

## The heroic epic and Canadian folklore

Robert B. Klymasz

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### Article abstract

L'auteur s'interroge à propos de l'absence de poèmes épiques dans les collections de folklore comme dans les préoccupations de la recherche folklorique au Canada et tente de voir dans quelle mesure on pourrait identifier des formes de production littéraire qui s'y apparenteraient et qu'on n'aurait pas su reconnaître de ce point de vue jusqu'à ce jour.

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## *The heroic epic and Canadian folklore\**

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ROBERT B. KLYMASZ

One of the genres that is conspicuously absent from almost any collection or discussion of Canadian folklore is the heroic epic.<sup>1</sup> It appears, at first glance at least, that this genre's unproductivity in modern times both here and abroad is linked to a host of contextual variables and that, in effect, the very notion and term, heroic epic, is — for Canadian folklorists at least — something of a lost cause.

But what are the varied features that experts tell us are those that mark a well developed epic tradition?<sup>2</sup> In brief, we are told that epic norms generally include a decided, overpowering "macho-like" quality, — an essential heroicism, male rather than female-oriented, but varying in detail and manner of exposition from tradition to tradition. The established Indo-European model has advanced in this regard the image of the valiant warrior who serves as the guardian of his native land; his character is unique, and he is endowed with supernatural strength and engages in single-handed combat. Northrop Frye has defined the epic hero as an individual whose power of action is superior in degree to other men but not to the natural environment. Other norms that are common to epic traditions are cyclicization, the development of special epic locales and epic times or eras, the use of varied poetic and compositional devices (such as gradation, hyperbole, triads, formulae), and so forth. Observers such as the Chadwicks and Bowra<sup>3</sup> have noted the impact of lament and panegyric as providing a suitable narrative tone and texture for the epic, while Felix

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\*Most of the material presented here was delivered at the 1980 annual meeting of the Folklore Studies Association of Canada in Montreal.

<sup>1</sup>An important exception is Jean-Claude Dupont's initial chapter on "La geste des morts en mer" in his book, *Héritage d'Acadie*, Montréal: Leméac, 1977.

<sup>2</sup>The general observations presented here on the nature of the folk epic have been culled from the collection of authoritative statements compiled and edited by Felix J. Oinas, *Heroic Epic and Saga: An Introduction to the World's Great Folk Epics*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978.

<sup>3</sup>See H.M. and Nora Chadwick, *The Growth of Literature*, London, Cambridge University Press, 1969 and C.M. Bowra, *Heroic Poetry*, London: Macmillan, 1969.

Oinas has suggested that the folk epic's narrative content can draw upon one or more of the following four sources:

1. history
2. biography
3. personal/individual invention
4. available folk narrative materials.

Keeping in mind the generalities noted above, let us now examine the Canadian folklore complex to see to what extent Canadian folklore has the potential of yielding similar epical features. In this regard, one can approach the problem comparatively and in terms of an organizational working scheme composed of four columns as follows:

| <b>I<br/>epic type</b>   | <b>II<br/>intent</b>                                 | <b>III<br/>verbal vehicle</b>              | <b>IV<br/>examples</b>  |
|--|--|--|---|
| (identified in terms of primary narrative focus)<br>- an adventure or foray ( <i>geste</i> ) with obstacles and/or adversary<br>- separation from loved ones/home because of death, immigration, etc.) | A to commemorate<br>B to glorify<br>C to immortalize | via lament<br>via panegyric<br>via exempla | - East coast shipwreck cycles<br>- la complainte de Cadieux<br>- songs of immigration to Canada |

In most cases, the features itemized under the first three columns overlap. In addition to the artificiality of the scheme, however, one can also

note that, in comparison with the elaborate heroic epic traditions recorded elsewhere, the Canadian narrative folksong materials cited in column IV hold only the kernels of epic productivity. They are, in this sense, underdeveloped epics showing an epicization process that possibly has been nipped in the bud, as it were. One cannot deny, however, that even such a phenomenon holds considerable interest for the serious folklore scholar.

Also, the scheme ignores *prose* narrative materials which can function in the epic tradition to support, reinforce, and flesh-out the corresponding folksong items or which can function independently as epics. An obvious example of the latter would be Pierre Berton's popular book-culture epic on *The Klondike*. After all, as Richard Dorson has noted, "there is no good reason to exclude . . . prose . . . from our conception of the folk epic — if we identify epic as a stirring traditional narrative of perilous adventure, daring, and manhood honoring the heroes of a people."<sup>4</sup>

To sum up, then, there is a need for caution in any further efforts to identify, study, and evaluate elements of the heroic epic in Canadian folklore. In the course of such work one will need to know but not ape the approaches and definitions developed elsewhere in relation to non-Canadian folkloric materials. Finally, we will have to reconsider, adjust, and crystallize our notions concerning a wide range of other folkloric phenomena, both verbal or otherwise, that relate to and constitute the totality of the Canadian folklore complex in general as well as the Canadian folk epic tradition in particular.

University of California  
Los Angeles, California

### Résumé

*L'auteur s'interroge à propos de l'absence de poèmes épiques dans les collections de folklore comme dans les préoccupations de la recherche folklorique au Canada et tente de voir dans quelle mesure on pourrait identifier des formes de production littéraire qui s'y apparenteraient et qu'on n'aurait pas su reconnaître de ce point de vue jusqu'à ce jour.*

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<sup>4</sup>Op. cit.