

Problems in Canadian Folklore Studies

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Review Article/Note critique

Problems in Canadian Folklore Studies

Martin LABA

Edith Fowke and Carole H. Carpenter, eds. *Explorers in Canadian Folklore*, Toronto, McClelland and Stewart, 1985.

Explorations in Canadian Folklore runs the gamut from the scholarly and penetrating to the romantic and naive, and the concept of folklore varies radically in the diverse treatments of folkloric expression that comprise this anthology of essays. A reading of this book reveals everything that is problematic in Canadian folklore studies, while at the same time, the enormous potential in the analysis and application of folklore is made evident.

A romantic tendency clearly pervades this volume, from the essays themselves to the editorial comments before each essay. With notable exceptions in the final section, entitled "Analyses" (John Widowson's "The Function of Threats in Newfoundland Folklore", Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett's "A Parable in Context: A Social Interactional Analysis of Storytelling Performance", Robert Klymasz's "The Ethnic Joke in Canada Today", and especially Carole Carpenter's "The Ethnicity Factor in Anglo-Canadian Folkloristics"), the articles in this book tend to treat folklore as collectable archaisms necessarily generated in marginal contexts of ruralism and ethnicity. In this view, culture is embodied and discoverable in folklore, and, it is implied, a Canadian heritage can be perceived, defined and constituted out of these traditional bodies of folkloric materials.

At issue here is a failing of Canadian folklore studies in general; that is, the complexities and tensions of the historical, political, economic and social structural conditions in which folklore is shaped, and through which folklore is expressed, are glossed over in a decontextualized approach to culture and regionalism. If, as the editors argue in their introduction, folklore somehow affords us insight into

the realities of cultural diversity in Canadian society, it is critical that the conditions of folklore be analyzed. These conditions are best understood in terms of the history and cultural politics of regionalism in Canada.

The uncoordinated Canadian cultural reality has always prevailed against attempts to define a unified character or integrative national theme of "Canadianism". The keenest observation of the nature of Canadian regionalism — the economic, political and social development of "local" culture — has been and continues to be the fundamental direction of cultural process in Canada. A singular and impelling concept of a Canadian cultural heritage is historically groundless, and therefore an elusive objective in the many and varied searches for a Canadian sense of nation. Multiculturalism, and other official definitions and policies directed toward constructing forms of national identity are, as Melville Watkins has suggested, largely strategies "of pasting over the cracks."¹

These "cracks" refer to the depth and intransigence of regional and cultural divisions in Canada, divisions that must be considered as the consequence of unequal distributions of power and wealth in the uneven economic development of the country.² Regions are not simply geographical entities that exist because cultural traditions distinguish them. In other words, regions do not contain their own explanation, their own reasons for being, and their character cannot be inferred simply from an examination of folklore or other cultural traditions. Rather, regionalism and the expressions that are situated within local cultures can be traced to factors which are external to, but are determining conditions of, the particular region.

These external factors can be found in the central Canadian capitalist class that developed in the first half of the 19th century to manage the financial resources of British capital investment in Canada. By the mid-19th century with the movement to free trade and a consequent diminished position of Canada in the British Empire, this

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1. Watkins, Melville. "Technology and Nationalism," in *Nationalism in Canada*, ed. Peter Russel. Toronto, McGraw-Hill, Ryerson, 1966, p. 294.
 2. Two outstanding analyses of the uneven development of regionalism on which I have relied are Ron Brunton, James Overton and James Sacouman, "Uneven Underdevelopment and Song: Culture and Development in the Maritimes," in *Communication Studies in Canada*, ed. Liora Slater, Toronto, Butterworths, 1981, pp. 105-132, and Wallace Clement, "Regionalism as Uneven Development: Class and Region in Canada," in "Perspectives on Regions and Regionalism in Canada", *Canadian Issues/Thèmes Canadiens*, ed. William Westfall, 5(1983), 68-80.

business relationship was no longer viable, and the capitalist class searched for an alternative imperial centre to align itself with. The United States represented this new centre, and an enduring relation of dependence was established through the commercial arrangements defined in the Reciprocity Treaty of 1854. With Confederation, according to Wallace Clement, "central Canadian capitalists became their own colonizers, reaching both east and west, thereby setting the conditions for the uneven development which was to follow."³

These "conditions" involved a critical control of transportation networks by the capital interests of central Canada. While these interests already served a dominant economic function of mediating trade and markets between the regional resource bases of Canada and foreign interests, transportation became the most strategic economic power for the central Canadian capitalists. In particular, the small manufacturing concerns which emerged in the service of local markets relied almost entirely on networks of transportation to and from their region— and transportation was the controlled domain of central Canadian commerce. Further, the emergent industrial strategies of the United States became directed at the development of Canada as a source for raw materials and as a market for manufactured goods.

