

Interview with John Archbold

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John Archbold contacted me after seeing my project website, disastersongs.ca, to let me know about two Nova Scotia mining disaster songs that he had recently composed: “Buddy, Can You Hear Me?” about the 1958 Springhill disaster, and “Pictou’s Black Coal”, about the 1992 Westray disaster.

The 1958 “bump” was a geological event that killed 75 working in the Springhill coal mine, but 19 miraculously survived, rescued more than a week after the event. One of the survivors was Maurice Ruddick, a black man nicknamed “the singing miner”, named Canada’s “Citizen of the Year”, and commemorated in a television Heritage Minute.

The Westray explosion, which killed 26 miners only eight months after the mine had opened and shortly after the mine received a safety award, shocked the nation; there was a feeling that such disasters should no longer happen in a developed country such as Canada. Shock turned to anger as miners employed by Curragh Incorporated accused management of deliberately running an unsafe mine in order to maximize profits. The RCMP charged Curragh Incorporated and two mine managers with criminal negligence and manslaughter, although, due to a variety of problems with the case, it was later dropped. In the end, the exact cause of the explosion was not determined, but the Nova Scotia Supreme Court concluded that blame for the disaster lay with many people and departments in both Curragh and the provincial government, the latter of which was accused of turning a blind eye to safety infractions in order to improve the province’s economic well-being. Both events received an extensive amount of press; multiple books have been written about each.

John Archbold was born in England and was only 13 months old when his parents immigrated to Nova Scotia. His first memories are of living in Parrsboro, but he also lived in New Glasgow (near the site of the Westray mine disaster many years later) and Glace Bay (another mining town in Cape Breton). Eventually the family moved to Toronto, where they remained, and where John lives today.

HS: How did you get involved in songwriting?

JA: It started when I was a graduate student [in biology]. Whenever we had a visiting grad student or post-doc or something in the lab, we’d have a party when they left. I guess I tended to write little comic songs. [Then] I got involved in Morris dancing around 1980. And they did quite a bit of singing. We

formed a new team in 1985. One of the guys on the team was David Parry – he’s dead now – he was, I think, head of theatre at the national museum eventually, the national museum of Canada in Ottawa. He was a great singer, he literally could sing all night long, which he did one time, much to my wife’s disgust. When we were camping, he sat outside singing all night long. So it became quite important on the team to be able to sing, and I guess that was what started me writing serious songs. Everybody knew all [sorts of songs]. I’d sort of work for weeks or months trying to learn a song from, I guess in those days, it would be a tape or a record. I’d be just about ready to sing it, and somebody else would sing the damn thing, so I thought, “Well, I might as well write my own.” That’s basically how it started.

HS: And were you a singer, then, before all of this?

JA: I knew all the sort of traditional Northeastern English songs. They have a musical tradition that goes back to the 1850s and it’s still very much alive today. And everybody knows “The Blaydon Races”, “Keep Your Feet Still, Geordie Henny”, and a whole bunch of things like that. I knew all of those songs, ’cause [when] my father’s friends had a party, they’d sing them. And I loved all of those songs, too. Those are about the only songs I knew, and in Nova Scotia we learned a few folk songs as well. But I didn’t sing outside the Morris community at all.

I remember my grandparents in England, they had a piano, and when they had a party, people would all gather around the piano, and somebody would plonk away on the keys, and they’d all sing. And the same thing when we were over in Toronto. My dad’s friends were all Geordies. They were all from Northeastern England, all from Newcastle. There were a couple of Scots and a couple of Yorkshire men, but they were mostly Geordies. One or two other guys would sort of lead all this singing and whatnot, and it would go on for an hour, or something like that. It was great fun. We really loved it, and enjoyed it. So, the Morris community is much the same. We do the same thing. Monday night, we practice for a couple of hours, then we go off to the pub and it’s the Tranzac Club (where the Flying Cloud is now), and we go in the big room where nobody else is, and we just sing and drink for another two hours or something. That’s the way we entertain ourselves.

