

## John Murray Gibbon and the Inter-war Folk Festivals

Janet McNaughton

Volume 3, numéro 1, 1981

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1081050ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1081050ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Association Canadienne d'Ethnologie et de Folklore

ISSN

1481-5974 (imprimé)

1708-0401 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer cet article

McNaughton, J. (1981). John Murray Gibbon and the Inter-war Folk Festivals. *Ethnologies*, 3(1), 67–73. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1081050ar>

Résumé de l'article

L'Auteur relate brièvement la petite histoire des festivals organisés par la compagnie des chemins de fer du Canadian Pacifique à la fin des années vingt et trente, et elle livre certains aperçus sur les motivations et les Idéologies qui animaient alors leurs organisateurs, en particulier John Murray Gibbon.

---

# *John Murray Gibbon and the Inter-war Folk Festivals\**

---

JANET McNAUGHTON

My business in life is to try and get things done in a practical way, creating friends where possible and avoiding the possibility of making enemies.<sup>1</sup>

Between 1927 and 1930 at least fourteen major folk festivals were held in Canadian Pacific hotels in central and western Canada. Each event was staged over a period of several days and some involved as many as 400 performers. These festivals presented the music, dances and handicrafts of French Canadians and recent European immigrant groups, as well as material from the contemporary folklore revival of Britain.<sup>2</sup> In addition, original ballad operas were staged and an effort was made to encourage the composition of classical music based on Canadian folk music themes.

This paper will briefly outline the history of these Canadian Pacific Railway-sponsored folk festivals of the late 1920s and early 1930s, and attempt to offer some insight into the theoretical orientation and motivations of those who organized these events.

The main organizer of the festivals was John Murray Gibbon who was employed as head of publicity for the C.P.R. from 1913 to 1945. Gibbon was born in 1875 in Ceylon, the son of a wealthy tea planter originally from Aberdeen, Scotland. He was educated as a young man at colleges in his father's home city, and went on to study English literature at Oxford, graduating with first class honours. He then attended the University of Göttingen in Germany where he studied Sanskrit and Greek Archaeology, two fields which were then closely related to folklore studies as a result

---

\*This paper was first presented at the Folklore Studies Association of Canada meeting in 1981. Material for it came from research for two courses taken at Memorial University with Dr. Neil Rosenberg, "History of Folklore Studies" and a reading course on the national romantic movement. I would like to thank Dr. Rosenberg for his helpful guidance in this research.

<sup>1</sup>Letter, J.M. Gibbon to Marius Barbeau, January 3, 1928. Barbeau Correspondence, Canadian Centre for Folk Culture Studies, National Museum of Man, Ottawa.

<sup>2</sup>Although Gibbon was born and raised in Ceylon, his work was limited to promoting the cultures of European ethnic groups in Canada; he never dealt with Asians or other non-European peoples.

of the influences of the solar mythologists and early anthropologists such as Edmund B. Tylor.

After working for some years as a journalist, Gibbon accepted the position of Supervisor of European Propaganda for the C.P.R. in 1907. In this job he was responsible for encouraging Europeans to immigrate to Canada and to this end Gibbon visited Russia, Austria, Hungary and Scandinavia. Such extensive travel may have helped to contribute to the open-minded attitude Gibbon exhibited towards other cultures throughout his career.

In 1913 Gibbon immigrated with his wife to Canada to become head of publicity for the C.P.R., taking up residence in Montreal. A few years later his first novel, *Hearts and Faces*, was published, followed in 1919 by the second of his five novels. Perhaps because of his experiences as an author in Canada resulting from the publication of these books, Gibbon became active in the movement to gain adequate copyright protection for writers in this country, and in 1921 he helped to found the Canadian Authors' Association, of which he became the first president. Gibbon was later able to utilize his contacts with members of this association to contribute material to the folk festivals he organized.

