

Before Newfoundland: Maud Karpeles in Canada

Maud Karpeles (1885-1976) is best known for her folksong collecting with Cecil Sharp in the Southern Appalachians, her biography of Sharp, and her work for the International Folk Music Council. During 1929 and 1930 she made two collecting trips to Newfoundland, and eventually published most of what she gathered there in the 1971 edition of *Folk Songs from Newfoundland*. Although this was Karpeles' most important solo work as collector, during the late 1920s she also noted songs and dance tunes in the U.K., Canada, and New England. This aspect of Karpeles' work seems to have been completely ignored. The aim of this paper is to shed some light on Karpeles' activities as a tune-hunter between the death of Cecil Sharp and her second trip to Newfoundland. The main focus will be on Karpeles' collecting in Ontario, Saskatchewan, and New England.

Working with Sharp in the Southern Appalachians during the First World War had deepened Karpeles' knowledge and love of folksong. Not surprisingly, his death hit her very hard, and, by her own testimony, she became depressed and disoriented. She wrote in her draft autobiography that "I felt I was left groping in a sunless world...After the [EFDS Summer School at Cambridge] was over and every one but me had departed, something seemed to snap. I felt very lonely and helpless and it was difficult to know what immediate step to take."¹ Nonetheless, she resumed her own field work in 1925, obtaining information on local Morris Dances at Upton-on-Severn in Worcestershire. That same year she came across a book review by Lucy Broadwood in the current issue (Volume VII, No. 29) of the *Journal of the Folk-Song Society* that would influence her later activity as a collector. It was a favourable notice of *Folk Songs of French Canada*, collected and edited by Marius Barbeau and Edward Sapir.² This publication alerted Maud to the fact that there were Canadian folklorists, associated with the National Museum in Ottawa, collecting folksongs of European origin, and that certain regions of Canada might be as fruitful a source of English songs as the Southern Appalachians had proven to be. 1926 saw her looking for sword dances in Yorkshire and elsewhere in the north of England: she initially found only fragments but later noted a revived Sword Dance play at Bellerby.³ The next year she collected square-dances in Massachusetts,

Connecticut, and elsewhere in New England. She also collected mumming play and dance tunes in Gloucestershire that year. In 1928 she collected folksongs in Glamorgan, and then went hunting for mumming plays and dance tunes in Devon. She also returned to Northumberland to collect country dances.⁴ We don't have much detailed information on these collecting trips, but an occasional reflection of them is to be found in the pages of the *Journal of the Folk-Song Society*. For example, one item, a "Wassail Song", that Maud noted from Edwin Ace at Llangeneth in Glamorgan on April 18th, 1928, was printed in the *Journal* two years later, and her notes reveal that she also collected the same song from a Mr. Williams of Llanmaddock.⁵

All this activity gradually gave Maud the conviction that she was capable of undertaking solo the major collecting expedition to Newfoundland that she and Sharp had planned. What still worried her, though, was her ability to note tunes by ear, a skill that with characteristic doggedness she practised for several years before deciding she was sufficiently expert.⁶ By 1929 she felt confident enough to give it a shot, although still with considerable trepidation. And events conspired to give her the opportunity. Invited to once again direct a folk music summer school at Amherst, Mass., and then to participate in an EFDS dance tour of the USA and Canada in November of the same year, Maud found herself with nearly two months to spare in North America.⁷ Canada and Newfoundland beckoned. The Amherst summer school was scheduled for late August (1929), so she decided to take a vacation in Canada first and do some "prospecting" (her term) there, then teach the summer school, and finally to move on to Newfoundland in September.