HS: And you’ve been doing this for over 30 years now. How many songs have you written at this point?

JA: Oh, that are worth singing? Maybe half a dozen. I guess I didn't write any songs from about 1994 to last year. And then last year I wrote a song. Somebody had decided that I was always late to Morris events and I was always referred to as "the 'late' John Archbold". So I wrote a song about the benefits and advantages of being late. It turned out to be a big hit with the guy. Just pure comedy. And then, I guess, around December, I wrote "Buddy, Can You Hear Me?" [I first] sang it, I think, the end of January, and it was a real hit with the guys. I've been singing it about every other week since. I counted it up the other night. I keep a list of what I sing and when and where, or at least for at least six months, or something like that. I discovered I'd sung it, I think, nine times since January 31st, which is pretty good. And all but the first were requests.

HS: Tell me about what inspired that song at that particular point.

JA: Well, I can't remember exactly how it started, but I guess I was probably doing an internet search on Canadian mining songs. I found the song by Maurice Ruddick's daughter called "[No More] Pickin' Coal". And I guess it was published in a Canadian folksong journal or something [*Canadian Folk Music Bulletin* 23/4: 12-13]. It had the music and then there was a biography of [Ruddick]. I couldn't learn the song. I just couldn't figure it out for the life of me, 'cause I don't read music very well. So, that's where I got the biography, and I was so affected by the story of how he was such an outstanding person, and he meant so much to his workmates. And then he was named Canadian citizen of the year in 1959. And then it was all downhill from there, and he ended up in, like, abject poverty, practically. Just an incredible story. And having grown up in New Glasgow, I'd seen a little bit of the racism that was kind of endemic there when I was a kid. All the black families lived outside the town, up the hill by the quarry. So New Glasgow had its own little Africville [a predominantly black community near Halifax]. Then I spent another summer down in Alabama in 1961, which was before all the freedom rides and all of that. So I saw racism institutionalized and full-blown down there. I think it's obviously something that had affected Maurice Ruddick in his life. So, anyway, because I couldn't figure out how to sing "No More Pickin' Coal", I tried to write my own. And I gave it kind of a black spiritual feel, 'cause I felt that was appropriate. Maurice Ruddick was familiar with church music and country and western, and I knew that [Helen Creighton collected] "No More Auction Block" in Nova Scotia, so I figured, "Well, he's probably familiar with some of the American spirituals and whatnot," so it's not so far off-base to give it that kind of a feel, so that's what I

did.

HS: Why were you searching for mining songs?

JA: I don't know. I guess it was just such an ever-present part of my childhood. Newcastle was the centre of the mining industry in the northeast of England. There was a saying [meaning something pointless or superfluous]: "carrying coals to Newcastle". And of course Nova Scotia was the same. Everywhere we went, there were coal mines. Coal mines in New Glasgow, Parrsboro was the shipping point for coal from Springhill and Maccan. My father worked in Maccan. He worked in Trenton and we used to go down to Trenton, and of course, [saw] the great lines of coal, hover cars full of coal at the power station. I don't know, it just seems like maybe I'm just trying to go back to my childhood or something like that. Not quite sure. It's all kind of emotional.

HS: Will you tell me about how "Pictou's Black Coal" came to be?

JA: It's the same thing. I guess, back in the '80s, I was thinking, "well, I want to write a song, something about what happened in Pictou." And I had been rooting around for some years in local history sections of libraries. I guess when I went to York – I did a Master's at York University – I discovered a local history section there. In a centennial year, I think every little town and village in Canada got money to produce a history. I found a book on [Pictou] county, and it had a whole big section on mining. It had all the background information and the history of it. There's a double connection here, too, because it turns out that commercial mining in Pictou was started by a company called The General Mining Association, and they brought a whole boatload of miners over from Northeastern England. Sort of like a double connection there.

