

## Phil Thomas – An Appreciation

Jon Bartlett



Until his death at age 85 on January 26 of this year, Phil Thomas was the foremost collector of the folk songs of British Columbia. Without his focused work over the previous 45 years, almost all of the material he found, in every part of the province, would have disappeared. Most of his informants are now dead, and his work could not now be replicated. It is thanks to him and his tenacity in collection, publication and dissemination that the body of orally transmitted songs—from the logging and fishing industries, from the early settlers in B.C., and from the days of the gold rushes—is now known.

In the mid-1950s, Thomas became interested in folk song, and was soon dissatisfied with the absence of Canadian song. He made connection with Edith Fowke (one of English Canada's foremost and most prolific folk song collectors), who hosted a regular national folk music CBC radio show. At that time Fowke had herself begun collecting songs in Ontario. Thereafter, every summer saw Thomas travelling his native province to collect the songs of fishing, homesteading, mining and logging, which form the basis of the P.J. Thomas Collection now deposited in the Aural History Archives of B.C.. Over the course of some twenty-five years he collected over five hundred items.

Songs made and sung by ordinary British Columbians are primary resources through which we can experience the history, culture, and way of life of people in this province. Without Thomas' collecting work these resources would have been irrevocably lost. The people and contexts which gave birth to the songs are long gone. Thomas caught them in their dying days and bequeathed to us a vital piece of this young province's ephemeral history.

Thomas contributed B.C. songs to several of Edith Fowke's books, most notably *More Folk Songs of Canada* (1967), *The Penguin Book of Canadian Folk Song* (1973) and *Singing Our History* (1984), and has published many articles on Canadian and especially B.C. folk song in a variety of journals, bulletins and magazines over the years.

Thomas' seminal work is his *Songs of the Pacific Northwest* (Saanichton & North Vancouver: Hancock House Publishers, 1979). The book is a unique publication in the field of folk song. Each song, from the earliest in his collection (a broadside ballad of the year 1791 relating to a fight between the Haida of the Queen Charlotte Islands and a Boston fur-trading ship) to the latest (concerning the burning of the *S.S. Minto* on Arrow Lake in 1968), is located in its geographical and historical landscape. Each song speaks not to long-forgotten moments of military or constitutional history but to the social history of B.C. citizens, and thus reflects what "ordinary people" felt and still feel about the issues confronting them. In 1980 copies of *Songs of the Pacific Northwest* were purchased by the Government of B.C. for every school in B.C., and copies are to be found in most libraries. A second edition, revised and enlarged, was completed before his death and will be published in the fall of 2007.

Phil Thomas was interested in the collecting and dissemination of the songs of B.C. because of a deep and abiding connection to his native province. It was not sufficient for him to merely collect and publish the material—it had to be sung. His own enthusiasm for the songs infected others, and brought about in 1959 the creation of the Vancouver Folk Song Circle, now the oldest such singing collective in the country

and one of the oldest on the continent. The Circle itself became the Vancouver Folk Song Society, whose purpose is to promote folk song and especially Canadian folk song, which it has done over the years by organizing twice-monthly singing sessions, a weekly radio show, two national magazines, and workshops and retreats. It has also created a host of singers anxious to carry on Phil Thomas' work.

In 1980 Thomas produced an LP titled *Where the Fraser River Flows*, featuring many of the songs from his collection sung by himself and accompanied with banjo, mandolin and guitar. A CD of songs he presented at Expo 86 in Vancouver was released that year. Other singers in the folk genre such as Mad Pudding, Fraser Union, Tête-à-Tête, Linda Allen—who also produced a book of Washington state songs containing several from Phil's collection—and Jon Bartlett and Rika Ruebsaat have also recorded songs from his collection.

B.C. songs have been disseminated in the classical genre with John Washburn's Vancouver Chamber Choir arranging and performing several of Thomas' songs. The combined performances and CD sales of these singers over the course of over twenty-five years has exposed a very large number of people to the songs in the P.J. Thomas collection.

One of the biggest impacts of Thomas' B.C. songs collection is in the field of education. In the 1980s CBC radio in B.C. and Manitoba and CKUA in Alberta broadcast a sixteen-part radio series entitled *The Songs and Stories of Canada*. The series focused on the songs of Canada and the work and lives of Canadians from whom the songs came. Thirteen of the sixteen programs contain songs from the Thomas collection; three of the programs focus exclusively on these songs. Without the collecting and disseminating work of Phil Thomas, this radio series would not have been possible. Through the B.C. Ministry of Education *The Songs and Stories of Canada* was made into an educational kit with song-teaching tapes and an extensive teachers' guide. This kit has just been reissued on CD-ROM and is being distributed to teachers throughout the province through the Lesson Aids program of the B.C. Teachers' Federation.

Because of Thomas' work, generations of B.C. schoolchildren have been singing songs from his collection. They have learned them from their teachers through *The Songs and Stories of Canada* broadcasts and kit and from other singers who have visited schools and sung these songs. Between 1976 and 1983, for example, a group called "Canadian Folk Workshop" toured throughout B.C. singing songs from Thomas' collection in schools and at teachers'

conferences. Pupils have also learned these songs from Phil Thomas himself, both during his years as a classroom teacher and later through his visits to schools after his retirement. For many years Charles Hou, a Social Studies teacher in Burnaby, took his classes on a hike along part of the Gold Rush trail. A feature of this hike was the singing of Gold Rush songs from Thomas' collection. Since Mr. Hou's retirement the hike and the singing of the songs have been carried on by his successors.

