

John C. O'DONNELL, "And Now the Fields are Green": A Collection of Coal Mining Songs in Canada (Sidney, University College of Cape Breton Press, 1992, xii+299 p., ISBN 0-920336-43-4)

David Frank

Volume 16, Number 1, 1994

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1083314ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1083314ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Association Canadienne d'Ethnologie et de Folklore

ISSN

1481-5974 (print)

1708-0401 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Frank, D. (1994). Review of [John C. O'DONNELL, "And Now the Fields are Green": A Collection of Coal Mining Songs in Canada (Sidney, University College of Cape Breton Press, 1992, xii+299 p., ISBN 0-920336-43-4)]. *Ethnologies*, 16(1), 216–220. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1083314ar>

It is to be hoped that there will be more such texts. Freda Ahenakew's dream — though it is only implicit in this volume — is to establish collaborations with Native linguists in other parts of Canada to produce similar life stories of the grandmothers among the Ojibwe, the Inuit, the Dene, and perhaps others. All of this will not be done through the work of a single person or within a short time span. More and more of it is likely to involve collaborations between Native people and academics, with the centre of gravity increasingly shifting toward the former. Usefulness of the products to Native communities and individuals is already crucial but will undoubtedly become increasingly so. Whatever the specific things to come, Freda Ahenakew has shown the way and others are already following.

Regna DARNELL
University of Western Ontario
London, Ontario

John C. O'DONNELL, *"And Now the Fields are Green": A Collection of Coal Mining Songs in Canada* (Sidney, University College of Cape Breton Press, 1992, xii+299 p., ISBN 0-920336-43-4).

This is a generous anthology of coal-mining songs, compiled by the long-time musical director of what has often been described as North America's only coal miners' choir. The Men of the Deeps were established in 1966, in conjunction with the construction of the Miners' Memorial Museum in Glace Bay for the Canadian centennial year celebrations of 1967. In the earliest days they performed a mixed repertoire, including Broadway show tunes as well as local compositions, but since that time they have achieved a national, even international, reputation as performers of songs rooted in the experience of the industrial community. It is hard to think of a better instance of their appeal than the television broadcast of the Canadian music industry's Juno Awards in 1989, when millions of Canadians were moved by the spectacle of these working men, dressed in pit clothes and lighted helmets, moving through the darkened aisles of the O'Keefe Centre in Toronto to take their place on stage to sing, with Rita MacNeil, "It's a Working Man, I Am".

For more than 25 years the Men of the Deeps have remained amateur performers in the best sense of the word; they range in age from men in their 20s to those in their 80s; all of the members of the group have worked in the coal mines, some for only a few years, others throughout their working lives; although

the composition of the group has changed over time, about one-third of the members have been with the group from the beginning; in regular rehearsals and performances they contribute their time and talent to the maintenance of what has now become an established part of the musical tradition of Cape Breton. Much of the credit for the success of the chorus belongs to Jack O'Donnell, a music professor from St. Francis Xavier University, who was recruited to provide musical direction for the group in its first years and then returned, permanently as it has turned out, in 1973. A classical pianist by training, sometime choirmaster at St. Ninian's Cathedral in Antigonish and a musicologist with an interest in 18th century liturgical music, O'Donnell has helped give the Men of the Deeps their familiar sound, the robust and precise, usually unaccompanied, four-part harmonies of a male choir. This is not so much traditional music as it might be heard in the kitchens and ceilidhs of the island, but a more formal, even "invented", tradition, one imbued with the solemnity of the public occasion. For the Men of the Deeps, however, O'Donnell has been much more than a choirmaster. He recognized early on that the strength of the group was in its authentic connections to the industrial history of their community. In searching out coal-mining songs, both of local and international origin, and even occasionally setting local verse to music of his own, O'Donnell has developed an impressive repertoire for the Men of the Deeps. This accumulation of raw material provides the contents for the present anthology¹.

In many respects this is a generous collection. The book is intended to be used: the pages are large, the type is big, the music is easy to read, chording is noted for many songs, there is an index of first lines and titles, and the coil binding allows the pages to lie open easily on the table or music stand. Moreover, the book contains more than 100 songs, ranging from "The Collier's Rant", a north of England song originally published in 1793, to the recent "Westville Miners", a composition by Eugene Johnson, one of the 26 men killed in the Westray mine in May 1992. A number of international standards are included — J. B. Geoghegan's "Down Deep in a Coal Mine", Merle Travis' "Sixteen Tons", Billy Edd Wheeler's "Coal Tattoo" — but the concentration is on Canadian material and compositions originating in Nova Scotia, Cape Breton in particular.

