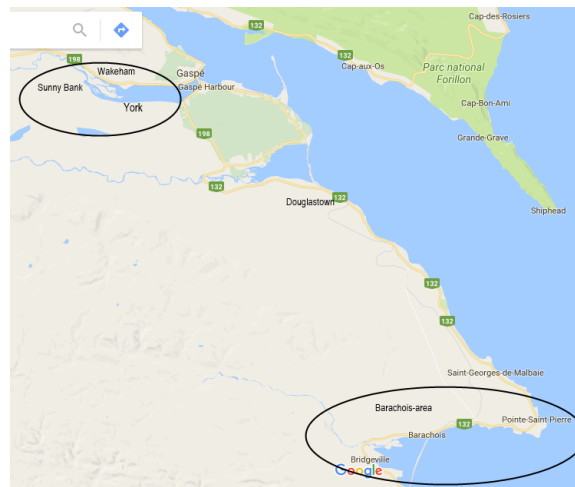


# “The Prospector’s Last Letter” – A Gaspesian Ballad and Other Songs of Wilbert Coffin

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In my research into popular and traditional music in the English-speaking communities of the eastern Gaspé Peninsula, I have been digitizing tapes from community members’ home recording collections and interviewing both musicians and recordists. To this end, I partnered with Vision Gaspé-Percé Now, a local health and social services organization for the local anglophone population, to set up a local repository, called the Gaspesian Community Sound Archives, where I’ve been archiving these digitized recordings.<sup>1</sup> The principal sung repertoire consists of renditions 19th- and early 20th-century popular songs and country music. The performances usually feature a single singer accompanied with guitar and sometimes pump organ or piano. Only a small minority of the dozens of singers I’ve encountered in my research composed original songs. Milton McGregor (1926-2010) and Keith Chicoyne (1939-2015) were both prolific amateur songwriters who wrote extensively about local themes, their songs telling stories of family members and local characters, and addressing topics from bootlegging, shipwrecks and automobile tragedies, to Western outlaws and gunfights. These songs offer a window into the collective memory of the region. Outside of my archival work, Gaspé-born folk musician, recording artist, and scholar Dale Boyle (b. 1972), who now lives in Montreal, has also delved into local themes of home, leaving, and returning, especially on his first two studio albums, *In My Rearview Mirror: A Story from a Small Gaspé Town* (2004) and *Small Town van Gogh* (2007).

All three of these songwriters were from villages in the Barachois area – a cluster of small former fishing villages at the foot of the Percé hills along a picturesque salt- and freshwater lagoon or *Barachois*. Anecdotally, several friends from Gaspé have suggested that a vital creative and artistic vein runs through many of the families in this 10-km stretch of the Gaspé Coast, with music, poetry, sculpture, and visual art part of the fabric of daily life. Indeed, Dale Boyle described growing up in the tiny hamlet of Belle-Anse in the 1970s and ‘80s in a cluster of about five houses, where he estimates there were around seventeen musicians across four generations (Boyle 2016). (His neighbour down the road was the somewhat well-known painter Tennyson Johnson, for whom Boyle named his 2007 studio album.)



**Figure 1: The eastern Gaspé region with York and Barachois areas highlighted.**

In the corpus of local topical songs, several stories get highlighted again and again, although arguably, none more than the story of Wilbert Coffin. Coffin was a mining prospector from the anglophone community of York, just outside the regional service hub in the town of Gaspé. He was convicted, largely on circumstantial evidence, for the 1953 murders of three Pennsylvania hunters (Eugene and Richard Lindsay and Frederick Claar) in the backwoods towards the former mining community of Murdochville.<sup>2</sup> After seven denied appeals, one which went to the Supreme Court of Canada, Coffin was executed at Montreal’s Bordeaux Prison on February 12, 1956, at 12:01 a.m. I have encountered four original songs composed by local songwriters that treat what is often referred to as the “Coffin affair”.

In this article, I present these four songs and describe their basic “narrative paradigms” and poetic mode (e.g., narrative or lyric verse), with some additional contextual information about the singers and their cultural milieu. I use Jocelyn Neal’s idea of “narrative paradigm” as the combinations of “textual narratives and formal, musical designs, where [these] two aspects of the song reinforce each other”. According to Neal, “In recent decades, country songwriters have used similar compositional, literary, formal, and poetic devices in different songs to present the same types of narratives.” For initiated listeners, “an intuitive grasp of a song’s meaning arises

not only from text and melody but also from the specific presentation of that story through the song's form. In these instances, the ways in which a story is told are arguably as important as the story's basic themes" (2007: 42). I conclude with some reflections on the relationship between these songs, the archives I established with Vision Gaspé-Percé Now, and the presence of this story in the collective memory of the English-speaking population of the eastern Gaspé Coast.



Figure 2: Wilbert Coffin (image from CBC.ca, Feb. 10, 2016).

**"The Prospector's Last Letter" – Milton McGregor**

By far the most ubiquitous of the songs written about the Coffin affair is Milton McGregor's composition "The Prospector's Last Letter", composed within a few years of the 1953-1956 events. McGregor's song is conceived as a country ballad and the text is forged in a common narrative paradigm in early country music, essentially the "letter to mother" type of song sent by a wayward or imprisoned son. I've transcribed the melody and words of the first verse from this performance as featured on a home recording given to me by Milton's cousin Rena McGregor in 2016 (RM-CS-002 in the Gaspesian Community Sound Archives). She estimates the tape was made circa 1980. It includes many of his original compositions and covers of several country and western songs from the 1930s-50s. I should note that McGregor was somewhat flexible about the timing of his chord changes when performing. I've transcribed the chords as they unfold during the first verse. Other local musicians who have covered this song use a fixed set of chord changes perhaps more obviously suggested by the melody (see Lorne Cotton's recording mentioned later).