The process of uneven development proceeded from these early factors to become an elaborated strategy of domination through takeover by central Canadian financial/transportation interests in strategic arrangements with U.S. economic interests. The de-industrialization of Atlantic Canada for example, was attributable to a failure of local manufacturing as a result of central Canadian intervention.⁴ With the building of the Intercolonial Railway (part of the agreements and proposals favouring central Canadian commerce in the National Policy of 1879), there was an erosion of the local markets in the Maritimes which supported and reinforced exporting and manufacturing activities. The subsequent decline in Maritime manufacturing industries and related employment, was profound. From this decline of Maritime manufacturing, to the detrimental effects of protective tariffs for domestic markets and the unfair freight rate structure imposed by the CPR on the transport of raw materials from the West to both domestic and foreign markets, to the privileged access to Canadian natural and financial resources, technology and indus-

3. Clement, p. 71.

4. The events leading to this de-industrialization are well-documented by Clement, pp. 71-73.

try afforded U.S. investors, and numerous other examples—all point to the origins, scope and persistence of centralization and U.S. penetration in the uneven development of regions in Canada.

The imbalances between and within regions then, involve a set of power relations between the dominance of the indigenous central Canadian capitalists, who have historically determined and perpetuated Canada's branch plant economy, and the subordination of those regional forces outside the financial and industrial heartland of central Canada. These imbalances must be also understood in cultural terms. Folklore certainly provides important cultural texts, but these texts must be read against a background of those economic, political and historical conditions which impinge upon and even generate cultural traditions.

This brief discussion of Canadian regional development provides a necessary framework within which *Explorations in Canadian Folklore* can be considered and assessed. Further, this discussion offers an argument against, or at least complicates the editors' suggestion that an appreciation of folklore "is the key to cultural maturity":

in our multicultural environment we need to understand the role of folk traditions in each person's life so that distinctive cultural heritages may not be divisive. If all Canadians could come to realize that everyone has these traditions, it would help to unify people of various ancestries. The differences among them are relatively superficial: the important thing is that all peoples have traditions and consider them significant at some level. We hope that the articles in this book will help our readers to appreciate this common heritage.⁵

This perspective is deeply romantic, and indicative of earlier regionalist/nationalist movements in which culture has been regarded "in terms of an opposition to a central elite or colonial culture and is seen as the essence of the national/ethnic entity, an expression of the soul of the people."⁶ The editors make the contentious statement that Canadians share a "common heritage", possess a culture which is ultimately integrated when seen through the corrective lens of folklore. Folk cultures are viewed as distinctive and homogeneous, and in essence, symbolic of the region and the nation. The historically-based divisiveness of regions, cultures and classes is never addressed.

For all of its larger conceptual problems, *Explorations in Canadian Folklore* includes some gems: two 19th century eyewitness ac-

5. p. 11.

6. Brunton, Overton and Sacouman, p. 108.

counts of the Métis buffalo hunt by historian John Macoun and artist Paul Kane; George Patterson's comprehensive study of Newfoundland dialect, including some limited notes on the contexts and usages of the examples of vernacular tradition; singer and collector Carrie Grover's brief, sensitive and insightful discussion of the meaning and significance of traditional song in the everyday life of her Nova Scotia family, and by extension, the significance of song to the larger community; a solid ethnographic/autobiographical account of collecting music among the Inuit by ethnomusicologist Laura Boulton; and the four articles already mentioned.

Carole Carpenter's critical analysis of the political and cultural hegemony of Anglo-Canadian domination, and the development, direction and purpose of Canadian folklore studies in relation to these factors, is clearly the most important study in the book for an understanding of folklore and folkloristics in Canada. While Carpenter treats official policies of multiculturalism as almost benign, as real representations of Canadian cultural diversity, she accomplishes an informed, and at times incisive statement on the tensions that characterized the relationship between Anglo-Canadian culture and the minority cultures outside the Canadian political and economic power bases. She points to both the severe shortcomings and the great promise of folkloristics in the Canadian context.

Other than occasional, officially-directed outbursts of nationalism, commonality, in terms of historical consciousness and cultural realities, is not a particularly Canadian attribute. (The Stanley Cup playoffs and Canada vs. the Soviets in international hockey perhaps go farther than any other cultural activity in establishing some common form of discourse on a national level.) Canadian folklore studies that pursue a mythic common "heritage" or a unified cultural history, are in effect, chasing an insubstantial, or at best, ambiguous factor in Canadian cultural and political history. *Explorations in Canadian Folklore* presents in its four sections ("Early Accounts", "Personal Experience Accounts", "Surveys" and "Analyses") primarily those studies that benefit the collector and those folklorists inclined toward general, descriptive approaches. The book has limited value however, for the analytical folklorist, or for the student of Canadian culture who recognizes the interdependent and interdeterminate relationship between cultural process, history and political economy in Canada.

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