

Oral and Written Tradition: A Micro-view from Miramichi

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Oral and Written Tradition: A Micro-view from Miramichi

I HAD JUST ARRIVED IN NEWCASTLE, New Brunswick, from a year's doctoral work in folklore at Indiana University. I had received a small grant to continue my study of local songs, especially those having to do with the lumberwoods, and even more especially those to be found along the Miramichi River, where that lumbering tradition had been heavily concentrated.¹ Even before we settled ourselves in our temporary home in Chatham Head, just across the river, Bobby and I and our three children went to have dinner with Louise Manny, chief among those who knew things about Miramichi. All through dinner I talked of what I hoped to accomplish that summer; then, as we were about to leave, Louise announced that *we* were driving down to Sackville Friday morning to attend a music teachers' conference. "They've asked me to present some of our Miramichi singers", she said. "I want you to pick up Nick and Wilmot about eight, so they'll be ready to sing about ten. And get them there sober, please".

That was Louise's way. It never entered her head that I might have had different plans for Friday — and I did — any more than it would have occurred to her that Wilmot MacDonald and Nick Underhill might not have considered a trip to Sackville as something they wanted to take a day off from work for, but they were two of the best singers in her by now well-established Miramichi Folksong Festivals, and that was all there was to it. Needless to say, Friday morning I was on the job, picking up Nick first in Northwest Bridge just north of town and then Wilmot at his home in Glenwood, twelve miles down the road to Sackville.

A few more words about Louise Manny before I continue my story. Back in the 1940s, she had been asked by Lord Beaverbrook to gather some of the old songs he remembered hearing in his youth (he was born in Newcastle, and he and Louise were old friends). She knew absolutely nothing about folksongs and had no idea how or where to start, but, knowing no better way, she simply let it be known via the local paper and movie hall that she was looking for old songs and would people who knew them please come to the local Legion Hall, where they would be recorded. I can't think of a less likely way for someone to begin, but the response was gratifying and she soon had a sizeable collection of songs for His Lordship, who acknowledged them and that was that.²

1 The results of this field work are summarized in my book, *Larry Gorman: The Man Who Made the Songs* (Bloomington, 1964), pp. 167-79.

2 For an easily available look at most of the Beaverbrook Collection, see Louise Manny and James Reginald Wilson, *Songs of Miramichi* (Fredericton, 1968).

But now Louise herself was interested, and she began a fifteen-minute Sunday-afternoon program over the local radio station on which she played her recordings of woodsmen and farmers singing the old come-all-ye's in the old unaccompanied way, and that program developed a loyal and devoted following all through the Miramichi area and even as far away as the west end of Prince Edward Island. Then in 1958, she organized the Miramichi Folksong Festival, and for three nights those same woodsmen and farmers got up on the stage of the local town hall and performed in the old way.

Louise died in 1970, but the Festival has continued, this past summer being the 31st. What she singlehandedly did, then, was to bring about a folksong renaissance in Miramichi, not for the young urbanites with their guitars and dulcimers but for those local folk who still had the old tradition within them. Through her radio programs she called attention to it, and through the Festivals she created an arena for its performance by singers like Wilmot MacDonald and Nick Underhill. As a by-product of this effort, Louise also became New Brunswick's recognized expert on folksongs. Hence when a regional teachers organization wanted a program on that subject for their annual convention, they called on her, and her writ ran so strong locally that no-one — not Wilmot, not Nick, and certainly not a young graduate student from away — would have considered even a token demurrer to anything she requested. As I said, Friday morning I was on the job, and the three of us were on our way to that convention.

The trip down was a bit formal. Nick and Wilmot knew each other, to be sure. Both were well-known Festival singers; both had spent a good portion of their lives working in the woods and on the drives; and both had their family roots in the Gray Rapids, a community a few miles upriver near Blackville. But I doubt that they had ever spent this much time before in each other's company, and the conversation was largely a feeling around, a getting to know each other. I was alone in the front, and the two of them sat right behind me. Both men wanted something to drink, and I felt the ass every time I shot the car past a liquor store on the excuse I didn't have time to stop. They were getting a little annoyed with me, and I didn't blame them at all, but I promised that as soon as we got to Sackville I'd see that they got something before they had to sing. I was as good as my word too, stocking up enough Lamb's Navy Rum both to get them through their required singing and to make up for the aridity of the down-trip on the way home!