## The Prospector's Last Letter

As sung by Milton McGregor circa 1980  
(fonds Rena McGregor: RM-CS-002)

Words and music by Milton McGregor

C G G C C F F

In a cold lonely pri-son one win-ter's night This con - vic - ted pros - pec - tor to his

8 F C C F F F C G

mo - ther did write I soon will leave you my time it ain't long But re - mem - ber

16 G G C

Moth - er I nev - er did wrong

The complete verses as sung on this same recording are as follows:

**The Prospector's Last Letter – Words and music by Milton McGregor**

In a cold lonely prison one winter's night  
This convicted prospector to his mother did write  
I soon will leave you, my time it ain't long  
But remember, mother, I never did wrong

The jury found me guilty, the judge said I must pay  
Of a crime I'm guilty, that's what they say  
Although this will be my last day  
I am not guilty, that's all I can say

Last night I lay sleeping on the pillow of stone  
I dreamed of you, Mom, and the old folks back home  
Of those hills I roamed when I was a boy  
To walk by the seashore was my pride and joy

I'm sorry for the heartaches that I caused to you  
To my sweet loving wife, so kind and so true  
For the plans that we made are all broken apart  
And I'm sorry for the way now that we have to part

It's to my son Jimmy I leave all I own  
And the little log hut he used to call home  
For never again with him will I play  
As we used to do with those sweet yesterdays

So it's goodbye, Mother, farewell to the rest  
To the old Gaspé Coast, the place I love best  
For those hills and valleys, I'll prospect no more  
I'll stake out my claim down on some other shore

The parson is with me so I'll kneel and I'll pray  
For I know that we'll all be together some day  
Where God will be the judge and over all he does see  
And I know he'll set your convicted son free

McGregor's artistry – as both performer and songwriter – can be understood in a larger context of patterns typical across the Canadian Maritimes in the mid-20th century (see Rosenberg 1976, 1980; Marquis 2012; Narváez 2011). His songwriting and delivery, here and elsewhere, are strongly influenced by early commercial country balladeers like Jimmie Rodgers and Hank Snow. His guitar playing in particular, with its iconic walking bass, is particularly reminiscent of Rodgers' guitar style. In fact, across the collections in the Gaspesian Community Sound Archives, we get a sense that Rodgers, Hank Snow, and Hank Williams were predominant influences in this region among both English- and French-speakers who grew up in the 1930s and '40s.<sup>3</sup> Milton McGregor (1926-2010) was born into a family with a tradi-

tion of singing ballads as well as 19th- and early 20th-century popular songs. His father, John McGregor (1889-1964), sang this repertoire in the older unaccompanied style, with a full, projecting voice and melismatic and highly ornamented delivery.<sup>4</sup> This practice of unaccompanied English-language ballad singing was fairly widespread in the eastern Gaspé until about the mid-20th century. Unfortunately, it was overlooked by the celebrated folklorist Carmen Roy – herself a Gaspesian – in her collection of folksongs and “oral literature” of the Gaspé Peninsula (1955), which included only French-language material and what she calls *littérature orale* – orally-learned texts that had ostensibly been uncorrupted by mediated sources like broadsheets or the radio.<sup>5</sup>

**Unknown Song About James Coffin – Milton McGregor**

For Milton McGregor, there was more than one story to be told in the Coffin saga. He later wrote another

song, I presume after “The Prospector’s Last Letter”. Because the tape from which I digitized the song had no accompanying documentation, I do not know McGregor’s title.

**[Song about James Coffin] – Words and music by Milton McGregor**

As I was out walking in Sunny Bank one day  
By chance I passed a graveyard as I went on my way  
A little boy was kneeling, beside a lonely grave  
With trembling voice and head bowed low,  
These words I heard him say:

**Chorus:** Oh, how I miss you daddy, since they took you away  
Mummy's oh so lonely she cries both night and day  
I know you're not guilty of that awful crime they say  
But there's too much gossip in this town and we must be on our way  
But I know we'll meet again in Heaven some glad day

Last night as I lay sleeping I dreamed that you were home  
And we went a-walking where oftentimes we would roam  
To that little old log cabin built there among the pines  
Where you did your prospecting and found peace of mind

Well now I must leave you for we must be on our way  
But I'll be returning, yes I'll return some day  
To that little old log cabin built there among the pines  
And to live the prospector’s life like the dear old dad of mine

[Repeat Chorus]



**Figure 3: Wilbert Coffin's headstone. The obscured inscription reads: “Judge not that ye be not judged.” Photo by author (July 2011).**

The song deals with the trauma experienced by Wilbert Coffin's son James – who was raised in Montreal and now lives in British Columbia – as he returns to see his father's grave during a visit to Gaspé. In a 2016 CBC feature, James Coffin describes how throughout his life, to visit relatives in Gaspé was to be constantly reminded of the tragedy:<sup>6</sup>

When people know who I am, when you walk into a room there is a silence comes over that room, and they just sort of look at you. It's like you're an axe murderer or a terrorist or something. There's just a quietness. You can have all kinds of people talking in a restaurant and I walk in and they know it's me – there's this silence (Solomon and Page 2016).

It is not clear, based on his comments, if he feels those who stare and go silent when he enters a room in Gaspé think his father was guilty. Again, my experience is that most Gaspésians believe his father was innocent, and James Coffin has certainly had the local support of many over the years, especially in Gaspé's English-speaking community. But it is undeniable that there were always unanswered questions and suspicions of some level of implication in the crimes (for example, that Wilbert Coffin may have known something but was being forced to remain silent and take the fall), and McGregor astutely conveys this perception of displaced suspicion: "there's too much gossip in this town".

Other details in the song are, however, inaccurate and we get the sense that, lacking enough factual information to fully write the song from the perspective of Wilbert Coffin's son, McGregor relies once again on a narrative paradigm common in early country music for recounting the stories of griever, the poor, or otherwise destitute. In this paradigm, the first verse presents a central narrator watching someone in distress (for example, at graveside) before they overhear them or approach them to inquire about their trouble. The last line of the first verse will usually be of the approximate form of, for example, "and these words I heard them say" or "and this was their reply", etc. The remaining verses then constitute a first-person reply to the inquisitive narrator. (For just one of possibly hundreds of examples, see variants of "The Orphan's Lament", a.k.a. "Two Little Orphans", recorded by Dolly Parton, Lloyd Snow, and Daniel O'Donnell, among others.) Some of McGregor's erroneous or dubious details include the gravesite (which is in York, not the neighbouring community of Sunny Bank, although the two places are strongly connected through family and their shared Anglican faith); and the suggestion that James wanted to become a prospector like his father is dubious,

because James was raised in Montreal and was only 8 years old when his father was executed (as attested in his interview above, he never really knew the details of his father's death until later in life). But basically, McGregor, in his second composition, relies on generic structures, themes, and lyrical figures of this country music narrative paradigm to tell yet another story of the Coffin affair.