Following this plan, Karpeles sailed for Montreal in July, took a train to Peterborough in eastern Ontario, and then travelled by road the last twelve miles to Lakefield, where she had made a reservation at a luxurious country hotel. She had hoped to collect 'old-time' dances, fiddle-tunes and folksongs there, but in the event she found little that she considered worth noting for posterity. She reported what had happened in a letter to her sister Helen:

The place I am staying in is very comfortable, but I am rather regretting that I am not at the village pub because the people who are running this place are so very much the gentry and they know very little about Lakefield as they have not lived here long. Consequently the people they have introduced me to have not been much good. I started off this morning by visiting various highly respectable citizens, but I got further down the social scale as the day wore on and I am hoping before long to find my own level... The people round about all seem prosperous, which from the point of view of collecting is a little disconcerting. I do not know why it is that it is so much harder to call on strangers when they are comfortable and well-to-do. However I have found every one friendly, though, as in Lancashire, their initial reception is uneffusive.⁸

She decided that the best way to break the ice was to enquire about old-time fiddlers. This seemed to do the trick, and she later remarked that she had "seen a lot of people and have found every one most delightful and friendly". Moreover, she obtained the names and addresses of several local musicians. She also found out that dances were held every night in Lakefield, and that on Tuesdays and Thursdays old-time square dances alternated with modern ('round') dances. It was just a matter of waiting until the next Tuesday to experience an Ontario square-dance:

Last Tuesday evening I went to the Pavilion (or Melody Inn, to give it its full title). It was an interesting experience. It is a very big wooden hut with open sides and it was crowded with the young men and women of the neighbourhood. You pay nothing at all to go in and watch, but if you want to dance you pay 10 cents a couple which entitles you to a group of three dances (and very short ones at that)...It is a wonderful way of making money...On Tuesdays and Thursdays they do square dances as well as "round" dances, but alas only one square dance (i.e. three figures) for every two or three groups of round dances. They had a special band for the square dances and they played quadrille and Lancers music, or well-known jigs and horn-pipe tunes, and there was a caller who shouted through a megaphone. I couldn't understand a word he called, but most people followed the instructions pretty well and evidently knew the dances. They were for the most part just quadrille figures and nothing like as interesting as the dances I saw two years ago. They were, too, danced in a very sophisticated way with a gliding walking step and jazz introduced

whenever there was an opportunity. I saw one very nice figure – another "Ocean Waves", but actually a variant of the Grimstock hey, or Grenoside figure.⁹

Maud also attended a 'house-dance', a private dance that had been organized for her benefit, but she found the music and the figures much the same as at the Pavilion. As for folksongs, she found they did exist in Lakefield, in the home of one family of Irish extraction, the Sullivans. She reported on her first attempt at collecting songs in Canada to Helen in the following terms:

I have made friends with an Irish family named Sullivan. The old father of 80 sang me several songs – nothing very good, but he is a real folk-singer, and now I have started him thinking about songs I expect all sorts of things will come back into his mind, and now I have seen and admired all the family photographs it will be easier to concentrate on the songs.¹⁰

Maud apparently never did succeed in obtaining anything she wanted from old Mr. Sullivan, but she was greatly impressed by another member of the Sullivan clan. This was an old-time fiddler named Michael Sullivan, and she described him to Helen in the following terms:

I have made friends with the most lovely Irishman, Michael Sullivan by name (not the Sullivan I told you about before). He is a fiddler and plays beautifully, but his tunes are unfortunately all the well-known Scotch and Irish ones. I took down three tunes of no great value and found it very difficult. I wish I could have taken down every word that he said in shorthand. He is a real artist and philosopher and has a wonderful way of expressing himself. He has a real vision of what all this folk-stuff means and it was quite wonderful to hear so many of Mr. Sharp's ideas coming from him. I am hoping he will be able to get to our show in Toronto, as he stays with a daughter there during the winter, so you may have a chance of seeing him. He was thrilled with what I told him about the Society etc. He said he always felt that somewhere there must be something of this sort, and now he felt so proud to think that he was allowed to play a small part in it. He was much impressed with my labourious [*sic*] attempts to take down his tunes and he implored me to stay in Canada and not go to the States, saying 'You should keep your talents for your own country'. When I had taken down one tune he said, 'Yes, you've got the notes all right, but remember it's what lies between the notes that makes the

music'. Other things I remember him saying are: - 'Music is time and space and measure. There is a grammar of music and one part calls for another.' 'This thing which has been started will be carried along by its own weight. There is no need to push it. When the truth has been spoken there is no need to repeat it.' When I finally said goodbye to him, he said, 'I feel highly complimented by your visits. It has been a wonderful thing. It is not only that you and I have met, but that it has been music which has brought us together. But let us not be over-proud. Let us remember that we are a very small part of a very big thing.'¹¹