And then when the Westray disaster happened, I guess we'd been down the year before and people had said, "Oh, there's no mining going on." The steel plant in Trenton had closed, and the railway car factory where my friend's father had worked was closed, and the foundry where another friend's father had worked was closed. Everything was closed. The mines were closed. Suddenly, in 1992, it turned out it wasn't all closed. It was just the same as it had been. So, again, I guess it was an emotional reaction to it. There was a personal connection to the place.

I've read everything I could [about Westray]. So, I wrote, I guess, the first verse, the third, and the fourth right away 'cause they're kind of history and a bit about how it affects families. [I wrote them] probably within – I can't remember exactly – but I think it was in two months. And then a year later, I guess it was the inquiry and the miners' testimony

started appearing on the paper, and again, I read everything I could find on it. And from that, I got the second verse, which was all the technical stuff about the bare wires, and fuel being spilled, and not sprinkling the stone dust around and all the rest of it. So, that's sort of how I managed to put it all together.

The first verse talked about the mining company saying it was safe, and they were doing this and that and the other to make it safe, and they were sprinkling the stone dust around, and this, that, and the other. And then the second verse goes into, well, they didn't actually do that. They left it bagged up, and they didn't do this, and they didn't do the other, and so on. So, I guess it was the natural follow-up from the first verse. And then, the third has the effects on the families, which I think is probably – to go back to Maurice Ruddick again – to me, the real disaster that that song is about is not so much about the bump, the 1958 bump, but the disaster that happened to his family.

HS: What is the process for you when you write a song?

JA: Usually, the best ones, I have an idea, like, "I want to write a song about Maurice Ruddick, or wouldn't that be great to write a song about Maurice Ruddick?" And something inadvertently, unasked for, without any effort, pops into my mind, and it's usually like a line of words with a tune. And I kind of think of it as a hook and I can kind of pull the rest of it out. And I think in the case of "Buddy, Can You Hear Me?" it was "Buddy, can you hear me? Call my name." And then I kept repeating "Call my name", and it all sort of came together within, I guess, a day. And then the next day, I kind of looked at it, and thought, "Well, there's too many repetitions of 'call my name', let's take out some of that, and put in a little bit of the story of him being trapped, and him being rescued, and the mine closing down, and how he ended up afterwards." It all came together in about two days, I guess. Sometimes it's faster, sometimes it's slower.

HS: So, the music comes at the same time as the words?

JA: Oh, absolutely. But that one tune – remember, I told you there was a tune where I found an old poem and was reading it? And every time I read it, I had a tune in my head. And every time I'd read it, it would be the same damn tune. And I've listened to all kinds of music since and I think it just popped out of my mind. I haven't found [that] tune anywhere else. It's probably one of the five basic folk tunes, I suppose. But, it just kind of comes. I don't really have to work at that sort of thing.

HS: Who are you speaking about when you're writing these songs? Who are these songs for?

JA: Well, primarily, I guess, a) they're for me, [and] b) they're for the group of guys that I sing with. I suppose what you're asking is, why do I write the songs? I guess with a lot of them, at least with the serious songs, I feel there's some sort of story that needs to be told. It's maybe a story of courage and injustice, or something like that. I guess that's what it is. But certainly, I feel a sense of injustice in the story of Maurice Ruddick and even with "Pictou's Black Coal", there's this long history of methane gas in the mines and explosions and the death toll there is unreal. It's like double the number of men that died in the two world wars. Quite substantial. And here we were in, what, 1992, and the same damn thing happened. They should have known better. It shouldn't have happened at that time period. So, I guess when I wrote "Pictou's Black Coal", I was actually quite angry about what happened. So, I guess to answer the question "why" is [that] I wanted to express my sense of injustice. I think the story's important to tell. Yeah, I guess those are the two main reasons why I did it. You hear the anger in "Pictou's Black Coal".

HS: Do you feel like your songs have achieved whatever goals you had for them? Did you have a goal for them? Did you have an idea of what these songs would do, and did they achieve that? Or will they?

