

# Stanley G. Triggs: Some Bunkhouse Music from British Columbia

Mike Tod, York University

British Columbia has long been the breeding grounds for a thriving folk music culture. The history of the region, primarily based on natural resource industries such as fishing, logging, and mining within the last century, appear to have created work, and working environments, conducive to the folk process. Those seeking more information on the traditional English-language folk musics of the interior and coast of British Columbia should be advised of a humble musician who preserved a good bulk of the folk songs from the region, yet has been by and large unrecognized. His contributions to the documentation of the music amongst logging camps, construction camps, railroad gangs, and tugboat crews should be appreciated. I recently spoke with the man, whom I located with the help of the telephone book in Hemmingford, Quebec, and he told me about his life, work, and music.

Stanley G. Triggs, a river-driver, trapper, packer, cook, deckhand, and lookout man, was born in 1928 in Nelson, BC, to a newly emigrated rancher from England who had an affinity for folk ballads and cowboy songs. He recalled a burning desire to be in the “bush” at an early age, and as soon as he left high school he got a job in a logging camp.

I worked for the forestry for three years. In the summertime, and in the fall, I’d be logging, and then you didn’t do anything in the winter ’cause there was no work. You just got firewood for yourself and for the neighbours and [would] go to dances. We had a dance just about every month in different schoolhouses around the (Lardeau) Valley. That was in the time of one-room schoolhouses. (Triggs 2015)

Inspired by a worker friend who “played and sang in a catchy and original style” (Triggs 1961), he started to pluck out simple melodies on a mandolin at night after work. As Triggs states, mandolin was not a common instrument heard on the radio in the interior during this time. Fiddle players, mostly workers from the US who brought along tunes like “Rubber Dolly” and “Red Wing”, and were also performers at the plank dances, largely influenced his mandolin style. There were only 150 people in the valley at that time. Triggs takes pride in being self-taught, both on mandolin and voice, saying he has always had an

aversion to formal training, and has been drawn to a natural singing approach. By age 21, Triggs had bought a whole city block in the Lardeau town site and built a little shack that he still frequents yearly to “put another shingle on the roof to keep it in shape” (Triggs 2015).

Triggs moved to Vancouver in the late 1950s, after a period of working many odd-labour jobs in the interior for short durations and a two-and-a-half year stint at the University of Santa Barbara in the Fine Arts and Anthropology programs. He started to make a living as a photographer, supplementing his income by playing the songs he had learnt in years past at coffee houses around the city.

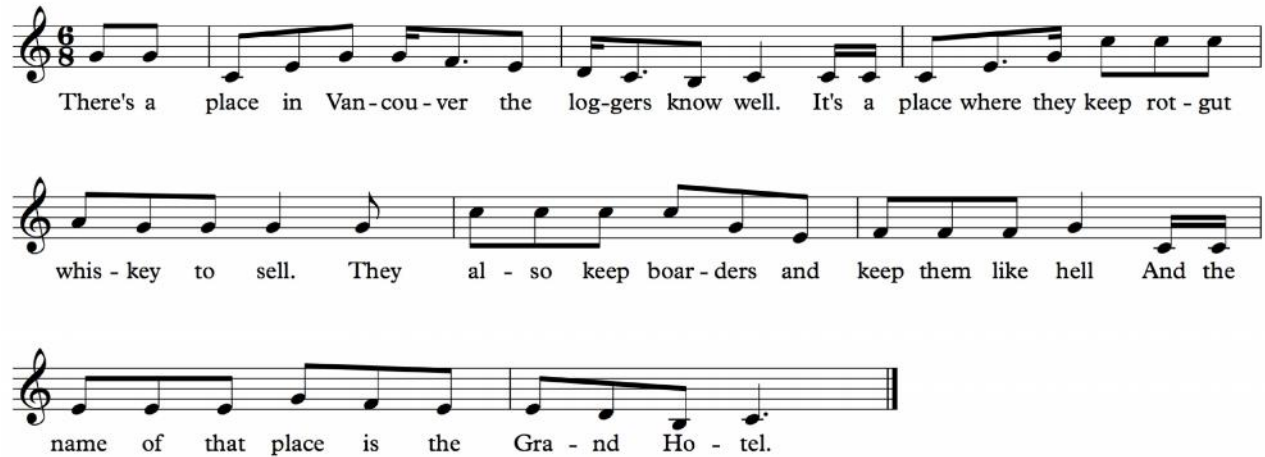
I was singing in Vancouver, and trying to be a photographer as well, and one of the local singers said I should get in touch with Sam Gesser in Montreal, who was the Canadian agent for Folkways. I had a friend who had his own studio at home; he worked for UBC in the Communications department, who had a policy of recording any of the folk singers. He also said, “Why don’t you send a tape to Sam Gesser in Montreal” We sent it off. And immediate reply, they were gonna make a record with Folkways the following year in 1961. (Triggs 2015)

