

# Tradition and Identity in Scotland and Canada: James Macpherson, Stan Rogers, Garnet Rogers

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Cultural traditions often have been preserved in poetry and song, passed down orally or sustaining in written form the energy and flexibility of the oral versions. As these traditions are passed down from generation to generation, they inevitably change, gradually and subtly, so that over a long period of time, the changes become significant. The adaptability of the songs and poems is precisely what keeps art and culture alive, because it keeps them interesting and relevant to current times. Many of these traditions sustain cultural identity—of a nation or a group.

Frequently, when a country experiences a crisis of cultural identity, it returns to such oral traditions to regain that identity. Two remarkable examples of this phenomenon can be seen: in 18th-century Scotland and in 20th-century Canada. In both instances, the excavation of traditional poems and ballads and their subsequent transformation led to a renewed sense of cultural identity.

In Scotland, the leader of the revival was James Macpherson, with his publication of the poems and songs of Ossian.<sup>1</sup> In Canada, the leaders were Stan and Garnet Rogers. Each of these men was a nationalist, a history lover, and a gifted poet; each understood and respected the importance of oral tradition. These qualities, combined with passion and a tireless devotion to work, enabled Macpherson and the Rogers brothers to have an invaluable, lasting, positive impact on cultural identity in their respective countries.

When culture and tradition are passed down orally, their forms change and take on new life. This is called “oral tradition,” or “the folk process.” The traditions are rejuvenated and adapted, but they never lose their core, and because of their flexibility, they stay popular. We see this especially in ballad traditions. As Pauline Greenhill states:

Folksongs exhibit not only continuity and selection, but also variation; that is, a folksong's versions share certain aspects of plot

*Morgan: James Macpherson and the Rogers Brothers*

and wording and are relatively widely dispersed through time and space, but they also differ from each other in significant ways, reflecting the cultures, times, and personalities of the singers. (Greenhill 1993: 139)

In Ian Haywood's view, the best way to revive cultural traditions and humanize the past, thereby giving a country a renewed sense of cultural identity, is to return to traditional poems and songs (Haywood 1983: 143). In 1775, Thomas Warton described poetry as a form especially suited to preserving and perpetuating cultural and national identity. For this reason, he supported the ballad revival in the late eighteenth century. In Warton's opinion, poetry was a form capable of:

. . . faithfully recording the features of the times, and of preserving the most picturesque and expressive representations of manners; and because the first monuments of composition in every nation are those of the poet, it possesses the additional advantage of transmitting to posterity genuine delineations of life in its simplest stage. (Warton 1775: iii, cited in Haywood 1983: 143-44)

Stories that live on for centuries are the ones which make the ordinary heroic. These stories of ordinary people are passed on in the form of ballads and poems, a rhyme scheme and a consistent pattern of verses that facilitate transmission by making a story easier to remember. Macpherson and the Rogers brothers turned to traditional poetry and song in their revival of the ballad; they turned to the oral roots of poetry and culture to help establish and reformulate the identity of countries whose identities were struggling to emerge.

## SCOTLAND

James Macpherson's obsession was history, and he ingeniously created a situation in which the past would be relevant and overbearing (Haywood 1983: 146). The 1707 Act of Union, the Act which united Scotland and England, was extraordinary because it resulted from discussion rather than military power. However, as Leith Davis has argued, through unification, the Scottish Parliament effectively wrote

itself and the country's independence out of existence, causing confusion regarding the nature of their national identity (Davis 1993: 133).

Within Scotland, unification intensified the tension between Highlanders and Lowlanders, who already felt they did not share a common origin. In reviving the ballads and poems of Ossian, Macpherson wanted to show Scots that what they knew as "British" actually had Scottish roots. According to Davis, "Macpherson [advocated] a future of union by theorizing a historical situation in which all races were one" (Davis 1993: 146).

Even though England was in a dominant political position, it lacked a sense of cultural identity, as its rulers in the late seventeenth century and in the early eighteenth century were either of Dutch or German extraction. In Davis's opinion,

As a result of the Glorious Revolution of 1688, England had gained a unique political character as a limited monarchy, but it also found itself saddled with a ruler who was undeniably un-English, indeed, who could not speak the mother-tongue . . . . The Englishman is a "Thing," an impure monster sewn together like Frankenstein's creature, rootless and speechless. Without an identifiable origin, the English lack a given "Name." (Davis 1993: 134-35)

By excavating and transforming the poems and ballads of Ossian, Macpherson provided a focus for Highland and Lowland nationalism in Scotland and traced a common identity for Highlanders, Lowlanders, and English alike (Davis 1993: 132). This gave both countries a renewed sense of cultural identity, simultaneously easing tension between the two countries, and between Highlanders and Lowlanders within Scotland.