**"The Saga of Bill Coffin" (also known as "The Prospector's Ordeal") – Keith Chicoyne**



**Figure 4: Keith Chicoyne (centre) sings at a family gathering, circa 1970s. Photo courtesy of Stanford Chicoyne.**

Barachois-West singer and guitar player Keith Chicoyne (1939 – 2015), like Milton McGregor, was a prolific local songwriter also influenced by early country music "troubadours" like Jimmie Rodgers, Hank Snow, and Wilf Carter. His songwriting is a carefully curated imaginative world. Using narrative paradigms from the same early era of country music, he writes of the people, places, and happenings of his youth around Barachois, infamous North American train wrecks and murders, and outlaws like John Wesley Hardin and Bill Hiscock from the "Old West". Although a local story, the Wilbert Coffin affair fits perfectly within this pan-North American repertoire of characters and tales that furnished the raw materials for Chicoyne's songwriting. He generally didn't perform his original compositions in public, instead committing these to carefully crafted home recordings made after retiring back in Barachois after a career in Montreal's textile industry. Sonically and visually, Keith's home recordings are unlike any others that I encountered. They feature overdubbed guitar parts (lead and rhythm), strategic use of both the capo and detuned guitar (on overdubbed guitar parts), and the occasional sound effect or vocal harmony. The cassettes themselves were always assigned and labelled with an evocative al-

bum title, usually based on one of the original compositions featured (e.g., “Barachois Troubadour”, “I Dealt the Cards”, “Under Gaspé’s Blue Skies”). These were accompanied with a carefully crafted handwritten sleeve note using a consistent, seemingly dedicated upper-case block font, with his own compositions clearly marked with an asterisk. After the

track listing, a legend informs you that these asterisked songs were composed by “CK Chicoyne”. I am not sure how many tapes Keith made. I encountered over 20, through copies loaned to me by several of his friends and family, although it is clear he reused some of his performances across different tapes.

**“The Saga of Bill Coffin” (A.K.A. “The Prospector’s Ordeal”) – Words and music by Keith Chicoyne**

In a little churchyard up in York town  
Where I stood at a graveside alone  
While whispering leaves told a story  
As I stood there and gazed at the stone  
And someone had placed tender flowers  
In memory of the man they once knew  
Who paid with his life on the gallows  
For a crime they know he did not do

Was 1953 in the springtime  
From down south of the border they came  
To hunt bears back of old Gaspé  
Or else to buy high-grade copper claims  
It was just about a month later  
Searchers had found their bear-torn remains  
All trace of tracks that had been in camp  
Were washed out by days of heavy rain

But a shirt had been pierced by a bullet  
And a manhunt was soon under way  
Across the border cries for vengeance  
An eye for an eye, a debt must be paid  
But the police and the detectives  
Knew well they were on a cold trail  
So Bill Coffin became the prime suspect  
He was picked up and brought into jail

He never contradicted his statement  
His simple story remained just the same  
So they questioned him sixty straight hours  
'cause there was no one else they could blame  
With politics playing a lethal game  
They must break this innocent man  
Whose only crime had been in lending  
The three bear hunters a helping hand

And so to the crowded little courtroom  
That just stood just nigh the great pierced rock  
This friendly prospector and bushman  
Found himself accused in the dock  
They said he'd been the last to see them living  
They swore he'd done this awful thing  
When the jury came in with a verdict  
The learned judge quickly sentenced him to hang

To the dungeons at Quebec they took him

But one day he escaped from his cell  
 With soap pistol he bluffed his way out  
 This man they had sentenced to hell  
 Three hours that day he knew freedom  
 The innocent should never lose hope  
 Trusting the law, he turned himself in  
 But for him there was only the rope

Now there is no end to the story  
 Executions have since been banned  
 And though they won't ever admit it  
 They know that they hanged an innocent man

According to cousin Stanford Chicoyne, Keith was a meticulous and lifelong collector of Western movies, country music history, and local lore. His songwriting distilled his intense passion for these topics and shows a deep commitment to research and detail (Chicoyne 2016). Like his “Saga of Bill Coffin”, his many original country songs are strongly narrative, so much so that they usually forgo a chorus and instead leverage verse after verse to pack in as much detail as possible. In fact, depending on how you break up his verses, the “Saga of Bill Coffin” has thirteen four-line “single” verses (every other verse describing a distinct plot point in the story) or six-and-a-half double verses (that is, eight lines each, as opposed to the conventional four; this is how it appears on a lyric sheet prepared by Chicoyne and consequently is how I transcribed it).<sup>7</sup> Each verse treats the sequential lead up to Coffin’s incarceration, imprisonment, and execution, and listening to Chicoyne’s performance, he seems to stretch the poetic metre to the melody in order to accommodate all the information he wants to share. The only obvious fac-

tual error is the location of the prison (Montreal, not Quebec City) from where Coffin escaped briefly by using soap carved into the shape of a pistol and sought out his lawyer before turning himself back in. Unlike McGregor’s two compositions, Chicoyne’s song tells the story from a more distanced third-person perspective rather than from that of specific actors (e.g., that of the convicted prospector writing to his mother from prison or the grieving son at the graveside). This narrative distance is typical of much of Chicoyne’s country ballads, where primacy seems to be given to recounting “the facts” of the story, presumably discovered through Chicoyne’s meticulous research. But interestingly, he is using a variant of the same narrative paradigm deployed by McGregor in his song about James Coffin; the only thing missing is the grieving person observed by the narrator in the first verse. Instead, the narrator observes Coffin’s gravesite, and rather than the grieved, it is the “whispering leaves” who tell the background story in subsequent verses.