They did their job splendidly. Louise was delighted, and the teachers were properly educated, having heard some of the finest traditional singing to be heard anywhere. We were given lunch, thanked, and sent on our way home. The bottle went round, and, believe me, the fun began as those two timber beasts began swapping songs. How I wished I'd had a tape recorder with me! But I knew that had I had one nothing would have been quite the same. It never is. I contented myself with simply listening to one of the greatest afternoons of song

it has ever been my privilege to enjoy.

Many of the songs they sang were familiar to me from the Festivals, but many too I knew from my reading and my studies, and what interested me more than the songs themselves was the way they'd talk about them after they'd sung them. "Remember the way Fred MacMahon would sing that?...Frank O'Hara made that one, and the old woman never forgave him for it...." And so on — wonderful stuff for the young graduate student driver who had decided some time ago that context was just as important as text. At one point Wilmot sang "The Thrashing Machine" and "The Red Light Saloon", two "off color" songs I'd never heard him do before. The rum was having its effect, I figured. Everyone was really relaxed. Then he sang another new one, about a young woman who rode off with a man who, when they came to a river, told her he was going to drown her just as he had drowned six other women. He then said she was to take off her clothes; she told him to look the other way, and, when he did, she threw him into the stream and rode back home alone. The song ended with a conversation between the woman and a parrot, the parrot asking why she was up so early and the woman telling the parrot to say nothing about it and she'd give it a golden cage "with doors of ivory".

As soon as Wilmot finished, Nick spoke up. "Wilmot", he said, "I heard Fred Jardine sing that on Renous back in 1927. He called it 'Pretty Polly'. I liked that song, but I never did learn it".

"I never cared much for it", said Wilmot. "Just up and down, that air. My mother used to set and sing that song for hours".

"Well, Wilmot, will you word that off for me sometime, so's I can learn it?"

Wilmot said he would.

I stuck to my driving, but my mind was racing back over all I knew about that song, which was quite a bit. I recognized it, of course, as "Lady Isabel and the Elf Knight", number four in Francis James Child's great collection, *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads*.³ I knew it was well-known in Great Britain and — having read Holger Nygard's *The Ballad of Heer Halewijn* and Iivar Kempainen's long study as well — I also knew it was known in various forms in almost every European language.⁴ I further recalled from Tristram Coffin's *The British Traditional Ballad in North America* that it was one of the so-called "Child" ballads most often found in American tradition, and I knew that versions of it had been collected in Newfoundland, Nova Scotia, and Maine.⁵ Therefore I was not surprised to hear Wilmot singing it, and, about two weeks later, while I was

3 Francis James Child, *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads* (Boston, 1882-1898), I, pp. 22-62.

4 Holger Olof Nygard, *The Ballad of Heer Halewijn* (Helsinki: Folklore Fellows Communications LXVII, No. 169, 1958); Iivar Kempainen, *The Ballad of Lady Isabel and the False Knight* (Helsinki, 1954).

5 Tristram P. Coffin, *The British Traditional Ballad in North America*, Revised Edition, American

recording some songs and stories at his home, I got him to sing it over for me again.⁶

His singing of it this time was just about identical with his singing of it on the way home from Sackville, so far as I could tell, and when I asked him he repeated that he'd never cared for the song, that the air was "just up and down", adding that it was just a two-line air and he liked the four-line airs (what we'd call a double or come-all-ye stanza) better. I pretty well agreed with Wilmot, and as a scholar I felt that far too much fuss had been made over Child ballads anyway. I was more interested in the few stanzas he was able to sing me of a local song, "The Wedding at Kouchibouguac", and the wonderful background he was able to give me for one called "The Home Brew Song" made up by an old friend of his, Frank O'Hara, from the Gray Rapids. As I was leaving, I asked it he'd had a chance to get "Doors of Ivory" to Nick yet. No, he hadn't, but a couple of weeks later when I was back again he said he had.