Macpherson transcribed from oral recitation many ballads attributed to the bard "Ossian." As Howard Gaskill emphasizes, Macpherson knew that what he collected consisted mainly of Irish and Scottish Gaelic ballads celebrating the exploits of the 3rd-century hero, Fionn, and his warrior band, the Fian (Gaskill 1991: 4). Over the centuries, the Fian material expanded. According to Donald E. Meek,



the growing Fian material not only stimulated the emergence of new poetry but also drew other verse to itself (Meek 1991: 24). Moreover, it was not uncommon (ibid.: 26):

. . . for different types of poetry to be fused together in a new literary creation; the tradition lived by borrowing and refreshing older items. It was . . . entirely acceptable, indeed expected, that many of the resulting compositions would be ascribed to [Ossian].

It is likely that, to use Gaskill's words, Macpherson "fancied himself as a Gaelic poet, indeed that he saw himself as donning Ossian's mantle, the last of the bards" (Gaskill 1991: 13). In the "Dissertation" that introduces his 1765 edition of *Fingal*, Macpherson acknowledges that "the translator collected from tradition, and some manuscripts" (Gaskill 1991: 8). In other words, most of the poems and ballads were collected orally.

After learning the poems and ballads, Macpherson interpreted them. A bard is a poet-historian, a double role that Macpherson realized in bold, imaginative terms (Haywood 1983: 142). He took the stories of Ossian and, in his own words, sought to make them "agreeable to the English reader." Macpherson was very successful in achieving this goal. His Scottish readers and some of his English readers saw Ossian as their Homer, and viewed the collected poems as their own epic.

Macpherson angered many Irish readers of Ossian tales because they felt he had stolen traditional Irish works and claimed them for Scotland. This argument is understandable, but not well founded. It is impossible to discern which material originated in Ireland and which originated in Scotland, because it was a shared tradition, in both language and subject-matter (Meek 1991: 27). And Macpherson's point was that the roots of English cultural history were Gaelic (Scottish or Irish).

The ballads began to take shape in the 11th and 12th centuries, when Gaelic Scotland and Gaelic Ireland were not culturally separate: the bonds of religion, politics, and culture were strong (Meek 1991: 34). Obviously, Macpherson drew from material originating in both countries,

but adapted it to suit his own country's needs. In particular, Macpherson made Ossian Scottish by proclaiming the greater antiquity of the Scots over the Irish (Haywood 1983: 146).

In his own country, Macpherson faced hostility from many critics and historians who saw his achievement as deception. Oral tradition and its adaptability had not yet been accepted as legitimate and instrumental in a culture's sense of identity, and nationalist historians were very concerned with origins and transmission (Haywood 1983: 142). They regarded Macpherson as a forger. Macpherson's critics refused to see the remarkable and positive effect Ossian was having on Scotland and England, and instead continued to focus on the authenticity and accuracy of specific factual claims. Despite the harsh, misguided criticism the poems of Ossian received — and continue to receive — the ambiguity of authorship in Macpherson's works was crucial in enabling him to please his readers (Davis 1993: 137). His critics did not understand that ancient poetry is history, and that the inclusion of fiction is not a hindrance (Haywood 1983: 144). "Nations," argues historian Timothy Brennan, "are imaginary constructs that depend for their existence on an apparatus of cultural fictions in which imaginative literature plays a decisive role" (cited in Davis 1993: 132).

The works Macpherson used as the historical basis for his Ossian saga had already gone through countless adaptations of their own, which is precisely why they were still in existence when he found them. As stated above, for traditional poems and songs to survive, they *must* be adaptable. Macpherson revived the poems and ballads of Ossian, and the works he published were considered as significant as the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, earning a place in the canon of literature. Many people, scholars included, didn't understand the importance or meaning of oral tradition and the folk process, and they tried feverishly to prove that Macpherson had altered the poems, or even created them from scratch. They did not understand that this was exactly why the poems were having such an impact and why they were achieving such success in renewing the cultural identities of Scotland and England. Macpherson did not go beyond his sources, and preserved the intrinsic vitality of

Gaelic tradition, which he was trying to re-create as an organized whole (Meek 1991: 33-34). In Haywood's words (1983: 145):

Macpherson went one step further than writing a modern piece of historical fiction. He created a 'genuine' ancient epic poetry, not an imitation.