JA: We sing a lot of songs from the 19th Century, the guys I sing with. We sing all kinds of old seaman shanties and things like that, and stuff that goes back long before that. But I don't think anybody on the team sits down and reads history. So the history is recorded in the songs, and I think it's a more immediate way of passing it on. So, yeah, I guess my objective is to try and keep the stories alive and sort of circulating, I guess. And I think putting the story in the song is one way of doing it. I guess I do have some ambition for the songs to stay around after I'm gone.

HS: I'm curious to know how much your songs might have been influenced by a sense of what disaster songs are typically like.

JA: The only other disaster song that I knew – well, there's some from Northern England, of course. "The Trimdon Grange Explosion", I knew that one. David Parry used to sing that. And there's a couple of others. There's songs about strikes and things. They probably had some influence. I'm not sure how much, or what sort of influencing, or anything like that. The only Canadian disaster song I can recall is Ewan MacColl and Peggy Seeger's song about Springhill that I probably only heard once or twice. I only heard ["The Wreck of the Edmund Fitzgerald"]

once or twice way back when.

HS: I was shocked by the number of disaster songs we found. The 1958 Springhill disaster that you wrote about has about eight songs, and Westray has about six [subsequent to this interview, we found even more songs for each event]. Do you have any thoughts on why there seems to be such a need for disaster songs?

JA: Well, I don't know that there's a *need* for them. But, I guess certain people feel compelled to write a song, just as I did. I only wanted to express what I felt about it. I guess you can write text, you can write prose, or something like that, and not a lot of emotion comes through. And you can write a poem, there's a little bit more emotion. But if you write a song, you can get away with one-tenth the number of words, but it has five times as much emotion. So, I suspect that's what compels people to do it.

HS: I guess I'm still intrigued that it's disasters.

JA: Well, I guess there's some empathy with what's happened to somebody who's lost a loved one, or found themselves in a difficult situation, or whatever. I don't know, I guess. I guess when it comes to Maurice Ruddick, I was really struck by what an awful thing it was that happened to him. He was obviously such an outstanding person to end up washing railway tracks, picking up coal. It's the sort of thing that my father talked about when he was growing up in the 1930s in England. That's what people did because they couldn't afford to buy coal to heat their houses [or] cook their meals. They walked up and down the railway tracks picking up lumps of coal. It's the bottom of the barrel kind of thing, it's the last thing you do. I don't know. I guess it just seems so horrible that somebody like Ruddick would end up in that situation. It's hard to put a finger on it. It's one of those things that either you feel it or you don't.

HS: Sounds like the person and the fact that there's a face in that situation, seems to have drawn you. Is that possible?

JA: Yeah, I'd agree with you. I see it as a much sadder song than other songs that I've written. Although "Southern Oceans" is a pretty sad song. Whereas "Pictou's Black Coal," it was more anger that motivated the song. I can't talk about it without choking up. "Buddy, Can You Hear Me?" I can barely hold it together to sing it. I remember the first time I sang it, everybody was just speechless, 'cause they hadn't heard it before. And immediately it was, "What's the story of the song?" Because it doesn't have a lot of words. It's a very sketchy story. But I think they were all aware there was a story there. They didn't know what it was about, or who it was about, and I started

trying to explain it, but I was really all choked up, and then, as soon as I mentioned the name Maurice Ruddick, this Welsh guy on the team, he recognized the name, and he jumped in, and he got most of the story out, so I didn't have to tell the rest of it. But there's a tremendous amount of emotional response to the story, and that's what generates the song, whether it's empathy or horror or anger, or whatever. I'm not quite sure what the emotion is, but it's certainly there in most of the serious songs I write.

HS: Why do you think some disasters seem to inspire more songs than others?

