

Reflections on the Passing of Allan Kelly (1903-2008): A Master of the Acadian Song Tradition

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Abstract: As noted at the beginning of this article, folklorist Ronald Labelle presented a version of the following text originally as a keynote address at the Canadian Society for Traditional Music conference held at St. Mary' University in November, 2008. Re-worked for the current issue of MUSICultures, in this article Labelle presents an engaging and telling account of the musical world of the late Acadian tradition bearer, Allan Kelly.

At the 2008 annual meeting of the Canadian Society for Traditional Music in Halifax, I had planned to speak about the difficult transformation of Acadian folk song from being orally transmitted to being passed down through educational institutions or the entertainment industry. My goal was to explain how, once they had lost their social function, some traditional songs were adapted to contemporary musical styles and given new life, while others took on symbolic importance as expressions of Acadian identity. My intention was to conclude by reflecting on the role played by revivalist groups who now find an appreciative audience for Acadian songs on the international folk festival circuit, despite the fact that traditional music is still marginalized by the mainstream mass media.

Many of the ideas in my original paper have now been published in a French language article entitled “La chanson



Figure 1. Allan Kelly performing at the Miramichi Folk Festival, summer 1986. The photo is by the author.

traditionnelle acadienne dans l'Acadie contemporaine" (Labelle 2009). But I decided to change the focus of my presentation at the Halifax conference because in November of 2008, the Acadian community had just lost its last great ballad singer. Allan Kelly, of Miramichi, New Brunswick, had passed away on October 1st at the age of 105, and I therefore chose to share my memories and my reflections about his contribution to our knowledge of traditional ballad singing in the Maritimes.

Kelly's ethnic and linguistic origins were mixed. While his mother, Judith Robichaud, was Acadian, his father, William Kelly, was of Scottish-Irish background. In the Miramichi lumber camps, Allan Kelly was known as the "French Irishman" because he associated mainly with French speaking Acadian co-workers, despite his Irish sounding name. Like many people with mixed origins, he could have chosen to identify with either linguistic group, and in his case he chose the Acadian side, possibly because he had grown up in the French speaking community of Pointe-Sapin, on New Brunswick's east coast, and was therefore most at home among Acadians.

Kelly fished as a young man in his community, but began to work in the lumber camps when he was still a teenager. At the age of 21, he married Léontine Doiron of Tracadie, in Northeastern New Brunswick, where the couple spent the first years of their married life. They were married for 65 years until Léontine passed away in 1989. In 1933, the couple joined the land settlement program of the Great Depression, often referred to inaccurately as the "back to the land movement", though in the Maritimes, most settlers were already living in rural areas before applying for land grants. Kelly's bilingualism helped him become an intermediary for the lumber agents in the Miramichi, and he was eventually able to purchase a small general store in the village of Beaver Brook, where he worked until moving to Newcastle, now the City of Miramichi.

Allan Kelly didn't lead a remarkable life. He and his family survived great hardships during the Depression, but then so did thousands of other New Brunswickers who were in constant danger of dying either from the effects of malnutrition, or from diseases such as typhoid fever. He was, however, gifted in many ways, and I use the term literally, as he was the last of seven consecutive sons, and therefore endowed with a gift at birth, according to popular belief. Speculating on the nature of his gift, Kelly sometimes said it was perhaps his ability to face all the hardships life threw at him without ever becoming discouraged. At other times, he said his gift was probably that of song.

Kelly believed in divine intervention, and thought it was fate that had brought him to the Miramichi during the Depression. He had originally at-

tempted to apply for a plot of land in Val-D'Amour, at the northern tip of the province, but circumstances prevented him from making the trip to stake his claim, and he finally ended up in Beaver Brook, just north of Newcastle. It was there that Louise Manny began to collect folk songs in 1947, using state-of-the-art recording equipment supplied by the Miramichi's native son, Lord Beaverbrook (Max Aitken). The preservation of the songs of the Miramichi was one of many causes funded by Lord Beaverbrook after his retirement from politics in Great Britain.

Louise Manny later founded the Miramichi Folksong Festival in 1958. Kelly's participation in the first festival, and his chance meeting in 1959 with Father Anselme Chiasson, the pioneer Acadian folklorist, gave him the opportunity to realize that his songs were survivals of a tradition dating back centuries. Allan Kelly believed that if he had settled in Val-D'Amour, he would probably never have encountered the folklorists, and would therefore not have fulfilled his mission of passing on the Acadian song tradition.

