

***Songs of the Newfoundland Outports. Recorded by Kenneth Peacock; notes by Edith Fowke, produced by Kelly Russell (St. John's Nfld : Pigeon Inlet Productions, 1984)***

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**Songs of the Newfoundland Outports**  
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"Songs of the Newfoundland Outports," a recent release from Pigeon Inlet Productions, is a small but significant sampling of field recordings made by Kenneth Peacock during his extensive collecting of Newfoundland folksongs between 1951 and 1961. The record is accompanied by a booklet which contains some comments by Peacock on his collecting experiences as well as the texts of all fifteen songs with an introduction and annotations by Edith Fowke. The record jacket is handsomely designed, and the notes are easy to read. Each song text is headed with a photograph of the singer, which is a particularly nice touch. The songs on this album were selected by Professor Fowke and Kelly Russell, who took charge of the technical aspects of production and is the driving force behind Pigeon Inlet Productions.

This record is an important contribution to the appreciation and understanding of Newfoundland songs and singing traditions. The recording quality may not be quite up to studio standards, but is remarkably good for field recordings. The singers, for the most part, have strong voices and true pitch, and the lyrics are clearly audible. "Songs of the Newfoundland Outports" will appeal to the folk music aficionado who is interested in hearing songs in their original setting. It should also prove a valuable classroom asset.

The fifteen songs on this record represent many aspects of Newfoundland culture. Side one is devoted to songs of British origin, while side two contains native Newfoundland material. These songs also provide a good sampling of the different regions on Newfoundland. The west coast of the island, the

southern shore of the Avalon Peninsula, central Newfoundland and the south coast are all represented. Also included are songs from the ethnic minorities of the province; a Gaelic milling song from the Cape-Breton derived communities of the Codroy Valley, and a French song from the francophone area of the west coast. I was touched to hear this latter song, sung by Mrs. Joséphine Costard, a consummate performer who graced the summer folk festivals in St. John's until her death a few years ago. A fine example of the highly ornamented Irish singing style is found in Patrick Rossiter's rendition of "The Loss of the 'Eliza'." Other songs on the record adhere to the more standard Anglo-American singing style once common throughout the north eastern part of this continent.

The varied seasonal work situations which characterized Newfoundland's economy in the past are also documented in the songs on this album. As might be expected, a number of songs reflect the importance of the sea to Newfoundlanders. "The Loss of the 'Eliza'" is a fine example of the shipwreck song, a huge category of native ballads in this province. "The Sealer's Ball" and "The Ferryland Sealer" attest to the former vitality of this once important activity. The song "Labrador" reflects the longstanding pattern of seasonal migration from Conception Bay to fish "down on the Labrador" in the summer months. Two lumber camp songs, "Twin Lakes" and "The River Driver's Lament" are also included. From the early 1900s, winter work in isolated lumbercamps represented an important source of income for Newfoundland men. The existence of this inland industry, which contributed greatly to the development of singing traditions here as in other parts of North America, is often ignored in favour of the apparently more glamorous traditions of the sea. Those who chose the material for this record are to be congratulated on their effort to provide such a well balanced

sampling of the wide variety of songs to be found in Newfoundland.

In notes included with the record, Kenneth Peacock describes his experience during fieldwork, and gives us some insight into the personalities of his informants. It is apparent that he had genuine respect and liking for these singers and their culture. However, Peacock's notes leave many significant gaps which only he could fill. For example, he alludes to the fact that some singers preferred specific types of songs. Charlotte Decker sang mainly love songs, while Annie Walters favoured "story" songs and Arthur Nicolle "liked work songs of various types" (actually occupational songs, sung about jobs rather than work songs like sea shantys which are sung to accompany the work itself). But we are given no insight into how the personalities or life experiences of these singers might have shaped their repertoires, and this is unfortunate.

This lack of contextual information also hinders the appreciation of specific songs on this album. "The Fisher Who Died in His Red" illustrates this problem most clearly. The words of this song are frequently humorous. For example, in verse five we are told,

There was never such a salter this side  
of the water

There was never such a glutton for  
eatin' cods heads.

There was never a crackie\* who could  
chaw tobaccy

Like old Skipper Jones who died in his  
bed.

But the tune of this song is clearly a lament, and it was sung by Patrick Rossiter in an apparently straight-faced manner. Listening to the song, we can only wonder whether it was intended to be funny or sincere. This is a question that the collector could have answered by asking the singer, and by taking note of the performance style and audience response.

If a collected folksong is to have any future use, such information is vital. For

the scholar, "The Fisher Who Died in His Bed" might be useful in understanding attitudes toward work, humor and death in an outport community. But without context the song is only an enigma. For the revivalist performer, this lack of context creates problems as well. While working on this review I mentioned "The Fisher Who Died in His Bed" to Anne Lederman, a graduate student in ethnomusicology and a fine performer of traditional music. Anne said that she had wanted to perform this song when she found it in Peacock's three volume *Songs of the Newfoundland Outports*, but was unable to decide how it should be presented. When the Newfoundland folk revival band Figgy Duff recorded this song on their album "Figgy Duff" they seem to have grappled with the same question. In that case, they chose to record only verses one and eight of the original eight verse text, omitting all the ambiguous elements of the song. This allowed them to treat the song a serious lament, but most of the text was lost. Such a compromise would not be necessary if we understood the attitudes of those who sang and listened to this song in its original context.

This criticism is an important one in relation to the collection of folksongs, but it detracts very little from the overall value of the record being examined here. "Songs of the Newfoundland Outports" is a carefully crafted, aesthetically pleasing production. It will be an asset to the teacher who wishes to demonstrate Newfoundland folksong traditions in the classroom, and will appeal to anyone who enjoys traditional music or wishes to know more about Newfoundland.

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\* A crackie is a small dog of no particular breed.