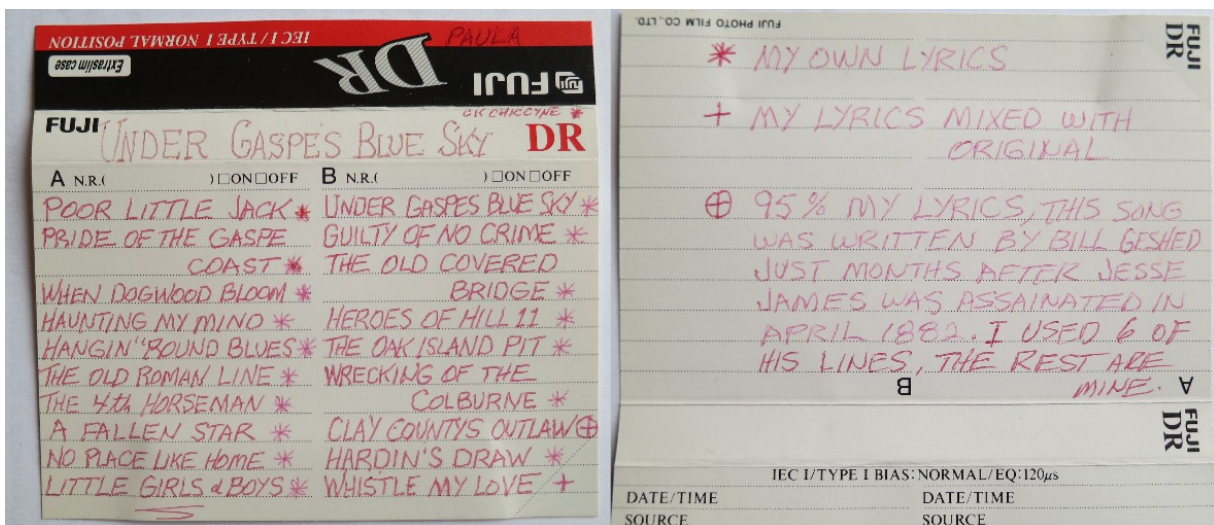


Figure 5: Front and back sleeve of one of Keith Chicoyne’s home recording (GM-CS-001; fonds Glenn Maloney). Photo by author.

**“The Wilbert Coffin Story, JPC (Justice Precluded Coffin)” - Dale Boyle**

Montreal-based songwriter and roots musician Dale Boyle wrote his own telling of the saga in “The Wilbert Coffin Story: JPC (Justice Precluded Coffin)” on his 2004 solo debut. The song is partially from the perspective of Boyle’s father, who was at a

Barachois garage and saw Wilbert Coffin escorted in handcuffs to use the washroom while en route to the courthouse jail in Percé. The song is conceived in a contemporary singer-songwriter style that Boyle notes was strongly influenced by his discovery of Steve Earle’s music when his debut solo album was conceived (Cottrill 2004).

**The Wilbert Coffin Story JPC – Words and music by Dale Boyle**

My daddy seen him, with shackles on his hands  
He was young but knew who it was, all the talk was of this man  
And the stories grew, and some they knew more than they would say,  
Three Yankees shot, down in Gaspé, some poor boy’s gonna pay

Just a stoic man, with a few mining claims  
When Altoona County cracked the whip, at him was laid the blame  
You see, they got their man, but any man could have killed  
Cause justice does leave holes that the innocent sometimes fill

And Coffin’s lawyer never called on anyone  
In his defence, no one took the stand  
And the prosecution claimed, “Find the thief, you’ll solve this crime”  
But have you ever been in the wrong place at the wrong time?

Three years went by, and they sentenced him to hang  
He swore “I ain’t the one” and his hangman felt the same  
With seven unlucky chimes, and a single death flag raised  
Wilbert Coffin was sent to an early grave

And then he said . . .

“Into thy hands Lord, I commend my soul”  
“Into thy hands Lord, I commend my soul”  
“Into thy hands Lord, I commend my soul”  
"Lord I, I commend my soul"

The minor-keyed melody is sung *sotto voce* over a fingerpicked guitar chord pattern. Unlike the other Barachois area writers who favoured a strongly *narrative* approach, Boyle’s composition is more *lyric* than the other Barachois-area songwriters. There are no clear narrators, and specific factual details are sparse compared to the other songwriters. Instead, Boyle’s song captures the emotional tenor of the events and considers the larger legacy by drawing attention to perceived social injustices (“some poor boy’s gonna pay”, “justice does leave holes that the innocent sometimes fill”). The last verse is constructed from what witnesses reported as Coffin’s last words before he was hung.<sup>8</sup> Although written in a different genre than the other Barachois area songwriters, Boyle’s narrative paradigm is not entirely

divorced from the ones used by McGregor and Chicoyne (and arguably, its metastructure and function is the same). The first verse portrays a distressed character being observed (in this case, his father sees Coffin entering the garage with “shackles on his hands”) in a way that demands other aspects of the story be told roughly chronologically in subsequent verses.

Outside of Gaspé, the memory of Wilbert Coffin usually resurfaces – especially in Quebec – in the two weeks surrounding the anniversary of his execution, with a few articles and features in French- and English-language media. The rest of the year, it is among the cases taken up by Innocence Canada – formerly the Association in Defence of the Wrongly Convicted (AIDWYC) – who have worked with Coffin’s family for his posthumous exoneration. However, in the



decade following Coffin's execution, there were a flurry of newspaper articles and two books by Coffin trial journalist and future senator Jacques Hébert, who described the case as the greatest miscarriage of justice in Quebec history (Hébert 1964, Hébert 1958).<sup>9</sup> His 1964 book triggered a Royal Commission of Inquiry in 1964 – the so-called Brossard Commission – that ruled that Coffin received a fair trial. The story was also featured in Jean-Claude Labrecque's 1980 dramatization *L'affaire Coffin* ("The Coffin Affair"). It seems the mantle of Coffin's innocence gets taken up every few decades. More recently, in the 1980s and 90s, Alton Price deconstructed the trial transcripts and evidence and hinted at an alternate theory based on local accounts describing a resident who would supposedly brag that they executed the wrong man (Price 1996); currently, Gaspé-born lawyer and author Michael Rooney, who is now based in the D.C. area, is completing another account of the story based on his research in the Altoona, Pennsylvania, area, home to the three murdered hunters. Whether in song, article, book, or film, the crux of the controversy has always been the conviction on circumstantial evidence, the apparent incompetence of Coffin's defence lawyer (who didn't allow his client to testify and presented no defence witnesses, despite claiming he had found hundreds of them), and the intense pressure many thought the provincial government of Maurice Duplessis was exerting for a quick conviction in order to mitigate the impact on Quebec's lucrative (largely American) tourist and hunting industry, of which the Gaspé Peninsula was one of the crown jewels at the time.