I first visited Allan and Léontine Kelly in July 1979, after seeing Allan on stage at the Festival. Impressed both by the quality of his singing and his vast repertoire, I began to visit him regularly, and I undertook a fieldwork process that would last 25 years, ending only when he reached the age of 100. To say that I learned a great deal from Allan Kelly would be an understatement, because he not only allowed me to record 260 different songs, but he also provided me with an extraordinary amount of information on folk beliefs, customs, religious life, oral history, folk medicine, life in lumber camps, agricultural practises and fishing techniques. Additionally, Allan Kelly's personal philosophy enveloped all his accounts of what life was like in earlier times.

I eventually completed a doctoral dissertation based on Kelly's world view as recounted in his life history. Only one chapter of the dissertation deals directly with songs and singing. Allan Kelly was a mentor to me; as a 25 year old folklorist recently hired to run the Folklore Archive at the Centre d'études acadiennes in Moncton, I had everything to learn, and I tapped into his knowledge time and time again.

As a child in Pointe-Sapin at the beginning of the 20th century, Allan would listen to his father William Kelly sing Irish ballads. He had the misfortune of losing his mother when he was 7 or 8 years old, but he was close to his older sisters, who sang French language songs, and he attended house parties where his mother's relatives sang and played the fiddle, while his brother Daniel step danced. (Daniel Kelly was killed in the First World War.) Allan also recalled hearing local women sing as they worked in the fields, smoking clay pipes all the while. He sang some of his father's songs, but regretted not having learned them all, because folklorists often asked him for ballads he

remembered hearing from his father William, such as those of “Pat O’Brien” and “William Hill”.

Among the 260 songs I collected from Allan Kelly, the majority are in French, while 70 are in English. Margaret Steiner, who has been documenting the Miramichi Folksong Festival for over twenty years, has no doubt collected more English language material from him, as all my fieldwork was done in French, while hers was conducted primarily in English.

Kelly no doubt learned the majority of his folk song repertoire while working in the lumber shanties of New Brunswick, where he spent his winters between the ages of 16 and 30. Until the 1940s, economic necessity forced the majority of local men to spend their winters in the woods, where they worked alongside lumbermen from other parts of the Maritimes, and also from Newfoundland and Québec. Most of the lumbermen with whom Kelly worked were French speaking Acadians from the area of Northeast New Brunswick known as the Acadian Peninsula. At the heart of the Peninsula, the community of Tracadie was home to a great many storytellers and ballad singers, who carried the tradition well into the 20th century.

Being completely isolated in the woods, the men spent their evenings singing, listening to folktales, playing the mouth organ, and step dancing. It was not uncommon for men as old as 70 years of age to go to work in the woods at that time. As a teenager, Kelly thus had the opportunity to learn songs directly from men who were born in the mid-19th century. He remembers, for example, learning long ballads such as “Le fils assassiné” or “The Murdered Son” from an old lumberman named Jos Leclerc.

Kelly often mentioned that he had only to hear a song once or twice to memorize it, and he told me how, after listening to Leclerc sing “Le fils assassiné”, he asked him to sing it again so he could learn it. The following Sunday, during a singing session at the lumber camp, Kelly amazed Jos Leclerc by performing all 15 verses of the ballad. His technique for learning songs consisted of first memorizing the lyrics, and then repeating the song in his head several times over the course of the following days, until he felt he was able to perform it without hesitation.

“Le fils assassiné” (see Appendix A) is one of many tragic ballads that tell of the return of a soldier from the wars. Here, the soldier, who has earned a considerable sum of money, arrives at an inn belonging to his parents, where he takes a room. When his mother learns that a traveller has arrived with a fortune in his pack, she plans to rob and murder him. The next day, the murdered soldier’s sister arrives, looking for her brother, and the parents realize that they have killed their son. Allan Kelly was fond of this long ballad because, like most traditional singers, he thought songs should tell stories, and he lamented

the fact that the popular songs of today did not have a storyline.

Singers in the lumber camps would often discuss the stories told in songs, and speculate about their possible origins. Kelly remembers that Jos Leclerc thought “Le fils assassiné” may have originated at the time of the Boer War, while others estimated that it was at least 200 years old. This tragic narrative has long fascinated scholars in Europe. The story has circulated in many different forms since the early 17th century, when it began to appear in chapbooks in England, France and Germany (Kosko 1966). In every case, the story was presented as being true, although no historical proof has been found to verify its authenticity. One version is now considered as a folktale and is identified as type 939A in the international tale-type index (Uther 2004).