In the late 1990s Thomas presented to the Special Collections Division of the UBC Library his folk music library, now numbering over 7,000 books and other publications.

Phil Thomas received awards from those who know him and his work best: he was an Honorary Life Member of the Vancouver Folk Song Society, the Honorary President of the Canadian Society for Traditional Music, a recipient of the G.A. Fergusson Memorial Award for excellence in teaching (the highest award of the B.C. Teachers' Federation), of the Folklore Studies Association of Canada's Marius Barbeau Medal, and of the Heritage Society of British Columbia's Personal Achievement Award. He was a Life Member of the B.C. Art Teachers' Association and had been honoured by the American Association for State and Local History. In May 2004 he was honoured at the 33<sup>rd</sup> Annual Northwest Regional Folklife Festival in Seattle, WA, with a concert and a panel discussing (and singing) the songs he had collected over the years. It would have been fitting if his own province had similarly recognized his work on behalf of the citizens of B.C.—the collection, publication and dissemination of their oral song tradition.

Phil Thomas was born 26 March 1921 and educated in Victoria, B.C.. Following war service in India, he graduated from UBC with a B.A. in 1948 and a B.Ed. the following year. His teaching career began that year and continued until his retirement in 1981. Apart from one year at the New School, he taught in B.C. public schools, almost entirely in the Vancouver elementary system.

Thomas' interest in children's art led him in 1953 to become a weekend instructor for the Canadian Federation of Artists and for the Vancouver School of Art, and to his work until 1964 with the Child Art Centre at the University of B.C. In that year he became the Director of the Children's Saturday Morning Classes at the Vancouver Art Gallery. He was the Founding President of the B.C. Art Teachers' Association and the author of its report to the Chant Royal Commission in 1958, and was made an Honorary Life Member. He was the 1983 recipient of the G.A.

Fergusson Award, the highest honour awarded by the BC Teachers' Federation.

Phil Thomas' interest in folk song began in the mid-1950s during the early years of the folk revival. Inspired by such singers as Pete Seeger and Woody Guthrie, Phil took up the banjo and began singing folk songs. The revival in Canada at that time was essentially an "echo" of the revival happening in the United States, and the repertoire was predominantly American. The absence of Canadian songs as well as his contact with Edith Fowke and her song collecting in Ontario inspired Thomas to begin collecting in B.C.. For nearly thirty years Thomas spent his summers traversing the province collecting songs. In the late 1970s this collection was consolidated, catalogued, and housed in the Aural History Archives of the B.C. Provincial Museum.

With his wife Hilda and two others, Thomas founded in 1959 the Vancouver Folk Song Society. He served many years on its Board and was made a Life Member in 1975. His connection with Dr. Fowke led him to join the Canadian Folk Music Society in 1970 and to begin serving on the Society's Board in 1971. He served on that Board until his death, and was made Honorary President in 1999. He had given presentations, performances and workshops in B.C. folk song at a variety of festivals (nota-

bly at the Spokane World's Fair in 1974, at the first and third Vancouver Folk Music Festivals in 1979 and 1981, at Expo 86 in Vancouver, at Folklife in Seattle and at Toronto's Mariposa Festival in 1982), on radio and TV shows, and at conferences of music educators. He was honoured at the May 2004 Northwest Regional Folklife Festival as the Pacific Northwest's most prestigious collector.

The folk songs of British Columbia reflect the diverse cultural and occupational heritage of the Province and the daily life of its people in a form that remains accessible to this day. Thanks to the work of Philip J. Thomas, current and future generations of British Columbians will continue to sing and hear those folk songs, and through the songs they will understand the lives of the people who created them and the places that formed their lives. Every B.C. schoolchild who sings about the Kettle Valley Line, the Fraser River Gold Rush or the Cariboo Road owes a debt to Phil Thomas; so too do the loggers, farmers and fishers, and the urban dwellers of Vancouver and Victoria who know how their predecessors lived through their songs. Members of the Canadian Society for Traditional Music will be the first to recognize his tremendous contribution to preserving and disseminating our common heritage.

## Phil Thomas – A Personal Memoir

Rika Ruebsaat

I first met Phil Thomas in about 1961 at the Vancouver Folk Song Circle—a local twice-monthly "hootenanny" founded in 1959 by Phil and his wife Hilda. I was a pimply thirteen-year-old who sang German folk songs with my family and American songs from the folk revival by myself. I remember this tall, bald man with a long-necked banjo singing "The Banks of the Similkameen" or "The Kettle Valley Line", songs from a landscape I had grown up in. It was the first time I had ever heard such songs—until then all the music I had ever heard came from somewhere else. I would like to say that the scales fell from my eyes and that I began singing B.C. songs, but that did not happen until years later. In the early days Phil was just a somewhat eccentric part of my musical landscape.

In the mid-1970s I "discovered" Canadian folk songs and remembered this unusual man who sang these hokey songs. I spent many days ensconced in

Phil's house surrounded by piles of books, records, papers and musical instruments. Going to Phil to collect songs for my repertoire was somewhat akin to a novice going to Buddha for tips on how to become enlightened—I was totally out of my depth. The sheer volume of material was overwhelming. I suspect that at that time his collection of traditional song was unsurpassed by that of any library in the country.

In a sense, Phil has been my teacher ever since. His sensibilities about song and its connection to the social landscape have informed the musical work Jon Bartlett and I have been doing for over thirty years. Our relationship with Phil was not always easy. As an autodidact who had broken new ground in the area of folk song, Phil could get cranky and possessive about his material. There were occasions when the three of us paced around each other in his cluttered kitchen, waving our arms and shouting at each other.