### **Songs of Wilbert Coffin and Collective Memory in the Eastern Gaspé**

Last year (2016) marked the 60th anniversary of Coffin's execution and, as is common, there was a small memorial service at Coffin's gravesite in the cemetery of St. Andrew's Anglican Church in York, with Coffin's friends and family. While the story resurfaces only briefly in Canadian media, within the eastern Gaspé's English-speaking communities the Coffin story is ever-present. Arguably, it one of the most important stories in their collective memory, something noted by the narrator of the 2007 documentary *Le mystère de Coffin*, featured on Radio-Canada's *Enjeux* program; as Dale Boyle begins playing his composition, the narrator's voice enters and tells us that « Dale Boyle chante le drame de Wilbert Coffin, rien de plus naturel pour un anglais de la Gaspésie » ("Dale Boyle sings the tale of Wilbert Coffin, nothing more natural for an English-speaker from the Gaspésie") (Miller and Boudou 2007). In an inter-

view, I asked Dale Boyle about how he came to know the Wilbert Coffin story and how it was transmitted in the community:

For me it was just, it was almost a part of – although reality, obviously, reality – it just had this kind of ... folklore. It was just this *tale* that I just heard about as a kid. And I just always heard about it, it was just there. It was this story that you just knew about. And it was really kind of hard to pinpoint: it's not like someone sat down one day and told you about it. It was just here and there, bits and pieces, you would pick up some information on it. And [the song] starts with "my daddy seen him with shackles on his hands" and it was me hearing my father say how when he was at this garage when he was a kid, they stopped by to let Wilbert use the washroom on the way to the jail. So, that's how it starts off, with me recounting something that my father told me. (Boyle 2016)

Musically, of the four songs written and recorded about the Coffin affair, it seems only McGregor's "Prospector's Last Letter" has entered the repertoire of other musicians, ostensibly through both oral and recorded transmission. The song is featured on two studio albums, *Under Gaspé's Blue Skies Vol 1* (produced by regional advocacy body Committee for Anglophone Social Action) and a session recorded by Barachois-area country singer Lorne Cotton, with full studio band of piano, mandolin, bass, and drums backing Cotton's expressive and smooth vocals (listen on Cotton's ReverbNation page).<sup>10</sup> In what I thought was an interesting twist, one of the last unaccompanied ballad-style singers in the region, Claude Rehel (1935-2016), recast McGregor's song as an old-style unaccompanied ballad, which he was singing as early as 1963.

Claude Rehel was part of a small number of people in the Barachois area who preferred to sing unaccompanied throughout his life, what is often referred to in Gaspé as "singing with no music".<sup>11</sup> His daughter Lyn discussed this preference:

It's like my dad always used to tell my brother-in-law [a guitar player and singer] ... "when you sing as well as I do, you don't need music in the background. I don't need an expensive guitar. I don't need any expensive instruments ... when you sing as well as I do. You really don't need it, it's in the background." Which we used to joke about, right? Because my dad could sing without actually anything. (Rehel 2017)

# The Prospector's Last Letter

As sung by Claude Rehel circa 1963  
(fonds Leo Fitzpatrick: LF-OR-040)

Milton McGregor

In a cold lone-ly pris-on one cold win-ter's night This con- vic - ted pros -  
7 pec-tor to his mother did write Sayin' Moth - er I'm leav-ing my time is not  
14 long But re - member dear Mother I ne-ver done wrong

Like other “ballad” singers in the area, Claude’s repertoire was not restricted to older material. For him, his unaccompanied singing was equally suited to commercial country and folk music learned from LPs. Two of his favourite songs were Hank Snow’s “Nobody’s Child” (1949) and Moe Bandy’s “Till I’m Too Old to Die Young” (1987). He also enjoyed the music of Cape Breton’s John Allan Cameron and Newfoundland country singer Dick Nolan. Lyn Rehel describes her father regularly singing in his rocking chair after a day’s work. But she also remembers that it was common to hear him singing or humming when he was working outside. McGregor’s “The Prospector’s Last Letter” was, however, a lifelong favourite of her father’s and I was fortunate to discover [Rehel’s rendition](#) on a reel-to-reel tape that I digitized in 2015. The recording was made by musician, tape collector, and then road department employee Leo Fitzpatrick of Gaspé Harbour (himself an acquaintance of Coffin) in 1963 while working on the stretch of road around Barachois and boarding at Percy Thompson’s Hotel, where Claude Rehel sang during an informal gathering of friends. This recording shows that Milton McGregor’s composition had already entered the repertoire of other singers within six years of Coffin’s execution. I’ve transcribed Claude’s melody and first verse in Figure 6. Comparing it to McGregor’s melody, you can see the extensive melodic contours Claude has applied in adapting into the unaccompanied ballad singing style.

In the rest of this article, I will reflect on the spaces occupied by the Coffin story – and its various musical retellings – within the collective memory in the eastern Gaspé. Boyle’s above account provides a crucial starting point. My analysis seeks to understand the story’s apparent resilience in the region and how it is that at least three songwriters, all from the Barachois area, decided to compose four separate songs chronicling the Coffin affair. Finally, I speculate on the possible long-term memory of this story in the region.