All that was in 1961. I didn't get back up to Newcastle again until just in time for the next year's Festival. Meantime, Louise and Wilmot had had a serious falling-out, and as a result Wilmot boycotted the whole three days of the Festival. Nick was there, though, and one of the songs he sang was "Pretty Polly".⁷ It sounded very much like Wilmot's version — at least the words did, but the tune was clearly something else again. The only problem was that Nick's version seemed much longer than Wilmot's, but then, given Nick's extremely slow *parlando* style, any song would sound longer when he sang it, and I let it go at that for the time being. As I said earlier, I wasn't all that interested in the Child ballads.

Then in July of 1963 I went up and spent about a week with Wilmot, listening to his songs and stories and talking to him about life in the Miramichi lumberwoods. One evening as we were getting toward the end of a rather long session during which we had passed a couple of bottles back and forth between us several times and were both wonderfully relaxed and easy, I asked him to sing "Doors of Ivory" for me again. He did, singing it as beautifully as I'd ever heard it — as beautifully as *anyone* would *ever* hear it, I'm sure — slowly and with that marvelous pacing no-one could get better than Wilmot.⁸

The next afternoon I was over in Northwest Bridge with Nick Underhill, and I got him to repeat his version for me.⁹ What he sang was identical with what he

Folklore Society, Bibliographical and Special Series, 7 (Philadelphia, 1964), pp. 25-8.

6 Northeast Archives of Folklore and Oral History (South Stevens Hall, University of Maine, Orono, Maine), Accession 1.105. Hereafter all references to this archive will be abbreviated thus: NA 1.105.

7 NA Ives 62.6.

8 NA Ives 1.125.

9 NA Ives 1.128.

had sung at the Festival the year before — the words clearly Wilmot's, the tune anything but Wilmot's. The two had nothing in common. That was obvious on the face of it, but it wasn't until some years later when I set about to make some careful comparisons amongst the two men's various singings that I saw that there were other differences, and equally interesting ones, as well.

Briefly, let's review what I had. First, there was the version Wilmot sang in the car on the way back from Sackville in June of 1961. I did not record that one, but I did record his singing of it a couple of weeks later, and my memory told me these two versions were, for all practical purposes, identical, both being eleven stanzas long. Next came Nick's singing at the 1962 Festival, which I discovered not only seemed longer than Wilmot's but *was* longer by three stanzas. The addition came in the final scene. Here's the way Wilmot sang it:

The parrot being high in the window
And this to the lady did say:
"Oh lady, dear lady, come tell unto me
Why you're riding so long before day".

"One turn, one turn, pretty Polly", she cried,
"One turn you done to me.
Now your cage shall be made of the glittering gold
With doors of ivory".

And here is how Nick handled it:

The parrot was out on the window,
And it to the lady did say,
"Now lady, dear lady, come tell unto me
Why you're riding so long before day".

"Hold your tongue, pretty Polly", said she,
"And tell no tales on me,
And your cage may be made of the glittering gold
And doors of ivory".

The old man arose in the morning,
And then to the parrot did say,
"Pretty Polly, pretty Polly, come tell unto me
Why you're talking so long before day".

"The cat was here on the window sill,
And she was staring at me.
And that is the only reason I had

For talking so long before day”.

“One turn, one turn”, m'lady replied,
“One good turn you done for me,
Now your cage shall be made of the glittering gold
With doors of ivory“.

Since Nick's re-singing of it for me in 1963 is just about identical with his Festival singing, we can safely speak of them both as representing Nick's version. Where, I wondered, had those three extra stanzas come from? Had Nick simply invented them? Very unlikely. First of all, that wasn't Nick's way. I had plenty of examples of Nick fixing up what seemed to him a faulty text or improving on his own version, but that amounted to changing a word or a phrase; in the present instance, for example, he changed Wilmot's having the girl return to “her own father's house” to having her return to “her father's abode”. But I had never known him to make up whole stanzas. Besides these “new” stanzas were well-established ones in oral tradition, being found in hundreds of examples in well-known collections, even collections made in the Maritimes. Was it possible these were a memory from his having heard Fred Jardine singing it way back in 1927 and, as he worked to commit Wilmot's worded-off version to memory, these stanzas came back to him? That seemed quite possible, and I had pretty well decided that was how it was, until I came to transcribe Wilmot's wonderful 1963 singing. And there, by the Lord Harry, were those three extra stanzas!