Although she was impressed with Michael Sullivan and she enjoyed square-dancing, Maud had so far found little that she considered really worth collecting. Her best lead came by chance, on July 22nd, when she heard some children singing "The Frog and the Mouse" in a Lakefield street. The mother of one of the children had taught them the song, and so Maud called on her in the hope that she might know more. It turned out that Grandma Ida Ruttle, who lived in Peterborough, was the real singer in the family, and, as luck would have it, she was visiting her daughter that very day. Not one to waste an opportunity, Maud noted "Edwin in the Lowlands Low" from Mrs. Ruttle, and arranged to visit her a few days later in Peterborough. When she did so she obtained five more songs: "Galloway Town", "Lady Leroy", "The Squire's Young

Daughter", "The Rich Damsel" and "The Female Highwayman".¹²

Curiously, four of the five were ballads with female heroines, which suggests that Ida Ruttle liked them as much for their feminist message as for their attractive melodies. "The Squire's Young Daughter" described how one of these heroines rescued her lover from transportation, and was a variant of an Irish ballad called "Mary Acklin". "The Rich Damsel", on the other hand, was derived from an English broadside ballad, "The Bold Damosel", in which a woman, searching for her lost lover and dressed as a sailor, takes over as captain of a naval vessel engaged in a sea-battle with a French warship. Variants of this had been collected from oral tradition, in Yorkshire by Frank Kidson and in the Upper Thames region by Alfred Williams. More common in English tradition were "The Female Highwayman" and "Edwin in the Lowlands Low", both of which had been noted by several Edwardian collectors, including Cecil Sharp. Maud herself had collected the latter in the Southern Appalachians. "Lady Leroy", on the other hand, was something new. Maud had never come across a British version, although she may have known an American variant printed in John Harrington Cox's *Folk-Songs of the South*. Here is Mrs. Ruttle's Ontario version of "Lady Leroy":

As I went out walking one evening in May,
A viewing wild flowers, all nature seem'd gay,
I spied a fair couple on Erin's green shore,
They were viewing the ocean where the wild billows roar.

He says, "Pretty Polly, you're the girl I adore,
And to be parted from you it grieves my heart sore.
Your parents are rich, love, and angry with me,
And if I tarry with you my ruin they'll be."

She dressed herself up in a suit of men's clothes,
And to her old father she immediately goes.
She purchased the ship, and paid down the demand,
But little he knew 'twas from his own daughter's hand.

Then she went up to her lover and this she did say,
"Hurry up, lovely Johnny, we have no time to stay,"
They hoisted their topsail and hurried for joy,
And out on the ocean sailed the *Lady Leroy*.

When her father heard this how he cursed and did swear,
He went to his captain and bade him prepare:

"Go seek them and find them and their lives destroy,
For they never shall enjoy my proud *Lady Leroy*."

The captain was glad of his message to go,
To seek and pursue them like some wandering foe.
He spied a fair vessel with her colours let fly,
He hailed her and found she was the *Lady Leroy*.

He bade her return to old Ireland once more,
Or broadside with broadside all on her will pour;
This brave Irish hero made him this reply,
"We will never surrender, we will conquer or die."

Then broadside to broadside on each other did pour,
Till louder than thunder the cannons did roar.
This brave Irish hero gained the victory:
Hurray for true lovers, for they always go free!

They landed in Boston, that city of fame;
The other ship, the commander, I'll mention no name.
Here's a health to Pretty Polly, long may she enjoy
Her grandest of heroes and her *Lady Leroy*.