Theorizations of collective memory trace to the late 19th century, and one of the most influential thinkers was Maurice Halbwachs, who leveraged Durkheim’s sociology to build his framework in the 1920s. In his famous *Les cadres sociaux de la mémoire* (1925), he was principally interested in how our immediate social formations (for example, our family or religious group) structured and mediated our individual memories. What Halbwachs showed was that when there are changes or disruptions to the bonds within a social framework, forgetting occurs. In other words, our seemingly personal memories are strongly shaped by the collectivities to which we belong and are resilient to the extent that social bonds in these groups are secure (Halbwachs 1925).<sup>12</sup> For Halbwachs, collective memory was an embodied, informal phenomenon that occurred through individuals’ interactions and communication within these immediate social formations (e.g., family, commu-

nity, etc.) rather than through the external representations (e.g., written texts, iconography, music, art, etc.) transferable between members of society and across the generations. More recently, the Egyptologist Jan Assmann has expanded Halbwachs' understanding of collective memory to include what he calls the "cultural" sphere consisting of these external representations.<sup>13</sup> For Assmann, collective memory has a bipartite structure: what he calls *communicative memory* corresponds with Halbwachs' conception of collective memory; *cultural memory*, on the other hand, encompasses the formal and representational externalizations of memory excluded in Halbwachs' conception (2008b).

To elaborate, communicative collective memory is not supported by institutions of learning, transmission, and interpretation such as schools, museums, libraries, nor is it mediated by specialists like clergy, teachers, or political leaders. Neither is it formalized or stabilized in material forms and then summoned or celebrated for special occasions. Rather, it lies in the space of everyday interactions and communication and because of this, stretches back about 80 years, the span of three interacting generations (e.g., from grandparent to grandchild). Cultural collective memory, on the other hand, is institutionalized and externalized away from knowing bodies into stable symbols that can transcend situations (e.g., religious texts, art work, musical compositions). Access to and interpretation of cultural memory is mediated by society's institutional memory specialists, such as clergy, archivists, curators, politicians, and subject experts. These specialists decide which memories are important for future generations and mediate the interpretation of such memories for their society (Assmann 2008b, 110-111).

Aleida Assmann (2008a) elaborates further on the structure of cultural memory described by her husband. Cultural memory consists of both an "active" and a "passive" side. Society's active cultural memory contains a relatively small number of circulating canonical memories. For example, English-Canadian cultural memory would arguably include (among other memories) the Battle of the Plains of Abraham, the British North America Act and Constitution, the national anthem, the First and Second World Wars, the 1972 Summit Series between the Canadian and Russian hockey teams, as well as the artwork of the Group of Seven, and even Ian and Sylvia's "Four Strong Winds" (which achieved first place through CBC's *50 Tracks* program to determine the 50 greatest Canadian songs of all time). Passive cultural memory, on the other hand, is those memories collected and stored by memory specialists for possible future use; they do not actively circulate in the society (e.g., reference documents stored in archival col-

lections, as well as music infrequently performed and mostly forgotten about).<sup>14</sup> Both Aleida Assmann and her husband recognize that memories can move between the informal "communicative" domain and both the passive and active domains of "cultural" memory; further, there are social and political dynamics at play in these reshufflings (Assmann 2008b: 113-114, 117-118, Assmann 2008a: 104, 106).

Where does the Wilbert Coffin story lie within the collective memory in the eastern Gaspé? Recall how Dale Boyle described his contact with the story growing up in the region: "it's not like someone sat down one day and told you about it. It was just here and there, bits and pieces, you would pick up ... " (Boyle 2016). As it circulates, the story, although ubiquitous, is mostly non-formalized and unstable. There is no single, canonical form of the story that is taught in schools, nor are there plaques or scripted community-wide commemorative moments (although there is the small, annual gathering of family and friends at Coffin's graveside). The Wilbert Coffin memory is still *mostly* communicative, to use Jan Assmann's terminology. The everyday quality of the Coffin memory in the eastern Gaspé is, however, also indelibly shaped by mediated versions of the story originating from outside the community from the numerous authors, journalists, and documentarians who have produced alternative interpretations of the Coffin affair. In fieldwork, I encountered several people with a lifelong interest in the case, an interest clearly nourished by the practice of collecting and engaging with these more formal Coffin narratives. In Wakeham, Albert Patterson showed me folders of materials he had collected over the years, including newspaper clippings, photos, annotated maps of the area where the murdered hunters were found, and extensive correspondence with Alton Price, the author of *To Build a Noose* (1996). In the Barachois area, Dale Boyle's uncle Claude Rehel was also someone with a lifelong passion for the case and who wanted to correct its bitter local legacy. His daughter described the ubiquity of the Coffin story in the home:

**Glenn:** You were saying that ["The Prospector's Last Letter"] was one of your dad's favourite songs?

**Lyn:** That's right. I heard him sing it so many times that I think I could sing it backwards, I'm quite sure [laughs]. But he read every book and was always a firm believer, you know, everyone has their own beliefs ... just a very firm believer that an innocent man had been hung. And every book that came out, he read every book about it. Because he loved reading. And he had every single book that was out at that time, of course."

**Glenn:** There's been a bunch of books, and a guy from Sandy Beach [Gaspé] is working on a new one right now.... I don't know if you'd agree with this, but I feel like I've never met anyone in Gaspé who thought [Coffin] was guilty.

**Lyn:** I don't think so either. Anyone, like my dad had lots of conversations with buddies and what-not, like here at the house. And the topic came up quite often. (Rehel 2017)

As Lyn Rehel and Dale Boyle describe it, much of the resilience of the Coffin story is rooted in informal and spontaneous interactions between family members and neighbours. At the same time, this informal milieu is clearly nourished by certain individuals, like Claude Rehel, with a particular passion for the case, who engage with it throughout their lives and shape it by, for example, reading every book about it and retelling updated versions in their social interactions. In these interactions, the story is overheard often enough to seem important. But as Lyn Rehel shows, interpretation of the Coffin story is still a matter of personal belief ("everyone has their own beliefs") rather than a collective "fact" of a formal cultural memory that is mediated by community leaders and local "memory specialists".<sup>15</sup> Arguably, the story, while important to many in the eastern Gaspé, especially among English-speakers, has not (yet) been energized with a larger collective meaning. It is still "a story" rather than a key moment in "Our Story".

