

Time to Move Webwards?

Nobody has yet written a general survey of Canadian traditional music equivalent to A. L. Lloyd's *Folk Song in England*. It is a great shame that Edith Fowke, who certainly had the knowledge and the ability, never got around to doing so. Yet anyone who has tried to study, let alone teach, Canadian folksong in a systematic way knows that the lack of a good textbook is but one of many obstacles.

Frankly, the current state of affairs is distressing. Resources are scattered and difficult to access. Primary resources — manuscripts and recordings — are contained in archives and libraries ranging from Victoria Municipal Library on the West Coast to the MUN Folklore Archives in St. John's, Newfoundland. Most printed primary sources (song collections) are out of print, so that libraries cannot purchase them and they remain inaccessible to undergraduates except at a few privileged locations. The same is true of many secondary sources, which in any case are not that numerous.

An obvious way to begin to remedy this lamentable situation would be to create a web site where researchers, teachers and students could access otherwise unavailable sources. The aim of this discussion paper is to examine some of the steps required to create such an online resource.

From Coast to Coast to Coast

If a web site dedicated to Canadian traditional music is aimed at students living right across the country, it must be organized in a way that overtly recognises the contribution of each region. As its basis, we need a Canada-wide collection of vernacular song that includes representative samples from each part of the country, bar none. In the early 1970s, when she compiled *The Penguin Book of Canadian Folk*

Songs, Edith Fowke believed that this was impossible to achieve. She chose a different,

topic-based, mode of organization, and defended her decision with the following remark:

Some national collections group the songs by regions, but this is not practical in Canada. Most of our songs come from the eastern part of our country: Newfoundland, the Maritime provinces, Quebec and Ontario. The four western provinces were settled more recently and fewer folk songs have taken root there. Hence the west is represented only by a few samples...¹

Since this was written Phil Thomas has shown us that British Columbia is not as bereft of English-language song as Edith Fowke feared, nor are we completely without vernacular songs from the prairie provinces. They and the north remain comparatively thin with regard to primary English-language sources, but to compensate we have the songs of our native peoples, including the Metis, and those of several European ethnic groups, most notably the Ukrainians. Consequently I suggest that a region-by-region mode of organization for the site *is* feasible. In terms of richness of material it will inevitably still privilege Newfoundland, the Maritimes and Ontario, but those *are* the regions in which the English-language sources are most plentiful. Similarly, most francophone materials will come from Acadia, Quebec, and Ontario, but the francophone communities of the prairies need not be neglected.

The first thing we need is an anthology of tunes and texts that is genuinely national in breadth and also sufficiently large to provide a representative sampling of the different kinds of

¹ Fowke, Edith (ed). *The Penguin Book of Canadian Folk Songs*, pp. 11-12. Markham, ON: Penguin, 1973.

vernacular song found in each region. Unfortunately, no such anthology exists. There are four general compilations of Canadian folksongs edited by Edith Fowke, either on her own or with Richard Johnston or Alan Mills: *Singing Our History*, *The Penguin Book of Canadian Folk Songs* and the two volumes of *Folk Songs of Canada*. Two of these songbooks are o/p, but even if they were not, the contents of all four together do not adequately cover the ground. One would need to add more songs from Acadie, Quebec, the Prairies, BC, and the North. So there is really no alternative but to start from scratch, and to create one's own compendium.

Given the decision to create a new anthology of songs, an obvious question arises. Should the anthology be in print, online, or both? Personally, I would like to see a print version issued by a Canadian publisher, but in practice a publisher is unlikely to want the songbook to be available free online. Hence a choice will have to be made between the two media. The easiest option would be to build an anthology electronically, using archival sources to minimise copyright issues. They will likely still be quite formidable.

It is one thing to see folksongs in print, quite another thing to hear them sung by traditional singers. One needs both visual and aural versions to fully appreciate tune, text, and the interplay between them. So although providing an anthology with tunes and texts is essential, it is not, in itself, sufficient. We also need to provide numerous audio examples of how the songs in the anthology were actually sung by informants. Creating a digital data-bank of traditional performances will be one of the biggest challenges that we face.

There are two possible sources for this audio component. One is the various LP records issued in the late fifties, sixties and early seventies by such labels as Folkways, Folk-Legacy and Topic Records. The technology exists to copy tracks from these LPs and make

digital audio-files of the songs. There are two obstacles to doing so: finding pristine copies of the LPs, and obtaining copyright permission to make the transfers and to distribute the results online. The latter is likely to be costly, even if access is restricted to students. Just how costly needs to be explored. The option just might be feasible. But my guess is that the copyright holders will be uncooperative or too greedy.

