

## It remains for Someone to Take up the Task of Producing an Authentic History in Song of Canada

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## Note critique/Review Article

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# It remains for Someone to Take up the Task of Producing an Authentic History in Song of Canada

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Jon BARTLETT

Edith Fowke and Alan Mills. *Singing Our History: Canada's Story in Song*, Toronto, Doubleday Canada Limited, pp. 249, \$15.95 ppbk.

*Canada's Story in Song* (Toronto, 1960) is now reissued as *Singing Our History*, a revised and enlarged edition of the earlier work: its purpose remains "to present Canada's story as it has been reflected in song."

In this new edition, ninety songs are grouped chronologically and thematically in sixteen sections. The titles of these sections give an indication of the development of modern Canada and its principal primary occupations: "Before the White Man", "The Discovery of Canada", "Voyageurs and Missionaries", "The Coming of the English", "Wars Against the United States", "The Rebellion of 1837-38", "The Country Grows", "Towards Confederation", "The Opening of the West", "Sailors and Fishermen", "Shantyboys", "Cowboys and Homesteaders", "Miners and Prospectors", "Railroad Men", "Industrial Conflict" and "The Depression".

The songs range in date from medieval times to 1954, and were collected in every province. Of the ninety, sixty-nine appear to have been collected orally, some two dozen by Dr. Fowke herself. The dozen or so songs not collected orally are drawn from documents and books where the printed lines give evidence (in some cases, slight) that they might have been sung. An appropriate tune is then attached. Ernest Gagnon is the earliest collector represented (with six songs); the work of other francophone collectors and editors (Barbeau, Tiersot, Anselme) appears, too. English-speaking collectors include Fowke, Thomas, Creighton, Doyle, Cass-Beggs, Mackenzie, Greenleaf and Mansfield, Peacock, Mills, and Johnston, amongst others.

The book is well indexed, with notes given on the provenance of most songs. A book list and recors list are appended. The ubiquitous error "International Workers of the World" appears in the index, though that organization's proper title (Industrial Workers of the World) appears in the text. Two of the songs from P.J. Thomas are marred : his "Far From Home", an 1858/9 Fraser River gold rush song, is reduced to three verses, instead of the seven printed in *Songs of the Pacific Northwest* or the original twelve ; his "Greenhorn Song" appears not in its original collected version, but in its slightly emended (and inferior) version printed in *Songs and Stories of Canada*, the guidebook to the B.C. Education Ministry's twelve-part audiotape series. (I note in passing that "The Bonnets of Bonnie Dundee", the tune to which Dr. Fowke has set the 1832 verses "Farewell to Mackenzie", was unknown at the time, it being made popular in the 1850's to accompany Sir Walter Scott's rewrite of the old broadside.)

The book, as I have said, is a "revised and enlarged edition" of *Canada's Story in Song*. It is instructive to compare the contents of the two.

The new version contains eighteen more songs ; one song, "The Frank Slide", is excised. The additions are mostly representative of the western provinces, so conspicuously (though with good reason) absent from the earlier book. Seven of them are from P.J. Thomas' collection : "Far From Home" and "The Greenhorn Song" noted above, together with "Song of the Sockeye", "Teaming Up the Cariboo Road", "Where the Fraser River Flows" and "Bowser's Seventy-Twa" from B.C., and "The Harvest Excursion" from Prince Edward Island. Edith Fowke contributes "Jerry, Go Ile the Car" and "Life in a Prairie Shack" (both collected from Capt. Charles Cates of North Vancouver), "The Red River Valley", "Farewell to Canada", "Riel's Retreat", "The Estevan Strike" and from Pierre Berton, "The C.P.R. Line". Barbara Cass-Beggs contributes "Riel's Farewell" and "Flunky Jim" and Peacock "Drill Ye Heroes". The final new song is a parody of "The Red River Valley" collected in Winnipeg in 1975 by Rika Ruebsaat, which Thomas has found to have come from the pen of journalist Chris Dafoe in the late 1950's.

The organization of the two books, with the exception of the added chapters, is identical. The chapter or section heads are the same throughout, except that "Lumberjacks" becomes "Shantyboys", "Modern Times" is dropped, its material being distributed elsewhere, and "Railroad Men", "Industrial Conflict" and "The Depression" are added. Many of the notes to the songs are recapitulated in full. The new Introduction closely follows the old, except that the notes on piano accompaniment have been omitted.

The book in appearance is now much handsomer. Gone are the cluttered scores, replaced by melody line with guitar chords; the page is thus much cleaner. Gone too is the long line of text so wearing to the eye; the text is now in a compact double column.

