

Editor's Note

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Résumé de l'article

Ce bref exposé du rédacteur sortant est un appel à tous les folkloristes de la nation pour répondre aux besoins pressants de la profession en matière d'études folkloriques pragmatiques. Madame Carpenter exhorte ses collègues à s'impliquer d'avantage dans une action concertée de sensibilisation nationale qui viserait trois buts spécifiques: une meilleure compréhension premièrement, de la culture en soi et de la place prépondérante et légitime qu'y occupe l'expression folklorique; deuxièmement, de l'évolution culturelle au Canada, plus précisément du développement d'un mode de vie particulier au sein d'une grande majorité de la population, et le rôle que détient l'élément folklorique dans ce processus; enfin, de l'importance des traditions orales dans la vie de tout individu et de chaque nation. Madame Carpenter conclut qu'une telle action non seulement aiderait à combattre la dissension, la mésentente et le sentiment d'aliénation chez les Canadiens, mais servirait aussi à promouvoir la profession folklorique à la grandeur du pays.

Editor's Note*

How very tempting it is to use a swan song to reflect and review. Indeed, it would be easy to comment upon the achievements associated with this journal, to laud those many who aided and to chastise those few who impeded its progress. But that is a song to be left unsung, its notes forever reverberating through the matter of consequence itself— five issues of a handsome, academically reputable journal of a small, yet vital society. I prefer to use this opportunity to gaze forward, to suggest a direction for the future, a guide to Canadian folklorists as they journey on.

Certainly folklore is alive and well in Canada today, easily found in cities and villages, bush settlements, prairie farms, isolated hamlets — everywhere throughout the nation. The study of this material also continues; it does not, however, seem to be expanding in overall recognition and significance. A glance at the extended bibliography included in this volume might urge one to conclude that the scholarship is thriving, having blossomed considerably in recent years. Yet, closer consideration of the entries in the bibliography (which includes works from 1965 onwards) reveals that the study of material culture flourishes rather selectively, predominantly in Quebec or of specific minority local and regional groups. There are, to be sure, studies that pertain to the majority, that arise from the mainstream of the country rather than the tributaries, however large and powerful. Most such works are, however the products not of folklorists but of historians of one ilk or another, antiquarians, and the like. Clearly, folklore and its study still does not *belong* to the mainstream — it remains associated by the majority with the other, it is not their own. By this abject self-denial, majority-group Canadians — The Establishment, if you will — reject the folk roots that ought to be theirs, the foundation for the identity they likewise negate and unwittingly encourage minority-group members to ignore or deride, resulting in the present ludicrous situation in which the very existence of Canadian culture is questioned.

If material culture studies — perhaps the broadest and most interdisciplinary aspect of Canadian folk culture research — reveal this situation, how much worse then is the state of less popularly accredited and supported genres such as belief legends? The Canadian Establishment

has yet to recognize consequence in such material — colour maybe, but not meaning or, at least, meaning worth anything.

What *means* to the Establishment is what is useful — what buys, what sells, what wins elections, what keeps the peace, order, and good government of this nation running. Canadians are, at one level, an intensely pragmatic people. The tendency towards applied folklore studies, recognition of folklore whenever it is socio-politically valuable, and so on is well documented in the history of Canadian folklore activities; these same tendencies persist with, at present, sorry results.

To the majority of Canadians and the entrenched Establishment, folklore is not currently “earning its keep” and therefore is being pushed aside. Central and Anglo Canada are not showing an increased turn towards folklore. Quite the contrary — a retreat from the major area of traditions applied to social situations, namely multiculturalism in its many guises — is increasingly obvious. Not that the policy means less than it did or that the myth of the mosaic has been debunked. Rather, continued emphasis (represented in concentrated expenditure) is not necessary, for the goods have already been bought. The financial supports are no longer required; hence, they are withdrawn to be employed to bolster some other vision or need elsewhere.

Folklore enjoyed some years on the crest of multiculturalism in Central Canada but, in that time, folklorists failed to convince the nation of the significance of folklore to everyone. Instead, and sadly, folklore became more deeply associated with minorities by being attached to the multicultural bandwagon. Now folklorists have an even greater job to do in persuading Canadians that folklore is everybody’s, and it must become a concern of the discipline as a whole in Canada if we are ever to make the mark on the culture, the inroads into the government purses, the impact on the people of this country that we might desire.

Canadians may be pragmatic, but they are, as well, poets. Ours is a spiritual land — one imbued with questions of the soul, and responsive to nature, and identified with and through spiritual or at least moral-ethical qualities. Surely folklore ought to have meaning in a country that went through an international conflagration with a mystic in its highest elected office. What better voice for this land than the people’s own? It ought to sell, but we, the folklorists, must become better salesmen.

Why lament the failure of the Applebaum-Hébert Committee (or other cultural review groups before it) to recognize folklore as a cultural expression on an equal footing with opera, ballet, and novels by Atwood, Carrier, or Davies? Why not, instead, produce material that will force this recognition? We must become involved in preparing curricular material for public schools, instructional aids to teachers, encyclopedia articles, popular books with sound academic bases, and so on.

In effect, we must assume the challenge of educating Canadians about three matters of importance as follows:

1. the nature of culture, with a view to making folklore understood as a legitimate and important cultural expression;
2. the cultural evolution of this country, specifically the shaping of the way-of-life of the majority of Canadians and the role of folklore in this process;
3. the significance of folklore in every person's and every nation's life.

By so doing, we will not only encourage Canadians to combat the alienation, misunderstanding, and dissension that plague this nation, but also promote our discipline throughout the country.

We cannot afford to garrison ourselves off in our local and regional, our academic, our generic exclusiveness. If we do, we doom folklore and its study in Canada to the current level of limited tolerance, questioned academic repute, and restricted funding. On the other hand, if we grasp the dilemma by its horns, we may use the situation of cultural confusion to our advantage. We may yet demonstrate that folklore is Canadian pragmatism in poetry — the true means for Canadians to reach out to our elusive national identity, the surest means to know ourselves.

*This commentary was, in part, included in my lecture to the Royal Canadian Institute on March 18, 1984, "Our Roots, Our Identity: The Importance of Folklore to Canadian Culture."

AVANT-PROPOS (RÉSUMÉ)

Ce bref exposé du rédacteur sortant est un appel à tous les folkloristes de la nation pour répondre aux besoins pressants de la profession en matière d'études folkloriques pragmatiques. Madame Carpenter exhorte ses collègues à s'impliquer d'avantage dans une action concertée de sensibilisation nationale qui viserait trois buts spécifiques: une meilleure compréhension premièrement, de la culture en poi et de la place prépondérante et légitime qu'y occupe l'expression folklorique; deuxièmement, de l'évolution culturelle au Canada, plus précisément du développement d'un mode de vie particulier au sein d'une grande majorité de la population, et le rôle que détient l'élément folklorique dans ce processus; enfin, de l'importance des traditions orales dans la vie de tout individu et de chaque nation. Madame Carpenter conclut qu'une telle action non seulement aiderait à combattre la dissension, la mésentente et le sentiment d'aliénation chez les Canadiens, mais servirait aussi à promouvoir la profession folklorique à la grandeur du pays.



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Wood, textile and metal accessories, Uxbridge, Ontario. 20th century, 125 x 40 x 24 cm. National Museum of Man. Photo: Harry Foster, National Museum of Canada.