JA: Well, it's just the amount of information that's available, I would think. I don't know, I can't find much about any of the other things that happened in Pictou. Westray, there was tons, it was in the newspapers ... I guess if I went back through all the old newspapers, I could probably find all kinds of good stuff. Or if I knew somebody, if we still lived down there, I might have met somebody, but ... I don't know. You have to have the information. You have to know enough about it to be affected by the story and feel that you want to reinterpret it as a song so the story lives on, or is easy for people to comprehend, or something like that. I don't quite know. I don't really think much about writing songs, I just do it.

HS: How much do you feel that the historical record constrains you as a songwriter? How much do you feel an obligation to the historically factual details?

JA: I try and make sure I've got the details right. Although, particularly with Westray, there were different views of what the truth was. I chose one side. I chose the workers' side. And the owners and managers and the government had a totally different view of what was going on. My sympathy's very definite: I side with the workers. So, yeah, I try to get the facts right, but in that case, where there are different sides to a story, I definitely chose one side rather than try to go down the middle somewhere, and have a story that would be ineffective, I think, basically.

HS: What do you think makes your songs effective as disaster songs?

JA: I'm not sure that "Pictou's Black Coal" is particularly effective. They tell a story that, I guess, rings true to some people. Maybe it appeals to their own sense of comradeship with workers-in-arms kind of thing, I'm not sure. A good tune helps. Some half-decent poetry helps. I don't know. You should probably ask people who listen to it and like it, see what they think, rather than me, the guy who wrote it.

HS: You don't think that "Pictou's Black Coal" is effective? Why?

JA: It didn't get asked for that often. It certainly hasn't been asked for for a long time. Plus, it's a bit of a dreary song. The group I sing with mostly sings fairly upbeat type songs. Or songs that are kind of sad and mellow. They're not so big on the angry songs. And it's very definitely an angry song. It's more like one of the union songs, or something like that. Occasionally, when I sing it, it goes over really well, they like it, but they don't particularly ask for it. "Buddy, Can You Hear Me?", that's certainly been asked for, I think. There's something about the music and the repetition that really grabs people. It's quite popular, at least with the guys that I sing with.

HS: So, you feel it might be the repetition that is a hook for people?

JA: I think it is. I think I mentioned that we sing an awful lot of old shanties and things and a solo is just a couple of lines, and then you get anything from a couple of lines to six lines of chorus or something like that, mostly chorus. The verses are just an excuse for another chorus. And there are some other songs where people will make up the solo parts, and it kind of bounces around the room, and it might go on for 20 or 30 verses with people making up the solo bit, and then everybody singing the chorus. And that's another great favourite kind of song that we have. I think I hang out with a kind of odd bunch of people. 'Cause all of us sing all the time, whenever we get together.

HS: Why do you think there are so many disaster songs from Atlantic Canada?

JA: Perhaps part of it is that it's a more stable community. Ontario gets tons and tons of immigrants, and there's a lot of people moving around, so maybe that has an influence on it. Whereas in Nova Scotia, there wasn't the flux in people coming in and going

out and whatnot. A lot of people leave Nova Scotia, for sure. I know New Glasgow's actually got fewer people than it had when I was a kid. A few hundred less. So certainly, people have been leaving, but I don't think very many people have come in bringing other ideas in, or diluting the culture, so I think it's a fairly intense culture. I'm guessing. I don't know. It was the same in Northeastern England. The thing about England, you get these tremendous differences in dialect from even one neighbourhood to another. My father could tell where somebody came from in Newcastle by their dialect. They were [only] half a mile from where he lived! And I think that's because you have these very stable communities where perhaps there aren't very many [new people] coming in. [Then again,] Newcastle had a lot of Irish immigrants from the 1800s, so to some extent, it's not true. It is, and it isn't. So, maybe that's one factor. I mean, people move around all over the place in Ontario. Tons of immigrants. Toronto must have tripled in size since we came here. I remember when there were tons of Italian immigrants around, and then there were Jamaican immigrants all over. When I went to York, there were tons of new Jamaican immigrant kids there. And now it's all Oriental. It's kind of like a different city than it was 50 years [ago], when we first came here. So, maybe that's something. I don't know.

