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Hints on Studying Canadian Folk Music

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How to begin exploring the vast corpus of Canadian folk music? If one is starting from scratch, how does one quickly obtain an overview of such a large subject? Where can one find a good but brief introduction?

Canada is such a large country, divided geographically into several main regions. We will need to examine each of those regions, moving from the

first settled by Europeans in the East to British Columbia in the West. We can take a preliminary look at the heritage of folksong in each region, and discover which important collectors preserved some of the best songs for us. But maybe we should begin by seeing if we can find a more generic overview of the folksong of the entire country, and after that we will better appreciate the regional differences.

An Overview of Regions, Collectors and Song-Types

To start with, where can we find a good introduction to Canadian folk music, that is, an overview which paints the whole picture within the framework of a single essay? We should probably look to one of the widely-recognised authorities on the subject, so who better than that pioneer Canadian folklorist and song-collector, Marius Barbeau? He did write such an essay, but unfortunately not for the *Bulletin*. His introductory chapter on “Folk-Song” can be found in *Music in Canada*, ed. Ernest MacMillan, pages 32-54.¹

As the date of publication of Ernest Macmillan’s book indicates, that piece was written sixty years ago. Is it very outdated? To make that judgement one can compare it with a similar attempt to do the same job by Carmelle Bégin and Kenneth Peacock. Their “Folk Music” was written in 1992 for the first edition of the *Encyclopedia of Music in Canada*. It is now available online as part of the *Canadian Encyclopedia* database.²

If these two authoritative, even if rather elderly, introductions do provide us with some sense of the breadth and depth of the subject, we still need a feel for what the music sounds like. A third overview, this time replete with musical examples, can be found on a CD ROM made for schools by Jon Bartlett and Rika Ruebsaat, two of the mainstays of both the Canadian Society for Traditional Music and *Canadian Folk Music Bulletin* during the last quarter of the twentieth century. The CD ROM is titled *Songs and Stories of Canada* and it includes a down-loadable booklet of commentary as well as a galaxy of songs f

across Canada coast to coast. It can be obtained from Jon and Rika’s website.³ There is a lot of knowledge and experience underlying this radio series, but the authors kept everything very simple, straightforward and suitable for use with children. Don’t be put off by this simplicity — it is still a very useful and enjoyable survey of Canadian folk song, indeed, the only one with both text and music available in a single package. So it provides a good starting point for our investigations, perhaps an even better starting place than the articles by Barbeau and by Bégin and Peacock.

It is now time to look a little more closely at the different regions and the kinds of folk music to be found in each. Right away we face the problem of the ‘two solitudes’: there is anglophone folk music and francophone folk music, and the two rarely meet. English-language folksong is found in most regions of Canada, whereas francophone song is limited mainly to Quebec, Acadia, French-settled Ontario and smaller pockets in all other provinces.

Taking anglophone song first, we find a useful survey of the different regions and their music in the multi-authored account found in the online edition of the *Encyclopedia of Music in Canada*. The authors are Neil Rosenberg, Helen Creighton, Edward D. Ives, Edith Fowke and Philip J. Thomas, and the article is titled “Folk Music, Anglo Canadian.”⁴ Each of these writers discusses the folk music of the province or region that he or she knows best. So, for example, Rosenberg discusses Newfoundland, Creighton Nova

Scotia, Fowke Ontario and Thomas British Columbia. Edith Fowke's interests were wide-ranging and she did not confine herself to Ontario, so she was perhaps the authority best placed to provide a solo overview of the topic, which she did for the journal *Ethnomusicology*.⁵ It was a pioneering effort, written in 1972, and makes for an interesting comparison with the later multi-authored survey.

We need to balance these accounts of English-language folksong with a brief introduction to francophone song. A quick and satisfactory way of doing this is to read Conrad Laforte's article "Folk Music, Franco-Canadian," written for the *Encyclopedia of Music in Canada*, which can now be found online in the *Canadian Encyclopedia* database.