An alternative source for this audio component would be to make copies from the original field-tapes made by Henri Barbeau, Helen Creighton, MacEdward Leach, Kenneth Peacock, Louise Manny, Barbara Cass-Beggs, etc. Assuming cooperation from the various archives where the field-tapes were deposited, this should be feasible. It will, however, involve considerable time and effort to achieve in practice, and there will no doubt be costs associated with making the digital copies. Special funding will be required to make this aspect of the project feasible. And first of all it will be necessary to determine exactly where some of the audio-material is actually located. Much (Barbeau, Creighton, Peacock) is in Hull, Halifax or St. John's. But Edith Fowke's tapes seem to have been scattered, and where, for example, are Barbara Cass-Beggs'?

Initially, in order to create an electronic anthology of Canadian traditional music, we will be looking for only a small selection of the audio material held by each of the main archives. In the long run we will want a lot more. Ideally we need to provide students with an opportunity to research *in depth* trans-regional topics in Canadian traditional music or the folk music of particular regions. Our challenge, then, and it is a huge challenge, is to work with selected archives in order to get entire collections digitized, or at least sufficiently large parts of them for students to do substantive online research.

About five years ago I approached the Museum of Civilization with the question: did the Museum intend to digitize its audio collection?

The short answer was “yes, but the fruits of the project will not be available for several years”. I am currently trying to find out what progress, if any, has been made with digitizing the 5,000 wax cylinders of folksongs in the Museum’s vaults. I gather that an online catalogue of the Barbeau collection will soon be available, but little has so far been done to digitize the recordings themselves. And it appears that the English-language song collections are still awaiting serious attention. Nor is the situation any better at any of the other archives with important audio collections. The one exception is the Peacock collection of Newfoundland songs; this has apparently been digitized with the aim of publication as a CD ROM.

Alternative Modes of Organization

A web-site can – and should – offer multiple modes of approaching its treasures. Because of the regional and political structure of Canada, I believe that a geographical mode of organisation – province by province – must be fundamental. But many alternative modes are possible, and all I want to do here is to suggest a few others that seem equally useful.

1. Language. Provincial and regional boundaries cut across linguistic lines. For example, francophone songs are to be found in most provinces from Saskatchewan to Newfoundland. A mode of organization by language allows them to be grouped together and thereby more easily compared and studied.
2. Source traditions. Since Canada is a nation of immigrants, most (although not all) of our songs can be traced back to other countries. Information on the musical traditions of such countries as China, the Ukraine, France, Spain, England, Scotland and Ireland (to name only the most obvious) will be of service to students and other web-visitors.

3. Archives. At present we lack a convenient guide to the various Canadian and foreign archives in which relevant primary sources (visual and aural) are housed. It will be extremely useful for students if we can provide such a guide, with links or URLs. All the better if this can include links to foreign archives with important collections, such as Vaughan Williams Memorial Library at Cecil Sharp House in London.
4. Topics. Students doing research papers may wish to focus on a particular genre of traditional song, for example pioneer songs, lumbering songs, sea-shanties, love lyrics, or Child ballads. The web-site should therefore also classify its data by subject matter, and allow visitors to approach its primary and secondary sources through key-word searches of topics.

The Need for Collaboration

The foregoing sketch of some of the ways in which the web-site might be organized suggests that the project will need to be catholic and comprehensive in involving the many institutions that could contribute to making it successful and useful.

At the moment Canadian traditional music – and the academic study of it – is fragmented into its component parts. Not many students are involved, and those few are restricted by the resources available locally. That may not be too much of a hardship for students in St. John’s, Ottawa and Toronto, but almost everybody else must either be feeling very frustrated or have already given up in disgust. Moreover, even if one can study local traditions – Newfoundland music at MUN or Ukrainian music at U. of Alberta – it is difficult to put them into perspective. Our fundamental problem is that because we cannot conveniently study all the pieces, it is very difficult to get an accurate and comprehensive idea of the whole. The big picture is hard to grasp when you only have access to one corner. Edith Fowke had an

overall perspective on Canadian folksong that I suspect very few of us have today. Yet we know that the whole is greater than the sum of the parts. Essentially, what we can achieve by collaboration is to win back the possibility of achieving that comprehensive, non-fragmented, perspective on Canadian traditional music from shore to shore.

Collaboration means taking the initiative to share what one has, even without the prospect of immediate recompense. Digitizing primary sources takes a lot of time and money. Archives have little incentive to use their scarce resources to make it possible for researchers to stay away. Yet it is much more efficient to permit researchers to access documents electronically, and, even more important, it opens the doors of the archive to students and others who would never come in person (for financial or other logistical reasons). Digitization can therefore be an excellent way of fulfilling an archive's fundamental mandate: that of providing researchers with access to primary sources while at the same time preserving and protecting those sources.