There are, however, flaws in *Singing Our History* which I believe go to the very heart of the book. These are errors in selection and interpretation which were apparent in 1960 and which have become increasingly disturbing over the years. This reissue offered an occasion, surely, to re-examine, from the ground up as it were, our notions about song and history and their interrelationship. What were the shortcomings of *Canada's Story in Song*? What has happened in the years since its publication to our concepts of history and song, and what has happened since then in the fields of collection, publication and analysis?

It is no easy task to produce a "story in song". Which is to take the uppermost hand? Should the songs generate the history, or should they be chosen because they illustrate historical events? What if songs are lacking? Are there songs which are culturally significant but unrelated to events of historical moment? What, indeed, is the "history" we are speaking of?

Modern notions of history are not limited to "great men" and "great events". In this century we have seen the steady decline of military and political history and the equally steady growth of economic and social history. Canada, perhaps more than most western countries, has profited by this process, being poor in the former categories and rich in the latter. We have no Washingtons and Jeffersons, and to set up W.L. Mackenzie and John A. Macdonald in their place is to invite derision. On the other hand, Canadian social and economic history is rich indeed; even if one adopts the European concept of history which disregards the role and even the very existence of the indigenous peoples, one has only to think of early exploration and the fur trade, the struggle for the infant colony's survival in the face of an immensely hostile environment and a tiny economic surplus, the opening of the west for homesteading and the massive urbanization consequent to the Second World War.

It is precisely Canadian social and economic history that is called for in such a "story in song". "History from below" comes precisely from the people who made (and make), sang and passed on the songs we call "folk" and "traditional". Our "story in song" should thus be an account, *in their own words*, of how people made (and make) their living, and not the administrative, military and political history which appears to be the framework of *Singing Our History*.

That this is, in fact, the framework used is supported by an examination of the order and titles of the chapters of the book. The

book seems to fall naturally into three parts : the first, of four songs, a timeless period, ahistorical, of Indians and Inuit (Chapter 1) ; the second, of forty-five songs, the "real" history of Canada from foundation myth (Chapter 2) to the last frontier (Chapter 9) ; the third, of forty-one songs, again ahistorical, of songs of work and of industrial conflict.

It is the framework of the second part which gives the book its old-fashioned flavour. Of forty-five songs, some twenty have to do with war and warfare. While it was possible in nineteenth century Europe to frame a history with battles and kings, the attempt in twentieth century Canada distorts our history.

That this framework is inappropriate and inadequate is clear when we turn to the organization of the third part, the "history" following Riel to date. Quite simply, there is no framework ; the songs are grouped only by occupation (Chapters 10 to 14) and by theme (Chapters 15 and 16), and chronologically within each chapter. Absent from the notes to these forty-one songs is any sense of development, whether social or technological. The tensions arising from the growing organizations of labour and its ever-more-frequent collisions with capital are dealt with not in the relevant chapter, but in the penultimate chapter of "Industrial conflict", as if "industrial conflict" functioned independently of the occupations in which it arose. The treatment in that chapter is in any event extremely thin. The massive technological changes that have occurred in the course of the present century in logging, mining and farming are reflected neither in the notes nor in the selection of the songs.

In fine, the framework used by Dr. Fowke represents a conception of history which is one-dimensional and class-biased. As Brian Smith notes in *The Poetry of the Canadian People*, of the "dignitaries in top hats" pictured in the famous photograph taken at the driving of the last spike on the CPR,

we have their memoirs, their biographies, volumes of carefully footnoted correspondence, every known detail of their lives carefully preserved for posterity. (p. 13)

But of those who worked and died on the line, we know next to nothing. Histories built from such sources naturally reflect the view of the world seen from the top, and reflect, too, the iconographic nature of official history — history as "dateable events". The problem for a would-be "historian in song" in using such a framework is the false and jarring note produced by the songs one must perforce publish to illustrate these "dateable events".

A case in point is "An Anti-Fenian Song" (pp. 93, 98-99). Dr. Fowke notes than

The Canadian volunteers who went out to fight the Fenians felt proud of their feat, and as they returned to their homes they made up an "Anti-Fenian Song" set to the tune of the American Civil War hit, "Tramp, Tramp, Tramp, the Boys Are Marching".

Without questioning whether the song was actually sung, let us glance at the words :

(verse 2)

Should this poor deluded band dare set foot upon our land  
Or molest the rights of England's noble Queen,  
They will meet with British pluck — English, Irish, Scots, Canuck,  
And they'll wish themselves at home again, I ween !