HS: You've given me so much wonderful material. Thanks so much.

JA: I'm glad that you put [my songs] on the internet. I think that was wonderful. Thank you very much for doing that.

HS: Oh, a pleasure! Thank you so much.

JA: You're welcome.

Buddy, Can You Hear Me?

Bud-dy can you hear me call my name Bud-dy can you hear me call my name

Drae-ger men soon be dig-ging come on a' sing-in' with me call my name call my name

Buddy, can you hear me?

Call my name.

Buddy, can you hear me?

Call my name.

Draegermen soon be diggin',

Come on a-singin' with me,

Call my name, call my name.

Buddy, can you see me?

Call my name.

Buddy, can you see me?

Call my name.

Fallen rock and coal dust,
My lamp's still gleamin' weakly.

Call my name, call my name.

Lord, are you near me?

Call my name.

Lord, are you near me?

Call my name.

I still got family need me,

Ain't yet time to take me.

Call my name, call my name.

Draegerman, can you free me?

Call my name.

Draegerman, can you free me?

Call my name.

Eight long days I'm waitin',
Now I hear you diggin' so near me.

Call my name, call my name.

Springhill, don't you know me?

Call my name.

Springhill, don't you know me?

Call my name.

Mine is closin' down now,
I'm needin' work to keep me,

Call my name, call my name.

Buddy, can you hear me?

Call my name.

Buddy, can you hear me?

Call my name.

Walkin' tracks all winter,
That pickin' coal will kill me,

Call my name, call my name.

Pictou's Black Coal

Ex - plo - sion they called it it should not have hap-pened this mine was as safe as an-y could be Gas
 sen-sors for me-thane and sprink-ling with stone dust showed the own-ers con-cern for the mi-ners' safe-ty But the
 old men knew bet-ter they'd walked on the big seam and there were twen-ty six men to add to the toll For
 all those smart fel-lows who said West-ray was fail-safe Don't go down un-der ground to go on the coal
 Fa - thers and bro - thers, sons hus - bands and lo - vers They'd go down un - der ground to go on the coal
 Fa - thers and bro - thers, sons hus - bands and lov - ers Are the price that we pay for Pic - tou's black coal

Explosion they called it, it should not have happened,
 This mine was as safe as any could be.
 Gas sensors for methane and sprinkling with stone dust,
 Showed the owners' concern for the miners' safety.
 But the old men knew better, they'd worked on the Big Seam,
 And there were twenty-six more to add to the toll.
 For all those smart fellas who said Westray was failsafe,
 Don't go down underground to go on the coal.

Chorus:

*Fathers and brothers, sons, husbands and lovers,
 They go down underground to go on the coal.
 Fathers and brothers, sons, husbands and lovers,
 Are the price that we pay for Pictou's black coal.*

What use a gas sensor if it's not calibrated,
 Not hooked to the Scoop, or its readings ignored?
 When the dust from the Miner lies thick in the deeps,
 What use the stone dust still bagged up and stored?
 What use the inspector if he turns a blind eye
 To the open bare wires, to fuel spilled on the coal?
 What use regulation if it's all for a buck,
 And there's scarcely a thought for the men on the coal?

And each time it happens the families stand praying,
 While the draegermen toil in that black hell below.
 The Allan, the Foord, the McGregor, the Westray,
 All the pits have killed more than fell to the foe.
 By fire and explosion, by rockfall and mishap,
 Six hundred and more is Pictou's grim toll.
 For a hundred and fifty years we've depended
 On the men who are willing to go on the coal.

"Why work underground?" some ask in amazement.
 There's more safety in jobs on the surface, we're told.
 But the mills and the factories and the jobs that they gave us,
 Have vanished like the smoke from their smokestacks so cold.
 Move away and you'll lose the strength of your family,
 And you'll pay with your pride if you go on the dole.
 Now these two are certain but the next is a chance,
 That you'll pay with your blood if you go on the coal.

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