While the Coffin story is resilient within the everyday communicative milieu, this milieu relies on interactions between people with some measure of first hand connection to the story. These might be people who knew Coffin (many are still living the York, Wakeham, and Sunnybank) or who (like Dale Boyle's father) recall the local drama of the searches for the hunters and Coffin's arrest, trial, imprisonment, and execution. What will happen to the local circulation of the Coffin memory when this living link is severed in 20 or 40 years?

Ostensibly the three Barachois-area songwriters all wrote their Wilbert Coffin songs in an effort to, at some level, externalize the story into a compact, transferable, and stable form. In many societies, musicians and poets are regarded as "memory specialists", the case of African griots being frequently cited. Setting the Wilbert Coffin story to music (and subsequently putting them on home and commercial recordings) seems to implicitly mark the story for some kind of posterity. These efforts clearly help position the story for a place in the society's longer-term cultural memory. Existing on recordings and (in the case of "The Prospector's Last Letter") in multiple musicians' repertoires places the story nominally

in the "passive" (or archival) side of cultural memory described by Aleida Assmann (2008a). But does being on a recording or in another musician's repertoire necessarily move a song into the "active" canonical side of cultural memory, the song the carrier *par excellence* (among all other songs) of the Coffin memory?

I will proceed by the evidence on the ground. When I interviewed Dale Boyle about his Wilbert Coffin song, I was surprised to also learn that Claude Rehel was his uncle. Although Rehel frequently sang McGregor's "The Prospector's Last Letter" around home, and several other Gaspé- and Barachois-area musicians had incorporated the song into their repertoires (even committing them to professional recordings), Boyle was only vaguely aware of the song. He thinks he may have heard it once in his life, and never while growing up in the small, tight-knit Barachois area. Part of me wants to believe that Dale Boyle *must* have heard "The Prospector's Last Letter" growing up. But whether or not this is true is irrelevant. What is important is not whether he heard the song, but rather that he doesn't *remember* hearing it. Suppose briefly that he did hear it: we can then speculate that when it was performed, it was done so without much fanfare or gravitas, say through spoken contextualization, where the singer emphasizes the importance of this song. Taken together (if he never heard it, or did but doesn't remember), my sense is that "The Prospector's Last Letter" (like the other related compositions) was simply part of the same of everyday fabric Dale Boyle described. That is, the song was just one among the many other "bits and pieces" of the story. There were no formal mechanisms to ensure that he would encounter this (or any other) specific piece. In this sense, despite entering other singers' repertoires, the song remains an "uncelebrated" or non-canonical carrier of the Coffin memory. It floats "passively" rather than circulates "actively" in the cultural memory, to use Assmann's terminology. This may partially explain why there were at least three other endeavors to set the story to music, including an additional composition by McGregor himself.<sup>16</sup> The Wilbert Coffin songs considered in this article have been marked for posterity but have, until recently, been lacking a formal infrastructure responsible for their continued existence, access, and interpretation.<sup>17</sup>

My research in Gaspé follows the proactive archival paradigms increasingly proposed by several ethnomusicologists in recent years (see Landau and Topp Fargion 2012; Treloyn and Emberly 2013; Brinkhurst 2012; Nannyonga-Tamusuza and Weintraub 2012). While these scholars have worked with communities to repatriate colonial-era recordings stored in Western archives with their communities of

origin, I have worked with the community to establish an archival record in the first place. Like other proactive archival researchers, I think sound archives can play an increasingly proactive and responsive role in musical culture (see also Seeger 1986), mediating between the passive, archival side of memory and ongoing musical practices, both formal and informal. My proactive archival work has necessarily involved selecting, summoning, and commemorating specific performers, recordists, and repertoires, with the archive's blog the primary public outlet for this work. With academic ethnomusicology increasingly critical about issues of representational authority and researcher privilege, I'll openly admit that I feel somewhat uneasy with this part of my work. Fortunately, the community response so far has been overwhelmingly positive, and for those who have expressed their support, I think they are just glad that someone is doing this work at all. For my part, I've tried to be responsive to the wishes of living performers or their families when sharing recordings and offer them a space to directly share their insights on the blog, sometimes co-authoring posts with them, other times directly inviting their feedback to specific research questions.

Thinking about the authorship of collective memory in my research, I'll conclude on a bittersweet note. When I first heard Claude Rehel singing McGregor's "The Prospector's Last Letter" on the 1963 recording during fieldwork, I had assumed that because of the vocal style, I was listening to an older man, long-deceased. A few months later, a friend mentioned that she had given Claude Rehel a copy of an archival sampler CD that I had given her at a presentation I delivered at the Royal Canadian Legion in Barachois in November 2015. Apparently, Claude had been driving in his truck listening to himself sing as a 28-year-old man. When the 60th anniversary of Coffin's execution was approaching in February 2016, I wanted to share this powerful rendition on the blog and I opened the phone book to call Claude to ask his permission. His daughter Lyn Rehel answered the phone and responded with obvious consternation. She told me that her father had died two weeks earlier. The family was still in shock.

What followed was a surreal but ultimately touching conversation with a stranger, where we discussed the song and what it meant to Claude. According to Lyn, the family had found their father's copy of the archival sampler I had made and used it honour his memory and find some comfort in a difficult time:

What I do remember at Dad's memorial, I didn't know they were going to play this song. And my niece gave the eulogy and she says my dad was a huge storyteller and you never left unless his story

was finished. First, out of respect. And second of all, we just really enjoyed [the stories]. And so in the eulogy, my niece says that – the grandchildren called my dad "Papa" – I think it's only fair that in talking about dad's story, and being children and listening to his stories, I think it's would only seem fit to have Papa Claude ... have the last word. And then they played his song ["The Prospector's Last Letter"]. Like him singing. Which was just actually very, very nice. (Rehel 2017)

While I felt petty bringing up the subject of permissions and the blog during that first difficult phone call with Lyn Rehel in 2016 (surely the blog post could wait), I ultimately asked because I had the sense the family might appreciate having wider access to their father and grandfather singing the song. Lyn was very positive about the idea.