Lady Leroy

Anon
Maud Karpeles

Folksong

1 As I went out walk - ing one
4 eve - ning in May, 5 a - view - ing wild
7 flow - ers, 8 all nat - ure seem'd 9 gay, I
10 spied a fair coup - le 11 on Er - in's green
13 shore, 14 They were view - ing the 15 oce - ean where the
16 wild bil - lows 17 roar.

Karpeles would have liked to stay longer in Peterborough, but she had already bought a train ticket to the USA and she had to stick to her travel schedule. She had been invited to stay with a family called the Dimocks in Vermont. The Dimocks were enthusiastic about her collecting plans, and offered to help her by driving her around the region to locate local fiddlers. Maud also went to a couple of local square-dances. She reported on her experiences to a friend in England, Mr. Nevinson:

Intended to do some prospecting in Waterbury, VT, but was invited by the Dimocks to stay with them in their rural Vermont location...The next day we drove through the most beautiful country in the Green Mountain section, called on some fiddlers and after a lovely drive in the cool of the evening arrived here about 9 p.m....It is a most restful place and the Dimocks are some of the kindest and nicest people I have ever met. So I am feeling very happy here, and I am consoling myself with the thought that although I am getting nothing now, I am building up strength for the Newfoundland trip. I have been by no means idle here. We have driven miles all over the country and I have seen numerous fiddlers – and heard them – but all they play are the well known tunes that are published. I now feel pretty certain that there is nothing very much more to be got here. Everybody is very friendly and charming and the difficulty is not so much to get them to play as to get them to stop.¹³

Next she moved on to Lincoln, Massachusetts, located about twenty kilometers north-west of Boston. Here she visited the wealthy Storrow family, one of the most generous and enthusiastic patrons of the English Folk Dance Society. Helen Storrow offered her the loan of a car and chauffeur, which meant an opportunity to spend nearly a week touring New England. Maud seized the chance to do some more prospecting for fiddle tunes and folk-dances. On August 9th she set out on a six-day tour, spending two days in Maine, one in New Hampshire, one in Vermont, one in the Berkshires, Mass., and one in Connecticut. This was her report to Douglas Kennedy on the expedition:

Besides seeing numerous individual dancers and fiddlers I went to four dances. The result was very disappointing and I got practically nothing of value. It may sound as though I covered too much ground to have been able to explore thoroughly, but I do not believe that I

have missed very much, because the places I went to should have been all right and the people I saw were of the kind that should have had the stuff had it been there. Of music, there is just a limited number of Reel and Jig tunes – all published – that they play everywhere, and it is very unlikely that any fine variants will be got, as all the fiddles insist that they cannot play so well without “the chords” – that means a vamping accompaniment on the piano. Usually an “orchestra” accompanies the dances, i.e., fiddle, piano, one or two cornets and a “trap-drum” – the result is excruciating. The dancing in Maine and N.H. is practically all Longways – and the same as I got in Vermont 2 years ago. These dances have all been published in one place or another, so that I really achieved nothing. In the Berkshires and Ct. they do real Square dances – a mixture of Quadrille figures and Running Set type. I got a few new figures that will be nice to introduce into the Running Set and that is about all I got after all my travelling!¹⁴

Obviously Maud was not a fan of the more modern, dance band influenced, ways of playing reels and jigs that she found to be prevalent in New England, and she was clearly disappointed at her failure to find any unusual dance tunes with a traditional flavour. She did find a few square dance figures that were new to her, and she noted them.¹⁵ But, on the whole, as a collecting trip it was close to a disaster. On the other hand, Maud had a most enjoyable holiday: as she put it: “I went through the most marvellous country and I met everywhere such charming people [and] I really had a good time”.¹⁶

