

**Tim BORLASE (ed. and comp.), *Songs of Labrador*,
(Fredericton, Goose Lane Editions, 1993, pp. 214, ISBN
0-86492-156-X)**

Neil Rosenberg

Volume 17, numéro 1, 1995

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1087482ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1087482ar>

[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

Rosenberg, N. (1995). Compte rendu de [Tim BORLASE (ed. and comp.), *Songs of Labrador*, (Fredericton, Goose Lane Editions, 1993, pp. 214, ISBN 0-86492-156-X)]. *Ethnologies*, 17(1), 223–225. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1087482ar>

Overall, Norrick has a clear writing style, and provides a wealth of examples to illustrate his points. He examines a wide variety of functions of humour, and explains them well. *Conversational Joking* should be interesting and informative to anyone interested in language and communication. The one comparatively weak component of the work, as Norrick readily admits, is the one-sidedness of his interactional situations, restricted to good-natured leisure time of midwestern American family and friends. A less confined study group could have altered Norrick's findings—particularly in regard to humour and aggression.

Michelle LONG
University of Manitoba
Winnipeg, MB

Tim BORLASE (ed. and comp.), *Songs of Labrador*, (Fredericton, Goose Lane Editions, 1993, pp. 214, ISBN 0-86492-156-X)

Co-published with the Labrador East Integrated School Board, this is a revised and expanded version of a volume published by the Board in 1982. It includes all but four of the first volume's 117 songs and narratives, and adds 23 new pieces, for a total of 136. The title does not convey fully the contents, for there are 13 narratives—essentially oral history texts—taken mainly from *Them Days*, the award-winning Labrador-based quarterly that has been publishing such material since the mid-70s. Also included are brief signed essays on aspects of traditional life such as sayings, games, medicine, and “old custom” trapping laws. One, “Folk Songs of the Trapper” by Alicia Eaton (117), offers insights into the traditional contexts and uses of some of the older songs in the volume.

In terms of the songs that comprise most of its contents the volume is quite eclectic, reflecting the region's cultural and geographical diversity. Its metal spiral binding signals the intention of the editor that it be used as a school songbook, and its texts are printed so that, with the exception of two songs for which lengthy choral scores are provided, each song fills no more than two facing pages. Music is provided for all songs and tunes. In his “Foreword” (9-11), Borlase, who is the coordinator of art, music, drama, and social studies for the School Board, sketches geography, climate, settlement history, and “The Labrador Way of Living.” It closes with a discussion of the collection itself, a collaborative labour which, editor Borlase stresses, speaks “to a common Labrador experience and the sharing of cultural values that have made this place so

remarkable and unique" (11). The materials are grouped according to nine broadly topical categories. As Borlase indicates, "most songs touch more than one aspect of Labrador life" (11), so brief introductions for each section explaining the categories would be a useful addition to a future edition of the book. I interpret them as follows. The first three ("The Big Land", "The People", "Young 'Uns") focus on the region and its inhabitants. Next come three that deal with human uses of animals as resource: "Carcashos and Others" ("Carcasho", from the French *carcajou*, is a local name for the wolverine), mainly about hunting; "Furriin' ", on trapping; and "Jiggin' ", on fishing. The final three deal with social and spiritual matters: "Hard Times" about social and economic struggle, "Songs of Faith" about religion, and "Ballads" about a variety of personal relationships. In this last category are both narrative and lyric songs—some seemingly quite old, others evidently rather new.

This reminds us that the book is a collection of "Songs" not meant to be considered folk music, even though among the additions to this edition are nine songs from MacEdward Leach's 1960 field collection, originally published by the National Museum in 1965. A substantial number of the other songs are comparatively recent compositions on various Labrador topics by locally popular singer-songwriters Shirley Montague, Harry Martin, Gerald W. Mitchell, and Byron Chaulk. Quite a few of these are or were available in some form of commercial recording (at the time of writing, CDs by Montague and Martin were receiving considerable air play on provincial CBC radio); a discography would be another useful addition in a future edition.

If Borlase does not speak of ethnography, even the most casual perusal of the volume shows that he has spent considerable time and effort gathering and recording texts and music in the classic ethnographic manner, although (except for the Leach material) individual texts are not presented as documents of specifically dated performances. Still, a substantial proportion of the material in the volume would pass muster as "traditional" under the most purist of definitions. Twenty-one of the songs are sung in First Nations languages. The Naskapi dialect of Innu-Amin spoken at Davis Inlet, the Sheshatshit Innu dialect, and the Inuktitut of the Inuit in Nain are so identified for most of these texts. Some are furnished with metrically rendered English translations that can be sung, while others have more literal translations intended only to convey the meanings of the original lyrics. One of the Innu-Amin songs, "Cumbaia", is itself a translation of "Kum Ba Yah", the African song popularized by Pete Seeger; it appears in the "Songs of Faith" section.

Undoubtedly because this is a singing book the region's rich instrumental tradition is only slightly represented. But the three accordion tunes from Drucilla and Susie Riche of Rigolet accurately represent one of the most popular local instruments. As well, they belie the stereotype of the male instrumentalist.

This volume focuses on songs and other expressive materials that relate uniquely to the history and cultures of Labrador. So ethnologists seeking a sampling of the total repertoire of Labrador folksingers will find that, as in most of the locally produced collections from Newfoundland, material from outside the region which may be popular and frequently encountered in actual singing situations is not included here. Still, this is an important book for students of culture for several reasons. First, it provides a pretty good record of what's locally popular (given the caveat just mentioned) at this time, for its eclecticism and diversity seems to me to be an accurate representation of local tastes. Second, it is a prime example of the creation of a canon openly intended to represent the idea of a region and its cultures and its rhetoric can be studied as such. Third, the songs themselves are packed with all kinds of social and historical information. This is not surprising, given Borlase's own perspective and the didactic purpose of the volume, but additional meaning can be prized out of the texts by the intrepid analyst who desires to do so.

Indeed s/he may be inspired to do so, for most of Borlase's headnotes to the songs range from brief to quite brief. They furnish enough information for the experienced Labradorian to understand the meanings of songs and other materials, but the outside reader may be puzzled by some references to ideas, places, and traditions familiar to local people but not to outsiders. This is, after all, a tool for teaching within the region, calculated to inculcate and reinforce a sense of shared local heritage. The need for such teaching aids as this is keenly felt in Labrador, which is often ignored by the island part of Canada's newest province, and whose integrity as a political-geographical entity has repeatedly been called into question by Quebec map makers. At the same time, it must be recognized that an openly canonical and didactic book is not likely to dwell upon problematic or conflict-ridden aspects of the regional cultures as they may be manifest in vernacular song. The need for serious scholarly research into the song culture of this fascinating region remains, then; but anyone undertaking such a task will find this an essential introduction and guide.

Included are some 75 black and white photographs, many of them quite striking owing in part to their generous size in the large format (8" x 11") of the volume. These help to bring the printed parts of the book to life. Also included are three indexes: song and tune titles (also including titles of oral history texts and other non-musical pieces), first lines, and contributors.

Neil ROSENBERG
Memorial University of Newfoundland
St. John's, Newfoundland
