

Lomax on Canadian Folk Music

As far as I know, Alan Lomax did not do any fieldwork in Canada and he did not regard himself as having any expertise on Canadian traditional music. Nonetheless, he was a friend of Marius Barbeau and knew about the efforts being made by Barbeau, Helen Creighton, Margaret Sargent, Kenneth Peacock and others to record folksongs and instrumental music in various regions of the country. He was also well aware of the great diversity of Canadian musical traditions.

It is interesting to see how the Canadian scene appeared to such an informed outsider in the 1950s, and we are fortunate in having the evidence provided by the script of a program titled "The Folk Music of Canada" that Lomax wrote and produced for the BBC in the summer of 1953 (broadcast of the program was actually delayed until May 1954).¹



When the BBC asked him to make the program, Lomax contacted Marius Barbeau, with whom he was already working on the Canada volume of the *Columbia World Library of Folk and Primitive Music*. In response to Alan's request for help, Barbeau assembled the recordings Alan needed to illustrate his talk, drawing on material held by four institutions: the CBC, the National Museum, the National Film Board, and the Museum of Neuchatel. The items Barbeau supplied had been collected by Helen Creighton, Jean Gabus, Ida Halpern, Kenneth Peacock, Marcel Rioux, Margaret Sargent, and Barbeau himself. Given the importance of selecting the music, this means that the program was, in effect, a joint effort between the two men; it might not be too much of an exaggeration to say that "The Folk Music of

Canada" presented Barbeau's overview of Canadian traditional song as filtered through Lomax's lens.

The Barbeau/Lomax thesis was stated clearly at the beginning of the program: "the vast stretches of Canadian forest, prairie and sea, shelter a variety of culture, and there is no one Canadian folk music...Canadian folk music consists of many different styles [with songs in many] different languages."² Since he could not deal with more than a dozen ethnic traditions in one short program, Alan decided to focus on what he regarded as "the six most important [styles] in six different languages - Eskimo, Kwakiutl, Gaelic, English, French Canadian and Iroquois".³ It was an interesting, and no doubt controversial choice, reflecting his (or Barbeau's) fascination with indigenous and pioneer cultures.

Alan began with the Iroquois, opening the program with a recording of a rain dance from the CBC archives, and commenting that the word "Canada" derives from the Iroquois-Huron word for "village dwellers". From a people numbering at least 10,000 and controlling territory from the mouth of the St. Lawrence to the Great Lakes, he informed his listeners, the Iroquois had dwindled to a few hundred men and women living on reservations in "backwoods Ontario and upstate New York, working on the section gang, farming with tractors, living and dressing as we do, but still, some of them, holding tenaciously to their pagan Indian beliefs and practices. [Yet] the Rain Dance goes on."⁴ He then played another example of traditional Iroquois ceremonial song and dance music: a "Corn Dance".

Analysing the characteristic musical structures in these performances, Lomax came to the following conclusion:

Iroquois melodies are usually pentatonic, structures of one phrase repeated with minor variations or at most of three or four phrases of equal length repeated in such a way as to give the song asymmetrical balance. Simple water drums and horn or terrapin rattles provide the rhythm, which is remarkable for its monotonous, unbroken evenness. The words are strings of nonsense [*sic*] syllables. Iroquois music is extraordinarily [*sic*] plain. Yet at the

same time it has originality, power, and nobility.⁵

More controversial, perhaps, was Alan's other principal conclusion concerning North American indigenous music: that despite some differences, native song was essentially similar from coast to coast, and, moreover, was closely related to that of north-eastern Asia. "Indeed," he remarked, "the intervals and the scales, so different from our own, are so similar to those of Mongolian Asia that in Indian music we find additional evidence to confirm the idea that North America was [first] peopled across the Bering strait from Asia. In such cases there is no better evidence than one's own ears."⁶ To prove the point he played three more musical examples, a "Head-dress Song" from the Pacific Coast, an "Amusement Song" from the Korean interior, and "False Face Dancing" from Barbeau's Iroquois collection, concluding triumphantly that there was "no question about the similarity, and such instances, which could be endlessly multiplied, would all make the same point that the Indians are musically as well as racially Mongoloid in origin".⁷

Whether or not one accepts this thesis, there can be no question of Lomax's respect for and genuine interest in Iroquois history, material culture, beliefs, and music. He spent several minutes of his talk explaining the Iroquois social system, world view, and religious beliefs, and he emphasised the devastation wrought on this highly functional culture by French and English fur-traders and settlers backed by military force. Discussing another song from Barbeau's collection, "Nigahnegao", he wrote in his draft script:

This grave melody with its archaic intervals reminds of the sadness that fell over this great people, living happily in the well-watered game filled hunting grounds along the St. Lawrence, when the first French explorers invaded their territory. The tribal orators told them...Friends and relatives, our fathers were strong and their power was felt throughout the land, but we have been reduced and broken by the cunning and rapacity of the white man. Many winters ago, our ancestors predicted that a great white monster with white eyes would consume our land. The monster is the white race, the prediction is near its fulfillment...⁸

This section was apparently cut from the broadcast but the reason for this is not clear: perhaps Lomax's producer, Peter Duval Smith, objected that it was

too ideological or perhaps the program was simply running over time and it seemed an easy place to trim.

The second section of "Folk Songs of Canada" dealt with the music of New France. Alan played ten examples of French Canadian music, all supplied by Barbeau from his collection at the National Museum. They included such *coureur de bois* songs as "Malbrouk s'en Vat en Guerre", "Les Filles de St. Constant" and "En Roulant Ma Boule", the latter performed by Phileas Bedard, whom Alan described as a typical francophone "woods singer who transplanted the flower of Gallic folksong into the American wilds where it took root and flourished, surviving more vigorously than in the mother country".⁹ Another Quebecois singer that Lomax mentioned by name was Zephorin Dorion, of Port Daniel in the Gaspé, from whom Barbeau collected over two hundred songs. He commented that her "high sweet voice" and "fleuri ornamental style" were typical of the French Canadian singing tradition, and illustrated what he meant with her version of "A la Claire Fontaine".

According to Marius Barbeau, Lomax reported, most French Canadian folksongs originated in provincial France and migrated to New France during the early period of settlement between 1640 and 1680. Among the thousands of francophone songs recorded by Barbeau, only twenty were of Canadian origin, mainly lumberjack ballads such as "Quand Je Parle". This "extraordinary conservatism" on the part of the French Canadian folksinger required explanation, Alan remarked, and he offered his own socio-political theory:

Canada received the finest and purest of medieval French folk song in great abundance, and these songs adapted themselves to wilderness life. The sudden about face defeat of the French at the battle of Quebec in a sense sealed off the French-speaking areas of Canada. These Catholic parishes became the most conservative communities in North America; they have clung to their French patois and their ancient customs, and they have fought to retain their lost independence; and they have felt little need for new ballads to replace the marvellous heirlooms received from their ancestors. Even to-day one may hear a party of haymakers singing at their work...And, until recently, one might hear a young man singing a medieval ballad to his young lady, appealing to her, and not in vain, to open the door to him. How different is this from any of our British American songs...¹⁰

The ballad to which Alan referred here was "Belle Nanon", and he played several more examples of traditional Quebecois music, a drinking song ("Bouvant Mes Amis"), two fiddle tunes, a piece of mouth music, and a dance tune played on the harmonica. This instrumental music, he claimed, demonstrated that the francophone lumberjack, like his anglophone counterpart, was not entirely satisfied with the "lively but somewhat delicate French tunes" that had crossed the Atlantic and he introduced a heavier beat and livelier pulse.

North American folk music, Lomax averred, was characterised by stronger, harder driving rhythms than possessed by its European parents. Quite why this was so could not be answered with certainty, but the reason might be one or more of three possibilities: the influence of aboriginal music, a response to the hardships and entertainment requirements of frontier life, or a reflection of an earlier stage in the development of European music that persisted longer in the New World than the Old.

Alan used the battle of Quebec, illustrated by his own rendition of "Brave Wolfe", as a means of transition to his next subject: the traditional music of the Maritimes. He emphasised the importance of Scottish settlement in the wake of the highland clearances, offering this as his explanation for the prevalence of strathspeys and Gaelic waulking songs in the music of Cape Breton. He played examples of Scots pipe tunes and fiddle tunes plus two Gaelic worksongs used in milling before moving to the British traditional ballad. Once again his examples of the eastern Canadian version of the genre were taken from Barbeau's collection: "The Banks of Vergie-o" and "Down by the Greenwood Side-o", but on this occasion he failed to mention the singers.

Lyrics and broadside ballads with murder as their theme were particularly common in the Maritimes, he claimed, and played as examples "The Carrion Crow" and "Daniel Munroe". Another common theme was the lament of the immigrant for his native home, a sentiment often found in such Anglo-Irish songs as "My name is Delaney". In contrast to Quebec, Lomax argued, the folk music of Nova Scotia and Prince Edward Island continued to develop during the 18th and 19th centuries, with the result that collectors in these regions have found a more modern stock of ballads, come-all-ye's, sea shanties and, above all, lumberjack songs.