The album, *Bunkhouse and Forecastle Songs of the Northwest* (1961), is a collection of tunes played by Triggs, accompanying himself on mandolin, consisting of both traditional material and his own songs. An oral tradition is clear, as indicated by Triggs in the introductory essay, in that all the songs were learnt through person-to-person transmission and were in healthy circulation amongst the camps where he was working at the time. Liner notes provide the approximate date and location the song was absorbed by Triggs.

“The Grand Hotel” was learnt in the logging camps on the coast, and was collected by Ed McCurdy in 1949 from a group of loggers in Vancouver. The song dates to the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century and talks about the gathering spot for loggers to imbibe after a day’s work. The version Triggs sings was learnt from Al Cox, a Vancouver folk singer.

## The Grand Hotel

Transcription by Paul Swoger-Ruston



There's a place in Van-cou-ver the log-gers know well. It's a place where they keep rot - gut  
whis - key to sell. They al - so keep boar - ders and keep them like hell And the  
name of that place is the Gra - nd Ho - tel.

There's a place in Vancouver the loggers know well.  
It's a place where they keep rotgut whiskey to sell.  
They also keep boarders and keep them like hell,  
And the name of that place is the Grand Hotel.

Oh the Grand Hotel when the loggers come in,  
It's amusing to see the proprietor grin,  
For he knows they've got cash and he'll soon have it all,  
So, "Come on boys, have a drink," you will hear Tommy call.

In the morning Tom Roberts comes up to the door,  
And there he sees loggers all over the floor,  
He shouts as he hauls them up onto their feet,  
"Drink up you bums or get out on the street".

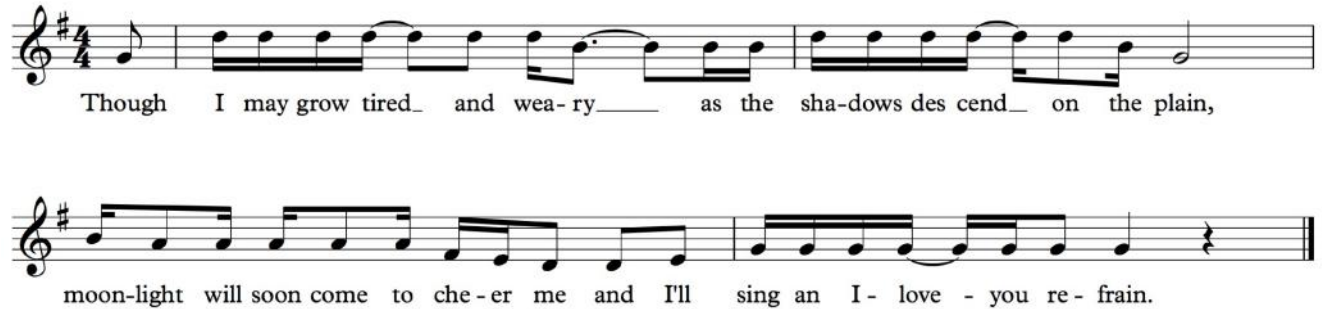
We're going back to work and we're still pretty high,  
With a bottle of rum and a mickey of rye,  
A dozen of beer and a two-gallon jar,  
And passes for camp on the old Cassiar.