All good times come to an end, and Karpeles now had to teach the summer school at Amherst College, which was located about one hundred and fifty kilometers west of Boston. She was now well aware of the stylistic and cultural distance between her own rather stylized English country dancing and the more vigorous if “degenerate” [Maud’s word] kind of square dancing practiced by ordinary people in New England. The ideal, she concluded, was a blend of the two, something that might be recreated if local musicians could be persuaded to go back to the traditional roots of their own fiddle-music. In the event, the Amherst summer school passed off routinely, and it was soon time for Maud to turn her thoughts to Newfoundland. This was the first of her two collecting trips on the island, and it lasted from September 9th to October 29th. She then travelled by ferry and train to Montreal, where she

joined a group of dancers and singers from the English Folk Dance Society, led by Douglas Kennedy. They were scheduled to make a cross-Canada tour after first making a few appearances in the eastern U.S.A. The company included pianist Imogen Holst, fiddler Elsie Avril, and singer Clive Carey, as well as a troupe of dancers who performed Morris and other country dances. Maud was responsible for ensuring the authenticity of the performances, which meant that throughout the tour she was busy leading rehearsals and had little time to spare for collecting folksongs.

The EFDS tour kicked off with three gigs in the USA: in Boston, New York, and Rochester, and, despite the shock to polite society caused by the stock-market crash and the onset of the Great Depression, they seem to have been successful, bringing in welcome dollars for the Cecil Sharp memorial project. Then it was back to Montreal for the first Canadian engagement, and the cross-Canada tour by C.P. rail organised by impresario Major Ney. The troupe had performances arranged in Toronto, Winnipeg, Regina, Calgary, Vancouver, and Victoria. Many years afterwards Douglas Kennedy still remembered vividly the company's few days in Saskatchewan:

Our next scheduled stop was Regina in Saskatchewan, but before we settled in to perform there we were whisked out of our coach, and taking only our night-things and dance-costumes, we were packed into another coach, serving a branch-line to Yorkton, further north. Coinciding with our visit was the trial of a murderer, who had been captured and charged by the North West Mounted Police. All the participants in the trial...the judge, the jury, the mounties, all came to our performance. Few of those present had ever seen an English folk-dance or heard an English folk-song since they left their mother's knee. Many of our audience openly wept through much of our programme. Ney declared that it was worth getting us over from England, just for that one occasion at Yorkton.¹⁷

Kennedy's reminiscences also provide some insight into the performance practice of early revival singers. The EFDS show had a strong folksong component, with Clive Carey as the lead singer. He was a trained musician, but he believed that folksongs should not be sung as if they were operatic arias or German *Lieder*. On the other hand, he came from a middle-class background, had an educated accent, and had no close knowledge of

traditional English singing styles, although he had done some field-collecting during the Edwardian revival. As a result, he had developed his own way of singing folksongs which was a compromise between trained-voice and traditional. Douglas Kennedy had mixed feelings about Carey's performances, which reveals that the issue of how traditional material should be performed by revival singers was a hot one as early as 1929:

During our North American tour, Clive Carey liked best to accompany his singing at the piano, but some of the songs he sang to Imogen Holst's piano-playing, and others he sang unaccompanied. To a musically sophisticated audience, like the one at the Eastman School at Rochester, this was an agreeable mixture, but to many of our Canadian provincial audiences Clive's unaccompanied songs were obviously very acceptable. He had one Dutch song he sang to the piano, and this performance always irritated me, for it seemed just the wrong sort of way to treat a folksong, however suitable it might be as a singer's show-off. But Clive's part in our program was such a success, on the whole, that it would have been churlish to pick on one item, which he enjoyed so much himself.¹⁸

Reading between the lines here, one can see that English traditional songs still found a resonance with Canadians of British descent, but that they preferred them sung in a straightforward manner, unaccompanied rather than dressed up as art songs.