Collaboration also increases the possibility of obtaining funding, especially a share in large-scale funding. This is the bottom-line reason for coming together in the common cause of promoting the study of Canadian traditional music. A team approach to grant applications may have a much better chance of success than anyone has on their own. Institutions that might be involved include (although they are not limited to) the following:

1. All Canadian archives that contain material on our traditional music. These range geographically from St. John's to Victoria, and they include the Museum of Civilisation, the National Library, the provincial archives of most provinces, the CSTM archive at the U. of Calgary, the York University archive, and MUNFLA.
2. Archives in other countries that contain significant collections of Canadian sources, or important collections of key source traditions.
3. Societies such as FSAC and the BC Folklore Society, plus other regional folklore or music societies.
4. Academic departments (and the individuals in them) who teach about traditional music or related subjects. These departments sport a variety of names, including Music, Folklore, Humanities, History and various kinds of regional and ethnic Studies.

Challenges to Be Faced

The first, and biggest, obstacle is inertia. It is easy to say: "yes, this seems a great idea". It is much more difficult to stop doing something else in order to find the time and energy to participate actively in the project. So the first challenge is finding a critical mass of people who are willing to work together to make things happen.

The second obstacle is lack of information. More preliminary research has to be done. Above all, we need to construct two detailed and accurate inventories. One will list all the archives, Canadian and foreign, that possess manuscript and audio collections of Canadian traditional music. The other will list all the institutions at which Canadian traditional music is currently being taught in one form or another, and the academics who are doing the teaching.

A third obstacle is copyright. This I suspect will turn out to be the biggest problem. Why? Because there seems to be a huge difference in practice between copyright holders' willingness to give (or sell at an affordable price) permissions for limited on-line educational use as opposed to permissions for general public access. We (in CSTM) are interested in making Canadian traditional music available to the public at large. I'm not sure how much this

distinction matters to public archives such as the Museum of Civilization or the Halifax Municipal Library. Nor am I sure how much it matters to a university archive such as MUNFLA or the U. of Calgary. But I am sure that it matters a lot to record companies who are in the business of selling their products commercially. And that includes labels such as Smithsonian and Folk-Legacy. Copyright on a wealth of Canadian folksong recordings is currently held by the Smithsonian, as a result of the deal by which they took over Folkways Records on Moe Asche's death. It would make the project a great deal easier if we could do a Napster on those old Folkways albums. But in practice we cannot, which means difficult negotiations with the Smithsonian, unless it proves possible to locate original field-tapes in all cases and digitize those archival recordings instead. A parallel issue exists over copyright on printed collections. If we want to digitize an *o/p* collection (say, Phil Thomas' *Songs of the Pacific North-West* or Maud Karpeles' *Folk Songs from Newfoundland*), how easily and how cheaply

will we be able to obtain copyright permission to do so?

If we can overcome the copyright issues with regard to audio-sources and printed sources, the fourth obstacle is to find the time and resources to do the digitizing. In attempting to put on line the back issues of the *Canadian Folk Music Journal* and the *Canadian Journal of Traditional Music*, I've learned the hard way that if you are dependent on others who have agreed, out of the goodness of their hearts, to do something for you in their spare time and without financial reward, you won't get it done fast. Eventually it will probably get done, but it's no use being in a hurry. So, in the interests of speed, this project will need its own equipment and technical help. And that means it will need funding to buy those resources. I therefore end with a crucial question to which I have no sure answer: from where could the project obtain that funding?

David Gregory

Call for Papers for Conference 2002

The last annual general meeting of the Canadian Society for Traditional Music voted to hold the 2002 conference/AGM of the Society in St. John's, Newfoundland, and the 2003 conference/AGM in Athabasca, Alberta.

We are pleased to confirm that arrangements have now been made to hold the next CSTM Conference and Annual General Meeting at the Music Department, Memorial University of Newfoundland, St. John's, NF, on November 1-3, 2002.

The conference will consist of our usual mix of traditional music on Friday and Saturday nights, academic papers on Saturday morning and afternoon, and the AGM on Sunday morning.

Presentations are welcome on any aspect of Canadian musical traditions or on the performance, collection and study of traditional music world-wide. Proposals (with a brief abstract) should be sent to Norman Stanfield, 301 - 2017 West 5 Ave, Vancouver, BC, V6J 1P8 (e-mail: nstanfield@shaw.ca). The deadline for submissions is 31st August, 2002.