Alan had an interesting theory about the influence of Canadian folksong on that of the USA during the late nineteenth century. During the American civil war, he suggested,

[S]inging Canadians replaced the Maine lumberjacks who had gone away to the army, and in that way the Canadian repertoire became well established in the United States. These lumberjack songs were used as raw material by the westward moving workmen, timber tigers, lake sailors, cow boys, and so left a deep impression on the most typical U.S. ballads. Our most popular lumberjack ballad, for instance, almost certainly originated in Canada; woods singers have carried it to the Pacific and back into Scotland. It is the big story of the frontier, the heroic young man killed at the job of opening up the wilderness for settlement.¹¹

The song was "The Jam on Gerry's rocks" and Alan regaled his listeners with his own version, sung to his own guitar accompaniment.



Around the turn of the century, Lomax argued, referring to Roy Mackenzie's findings in *The Quest of the Ballad*, traditional ballads began to die out in Nova Scotia, but the rhythms of everyday life were still reflected in the songs of the men and women who lived and worked on the Atlantic coast.¹² To illustrate the point he played his one and only example of Newfoundland song, "The Seller [*sic*] (Sailor?) from Fortune", sung by fisherman Lloyd Soper.

Alan ended as he had begun, with the music of the indigenous people of Canada. For the penultimate segment of the program, he jumped forward in time to the 20th century and right across the continent to Vancouver Island. For his discussion of the songs of aboriginal nations of the Pacific Coast he relied heavily on Ida Halpern's recordings and field reports. The examples he chose of native culture were perhaps rather stereotypical: a medicine song and a gambling song, both taken from the CBC's archives.

The CBC, too, was Alan's source for Inuit music. The songs of Arctic Canada, he argued, could be divided into two main categories: magic songs and dance songs. Relying on the fieldwork of Jean Gabus among the Inuit of Hudson's Bay, he argued that for northern caribou and seal hunters song was often used as a means of influencing the unseen powers whose help the hunter needed to feed his family. Even when it was not a tool for survival song was a way of communicating with both the other members of the community and its guardian spirits. For example, in "Piherk for Burial" the father of a lost son found frozen in a snow bank sings of his loss, of his discovery of his son's body, and of the three days of loneliness and despair that he experienced before others came to his tent to share his grief and assuage it through song. Alan commented:

The narrow melodic range and the simplicity of these Eskimo songs is one thing; the passion of the singers and the extraordinary power of the songs in Eskimo life is quite the contrary. Here the best singer in the tribe is beating a flat hand drum and attempting in his song to bring back the souls of dead ancestors to the dance. The poem has great beauty even in literal translation...For three nights this man cannot think. He loses his way. There is no more light in his mind. But now he is singing, [singing for his son, with] his people. This perfectly expresses the value of folksong, which is to link the individual to his community by the strongest, most profound and pleasurable bonds.¹³

Lomax concluded his talk with a reference to Queen Elizabeth's recent visit to Canada. Her Majesty's enchantment with Canadian square dancing, had, he noted, sparked a revival of "old fashioned community danc[ing]" in the U.K. It was, he argued, another example of the power of traditional music to bind individuals, communities and even nations together. Canada, he suggested,

was a good example of a country for which "oldworld nationalism" was inappropriate and out of date, but where a sense of community was strong and reflected in its diverse folk musics. Without meaning to take part in the ongoing debate over Canadian identity, he had inadvertently made a good case for multi-culturalism. It was a policy that chimed well with his own campaign for cultural equity.

David Gregory

Notes:

¹ Lomax, Alan. "Folk Songs of Canada", BBC Third Programme. Produced by Peter Duval Smith. Recorded 15th July 1953. Broadcast 19th May 1954, repeated 21st May, 1954.

² "Folk Songs of Canada", script, p. 2. BBC Written Records Archive, Caversham, Reading, England. Microfilm.

³ *Ibid*, p. 2.

⁴ *Ibid*, p. 1.

⁵ *Ibid*, p. 2.

⁶ *Ibid*, p. 3.

⁷ *Ibid*, p. 3.

⁸ *Ibid*, p. 5.

⁹ *Ibid*, p. 6.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, p. 8.

¹¹ *Ibid*, p. 16.

¹² *Ibid*, p. 17. Mackenzie, W. Roy. *The Quest of the Ballad*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1919.

¹³ "Folk Songs of Canada", pp. 19-20.