The version sung by Allan Kelly is one of two French folk songs based on the story. This particular one was directly inspired by a French chapbook that was published in several editions during the 1870s. (Kosko 1966:194) The text first appeared in a French song collection in 1906, and it was collected in Eastern Québec shortly after that. This shows how rapidly folk songs travelled, as “Le fils assassiné” must have been brought to French Canada not long after having appeared in France, and thanks to the mobility of Acadian and Québécois lumbermen, it then spread to Eastern New Brunswick, where Allan Kelly picked it up.

Kelly had essentially acquired his folk song repertoire by the age of 30, when he began his participation in the ill-fated attempt to extend the community of Beaver Brook to the north by settling in a marshy wooded area that had very little agricultural potential. The following years were dominated by his efforts to survive and to feed his family, a task made more difficult by the fact that a childhood injury eventually led to the partial amputation of his left foot. The Kellys lost two young children during the 1920s and 30s, but managed to save their nine others, and by the late 1940s, they were doing relatively well, running a general store at the heart of Beaver Brook.

Though he rarely had an opportunity to sing in Beaver Brook, Allan had not forgotten his songs, and would have been quite prepared to undertake the process of recording them at the time when Louise Manny began her fieldwork. He often took the local train to Newcastle, 15 km away, where Manny had set up a recording studio financed by Lord Beaverbrook, and where local radio station CKMR had begun to present the songs of the Miramichi every Sunday afternoon, using both Manny’s disk recordings and live performances by local singers. But Louis Manny was not interested in French songs, at least not at first. Manny, who had a degree in History, had been given a mission by Lord Beaverbrook to collect the English language songs that had been sung in the Miramichi lumber camps, and this she did to the best of her ability. In

the collection stored in the New Brunswick Provincial Archives, none of the songs on the acetate disks from the 1940s is in French. Likewise, her published collection of songs from the Miramichi completely ignores the French language tradition (Manny and Wilson 1968).

Louise Manny used her weekly radio broadcast to send out a call for singers to participate in the first Miramichi Folksong Festival in 1958. There again, she was primarily interested in the English speaking former lumbermen who could perform locally composed ballads such as “The Jam on Jerry’s Rock” and “The Steamer Alexander”. But the Miramichi is not a culturally homogeneous area. A sizeable Francophone minority has always lived in the towns of Newcastle and Chatham, while the Acadian community of Beaver Brook is almost entirely French speaking, most of its inhabitants having originally come from the Acadian Peninsula in the north or from francophone areas of Kent County in the south.

In 1958, Acadians with surnames such as Plourde, Chiasson and Richard answered the call for singers, and Allan Kelly joined them, as he was eager to share his knowledge of traditional songs. Soon after that first festival, people who had attended began to call the radio station, demanding that Louise Manny include Kelly’s French songs in her weekly broadcast, and she wrote to him that she would in future record his songs at the festival so that they could be played on the air. French language singers not only had an appreciative local audience, but they were also encouraged by Allan Mills, a bilingual professional folksinger who acted as judge at the early festivals. French language participation at the Miramichi Folksong Festival declined after the early years, as the new organizers didn’t make Acadian singers feel as welcome as their anglophone counterparts. The anglophone majority in the Miramichi has never entirely accepted the francophone minority, and the region continues to experience linguistic tension.

Allan Kelly’s wife, Léontine, was a fine singer herself, and when I asked her why she never sang at the festival, she said her husband fit in well because he had an Irish name, and could always include some English language song in his performances, but she was not fluent in English, and would not have felt comfortable singing at the festival, despite the fact that she spent more than 50 years of her life in the Miramichi.

Margaret Steiner has written about how Allan Kelly became “a cultural broker”, as he was able to cross the ethnic boundary between English and French New Brunswick, while identifying himself most strongly with his Acadian heritage (Labelle and Steiner 2000). He was proud to be able to sing rare English language ballads such as “The False Knight upon the Road”. (These songs were sought after by folklorists like Helen Creighton, who made an an-

nual pilgrimage to the Miramichi Folksong Festival.) But what mattered most to Kelly was his extensive and varied French repertoire that included ballads, locally composed songs and humorous ditties that he accompanied rhythmically with his feet.

