

The Life and Afterlife of a Folksong Collection: The Labrador Songbook Experience

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The Life and Afterlife of a Folksong Collection: The Labrador Songbook Experience

TIM BORLASE

IN 1993, *SONGS OF LABRADOR*, the first pan-Labrador folksong collection, appeared to the public.¹ It was greeted with a great deal of excitement, particularly by the composers and their relatives, who, up to that time, had only ever heard their songs sung by themselves in far-flung communities. The book launch held in Happy Valley became an emotional event. People were invited to come and share their experiences about some of the songs, and, as they told of where the song originated or how the song was sung, a few of them shed a tear for loved ones now departed. As organizer of the event, I wished that I had been able to get some of this information into the book, that I had held this event in a less formal location, and that composers outside of the Lake Melville area had been able to attend. A few songs in English, Inuktitut, and Innuamin were sung, and people went home with their copies under their arm into the cold but starry night of a Labrador winter. It was obvious that this songbook was merely a starting point, and that there were many more songs and stories to collect. What follows is a commentary on what I think has happened since the songbook became available.

Editors' note: Tim Borlase was not only the compiler, but in many cases also the collector, transcriber of lyrics, translator, and researcher. His reflections on this publication are valuable: this is one of the rare studies of the actual reception of a publication that has played a major role in sustaining a musical tradition; and it documents how the recovery of memories occurs through song, and how modern experiences are negotiated in relation to those memories.

Oh the moon shines bright tonight on old Grand River,
On the hillside where the breath of trappers lay,
Through the snowy bush their candle lights are burning,
All along old Grand River to the bay.

Stewart Michelin, North West River, "The Grand River Song," 29²

This was not the first song collection which featured Labrador songs. Two others preceded it — MacEdward Leach's *Folk Ballads and Songs of the Lower Labrador Coast* (1965) and Maija Lutz's thesis on the musical traditions of the Labrador Inuit (1982). Although valuable in an ethnohistorical sense, these volumes were not readily available and did not reflect the wide variance of musical tradition across Labrador. However, nine of Leach's original collection, all selections that had probably originated in Labrador, were used in the new volume.

The first version of *Songs of Labrador* had been produced at the Curriculum Centre of the Labrador East Integrated School Board in 1982 with Gestetner equipment and stencils, a considerable achievement for a financially strapped district. It was the first publication of the Labrador East Integrated School Board to receive a copyright number. This was important because its compilers wanted to assure that the integrity of the composers and the musicians was preserved. Validating the Labrador experience and demonstrating to young and old that their lifestyle was authentic, original, and precious was integral to the establishment of a Labrador Studies programme in the schools. Music was to be a cornerstone.

I am very proud of my country Labrador. That name goes very deep within my being.

Elizabeth Goudie, Happy Valley, "Woman of Labrador," 11

The purpose of the first songbook was to integrate Labrador songs into the curriculum as part of the Labrador Studies programme. The songs were chosen to be representative of the different regions and ethnic groups within Labrador. For the collector of songs, this presented a challenge. The most enjoyable part of putting the collection together was the home visits, the recording of people's stories, and the smiles that followed when they realized they knew something of value.

Now we open the door to warmth and light, supper laid and the kettle boiled ...

Leslie Parry, Cartwright, 11

The foreword notes: "The songs speak for themselves. They tell the story of the joys, sorrow, tragedies, habits and customs of the people. Some have an element of drama and some hint lightheartedly at Labrador life. Some are descriptive of the variety of pathos and the people's work and some are simply an expression of the sheer joy of living. These songs of the people are examples of a life long passed by

but a true expression of a way of life that has developed in special circumstances and in a special environment. These songs should not be lost to coming generations and we should attempt to preserve them through using them with the children we teach” (11).

Tsheminupantaiats. Help us all to travel well together.

Sheshashiu, 9

But has this happened?

The Integrated School Board had jurisdiction over only those schools of Protestant denominations in the east, representing only nine of Labrador’s 26 communities. This meant that the songs elsewhere had to be collected by a variety of means — by mail, over the phone, or from extant collections. None of them except the pre-published had been musically transcribed. A representative group of passionate Labradorians advised on song selection. A flotilla of music teachers and choir directors sat at the piano banging the tunes out one key at a time to accompanying tapes. Amateur photographers were contacted for accompanying visuals, giving the book its proper context. Friends of the collector helped with the indexing. As a result, many people knew in advance about this publication.

Now we don’t claim the credit,
For those men true and bold,
Their names are stamped upon this land,
Their story has been told.

Byron Chaulk, North West River, “We Sons of Labrador,” 56

The second edition was a much expanded version of the first, and Goose Lane Editions (Fredericton) offered to co-publish the volume for commercial distribution. The landscape had changed — contributors who had agreed for their contributions to be used for educational use only, now had to be re-contacted for a much wider distribution. Contributors were offered \$10 and a songbook for each story or song. Profits from the royalties would go to the Labrador Creative Arts Festival. To the compiler’s amazement, only one contributor did not agree to have his two songs in the new book. Several contributors had to have assistance in signing their signatures, an indication that, although they weren’t literate themselves, it was important to them that these songs were shared. One person tried to pay the School Board to have his song entered in the collection. From an original songbook of 71 songs and stories, the collection grew to 135.

