

A Family Heritage: The Story and Songs of Larena Clark. By Edith Fowke, with Jay Rahn. (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 1994. Pp. viii + 308)

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Volume 17, numéro 2, 1995

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1087505ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1087505ar>

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Éditeur(s)

Association Canadienne d'Ethnologie et de Folklore

ISSN

1481-5974 (imprimé)

1708-0401 (numérique)

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Citer ce compte rendu

Yocom, M. R. (1995). Compte rendu de [*A Family Heritage: The Story and Songs of Larena Clark. By Edith Fowke, with Jay Rahn. (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 1994. Pp. viii + 308)*]. *Ethnologies*, 17(2), 184–186.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1087505ar>

A Family Heritage: The Story and Songs of LaRena Clark By Edith Fowke, with Jay Rahn. (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 1994. Pp. viii + 308)

When Edith Fowke and Jay Rahn had to decide which ninety-three songs to put in this collection they had quite a task, for LaRena Clark (1904-1991) knew some 500 songs. Lucky for us they persevered, for in their book we now have the first comprehensive study of the repertoire of an Anglo-Canadian woman folk singer.

A Family Heritage is largely a collection of songs, lovingly and carefully annotated. Before the songs come eighteen pages of introductory and biographical information. The songs are followed by Rahn's six-page essay on LaRena's musical style, a two-page summary of the book, and four appendices. The songs themselves are arranged in fourteen categories: classic ballads, songs of true love, songs of false love, returned lover ballads, the [Robert] Burns connection, bawdy ballads, North American romantic ballads, comic songs, Irish songs, English songs, American songs, local Canadian songs, lumbering songs, and LaRena's compositions. The authors included those songs from LaRena's repertoire that they believed to be "unique or rare...particularly complete or well worded, or showed interesting textual or musical variations" (p. 4). Each song text comes complete with melody line and guitar chords as well as brief notes on the song text and song performances.

The appendices provide welcome information. The first offers an extensive list of books and records where variants of LaRena's songs can be found. It also describes the tunes LaRena sang and compares them to variants recorded elsewhere. "LaRena's Family Songs," the second appendix, offers a list of all the songs LaRena sang, complete with notes that tell in which records, field tapes, or books her performance of the song can be found. When applicable, the Child or Laws reference number is also included. From this list, we easily get a sense of just how broad LaRena's repertoire was. A third appendix lists all the songs on the twelve records that feature or include LaRena's work. The fourth and final appendix lists the singer's original compositions and the records on which they can be heard.

There is much to learn about traditional song and singing in this study. First of all, Fowke does her readers an important service by reminding us, in her opening sentence, that folksinging is "one art in which women have always excelled" (p. 1). She places LaRena among women such as Anna Gordon Brown (1747-1810), Francis James Child's main informant, and Bell Robertson who provided Scottish collector Gavin Greig with nearly 400 folksongs.

Fowke offers examples of how LaRena's songs celebrate Canada as homeland. She points out how the "bonny ivy tree" becomes "the bonny maple tree" (p. 143) in LaRena's "Razinberry Lane" ("Rosemary Lane" or "Home, Dearie, Home"). She also includes luminous stories about place as she discusses, for example, how LaRena came to write about tumbleweed in her 1967 composition "O Canada, Land of Our Homeland." LaRena, Fowke relates, had heard artist A. Y. Jackson tell how, as a boy, he would send notes in tumbleweed that blew across the prairies and that, sometimes, he would receive an answer back.

Fowke also keeps a sharp eye out for the startling phrase, the song with lines unknown in any other variant. So, in LaRena's "Go and Bring Me Back the Boy I Love," we are able to learn about an unusual third stanza:

Oh, my love is like a lozenger:
He is small but oh how sweet!
And if I had a crown of gold,
I would plant it at his feet. (p. 97)

Finally, Fowke provides us with information about how traditions flourish in a family setting, for LaRena's relatives learned songs in many places and brought them home. LaRena's great-grandfather, Edward John Watson, travelled all over Canada and the United States looking for songs. He passed those songs onto his son, Edward, who sang them to his daughter, Mary Frances, LaRena's mother. From her paternal grandfather, John Edward LeBarre, and her father, Ben LeBarre, who both worked their winters away in the timberwoods, LaRena learned songs of logging. From her maternal grandmother, Annie O'Neill Watson, LaRena learned many Irish ballads. Her paternal grandmother, Martha Anne Moore LeBarre, brought songs from her Quakersville, Pennsylvania home (or, should that be Quakertown, PA?). In notes to song sections and individual songs, Fowke indicates which songs LaRena learned from whom, giving valuable details about transmission and preference along gender lines in a family. Her study would have benefited from gathering all this material together in one place in the book and discussing song tradition in family settings: what happens to songs and singing when it moves from occupational settings of the lumberwoods to the family? How does individual preference in joint performance settings influence what songs are passed on—or forgotten—in a family, as Burdine and McCarthy have explored (Burdine and McCarthy 1990)? What accounts for the gendered preferences that are briefly sketched out?

Other contextual information Fowke carefully includes is equally intriguing. "I grew up in a singing family," LaRena relates in her interviews with Fowke. "Everyone in the family sang songs and my first recollections are of a big old wood stove in the kitchen all covered with white pine that my father and grandfather had built in an enormous kitchen, and people used to come to visit and

sit around the big stove, and there was a horsehair sofa, and they would sing songs. I didn't sing, I was too small, but I listened and every song they ever sang I knew by heart" (p. 17). LaRena also says that she learned all the songs during a "period of transition" (p. 15) after her father's boat-landing and their home burnt down, when the family—grandparents, parents, children—moved about, following Ben LeBarr's work. And years later as she performed on public stages, LaRena told Fowke, "[W]hen I would sing the songs [that my mother had sung] I would sing like my mother and I'd be thinking of my mother...And each ancestor when I reverted to either song that any one of them had sung I'd sing it the way they had sung it. To me it wasn't a song, it was an ancestor" (pp. 16, 17). I find myself wanting to know much more about these contexts for traditional learning in LaRena's life—and the others that are briefly mentioned. What did the songs come to mean to a family "in transition," moving about from place to place after being so swiftly wrenched from their home? And, though I certainly agree with Fowke's decision to honor LaRena's request not to speak of her previous marriages or her children, I do wish we could have known if singing played any part in the raising of LaRena's own family. What did LaRena's public singing later in life—with the support of her husband Gordon—mean to her? One of the particular challenges in family folklore, as Larry Danielson and others note, is finding ways to include the more troublesome, painful aspects of family life so that our explorations escape the half-truths of nostalgia (Danielson 1994).

With its details on traditional singing and its meticulous annotations, Edith Fowke and Jay Rahn's work represents a valuable addition to folksong and family study. *A Family Heritage* allows us to see a singer whose repertoire is based not only on reverence for Canadian history, but also on the realization of the role that the family group plays in the maintenance of traditional culture.

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