When Allan Kelly met Father Anselme Chiasson in 1959, the latter had already published three collections of *Chansons d'Acadie*, and had begun to record the singers of his native Chéticamp, in Cape Breton. During that year, Chiasson spent a short time in Beaver Brook replacing an absent priest, and he discovered Allan Kelly's singing abilities while the later was driving him home to Bathurst. He immediately invited Kelly to the convent where he lived in order to record some of his songs, and after hearing him sing the ancient ballad entitled "La blanche biche," he mentioned that it was a song he had been unsuccessful in collecting until then. Father Chiasson also told him that he had already recorded other versions of many of Kelly's songs, but not with such beautiful melodies. This gave Allan the confidence he needed to present French songs at the Festival, and also on local radio station CKMR.

When I first approached Allan Kelly in 1979, explaining that I was from the Folklore Archive at the Université de Moncton, he understood exactly what I was looking for, having long been in contact with folklorists such as Helen Creighton and Edward Ives, as well as folk singers like Allan Mills. During our first recording session, Kelly sang thirty songs, and I later realized that he had chosen many of his favourite ballads, such as "Le soldat assassiné," "La blanche biche," "La bergère sourde et muette" and "La porcheronne." It is significant that the very first song recorded was the one he called "Voilà le vingt-cinq d'octobre," one that he had adopted as his own by combining parts of a song about the lumber camps with "Le mariage heureux," one that describes a happily married couple. Kelly considered this as his only personal composition, because in all other cases, he tried to perform songs exactly as he had heard them.

All through the 1980s and 1990s, Allan Kelly would put together ("metre ensemble") the words of hundreds of songs stored in his memory. When a song came to him, he would note the first line on the back of a packet of cigarettes or a scrap of paper, so as to remember it for my next visit. Though several singers and folklorists had recorded him before, none had taken the time to document his full repertoire, and few had been interested in his French songs.

In December 1983, a crew from Radio-Canada in Moncton went to the Miramichi to record Allan Kelly for a weekly radio program called *Au rythme de l'Atlantique*, and I was allowed to use the recording to produce an LP entitled *Suivant l'étoile du nord*, with support from the Canadian Society for Traditional Music. I remember how at the end of the two-day recording session, the Radio-

Canada technician was absolutely amazed that an 80 year old man had been able to sing a total of 40 songs without once needing to stop and begin again. During his performance at the Miramichi Festival at the age of 97 years in 2001, Kelly still had no difficulty performing the long Acadian ballad entitled “La veuve affligée,” which tells the tragic tale of a young woman in Cape Breton who successively lost two husbands in accidents in lumber mills.

Several locally composed Acadian ballads were part of Allan Kelly’s repertoire, and he appreciated the information I could give him about their origin. One of these, the song he called “Au pied d’un haricot,” tells of how a mentally deranged man killed his wife and then buried her at the foot of a tree. Kelly instinctively knew when a ballad was based on a true story, so he wasn’t surprised when I told him the man’s name was Xavier Gallant, and that he had committed the earliest recorded murder in the Acadian community on Prince Edward Island in the year 1812. Allan Kelly was one of very few people living outside of Prince Edward Island who could sing this ballad that has been documented by Georges Arsenault (1980:117).

Kelly strongly believed in a divine presence in the world, and traditional songs that had a religious meaning were of particular importance to him. “La bergère sourde et muette” was one of these. It tells of how the Virgin Mary appeared to a deaf-mute shepherdess who was minding her sheep, and gave her the gift of speech. He always thought there had to be a true story behind this song, and he was interested to learn that it came from Brittany, where it referred to a miraculous occurrence reputed to have taken place in the village of Querrien on August 15th, feast day of the Virgin Mary, in 1652.

Kelly knew several traditional songs of a religious nature, one of which recounted the entire Passion of Christ in 26 verses, taking 13 minutes to sing in its entirety. “La Passion de Jésus-Christ” is an extremely rare song, having been collected only four times, each time from an Acadian singer. In Acadian society, where in the early 20th century most people had no more than a few years of schooling, religious instruction was handed down largely through traditional songs. The ballad entitled “Le blasphémateur transformé en chien,” in which an impoverished farmer curses God and shoots a bullet towards the sky, reminded Kelly of the destitute settlers of Beaver Brook, some of whom had abandoned all hope and had given up trying to survive during the worst years of the Depression.