The blog post I produced kept the focus on the Wilbert Coffin story.<sup>18</sup> However, the extended story that eventually emerged, through comments on the blog post and on links to it on Facebook created by family members, was not the one I had anticipated when I picked up the phone to call Claude, nor the one I envisioned when I sat down to write after that first intense conversation with his daughter. It was a privilege to have inadvertently helped a family express their memories of a departed loved one through Milton McGregor's song. With their help, the archival record of the Wilbert Coffin story now also includes a bit of the story of Claude Rehel, a man who sang "The Prospector's Last Letter" with utmost conviction and remained convinced of Coffin's innocence until the very end.

### **Note of Gratitude**

This article would not have been possibly without the help of Lyn Rehel, Dale Boyle, Rena McGregor, Albert Patterson, Leo Fitzpatrick, and Stanford Chicoyne.

### **Archival Recordings Used**

Chicoyne, Keith. Unknown date. Fonds Stanford Chicoyne. SC-CS-001. Gaspesian Community Sound Archives.

Fitzpatrick, Leo. 1963. Fonds Leo Fitzpatrick. LF-OR-040. Gaspesian Community Sound Archives.

McGregor, Milton. Unknown date. Fonds Rena McGregor. RM-CS-002. Gaspesian Community Sound Archives.

## Online Resources

<http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/montreal/wilbert-coffin-murder-execution-gaspe-1.3450208>.

<http://daleboyle.tripod.com/wilbertcoffinsong.html>  
<http://ici.radio-canada.ca/actualite/v2/enjeux/affCoffin.shtml#>.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qyEbaPo9ehk>  
<https://gaspesiancommunitysound.com/2016/02/10/re-membering-wilbert-coffin-the-prospectors-last-letter-sung-by-claude-rehel/>.

<https://www.reverbnation.com/lornecottoncountryroa/dwpamelarooney/song/5347806-prospectors-last-letter>.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> <https://gaspesiancommunitysound.com>.

<sup>2</sup> Technically, he was convicted for only one of the murders. At the time, you couldn't be tried for multiple murders.

<sup>3</sup> The archival recordings also suggest that Quebec's French-language country and western stars like Paul Brunelle and Willie Lamothe (themselves influenced by the above-mentioned American music celebrities) were also influential on the region's French-speakers. See fonds Leo Fitzpatrick.

<sup>4</sup> Several of his performances appear on a separate recording (RM-CS-001) also loaned to me by Milton McGregor's cousin Rena McGregor.

<sup>5</sup> These proclivities – French-language texts and oral transmission – must be understood as a reflection of the ethnological interests at the time, and Roy's is still a very fine collection.

<sup>6</sup> This CBC feature is accompanied by a longer emotional 30-minute interview with James Coffin, who had so far stayed away from the media.

<sup>7</sup> On this lyric sheet shared with me by his cousin, the song is titled "The Prospector's Ordeal" – a title perhaps too close to McGregor's original composition. The basic narrative is the same, but it's clear Chicoyne reworked the texts of his songs periodically.

<sup>8</sup> These lyrics as well as additional contextual information can be found on Dale Boyle's old website, which is still available as of this writing:

<http://daleboyle.tripod.com/wilbertcoffinsong.html>; further, Boyle performed the song on a 2007 documentary, *Le mystère Coffin* Radio-Canada television program Enjeux (<http://ici.radio-canada.ca/actualite/v2/enjeux/affCoffin.shtml#>).

<sup>9</sup> *Coffin était innocent* (1958); *J'accuse les assassins de Coffin* (1964)

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.reverbnation.com/lornecottoncountryroadwp/amelarooney/song/5347806-prospectors-last-letter>.

<sup>11</sup> On archival recordings, I've also encountered unaccompanied singers from Douglstown, a village halfway between Barachois and Gaspé. In truth, unaccompanied sing-

ing was probably much more widespread in the era until the mid-20th century. However, by the 21st century this practice was only carried on by a handful of singers in the Barachois area.

<sup>12</sup> Even our most seemingly personal memories are mediated by perception which is strongly cultural (e.g., we tend to notice phenomena that transgress or confront societal norms) and so in this sense, are also "collective".

<sup>13</sup> "Cultural" here refers to a memory more specific to so-called "capital C" culture, in the sense of a wider social formation (e.g., nations, religions, civilizations, etc.). Cultural memory symbols and texts are ones which a group considers crucial in telling the "story" of the group; they deal with origins and key moments in the group's history and therefore have a strong, explicit identity function.

<sup>14</sup> She describes these two sides of society's cultural memory (i.e., "working" and "passive") as the "canon" and the "archive" respectively. As an archival scholar, I find this terminology mostly confusing – there are parts of society's passive cultural memory that are not stored and collected.

<sup>15</sup> In Coffin's home parish of York and the adjacent communities of Sunny Bank, Wakeham, and Gaspé, the situation changes somewhat. The memory is arguably more institutionalized, with a small annual commemoration at Coffin's grave in St. Andrew's Anglican cemetery. This is, however, mostly a family affair which includes Coffin's surviving sister, Marie Stewart, with other family friends, and clergy. This more formal commemorative space relies upon individuals with a direct, autobiographical link to Wilbert Coffin.

<sup>16</sup> To give a comparison, this would be like Ron Hynes having composed another song to commemorate the Ocean Ranger tragedy after composing "Atlantic Blue".

<sup>17</sup> The purpose of my collective memory analysis is not to elevate the "cultural" over the "communicative" as a superior mnemonic form. There is a productive dynamic relationship between these domains. For anyone who spends time in the region, it is clear that communicative memory is efficacious, not surprisingly because – following Halbwachs – family and community bonds are still quite strong. Within these social frameworks, the communicative memory of the Wilbert Coffin story is a powerful force in Gaspé, inspiring at least four separate musical tellings by three different songwriters. But necessarily, existing mostly within communicative memory raises certain doubts about the long-term presence of the Coffin story – in musical or other forms – in the region.

<sup>18</sup>

<https://gaspesiancommunitysound.com/2016/02/10/rememb-ering-wilbert-coffin-the-prospectors-last-letter-sung-by-claude-rehel/>.