The question now was where did *Wilmot* get them? In 1961 they weren't there, but in 1963 they were. Could he have learned them from Nick, who had them in his 1962 Festival singing? That seemed both logically and chronologically sound, but, as I mentioned earlier, Wilmot had boycotted the 1962 Festival, and he and Nick never saw each other socially except at the Festival. Could he have learned them from someone else's singing? That is possible; I have heard at least one other person from the general area sing that song with those stanzas in it. But I doubt that he cared enough about the song to take that kind of trouble over it. Could he, through repeated singing, simply have re-remembered those stanzas? That is what I believe happened, and here's why.

To begin with, Wilmot claimed he never cared for that song. It was one of his mother's songs, one he heard her sing over and over again as she went about her chores. Obviously Wilmot had a quick ear for songs, and he probably committed some of her repertoire to memory without trying or even knowing that he had done so. “There are some songs you just can't forget”, he told me one time, implying that it didn't matter whether you liked them or not, and certainly his mother's songs fell into that category. Women sang songs around the house, within the family; men sang songs on public occasions, at parties and in the lumbercamps, and it would have been this public and hence men's tradition of

songs that would have interested young Wilmot the most.¹⁰ What inspired him to sing “Doors of Ivory” that day in the car there is no way of telling now. As I recall it was a kind of a throwaway, but when he did sing it he found an interested audience. Nick liked it and wanted the words, and that young professor in the front seat got him to sing it again two weeks later. Shortly after that, he “worded it off”, but I am sure he didn’t write it out himself, since writing wasn’t that easy for him. More likely he dictated it to his wife or one of the children, but however it was done, the process of committing it to writing meant going over it slowly and carefully, repeating phrases, pausing, thinking it over. Thus, after decades of lying dormant in the dark at the back of his mind, two singings followed by a dictating within the short space of a month could easily have been enough to have brought those stanzas back to him. It is quite possible that as he dictated he didn’t even recall that he hadn’t sung those stanzas before.¹¹

Nick, then, received all fourteen stanzas from Wilmot. But what of the “new” tune? I questioned him about that in 1963 as follows:

Ives: That was the tune that he [Fred Jardine] used, though — the one that you sang here?

Nick: Yes, yes, that’s right. And that’s the air that Wilmot had for it.¹²

That was a poor way for me to ask, since my question implied the answer I was looking for, but, even so, it may well be that Nick was working with a memory of Jardine’s tune. We should also remember that Nick had heard Wilmot sing that song exactly once — that time in my car — and he may have honestly believed that his singing *was* the same as Wilmot’s. But in folksong tradition the words are the important thing, the tune being often no more than a vehicle to carry those words forward, and this was especially true for Nick, who moved tunes around from song to song quite easily. I one time pointed out to him that he sang two songs to the same tune, and he flatly denied it, even after I played them side by side for him.

It remains for me to critique my own fieldwork. In his 1984 Presidential Address to the American Folklore Society, Bruce Jackson pointed out that “scholarship based on fieldwork is based on scholarly artifacts, not on the facts themselves”. He amplified that as follows:

Fieldwork collections, published or unpublished, reflect what individual collectors found, preserved, and selected, based on their own personal

10 For a full discussion of men’s and women’s traditions, see my *Joe Scott: The Woodsman Songmaker* (Champaigne, 1978), pp. 393-6.

11 As an interesting parallel, when Albert Lord had Yugoslavian epic singers dictate an epic they had previously sung, the dictated version was frequently longer than the sung version. See his *The Singer of Tales* (Cambridge, Mass., 1960), p. 128.