But to tell you the truth the way it do seem,
You’ll get the milk skimmed and de relations de cream.

Martin Hawco, Pinware, “Mission Song,” 164

Goose Lane Editions published 5,020 copies, of which 2,500 went to the Labrador East Integrated School Board for distribution to schools. Each school received a class set, and copies were provided free of charge to other districts and individuals across the province. The songbook was inserviced at every possible visit to coastal communities, and in music education forums. For example, in 1998 there was a province-wide inservice for primary teachers. Sometimes when the compiler arrived at a school, the class set was hauled out of a dusty corner in the back of the room to be thumbed through by an excited group of children looking in the lyrics for people and places that they recognized. Its use was most apparent in small schools without a music specialist teacher. A teacher in Cartwright once told the compiler that she was tone deaf and could not deliver a music programme, yet she could sing the songs of Harry Martin and Henry John Williams (both of whom are from Cartwright) perfectly in tune!

Oh, planning life's journey needs courage and skills
Not floundering about like the mighty big whale,
And all things planned right and it all goes well,
And it's only to work like the Devil's windmill.

Henry John Williams, Cartwright, "Me Name is Walter Kippenhuck," 46

Christmas concerts and assemblies were the time when the songbooks got the most use. In smaller communities, this sometimes resulted in a school/community sing-a-long when the books were passed out. For example, a teacher on staff in Makkovik regularly "borrowed" the books for adult house parties on the weekend. Additionally, by having the song in print, J.C. Erhardt Memorial School was re-introduced to its own Makkovik School Song:

Oh come to the Church, Christmas bells are a-ringin,
The trees are a-lighted, children are singin'.
The old Chapel Servants with trays in their hands
With turnips and candles, they look kind and grand

Rev. George Sach, Makkovik, "The Makkovik School Song," 95

Unfortunately, the songbook was rarely, if ever, used by the people who had the most expertise — the trained music teachers. Is it because the songs are not sophisticated arrangements, or is it because most of the music teachers reside in larger centres, are not Labradorian by descent, or have little affinity with the traditional lifestyle of Labrador?

Let us say they answer to our God, it is for us to learn.

Drucilla Riche, Rigolet, "Soldier Boy," 194

Still, photocopies of individual songs from the book appear at most community functions. Three songs in particular are sung frequently. They are Dr. Harry Paddon's "Ode to Labrador," Sid Dicker's "Inniugiamik Lâbadurimi/Sons of Labrador," and Harry Martin's "This is My Home." Shirley Montague wrote a new tune for the "Ode" and this is played by CBC each morning on "Labrador Morning" to announce the beginning of broadcasting. "Inniugiamik Lâbadurimi" is the signature song of the Okâlakatiget Society in Nain and the new anthem for the new territory of Nunatsiavut. "This is My Home" is often sung at funerals and weddings. After several years, Goose Lane sold its remaindered copies to the Labrador School Board, and profits still go to the Labrador Creative Arts Festival through the Labrador Institute Office of Memorial University.

But most of all to me,
Is to have the liberty,
To be a son of Northern Labrador.

Sid Dicker, Nain, "Sons of Labrador," 54

The most extraordinary result of the songbook is the affirmation that the sentiments expressed in the songs and music *are* universal. It would appear that these songs do more than highlight the Labrador experience. Since the release of the songbook, variations on the songs have been recorded by Great Big Sea, Figgy Duff (St. John's), June Baikie (North West River), Shirley Montague (Norris Point), Labrador Black Spruce (Labrador City), Northern Harmony, Northern Mosaic, Beatrice Hope, The Flummies (Happy Valley-Goose Bay), Red River Fiddlers (Saskatoon), the Camerata Singers (Halifax), and the latest CD by Cantus Vocum³ (St. John's). In 1997, as part of the Year of the Arts Celebration, twelve of these songs were arranged for four-part choir by well-known arrangers from across Canada including Nancy Telfer, Kenneth Bray, Gary Ewer, and Michael Snelgrove. These arrangements were subsequently toured throughout northern Newfoundland and southern Labrador by Northern Harmony, the Goose Bay Community Choir under the direction of Donna Lee McLennon. They have since been requested by other choirs.

I have no silver, no diamonds or gold
But I am far richer by the visions I hold

Harry Martin, Cartwright, "This is My Home," 204

Compiling a book of folksongs has its drawbacks: only one variation gets printed; sometimes the intimacy in which the song was written is lost; and some people feel that not everyone was acknowledged. The compiler shoulders a great responsibility in terms of access to these songs and the subsequent recording of them. New songs appear almost immediately once the final version has been printed.

Yet, we are privy to our innermost thoughts and feelings through music. If a song can bring you closer to the person that you really are, and if without that song in print you would have lost that opportunity, then compiling a songbook is surely worth the effort.

So now my song is ended, the truth to you I'll tell,
A trapper has a lonely life and that you all know well,
I think I'll boil the kettle, cheer the bogie with a junk,
I rhymed this into Apple Lake stretched out upon my bunk.

Douglas Best, Mud Lake, "The Trapper's Song," 126

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Notes

¹It was based on an earlier (1982) mimeographed anthology.

²Parenthetical titles in this article are references to songs in the anthology. Untitled references to individuals indicate quotations from interviews or stories, also in the anthology.

³*CV Home*. See Dunsmore, this volume.

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