Reflecting on his initial experience in assembling this material, O'Donnell notes in the introduction that relatively little collecting of coal-mining songs had been undertaken in Canada, in part because early collectors were more concerned, in the words of Archie Green, "to rescue rural folkways from the corrosive onslaught of the Industrial Revolution" (quoted on p. viii). O'Donnell was dismayed to learn that even the redoubtable Helen Creighton had failed to collect

1. On the history of the Men of the Deeps, see Allister MacGillivray, *Diamonds in the Rough: 25 Years with the Men of the Deeps* (Glace Bay, 1991). MacGillivray, p. 107-112, gives the date of the Juno performance as 1989, while "And Now the Fields are Green", p. 211, gives the date as 1988.

more than a few songs arising out of the experience of the coal country². Instead, O'Donnell has sought to be inclusive rather than exclusive in presenting his anthology. Some songs appeared in earlier publications or were provided by other collectors; others were generated in song-writing contests sponsored by the Sydney radio station CJCB; still others were handed in to the Men of the Deeps at concerts by members of the audience. There are anonymous classics such as "I Went to Norman's" and "The Yahie Miners", compositions about mining life by individual men and women (such as Nell Campbell's "Plain Ole Miner Boy") and a variety of songs written by or collected "from the singing of" musicians such as Amby Thomas, Archie MacInnis and Charlie MacKinnon. All these appear intermingled with more recent compositions by contemporary writers such as Allister MacGillivray ("Coal Town Road"), Leon Dubinsky ("Remember the Miner") and Rita MacNeil ("Working Man"). In short, this is a substantial and useful collection which will be of interest both to practising musicians and to students of industrial folksong³.

The process of inclusion, of course, is also a process of selection. In this case it is not always easy to discern the criteria for selection, and as a result the collection appears somewhat eclectic in its contents. As O'Donnell points out, the collection is "heavily weighted with songs from Eastern Canada" (p. viii) and there are only a small number of songs drawn from the coalfields of the western provinces; although "The Song of the Estevan Miners" (1931) is included, a contemporary song such as James Keelaghan's "Small Rebellion" (also recounting the events of 1931) could have indicated that there are contemporary writers in the west similar to those in the east. O'Donnell also points out that mining songs from outside the coalfields were excluded, although on the basis of internal evidence it appears that at least two of the songs ("On Cumberland's Rugged Mountain" and "I'm Only a Broken Down Mucker") have come from the hard-rock mines. Despite the general principles of inclusiveness underlying the book, there are some apparent gaps — little, for instance, from beyond the dominant anglo-celtic culture. It is surprising too that there is not more representation of the song and verse which appeared in labour periodicals — specifically newspapers such as Glace Bay's *Maritime Labour Herald* of the 1920s. In particular, there is

-
2. Although acknowledged as a strong supporter of O'Donnell and the Men of the Deeps, it is apparent that Creighton had earlier been very suspicious of efforts by collectors, including her contemporary Edith Fowke, to collect songs arising out of the work experience or the labour and protest tradition. See the discussion by Ian McKay in "Helen Creighton and the Politics of Antimodernism", in Gwen Davies, ed., *Myth and Milieu: Atlantic Literature and Culture, 1918-1939* (Fredericton, 1993), p. 1-16.
 3. A more modest earlier booklet, also compiled by John C. O'Donnell, was published by Waterloo Music Company under the title *Men of the Deeps* (Waterloo, 1975). I have discussed some of these themes earlier in "The Industrial Folk Song in Cape Breton", *Canadian Folklore Canadien*, vol. 8, n° 1-2 (1986), p. 21-42. For the record, the article contains an error at p. 26, line 3, which should read circa 1904.

no acknowledgement of the work of Dawn Fraser, a prolific writer of popular verse often associated with the labour unrest in the coal industry; although only a few of his verses were written to music (some as parodies of contemporary tunes in the 1920s), the anthology does include other verses by less controversial writers who composed without music⁴.