"Meadow Blues" is a short tune made up by Carla Miller, a young cook at 15 Mile Camp in the Lardeau Valley. Miller was born and raised on a cattle ranch

in BC's interior and wrote ranching songs that reflected her surroundings.

## Meadow Blues

Transcription by Paul Swoger-Ruston



Though I may grow tired\_ and wea-ry\_\_\_\_\_ as the sha-dows des cend\_ on the plain,  
moon-light will soon come to che-er me and I'll sing an I- love - you re- frain.

Though I may grow tired and weary,  
As the shadows descend on the plain,  
Moonlight will soon come to cheer me  
And I'll sing an I-love-you refrain.

When it's moonlight on the meadow  
I'll have romance in my heart,  
No care will cast a shadow.  
I'll be in a world apart.

There's a winding trail to follow  
When my daily work is through.  
When it's moonlight on the meadow  
I'll be riding home to you.

The traditional country tune, "Beautiful Brown Eyes", appears in many country and cowboy singers' repertoires, telling of a lady unlucky in love who will "never love blue eyes again." A rural variation of the

song was learnt by Triggs in the 1940s in Salmo, BC. He says "it seemed to have common distribution around that area and other parts of the Kootenays."

# Brown Eyes

Transcription by Paul Swoger-Ruston

Brown Eyes, \_\_\_\_\_ Brown Eyes, beau - ti - ful beau - ti - ful Brown Eyes,  
beau - ti - ful beau - ti - ful Brown Eyes I'll ne-ver love blue eyes a - gain.  
Lil - lie my dar - ling I love you, love you with all my heart. We  
might have been mar-ried ma-ny years \_\_\_\_\_ a - go but li - quor has kept us a - part.

Brown Eyes, Brown Eyes,  
Beautiful, beautiful Brown Eyes,  
Beautiful, beautiful Brown Eyes,  
I'll never love brown eyes again.

Lillie my darling I love you,  
Love you with all my heart,  
We might have been married many years ago,  
But liquor has kept us apart.

## Chorus

Down to the barnyard he staggered,  
He fell down at the old barn-door,  
The very last words that he uttered  
Was "I'll never get drunk anymore."

Surprising to me, but amusing to Triggs, is the sparseness of reception to the album since its release in 1961. Triggs remembers getting one fan letter a few months after the record was released, and a handful of phone calls over the course of the next 50 years. Having made a significant contribution to the documentation of Western Canadian folk songs, it is shocking what little has been written about Triggs and the *Bunkhouse* album. Two articles on Triggs by

Phillip J. Thomas and George W. Lyon (*Canadian Folk Music Bulletin* 30/1 [1996]) provide further information on Triggs's life and work. Several of the songs from the *Bunkhouse* album are still sung today, especially in British Columbia. Over the phone, Stanley told me stories of how he has met a number of folks who came across his album, learnt the songs, and continue to sing and play them today in coffee

shops around Vancouver, while working labour jobs or driving the interior roads of British Columbia.

In the years since its release, Triggs became the Curator of the Notman Photographic Archives, McCord Museum of Canadian History at McGill University, where he stayed until his retirement in June, 1994. In retirement, he divides his time between his cabin in British Columbia and his farm in Hemmingford, Quebec and has managed to record two new CDs: *The Wreck of The Green Cove and Other Homemade Songs* (2005), a collection of songs written between 1959 and 2005 that were mostly recorded in the living room of Phil Thomas ("Mr. BC Folk Man," as Triggs affectionately calls him), and *Road To Paradise: Dance Tunes From The Kootenays* (2012), made up mostly of tapes he recorded in 1998 on his home recording machine, that reflect his memories of the Lardeau Valley. Both CDs can be purchased by sending \$25 to the address below:

Stanley Triggs  
859 Route 219  
Hemmingford, QC  
JOL 1H0

It is my sincerest hope that young people of British Columbia be exposed to the music of Stanley G. Triggs and others from his generation since it is they who will carry it on. It's always a good time to get interested in the music of your own backyard!

### **Bibliography**

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