12 NA Ives 1.128.

idiosyncracies, the facts of the moment, and their ideas of what folklore was, what folklore information could be used for, and what recording technology was at hand.... No one collects everything that might be collected, and no one publishes every fact recorded and every observation made.¹³

He is quite right, and the present exercise is a case in point. What I have had to work with is not what was there but what I happened to record of what was there while I was looking for something else. As I mentioned earlier on, I wasn't especially interested in Child ballads. Besides, by the terms of the grant that was paying my way, I was supposed to be researching locally made songs, especially satirical ones made by well-known songmakers like Larry Gorman and Joe Smith. Still, I was going to be teaching a folksong course at Maine in the coming year, and since I knew it would certainly be incumbent upon me to devote a decent amount of time to these so-called "aristocrats of the ballad world", I made a mental note on the way back from Sackville to make sure and record Wilmot's singing of this very well-known exemplar. I recorded Nick's singing of it in the 1962 Festival because Sandy Paton and I were recording the whole Festival and there it was on the last night's program.

Then in 1963 I had a chance to put together an album of field recordings from Maine and the Maritimes, and since I wanted to include at least one Child ballad, since Wilmot's "Doors of Ivory" was the best singing of such a ballad I had ever heard, and since my 1961 recording of it had been badly miked, I asked him to record it again. While I was at it, almost as an afterthought, I decided to get Nick's version again. At no point in the whole process did I purpose a close study of this ballad; always I was up to something else. Aside from that shift in tunes — pretty obvious even at first hearing — I never really noticed the changes I have been speaking about until some years later when I brought the different versions together for a class presentation to demonstrate the interplay of oral and written traditions, and it wasn't until I began to put this paper together that I thought of all the wonderful questions I should have asked. The following is a fair sample:

Was Wilmot conscious of the changes he had made? When he first sang the song, did he know he wasn't singing the whole of it but was making do? Unfortunately, even though I spent a lot of time with Wilmot in later years, I never thought to ask, and now it is too late. As a corollary to that — and equally unanswerable — had I not already known from my studies what that final scene with the parrot was all about, would I have been puzzled by the ballad's close? Evidently as I heard what Wilmot sang, I also "heard" the missing stanzas, and it all made perfect sense. However, I've noticed my students are often puzzled at

13 Bruce Jackson, "Things That From a Long Way Off Look Like Flies", *Journal of American Folklore*, 98 (April-June 1985), pp. 131-2.

first hearing; then when they hear the second version they understand. Then there's that all-important "wording off". Who wrote it? What did it look like? Did Nick still have it, and could I have made a copy? Unfortunately again, by the time its existence assumed any importance for me, Nick was gone, his wife was gone, and whatever papers might have been left behind disappeared into the big night.

All very well. I can beat my breast in a thousand *mea culpas*, but the plain fact is that in folklore — as in other disciplines dependent on people-studying-people fieldwork, hindsight is a very cheap and common commodity, and such lapses as mine, lamentable as they seem to be, are an inevitable product of the way we go about our work. Often enough, we don't know what we should have been looking for or in what terms we should have been asking about it until long after it is too late to go back. Our fieldwork is the resultant of many vectors, only one of which is the controlled search for some specified thing, and our scholarly rigour should take all of them into account in any assessment of what we find. To put that another way, we must be as objective as possible about the probable subjectivity of our data. Yet, when we come to work up our field data, we should not be discouraged because it is not as clean or complete as we now see it should have been any more than we should fool ourselves that we are being truly objective when we gather it. We have to do the best we can with what's available. In the present instance, I believe my data — gathered along the way while I was either looking for something else or not really looking for anything in particular — can, for all its tentative nature, give us a look at how, in a new performance context created by scholars and promoters, a single song moved from one singer's passive to his active repertoire as it also was passed on by him to become part of another singer's active repertoire. But I have also tried to place that data in a second context: that of the collector's experience and shifting agendas — something I haven't seen done very often, and I thought it would be worth a try.

Finally, as Bruce Jackson suggested to me one day, it all goes to show that the facts — for whatever reason collected — know more than we do at the time, and, if they are properly saved and stored away, they may some day answer questions we never knew enough to ask. Of course, rather than providing answers, they may raise questions for future investigation. Either way, they provide us with more than we could ever know they had to offer. That is a comforting thought for an archivist.