It is not clear when Gibbon met Marius Barbeau, or under what circumstances, but in 1927 Gibbon published a book of translations of French-Canadian folksongs, most certainly a product of their acquaintance. Barbeau had already collected traditional French-Canadian material extensively, and in 1918 and 1919 he had staged concerts in Montreal to popularize the material he had collected.<sup>3</sup> Perhaps through this acquaintance with Barbeau, Gibbon became exposed to the national romantic approach to folklore studies. This movement began in Europe in the eighteenth century and was especially popular in areas where ethnic groups were attempting to assert their rights to political self-determination. Adherents of this school of thought believed that folk arts could be used as sources of inspiration for more formal art and that such efforts would result in the development of distinctive national cultures. Emphasis was placed on the applied use of collected items of folklore. National romanticism was the impetus behind some of the significant early collecting of folklore, for instance, the work of Wilhelm and Jacob Grimm.

In England the national romantic school of thought was adapted in the late nineteenth century to enable English composers of classical music to escape more than a century of domination by German styles, replacing

---

<sup>3</sup>Carole Henderson Carpenter, *Many Voices: A Study of Folklore Activities in Canada and Their Role in Canadian Culture*. Ottawa: National Museums of Canada, 1979, p. 226

German chromaticism with the modal style of English folk melodies. In adapting the concepts of the national romantic school to the needs of England at that time, emphasis was shifted away from the collection of folk literature to the collection of folk song, with most of the attention being given to the music as opposed to the texts. In 1889, as a result of this movement, a number of English musicians and folksong collectors came together to form the English Folk-Song Society. In keeping with the stress which the national romantic school placed on applied use of items of folklore, the aim of this society was to collect English folksongs so that they might serve as the source of inspiration for the composers of classical music. Members of the Folk-Song Society were influenced by Fabian socialism, which was then an important force in English intellectual life. Because of this influence, they added to the basic tenets of the national romantic school of thought the somewhat contradictory concept of internationalism: the idea that folk music could be used as a means not only of expressing the unique aspects of a nation's culture, but also of bringing people of different cultures together in mutual appreciation. This concept would prove especially attractive to John Murray Gibbon, who was faced with the task of promoting a positive attitude toward diverse immigrant cultures in his professional work, as the continued flow of such people into the Canadian west was essential to the financial well-being of the C.P.R.

While Barbeau may have introduced Gibbon to these concepts concerning folklore, the idea of staging large folk festivals as part of a movement to encourage a general interest in folklore was Gibbon's. He had, because of his professional work, access to a well organized publicity network, as well as to the many C.P. hotels which served as sites for these events.

The fourteen festivals Gibbon organized and staged between 1927 and 1930 served as promotional events for the railway-owned hotels. These events can be grouped into three thematic categories, namely, French-Canadian, European ethnic, and British-oriented festivals.

The Quebec festivals, held at the Chateau Frontenac, involved the presentation of French-Canadian culture. Marius Barbeau played a key role in the organization of these events and many of the performers of music and crafts demonstrators were his informants. Participants also included amateur dance groups and highly trained professionals, such as the Hart House String Quartet who performed classical arrangements of folksongs. Major English-Canadian musicians such as Healey Willan and Ernest MacMillan, both of the Toronto (later Royal) Conservatory of Music, and Québécois musicians Claude Champagne and Alfred LaLiberté were involved in the composition for, and performance at, these events of

original music based on folksong themes. At least three original ballad operas were written and performed over the years. One of these, "L'Ordre du Bon Temps" arranged by Willan, was later translated into English by Gibbon and performed again at the western festivals. There were, as well, displays and demonstrations of French-Canadian crafts such as wood carving, spinning and weaving at the Quebec festivals.

