

***Songs and Stories from Deep Cove, Cape Breton.* Edited by Ron MacEachern (Sydney: College of Cape Breton Press, 1979. Pp. 49, photographs, illustrations. \$4.95)**

John Ashton

Volume 3, numéro 1, 1981

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1081053ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1081053ar>

[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 ce compte rendu

Ashton, J. (1981). Compte rendu de [*Songs and Stories from Deep Cove, Cape Breton.* Edited by Ron MacEachern (Sydney: College of Cape Breton Press, 1979. Pp. 49, photographs, illustrations. \$4.95)]. *Ethnologies*, 3(1), 81–82.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1081053ar>

Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

Songs and Stories from Deep Cove, Cape Breton.

Edited by Ron MacEachern

*(Sydney: College of Cape Breton Press,
1979. Pp. 49, photographs, illustrations.
\$4.95)*

At first glance, the prospective reader might expect to find in this volume a regional or local collection of songs from Cape Breton. This, however, does not prove to be the case. In fact, the book contains a total of twenty songs culled from the repertory of one singer-songwriter, Ambrose (Amby) Thomas of Deep Cove, Nova Scotia together with a series of related narratives and personal reminiscences. The editor of the collection, Ron MacEachern, is himself a singer and musician from Cape Breton, and has done undergraduate work in folklore at Memorial University of Newfoundland. He recorded on tape forty-four of Amby's songs and collaborated with his informant to select twenty of them for presentation in this volume. Herein lies the book's first shortcoming. Why it was decided not to present the singer's entire repertory and according to what criteria the songs that are present were chosen, we are not told. In fact, the general lack of information about the songs and the tradition to which they pertain represents this book's most obvious failure. The twenty songs are presented without comparative notes so

that the reader can gain little idea of their currency either within the Deep Cove area or, for that matter, anywhere else. What we have here is simply a mixture of songs, some of which are international in their distribution, for example "The Maids of Australia" and "The Darby Ram"; others which belong to the general North American tradition, like the lumbering songs "The Jam on Jerry's Rock" and "The Woodsman's Alphabet"; and still others presumably localized in their currency, for instance Amby Thomas' own composition "Wilson's Accident". I did find one item in the collection particularly interesting, namely a version of "The Dunkin' Captain" which contrasted markedly with Newfoundland variants of the same.

How far these songs are representative of the singer's entire repertory remains to be seen. Similarly we are told nothing as to whether or not Thomas is typical of Deep Cove tradition or Cape Breton tradition in terms of the size and content of his repertory or of his singing style, which also goes without comment except for the editor's remark that "Amby has a very free singing style." Most of the contextual details, both about the body of songs as a whole and about individual items within the collection, are provided within Mr. Thomas' personal narratives and reminiscences which precede many of the songs. Here we discover, for example, that the singer's mother served as an important source of songs, and we are

given some insight into the local "ceilidh" and broadside traditions. The editor has done a good job of finding segments of his interviews with the singer that readily complement the items in his repertory. In addition, Ellison Robertson's tasteful illustrations are highly evocative of the songs to which they relate. The book as a whole is well produced and effectively organized.

This collection is valuable in so far as it is one of the few that centres on the repertory of an individual singer and his song tradition. One would hope that Ron MacEachern will compensate for the omissions in this volume by producing a more extensive work in the future. Amby Thomas is an interesting, articulate man and a thorough examination of his songs and singing would make for a fascinating study.

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

The Lumberjacks

By Donald Mackay
(Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 1978.
Pp. 319, introduction, maps,
photographs, drawings, notes, glossary
of logging terms, bibliography, index.
\$19.95)

The North American lumber industry is without question one of the most thoroughly and best documented workingman's occupations. Canadian accounts, like those concentrating on the United States, appear in periodicals and books beginning in the mid-nineteenth century. Logging was big business by 1900; rapid industry growth and its geographic spread from east to west prompted numerous treatments, including several ambitious attempts at industry-wide surveys on both sides of

the Canadian-American border. Since the First World War there has been a steady stream of regionally focussed social and economic histories, reminiscences, and collections of lumberjack folklore, not to mention the flood of Bunyan-inspired popularizations. One would expect, as is the case, to find a high proportion of overlap in this wealth of published material.

Seasoned woodsmen and folklorists immersed in logging-related literature or fieldwork will indeed find much that is familiar in *The Lumberjacks*. That said, let it be emphasized that Donald MacKay has compiled a highly informative and distinctive book on Canadian lumbering and loggers. In fact, given the close parallels linking the Canadian-American labor force, work settings, routines, equipment, camp life, and recreational camaraderie, *The Lumberjacks* is arguably the best single work now available if one wants a richly detailed, grassroots sense of the pre-1950s industry as a whole.

MacKay traces the rise of Canadian lumbering from its early 19th-century roots in Ontario, Quebec, and New Brunswick. He devotes a chapter to cable-and-steam logging on the British Columbia raincoast, and two brief ones near the end of the book to the unionization movement, and to liquor consumption in and out of the woods. A somewhat peripheral and overly tedious section – in this reviewer's opinion, at least – recounts major forest fires. The author openly eschews consideration of "such important issues as ecology, reforestation, or even the companies or mill towns to any extent" (9). Instead, the bulk of the twenty chapters focus on life in the lumberwoods as known firsthand by the "axemen, sawyers, teamsters, river drivers, rigging slingers, and foresters who cut and hauled from the birth of the industry until the 1950s when internal combustion replaced steam on the west coast and horses in the east" (10).