For Allan Kelly and those of his generation, folk singing was much more than a pastime. It was also a way of handing down a view of the world from one generation to another. With the transformation of Acadia from an oral society to a literate one during the first half of the 20th century, traditional songs lost their social function. The Acadian elite promoted a canon of recently composed

patriotic songs representing the values defended by Catholic Church leaders, and these songs were taught in schools, but they didn't connect with the majority of the people, who rarely sang them at home. At the same time, new musical styles were entering the region through radio stations from either Québec or the United States, and traditional songs that couldn't be readily adapted to a guitar accompaniment fell by the wayside. This explains why Allan Kelly's songs had a very limited audience, apart from the folklorists who made an annual pilgrimage to the Miramichi Folksong Festival.

The goal of most folk song collectors, myself included, was to record the old songs as they used to be sung, and to store them in an archive so they could eventually be appreciated. Now and then would come along an opportunity to publish the songs or to release them on record, and apart from the LP entitled *Suivant l'étoile du nord*, a small number of Allan Kelly's songs were included on commercial recordings produced at the Miramichi Folksong Festival, most notably on the Folkways LP entitled *Folksongs of the Miramichi*. A few other songs were recorded by folk singers such as Allan Mills and Edith Butler, but without any mention of the sources the singers drew upon.

Several of Kelly's songs were printed in *La fleur du rosier* (Creighton 1989), an anthology of Acadian songs collected by Helen Creighton. But since completing my collection of his song repertoire in 2001, I have hesitated to embark on the preparation of an anthology, and this despite the fact that I would very much have liked to present him with a book of his songs while he was still living. Hopefully, a joint project with Margaret Steiner will soon result in a substantial published collection. But my hesitation to embark on the project up until now is explained by the fact that Acadian traditional song, long regarded simply as a remnant of a past society, was eventually rejected, ignored, forgotten, and considered as an artefact suitable only to be displayed at re-enactments of the past, along with period costumes, and then put away until the next event. In other words, it was no longer a living tradition.

Jeanette Gallant (2009) has shown how Acadian choirs have showcased traditional songs since the 1940s, but choral directors have consistently chosen from the canon of well known folk songs such as "À la Claire fontaine" and "V'la l'bon vent." Published versions of these songs have been around since the first edition of Ernest Gagnon's *Chansons populaires du Canada* in 1865. A limited number of songs published by Father Anselme Chiasson during the 1940s in the first three volumes of his *Chansons d'Acadie* were adapted and popularized by choral groups, the most notable being "En montant la rivière," "Au chant de l'alouette," and "Le pommier doux." However, Jeanette Gallant's research shows how Acadian choir directors considered that most of the traditional songs published by Chiasson lacked both musical quality and public appeal

(Gallant 2009:172).

Ironically, the *Chansons d'Acadie* song books were held in much higher esteem by Bernard Lallement, a well respected choral composer in Europe. Lallement drew extensively from the Chiasson collections in his compositions entitled *Cantate pour l'Acadie* and *Petite suite acadienne*, which were premiered by his Chorale franco-allemande de Paris (Lallement 1990). There are, of course, revivalist singers who are always looking for interesting material, but they generally know where to find songs when they need them, and are no strangers to folklore archives.

In early 2007, I proposed a weekly radio series to Robert Arsenault, one of the very few Radio-Canada producers who still believe in the importance of presenting traditional culture on radio. The idea was to present each week a well known Acadian folk song, contrasting rare archival versions with the more familiar ones. During the three month series broadcast Saturday mornings on Radio-Canada Atlantique, I explained how most well known folk songs in French Canada originated in the Gagnon printed collection, while others were first popularized by Father Anselme Chiasson in the 1940s – and each week the announcer was surprised to discover that indeed there existed more than one version of “À la Claire fontaine” or “Isabeau s’y promène.” Whenever I attempted to play more than a few verses of an unaccompanied archival version of a traditional song, I could see the producer fidgeting on the other side of the glass, and it was usually necessary to cut songs short, making sure the entire presentation didn’t last more than eight minutes. This is not to say that the producer himself didn’t appreciate the musical content, but it is now almost impossible to play traditional music on the airwaves of Radio-Canada, and Arsenault probably judged that a twelve-week series of eight-minute folk song productions would be the most his directors of programming would tolerate.