Some features of the organization of this anthology are also confusing. The sectioning of the material in a series of eight thematic chapters is not always successful — in some cases the section titles are too general (one is entitled “A Miner’s Life and Loves” and another “Jolly Wee Miner Men”) — and there seems little reason to provide a short separate section on “Premonitions and Supernatural Phenomena” instead of including these songs in the section on “Danger — Tragedy — Disaster”. To add to the confusion, Appendix A presents three “Related Songs”; two of these usefully allow us to trace the origins of “The Yahie Miners” in earlier north of England songs, but could have been presented more effectively in sequence with the Cape Breton song earlier in the book. Meanwhile, Appendix B presents a group of “International Songs” which “did not originate in Canada but have become known through the singing of the Men of the Deeps” (p. 195) — including, for instance, the labour ballad “Joe Hill” (difficult to categorize as a mining song); this is perhaps a reasonable arrangement, except that it is not clear why other non-Canadian songs which appear earlier in the anthology (“Sixteen Tons”, “Dark as a Dungeon”, “A Miner’s Life”, etc.) are not included in this section as well.

Throughout the book O’Donnell has provided a running commentary on the social and historical context of the coal industry, but he does not appear to have taken advantage of the more recent literature on the history of the coal miners⁵. Comments on the individual songs are presented in some cases before and in some cases following the song (and in some cases there is no comment), an arrangement that makes the book less effective as a reference. In addition, where comments are provided they are not always fully informative. Not all of the songs are dated, even approximately, so in some cases it is difficult to judge whether a song is a traditional or more recent composition. Although O’Donnell argues, very legitimately, for a broad construction of the meaning of traditional music, in the case of a song about a mine explosion, for instance, such as Angus Timmons’ “New Waterford’s Fatal Day”, it is worth knowing for purposes of historical analysis whether this is a lament composed and circulated at the time or whether it is a later composition based largely on stories handed down over several generations.

4. For the most recent edition of his work, see Dawn Fraser, *Echoes from Labor’s War: The Expanded Edition* (Wreck Cove, 1992).

5. There are no references, for instance, to the recent general history of the miners’ union by Maier B. Fox, *United We Stand: The United Mine Workers of America, 1980-1990* (Washington, D.C., 1990) or to the articles which appear regularly in the journals of regional and labour history such as *Acadiensis* and *Labour/Le Travail*.

There are a few inexactitudes in the running comments as well. One that is often repeated in Nova Scotia is the claim that the Springhill explosion of 1891 was “the worst mining disaster in Canadian history” (p. 133), but in fact the worst tragedy took place in western Canada in 1914, when 189 men died in an explosion at Hillcrest, Alberta. Another minor error of particular interest to this reviewer can also be cited: it is stated (p. 109) that the union leader J. B. McLachlan was born in 1870 but that this tombstone gives the date incorrectly as 1869; a small point, perhaps, but this then makes the first line of Charlie MacKinnon’s “The Ballad of J. B. McLachlan” (p. 110-111) appear misinformed (“Born in old Scotland in eighteen sixty-nine...”); O’Donnell bases his correction of MacKinnon on the claims of an older popular history of the coal miners which, at least on this point, is misleading⁶. It can also be added that in a few places (p. x, p. 94) there are footnotes which are obviously inaccurate.

None of this is meant to detract from the value of the material assembled in this volume, but only to point out that an important book such as this one, originating from a university press, should have benefited from a stronger editorial process. Although much remains to be done in analyzing the history of popular culture in the mining communities of Canada, this collection stands as a reminder of the role of Jack O’Donnell and the Men of the Deeps in gaining recognition for the local industrial culture of the coal country.

David FRANK
University of New Brunswick
Fredericton, New Brunswick

Gillian BENNETT and Paul SMITH (eds.), *Contemporary Legend: A Folklore Bibliography* (New York, Garland Press, 1993, Garland reference library of the humanities, 1307, xxv+370 p. (“Garland folklore bibliographies”, 18), ISBN 0-8240-6103-9, US \$56.00).

Garland Publishing of New York has become well-known in the past decade or so for its several series of academic bibliographies: literally thousands of titles, some on topics very esoteric. Such tomes are not profitably published by standard publishers, nor profitably distributed when privately published. But

6. Birth records at the Scottish Record Office, Edinburgh, confirm 1869 as McLachlan’s correct date of birth.