The stated purpose of these events was to encourage an awareness of French-Canadian folk culture. It was hoped that this would, in turn, foster communication between anglophone and francophone Canadians. Relations between these two groups had been severely strained during the conscription crisis of World War I, reaching their lowest point since Confederation. The desire to develop a better understanding was, then, based on an accurate assessment of the problems facing Canadian society at that point in time. However, examination of local newspaper articles published while the festivals were being staged reveals that these events were ironically being regarded by the conservative nationalist element in Quebec as a means of promoting the insular type of nationalism which was popular at that time, a nationalism rooted in devotion to the land, the Church and traditional peasant culture.<sup>4</sup>

The European ethnic festivals, held in prairie cities such as Winnipeg, Regina, Edmonton and Calgary, were organized along the same lines as the Quebec festivals. Ukrainian, German, Scandinavian, Hungarian, Polish, Dutch and Italian groups were among the many ethnic minorities involved. Most of the folk dance and choral groups participating in these events were ongoing organizations, previously established by members of the ethnic communities that they represented, while groups organized specifically to appear at the festivals were in the minority.

Anglo-conformity was considered to be the best policy for the assimilation of immigrants in English Canada until the 1940s.<sup>5</sup> Those who supported Anglo-conformity believed that it was the obligation of the immigrant to conform to the existing institutions of Canadian society. Such people felt that British immigrants would be most likely to do this. But British immigrants came mainly from urban areas and were unsuited to farming. During the early decades of this century when the prairies were being settled, farming people were urgently needed, and rural immigrants from eastern and central Europe adapted much more easily to the prairie environment than did the more socially acceptable British. Yet even those who defended the need for immigrants from central and

---

<sup>4</sup>For example of this attitude see "La Veille Chanson," *Le Soleil*, samedi 21 mai 1927, p. 19.

<sup>5</sup>Howard Palmer, "Social Adjustment," in Howard Palmer, ed. *Immigration and the Rise of Multiculturalism*. Toronto: Copp Clark, 1975, p. 112.

eastern Europe tended to believe in Anglo-conformity and felt that their responsibility was to convince those who opposed such immigration that these Europeans could in fact be assimilated.

It was clearly to the C.P.R.'s economic advantage to promote a positive attitude towards European immigrants, but Gibbon's approach of presenting native European folk culture as a desirable element in Canadian society was a fairly radical one for that time. Gibbon was aware of the predominant attitude of Anglo-conformity. As he later reported in his book *Canadian Mosaic*, he was frequently told by people he met while organizing these events that the C.P.R. was wrong to encourage such immigrant groups to maintain their native cultures.<sup>6</sup>

Gibbon believed that the festivals had created a marked change in the attitudes of Anglo Canadians towards immigrant peoples in the west.<sup>7</sup> Newspaper reviews of these events indicate that such presentation of European folk culture was enthusiastically received by audiences. But emphasis was on the picturesque aspects of peasant culture, having little to do with the day-to-day lives of these immigrants as new Canadians. It is difficult to assess whether enjoyment of this kind of romantic presentation of folk culture had any effect on the Anglo-Canadian tolerance of ethnic minorities in daily life.

From 1927 to 1930, and perhaps even later into the Depression, the C.P.R. also organized an annual Highland Gathering and Scottish Music Festival in Banff. British-oriented festivals were also staged in Victoria, Vancouver, and Toronto. These festivals seem to have been motivated by a desire on the part of the C.P.R. to maintain good public relations with Anglo Canadians by providing for them the same type of cultural promotion as for the francophone and European ethnic groups.

Recognition of the fact that anglophone Canadians of British origin have a folk culture would certainly have been a positive contribution to Canadian society at that or any other point in this country's history. Lack of awareness of the majority group's own folk culture is certainly a contributing factor to the kind of cultural intolerance that Gibbon sought to alter, an attitude summarized by Carole Carpenter as follows:

... the popular opinion of the controlling classes of Anglo Canadians from early settlement to the present (is) that folklore is the quaint possession of the underprivileged, underdeveloped, largely uncultured, or decidedly foreign portions of the populace, in others words, the property of others, not themselves.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>6</sup>John Murray Gibbon, *Canadian Mosaic: The Making of a Northern Nation*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1938, p. 276.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup>Carpenter, *op. cit.* p. 23.