Luckily, community radio stations can sometimes fill the void left by the exclusion of folk music on both commercial and state radio, and they contribute greatly to the thriving Acadian musical culture in places like Cheticamp, Cape Breton and Shediac, New Brunswick. But Allan Kelly lived in the Miramichi, where French language culture is still regarded at best with indifference and at worst with hostility, and where the radio station CKMR long ago ceased to broadcast the songs of the Miramichi, to be transformed instead into an insipid commercial station such as those found everywhere in Canada. Apart from Festival week, Allan Kelly didn’t have an appreciative environment in which his talents could be recognized. There is a fast growing revival of interest in traditional storytelling all over French Canada now, but unfortunately, this movement does not yet have a parallel in the field of folk music.

When news of Allan Kelly's death was announced in early October 2008, Robert Arsenault made sure I was invited by both the Radio-Canada radio and television news studios to give interviews on the significance of his passing. Before I left the studio that day, he asked me why it was that the death of such an exceptional person could go almost unnoticed in the Acadian community. Because of Allan Kelly's consistent participation at the Miramichi Folksong Festival, there had been brief mentions of his passing in the English language media, but if Arsenault hadn't intervened, Allan Kelly would have disappeared without any mention at all in the Acadian news media. I mentioned to Arsenault how Acadians who live in the Miramichi are rarely acknowledged in general, but I couldn't entirely explain why Allan Kelly was not better known. Maybe the answer is that, unfortunately, few people are able today to appreciate the beautiful art form that is unaccompanied ballad singing.

During the years when I visited Allan Kelly, both as a folklorist and a friend, when I found myself discussing songs with him in his living room, Allan would very often pause after mentioning a song, and then he would look at me and say: "La veux-tu, celle-là? Je vais essayer de la mettre ensemble" (Do you want that one? I will try to put it together). When that happened, I felt privileged. I felt that I was witnessing something profound, something sacred even, and each time it was a moving experience for me. Allan would pause then, and a faraway look would come into his eyes, as he was transplanted back to the lumber camps, and then further back over the centuries, back to the France of his ancestors, sometimes even as far back as the Middle Ages, and then possessed by the song, he would start singing, and through him the song would be brought to life.

In today's society, I don't think we are ready to appreciate what Allan Kelly accomplished; not yet, anyway. But I know that people who have an interest for traditional music are able to appreciate his songs, and so I chose to end my presentation at the Halifax conference by doing something that would not be permitted on public radio in Canada. I played, in its entirety, the ballad of «Le soldat assassiné» sung by Allan Kelly.

There was great emotion in Kelly's voice when he concluded the last of 15 verses with the words "qu'ils ont subi la mort", as the soldier's parents are condemned to die for their crime. "Le soldat assassiné" has been collected more often in Acadian areas of the Maritimes than anywhere else in the French speaking world (Laforte 1981). It is one of many examples of how Acadians like Allan Kelly carried French narrative traditions into the 20th century so they could be documented and preserved, therefore contributing to our understanding of past culture. Kelly was one of the last Acadian ballad singers whose memory provided a living link to the past, and his disappearance truly marks the end of an era. 🍀

APPENDIX A: Le chanson du guerrier tué

This song is taken from *La fleur du rosier*, edited by Ronald Labelle (University College of Cape Breton Press, 1988, pp.138-141).

67. La chanson du guerrier tué

Rythme libre

CR-B-199 B.9

E - cou - tez pour en - tendre Un triste é - vé - ne -
 ment. Ce - la va vous sur - pren - dre, E - cou - tez un
 mo - ment. Un pau - vre mi - li - tai - re, Re - ve - nant de
 la guer - re, Re - gret - tant son bon - heur. Un sol -
 dat doux et sa - ge, En - trant dans son vil - lage,
 Por - tant la croix d'hon - neur. Por - tant
 la croix d'hon - neur.

Transcription: E. Sircom

Informateur: Allan Kelly, Miramichi Folk Song Festival, Newcastle, 1960.

Ecoutez pour entendre
 Un triste événement.
 Cela va vous surprendre,
 Ecoutez un moment.
 Un pauvre militaire,
 Revenant de la guerre,
 Regrettant son bonheur,
 Un soldat doux et sage,
 Entrant dans son village
 Portant la croix d'honneur. (bis)

*Listen and hear
 About a sad event.
 It will surprise you,
 Listen for a moment.
 A poor soldier,
 Returning from battle,
 Regretting his good fortune,
 A kind and gentle soldier,
 Who comes to his village
 Wearing the Cross of Honour. (bis)*

Z-il va-t-à la fontaine.
 La femme de Poirier
 Z-a reconnu sans peine
 Cet aimable guerrier.
 Elle lui a dit: "Cher frère,
 Voici notre chaumière.
 Z-allons, entrez chez nous.
 Poirier, la bonté même;
 Content, comme il vous aime.
 Z-allons, entrez chez nous.