After their Regina performance, the company had a day off, and on November 20th Maud seized the opportunity to do a little song-collecting. As far as we know, she only noted one item, from an eighty-five year old lady named Mrs. James Vrooman, the immigrant daughter of an Irish mother and an English father. It was a folk-carol, "The Cherry Tree" or "Joseph Was an Old Man", which William Sandys had first collected in the south-west of England about one hundred years before.¹⁹ Maud already knew it from the seven versions that Sharp had noted in Cornwall, Gloucestershire, and elsewhere in England, but she thought enough of Mrs. Vrooman's variant to submit it for publication in the *Journal of the Folk-Song Society* when she got back to England, just in time for Christmas. It appeared in the 1930 issue, along with four of Ida Ruttle's feminist ballads.²⁰ Anne Gilchrist judged one of the latter, "The Female Highwayman", to have the most appealing melody of any collected by Maud in Canada. She commented that "this very

"What made you venture on such a plot? If I'd had my pistol you might have been shot.
I'd a left you bleeding all on the plain, you never would have came to yourself again."

"I did it for your love to try, to see if you thought much of I.
But now I have a contented mind, for I know, my darling, your heart is mine."

"Tomorrow morning to church we'll go, and we'll get married in public show,
And here on earth we'll live in peace, and live on again in Paradise."

Notes:

¹ Karpeles, Maud. *Draft Autobiography*, p. 117-118. Manuscript in the Karpeles Collection, Vaughan Williams Memorial Library, Cecil Sharp House, London, UK.

² Barbeau, Marius & Edward Sapir (eds). *Folk Songs of French Canada*. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1925. Also published in England: London: Oxford University Press, 1925.

³ Karpeles, Maud. "Some Fragments of Sword Dance Plays", *Journal of the English Folk Dance Society*, II, 2 (1928), pp. 35-48.

⁴ Karpeles, Maud. *Draft Autobiography*, pp. 145-148.

⁵ *Journal of the Folk-Song Society*, Vol VIII, No. 34 (1930), p. 231.

⁶ Karpeles, *Draft Autobiography*, p. 157.

⁷ *Ibid*, pp. 137a & 157-158.

⁸ Letter from Maud Karpeles to Helen Kennedy, 21/July/29. Karpeles Collection, MUNFLA, St. John's, Newfoundland.

⁹ Letter from Maud Karpeles to Helen Kennedy, 26/July/29. Karpeles Collection, MUNFLA.

¹⁰ Letter from Maud Karpeles to Helen Kennedy, 21/July/29.

¹¹ Letter from Maud Karpeles to Helen Kennedy, 26/July/29.

¹² Karpeles subsequently published four of these ("Lady Leroy", "The Squire's Young Daughter", "The Rich Damsel" and "The Female Highwayman"), plus "Edwin in the Lowlands Low" as part of an article in *Journal of the Folk Song Society*, Vol VIII, no. 34 (1930), pp. 218-230

¹³ Letter from Maud Karpeles to Mr. Nevinson, 2nd August 1929. Karpeles Collection, MUNFLA.

¹⁴ *Ibid*.

¹⁵ Karpeles, Maud. "Some Additional Figures for Set-Running". *Journal of the English Folk Dance Society*, 2nd Series, No. 3 (1930), pp. 39-50. Karpeles, Maud. "Square-dance Figures from Northern New York State".

Journal of the English Folk Dance Society, 2nd Series, No. 4 (1931), pp. 9-13.

¹⁶ Letter from Maud Karpeles to Mr. Nevinson, 2nd August 1929.

¹⁷ Kennedy, Douglas. *Talking About My Life, 1893-1935*, audio-taped reminiscences; type-script made by Peter & Beryl Kennedy, p. 248. Unpublished manuscript at Heritage House, Gloucester, England.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, p. 253.

¹⁹ Sandys, William (ed). *Christmas Carols, Ancient and Modern, including the most popular in the West of England, and the airs to which they are sung. Also specimens of French Provincial Carols*. London: Richard Beckley, 1833.

²⁰ Karpeles, Maud. "British Folk Songs from Canada", *Journal of the Folk-Song Society*, Vol VIII, No. 34 (1930), pp. 218-230.

²¹ Gilchrist, Anne G., note to "British Folk Songs from Canada", *loc. cit.*, p. 226.