This is jingoism. It is the voice neither of the government nor of the people, but of the one *disguised* as the other. One has only to compare it to the voice of the songs of the World Wars — from "We Are Sam Hughes' Army" to "Farewell to Sicily" — to recognize that it rings false. Were this song the only survival from the period (which it is not : see Ralph Connor's *Postscript to Adventure*), its inclusion might be justified under the old-fashioned notion of history, but it is not the authentic voice of the people. Says A.J.M. Smith,

If we examine the poetry of the pioneer and emigrant in the days when the Canadian provinces were struggling for constitutional self-government, we shall find, I believe, that . . . colonialism reveals itself most surely in the abstract and conventional patriotic poetry, the ostensible subject of which might be devotion to the Empire — or even to Canada — while true nationalism rises out of the local realism of the pioneer.

— quoted in Davis, *op. cit.*, p. 24

In 1960 when *Canada's Story in Song* was first published, such authentic voices were perhaps unheard outside Quebec and the Maritimes. Since that date, much has been added to the corpus of Canadian song. To speak only of major publications, Newfoundland is represented by Peacock (1965), Leach (1965), Karpeles (1971) and Ryan (1978) ; Prince Edward Island by Gledhill (1973), Dibblee (1973) and Arsenault (1980) ; New Brunswick by Manny (1968), Creighton (1962 and 1971) and Cormier (1978) ; and Nova Scotia by O'Donnell (1975). Quebec has added, amongst others, books by Barbeau (1962 and 1982), Carrier (1977-1979) Béland (1982) and the massive indexes of Laforte. Ontario has seen significant books by Fowke (1965 and 1970), and by Lemieux (1963-4 and 1974-5). The west has seen the publications of Cass-Beggs (1967 and 1973), Ferland (1979) and Thomas (1979). Three general and popular Canada-wide books, Fowke's *More Folk Songs of Canada* and *The Penguin Book of Canadian Folk Songs* and Cass-Beggs' *Canadian Folk Songs for the Young* have seen print since 1960. These, together with specialist books such as

Anthony Hopkins' collection of Forces songs, *Songs from the Front and Rear* (1979), have been the leading edge in Canadian folk song publication, followed by such an outpouring of monographs as to overwhelm the pre-1960 material and to redirect the course of Canadian folk song studies.

We have seen, too, the establishment of the *Canada Folk Music Journal* and of *Canadian Folklore canadien*. Both the Canadian Folk Music Society and the Folklore Studies Association of Canada have grown rapidly over the period, the one drawing renewed support from singers and teachers, the other from the Departments of Folklore at Memorial and Laval. Local folk music societies have grown, too, increasing the number of singers of these songs and, through local publications, the general interest in their communities. Massive "folk" festivals have been established, national and local radio and TV shows have come and gone.

Is this work reflected in either the songs or the notes in *Singing Our History*? In a word, no. It is as though it had never existed.

This failing is most evident in the treatment of French-language songs. The same eleven songs greet us as we turn the pages. There is nothing here to represent the forty years of work of Lemieux, nothing of Arsenault's work in Prince Edward Island, nor of Cormier's in New Brunswick, nor of Ferland's in Manitoba, nor of Gerald Thomas' in Newfoundland. Only Cass-Beggs' "Riel's Retreat", collected in Saskatchewan, is new to the book. With the solitary exception of Barbeau's locomotive fireman ("Chauffe fort"), francophones are exactly where we left them when we graduated from grade school; red-shirted, gay (though that now suspect work has disappeared from the translation of "The Raftsmen", to be replaced by "jolly"), and either trappers, voyageurs or lumberjacks. Was there nothing in song to reflect social development since the days of Lesage? Could not even "Mon pays" have been included?

A third of Canada's labour force is now unionized, the result of years of struggle, struggle which produced many songs from across the country. Is this history to be represented only by Joe Hill's "Where the Fraser River Flows", Thomas' collected "Bowser's Seventy-Twa" and the execrable "Estevan" (surely the most unsingable and certainly the most unsung song ever penned by a party hack)? Where are the industrial songs from Ontario, where the miner's song from Glace Bay, Springhill and Buchans, where the needle trade songs from Montreal?

Absent, too, any songs from the World Wars or any songs to indicate that Canada's population is not exclusively of British, French or aboriginal extraction. For a history in song of such a multicultural country, this book is remarkably Waspish.

Dr. Fowke's role in the popularization of Canadian song is not a minor one. From her work in radio, in publishing and in teaching, she has been, in anglophone Canada, a central figure, associated with many of the developments in folk music over the past thirty years. There is no doubt that she is aware of the resources to fill the huge gaps I have spoken of here. She has regularly contributed a first-rate selective bibliography of folk music materials (all of the titles referred to here are drawn from her latest reference list (*CFMJ*, Vol. 11, 1983, pp. 43-60)).

Yet she has chosen to offer as a new edition what is essentially a minor updating of the original flawed work, rather than a genuine "history in song" which makes use of the varied and illuminating materials which have become available since 1960. It remains for someone with a fresh vision to take up the task of producing an authentic history in song of Canada.

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