Poirier, voici mon frère,
 Comment le trouvez-vous?
 Tout à fait bien j'espère,
 Z-il soup'ra avec-que nous.
 -Poirier, laissez-moi faire,
 J'veux y aller voir ma mère;
 J'suis content de la voir.
 Avec mon père et mère,
 Qui sont 'vec moi sur terre,
 Je les aim'rai toujours.

Bonsoir, ma très chère soeur-e,
 Z-embrassons-nous, bonsoir.
 Demain-z-après la messe,
 Tous deux venez de la voir.
 Nous ferons une fête.
 Qu'elle soit belle et parfaite,
 Je veux dans ces beaux jours,
 Avec mon père et mère
 Qui sont 'vec moi sur terre,
 Chanteront mon retour.

-Bonsoir, mes aubergistes,
 J'pourrais-t-ici loger?
 -Cher ami, je suis triste,
 J'ai rien de préparé.
 -Que rien ne vous chagrine,
 Du pain, z-une chopine,
 C'est suffisant pour moi.
 Daignez de me fair' place,
 Dessus-r-une pailleasse.
 'Gardez, il fait encore froid.

-Si cela vous contente,
 Entrez-assoyez-vous.
 Que rien ne vous tourmente,
 Vous soup'rez avec-que nous.
 Oh! J'aime qu'on me l'explique,
 Les affair' de l'Afrique;
 Où est mon fils soldat.
 En savez-vous des nouvelles?
 -Oui, des bonnes et des belles:
 Z-en grands coups on se bat.

Les fils de la victoire
 Sont couverts de lauriers.
 J'en suis pleine de gloire,
 Z-on entend le guerrier.
 Les canons qu'ils tonnent,
 Les enfants de Balonne

*He goes to the fountain.
 Poirier's wife
 Recognized him easily
 This amiable warrior.
 She says to him: "Dear brother,
 Here is our cottage.
 Come into our home.
 Poirier is really kind;
 Satisfied, he loves you very much.
 Come into our home.*

*Poirier, here is my brother,
 How do you find him?
 Very well, I hope,
 He will dine with us.
 -Poirier, let me go,
 I want to go and see my mother;
 I'm happy to see her.
 With my father and mother,
 Who are with me here on earth,
 I shall love them always.*

*Good-night, my very dear sister,
 Let us embrace, goodnight.
 Tomorrow after Mass,
 Both of you should come to see me.
 We shall celebrate.
 May the event be beautiful and perfect,
 I want, in these beautiful days,
 With my father and mother
 Who are with me here on earth,
 I want you to praise my return.*

*Goodnight, innkeepers,
 Could I stay here?
 -Dear friend, I am sad,
 I have nothing prepared.
 -Let nothing sadden you,
 Some bread, a tankard,
 That is good enough for me.
 Let me have the use,
 Of a mattress.
 Look, it is still cold.*

*-If that satisfies you,
 Come and sit down.
 Let nothing trouble you,
 You will have supper with us.
 Oh! let someone explain to me,
 What goes on in Africa;
 My son is a soldier out there.
 Have you any news?
 -Yes, good and exciting news:
 A great battle is taking place.*

*The sons of victory
 Are covered with laurels.
 I am filled with glory,
 As I hear the warrior.
 The canons are thundering,
 The children of Balonne*

S'enfurent gagner la croix.
Je termine la veille,
Là, déjà, je someille,
J'veux y aller me coucher."

Dans la chambre de grâce
Sa mère va le conduire.
Z-il mit bien l'sac en place
Sur la table de nuit
En disant: "Chère bourse,
Tu seras la ressource
De l'auteur de mes jours.
Avec mon père et mère
Qui sont 'vec soi sur terre,
Je les aimerai toujours."

Le temps est ténébreux,
Le soldat dort bien fort.
L'hôtesse toute réjouie
Z-en visitant les valots.
Elle trouve par surprise
Une lourde valise.
Z-elle les visite encore.
"Je vous dirai sans honte,
Ce monsieur-là il compte
Cent dix-huit piastres d'or.

