's no
 Is land can com - pare, or a coun - try that's more fair with the tar - tan that the folk so proud - ly wear. To fid - dle
 whist les blow and toll in the air you can be - hold, count - less fac - es that are warm dis - pite the cold. For they

13 ^D ^{A7} 14 ^G ^{A7} 15 ^D ^{A7} 16 ^D

march with - ban ners proud; bring back min ing to our town And I will sing to all in joy - ful fes - tive sound. (R.)
 use to leave this sand for a far and dis - tant land, we can stay to hear the breez - es off the shore. (R.)
 tunes we'll sing and dance, giv - en now a se - cond chance to a - bide in this fine Is - land of C. B. (R.)
 know that spring is here as the blos - soms all ap - pear where min ers bring up coal so dear with rig and gear. (R.)