Encouragement of an awareness of Anglo-Canadian folk culture might have been one of the most significant contributions that these festivals could have made. Unfortunately, rather than looking for examples of indigenous folk music and dance among Canadians of British origin, Gibbon was content to import the songs and dances of the British revival wholesale. Thus the concerts at these festivals consisted of Morris dancing, madrigal singing and performances of Ralph Vaughan Williams' ballad opera, "Hugh the Drover". As might be expected at a time when Anglo-conformity was dominant and a positive feeling toward Britain prevailed, these festivals found enthusiastic acceptance.

The reasons for the rather abrupt end of the C.P.R.-sponsored festivals in the early thirties were never officially stated. However, Gibbon's correspondence with Barbeau indicates that these events were far too costly to justify the amount of business they generated. It is also safe to assume that the Depression of the thirties contributed to their decline. The abrupt halt of immigration at that time created huge debts for the C.P.R., and it is unlikely that such expensive promotional work could have been maintained under those circumstances. Gibbon remained in his position as director of publicity until his retirement in 1945, and continued to promote the ideas of the national romantic school, especially in his position as president of the Canadian Handicrafts Guild and in his writings. However, he would not again be given the opportunity to apply the concepts of this school of thought on such a grand scale.

In 1938, Gibbon's *Canadian Mosaic* was published. This book detailed the positive contributions made by European ethnic groups to Canadian society. A year later, *New World Ballads* appeared. This was Gibbon's personal attempt to contribute to a national music for Canada, and in it he presented songs he had written about events in Canadian history, set to the tune of British and European folksongs.

To summarize then, in the organization of all three types of festivals Gibbon seems to have been motivated by an accurate perception of problems in Canadian society at that time: the need for greater understanding among Anglo Canadians of francophone culture, the need for greater tolerance of recent immigrant cultures, and the need for Anglo Canadians to recognize and develop their own folk culture. In the ideas of the national romantic school he found a theoretical framework that allowed him to approach these problems with concrete measures, namely, the staging of folk festivals to create better understanding among people of the various cultures in Canada, and the encouragement of a national music based on folk music themes which was intended to bring these various cultural elements together.

It is difficult to assess the impact of these measures upon Canadian

society. The underlying problems of cultural intolerance persisted, and a national music in the terms that Gibbon encouraged did not emerge in Canada. Part of the reason for the failure to achieve these goals was that the staged events imposed a romanticized notion of folk culture upon the audiences. This folkloric representation had little to do with contemporary Canadian life and therefore could not realistically have been expected to affect it significantly.

The C.P.R.-sponsored festivals were apparently the first major folk festivals in North America. There is evidence that the Canadian events may have served as models for the North American folk festival movement, particularly the National Folk Festival which began in St. Louis, Missouri in 1934.<sup>9</sup>

For his time, Gibbon was remarkably progressive in that his encouragement of the preservation of European culture in Canada foreshadowed the concept of multiculturalism by many years. Thus, while Gibbon's vehicle for effecting change in Canadian society may have failed, he developed a sensitive and sophisticated analysis of the problems in Canada, and, at a time when extreme unconscious ethnocentrism was common among Anglo Canadians, he maintained a progressive and open-minded approach to other cultures.

Memorial University of Newfoundland  
St. John's, Nfld.

---

<sup>9</sup>See Sarah Gertrude Knott's article, "The National Folk Festival after Twelve Years," (*California Folklore Quarterly*, 5(1946), 83-93), for evidence of Gibbon's influence. Though Knott never mentions Gibbon directly in this article, she comments on the role folk festivals could play in promoting national unity and even refers to "our folk mosaic" (p. 85).

### **Résumé**

*L'Auteur relate brièvement la petite histoire des festivals organisés par la compagnie des chemins de fer du Canadian Pacifique à la fin des années vingt et trente, et elle livre certains aperçus sur les motivations et les Idéologies qui animaient alors leurs organisateurs, en particulier John Murray Gibbon.*