Drawing on these sources, we can initially ask two questions: what are the major regions of Canada in which distinct traditions of folk music are to be found, and what are the different kinds of song and instrumental music that usually fall under the folk music label? When answering the first of these questions we must recognize that the major geographical regions of Canada are not necessarily homogeneous where folk song is concerned. The province of Newfoundland and Labrador, for example, is somewhat divided musically between the areas where Irish settlement predominated and those where more of the settlers were English, the latter mainly in the south; nor was coastal Labrador musically quite the same as mainland Newfoundland. Nova Scotia, similarly, had three fairly distinct folk cultures: that of settlers of Scottish origin (including Gaelic speakers) in Cape Breton, the francophone area known as Acadia that also included part of New Brunswick, and the English-dominated mainland. Ontario, too, had pockets of francophone settlers with their own musical culture in the Laurentians and in the southwest near Windsor. So we will need to examine each of the major regions in more detail in later sections of this survey.

At this point it is useful to introduce some of the major collectors the fruits of whose work we will be examining as we make that cross-country journey. The easiest way to begin is with Tim Rogers' article "Canada's Musical Group of Seven" in one of the 2012 issues of *Canadian Folk Music*.⁶ This piece discusses seven of the pioneer folk song collectors in Canada and Newfoundland, although there were more names that Rogers might have included. The single most comprehensive collection of Newfoundland folksong was the work of Kenneth Peacock. Helen Creighton is the biggest name among several important collectors in the Maritimes. For Quebec the obvious choice is Marius Barbeau, as is Edith Fowke for Ontario, and Phil Thomas for British Columbia.

But, as Tim Rogers has pointed out, these men and women did not stand alone. There were, for example, several important song collectors in Newfoundland before Peacock did his collecting there in the 1960s. They included Gerald Doyle, Elisabeth Greenleaf, and Maud Karpeles, among others, while MacEdward Leach explored the song legacy of the Labrador coast. Helen Creighton's principal predecessor in Nova Scotia was William Roy Mackenzie, while Ernest Gagnon was an important pioneer collector in Quebec. John Murray Gibbon also played a significant role between the World Wars as a popularizer as well as a collector of folk songs and folk arts.

The Canadian folk song revival in fact had its roots in the nineteenth century and the decades before World War I. Its birth and early development were bound up with Canadian political, social, and economic history, as Gordana Lazarevich points out in "The Role of the Canadian Pacific Railway in Promoting Canadian Culture."⁷ Nonetheless, it was the fieldwork of the great collectors during the first half of the twentieth century that laid the foundation for the flowering of Canadian folk song from the mid-1950s onwards.

¹Barbeau, Marius. "Folk-Song," in Ernest MacMillan, ed. *Music in Canada*, 32-54. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1955.

²Bégin, Carmelle and Kenneth Peacock, "Folk Music," *Canadian Encyclopedia Online*.

³Bartlett, Jon and Rika Ruebsaat. *Songs and Stories of Canada*. CD Rom.

⁴Rosenberg, Neil, Helen Creighton, Edward D. Ives, Edith Fowke and Philip J. Thomas, "Folk Music, Anglo Canadian," *Canadian Encyclopedia Online*.

⁵Fowke, Edith. "Anglo-Canadian Folk Song: A Survey," *Ethnomusicology*, 16: 3 (September 1972), 335-350.

⁶Rogers, Tim. "Canada's Musical Group of Seven," *Canadian Folk Music/Musique folklorique canadienne*, Vol. 46, No. 2 (Summer 2012), 1-10.

⁷Lazarevich, Gordana. 'The Role of the Canadian Pacific Railway in Promoting Canadian Culture,' in *A Celebration of Canada's Arts 1930-1970*, ed. Glen Carruthers and Gordana Lazarevich, 3-13. Toronto: Canadian Scholars' Press, 1996.