Mon mari, cette somme,
Pour nous, c'est un trésor.
Qu'on assomm'rait cet homme,
Nous aurions tout' son or.
Jamais aucun avis-e
Auprès de la justice
Ne saurait nous trahir.
Cette lourde valise
Nous fera réjouir
Le restant de nos jours."

Elle s'en va trouver le brave.
"Toi, creuse le tombeau
Dans le fond de la cave
Z-auprès du grand tonneau."
Aussitôt elle s'enfuit-e,
Elle s'en va arracher la vie
Du soldat décoré.
Et, sans le reconnaître,
Elle s'en y va le mettre
Dans ce lieu préparé.

Le matin avant l'aurore,
Cet aimable Poirier
Z-avec Eléonore
S'en va voir le guerrier.
-Parlez-moi donc, ma mère,
De ce beau militaire
Que vous ici logez.
-Z-il est sur la grand'route,
Déjà bien loin sans doute,
Qu'il retourne en congé.

*Went to win the Cross.
I terminate the evening now,
Already I am sleepy,
I want to go to bed."*

*His mother leads him
Graciously to the room.
Placing the sack
On the night table.
Saying: "Dear purse,
You will be a resource
For him who gave me life.
With my father and mother
Who are with me here on earth,
I shall always love them."*

*The weather is forbidding,
The soldier sleeps deeply.
Happily the hostess
Goes through his belongings.
By surprise she finds
A heavy suitcase.
She goes through his possessions again.
"I tell you without shame,
This gentleman has
One hundred and eighteen piastres of
gold.*

*My husband, this money,
Is a treasure for us.
Let's knock him senseless,
We shall have all his gold.
No one will ever
Betray us to the law.
This heavy suitcase
Will be our joy
For the rest of our life."*

*She goes to see the brave fellow,
"You, dig the grave
In the basement
Near the large barrel."
She then runs,
To deprive of his life
The honoured soldier.
And without recognizing him,
She puts him
In the prepared place.*

*The next morning, before dawn,
The amiable Poirier
With his wife Eléonore
Goes to see the soldier.
"Tell me, mother,
About this beautiful soldier
Whom you have in your house.
-He is on the road,
Pretty far already, no doubt,
Returning from his furlough.*

-Ma mère, ce sont des farces
 Que vous me faites ici.
 Ce soldat doux aimable
 N'a point sorti d'ici.
 Oh! révèle, ma mère,
 Afin que je l'embrasse,
 Je l'aime si tendrement.
 -Le connais-tu, ma chère?
 -Oui, ma mère, c'est mon frère
 Qui sort du régiment.

-Hélas! Je sens mon crime
 Qu'il m'entraîne à la mort'.
 Mon fils est la victime.
 Grand Dieu! Quel triste sort!
 Hier soir après la brune,
 Croyant faire ma fortune,
 J'ai pris un long couteau,
 De mon fils tout aimable,
 Moi mère abominable,
 J'en deviens le bourreau."

Mais à la justice alors
 La femme de Poirier
 S'en va dénoncer sa mère.
 Z-alors le brigadier:
 C'est pas mal détestable
 Qu'un père abominable
 Soit-y comme elle d'accord.
 Pour payer leur crime,
 Avisez la victime,
 Qu'ils ont subi la mort.

*-Mother, this is a joke
 You're telling me.
 This nice and kind soldier
 Has not gone out of your house.
 Oh tell me, mother,
 That I may kiss him,
 I love him so tenderly.
 -Do you know him, dear?
 -Yes, mother, he is my brother
 Who just left his regiment.*

*Alas! I feel mu crime
 Is taking me to my death.
 My son is the victim.
 Good God! What a sad fate!
 Last night, after dark,
 Hoping to make my fortune,
 I took a long knife,
 And, oh me, abominable mother,
 I have been the executioner
 Of my lovely son."*

*Poirier's wife
 Goes to the law
 And denounces her mother.
 Then the sergeant said:
 "How awful it is
 That an abominable father
 Should agree with her.
 Tell the victim
 They paid for their crime,
 They have been put to death.*

Voici une longue complainte tragique à l'origine sans doute ancienne. Au Canada, elle a surtout été recueillie en Acadie, où les versions varient parfois considérablement.

Here is a long and tragic ballad, the origin of which is undoubtedly set in the distant past. In Canada, it has mainly been collected in Acadia, where the different versions vary considerably.

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