## CANADA

Like 18th-century Scotland, Canada has confronted the historical situation of its cultural identity being merged with another, dominant culture. Like Scotland, Canada's identity has been overshadowed by a bordering country, in this case the United States. Stan and Garnet Rogers were interested in both discovering and writing a unified body of traditional songs and poetry Canada could call its own, distinct especially from its North American neighbour, in order to prevent Canada from being assimilated into "American" identity.

When Stan and Garnet Rogers began producing music together, they turned for inspiration to Eastern Canada, especially Nova Scotia. Eastern coastal towns were rich in traditional ballads and poems that had been born of the same traditions Macpherson revived for Scotland and England. Stan and Garnet understood this, and Stan even wrote a song called "Giant" about the legend of Fingal, the heroic father of the bard Ossian. It is unclear how much Stan knew about Macpherson, or whether he tried to emulate him. In Garnet's words, "we only had a smattering of knowledge about [the Gaelic legends]" (Garnet Rogers 1993). All the same, the song gives solid proof that they knew where Newfoundland traditions had originated. "Giant" also provides evidence of Stan's understanding of oral tradition, as he describes the legends being passed on beneath an eerie moon (1982c: 23):

*In inclement weather the people are fey  
Three thousand year stories as the night slips away  
Remembering Fingal seems not far away  
The giant will rise with the moon.*



Stan and Garnet took these traditions and rewrote them in a Canadian context, giving Canada a fresh store of songs that were no longer dependent on Europe or the United States. Like Macpherson, the Rogers brothers engaged in excavating traditions, and their work had the same unifying effect, providing a renewed sense of cultural identity formulated by music and poetry.

In examining the music produced by the Rogers brothers, the importance of the folk process and the flexibility of oral traditions is very clear. In his 1788 "Ode on the Popular Superstitions of the Highlands of Scotland, Considered as the Subject of Poetry," William Collins alludes to the ahistorical, oral tradition of Scotland, where poems are "Ev'n yet preserved . . . Taught by the father to his list'ning son," and contrasts this process with the English practices of history and writing (Collins 1788, cited in Davis 1993: 134-35).

The Rogers brothers' acknowledgement of, and respect for, oral tradition are especially clear in Stan's poem, "Finch's Complaint." Stan does not print the words on the inside of his album with other songs of his own composition. Writing of "Finch's Complaint," Stan stresses the importance of passing down the story: "A recitation in the old tradition, [is] to be learned by ear, and not from the printed (or written) page" (Stan Rogers 1976).

The most important aspect of the folk process is the ability of a song or poem to be altered, and Stan's understanding of this is evident in his songbook, *Songs From Fogarty's Cove* (1982c: 4):

I have often been told that people are reluctant to play my songs, even though they might like to. The reason most often given is that they feel they should be able to make the songs sound the way I do them. To this I say: "What makes you so sure that my way is the best way? I only wrote the things. You can make them your own by doing them your way." I have at home several recordings of songs of mine by other artists whose versions I much prefer to my own, and I am always delighted to hear anyone sing one of my pieces. I intended all of these songs to be shared, else I never would have recorded them. Please feel free to play with the chords, tempo, rhythm, and melody as much as you like, and if you come up with anything good, let me

know immediately so that I can steal it from you in that time-honoured tradition known as “the folk process.”

Stan practised what he preached on many occasions, putting together his own rendition of a traditional song, or even the song of a contemporary artist. Stan did not hesitate to change the lyrics and melody of songs written by his contemporaries, and when he did so, he considered it testimony to the deep respect he felt for a particular songwriter: “I only steal from the best” (Stan Rogers 1982c: 38).

In his songbook, Stan speaks of his “long-standing admiration for [Scottish singer-songwriter] Archie Fisher and all his works” (Stan Rogers 1982c: 36). Regarding his adaptation of Archie Fisher’s “The Witch of the Westmorland” (1986), Stan writes, “Another gem from the pen of Archie Fisher. We rather changed it from his original version . . . he doesn’t mind” (Stan Rogers 1982c: 64). In his album *Between the Breaks . . . Live!* (1979), Stan explains:

We have edited three verses from the original, and modernized the language a little for the sake of having the story understood by the average North American listener at the first pass. I highly recommend Archie’s version to those of you who want all the verses.

A subtle but indispensable element of Stan’s account of “The Witch of the Westmorland” is his reference to *we* when he discusses changing it to suit his own liking. Stan is referring to his brother, Garnet, who was the quiet catalyst behind all Stan’s songs, both originals and adaptations, and his equal partner. Stan counted on all his songs to grow and evolve under the care of Garnet before he released them:

Most important . . . is my brother Garnet Rogers, who in a weak moment right after high school agreed to try playing with me for “a while.” It has been nearly ten years now, and no other person can claim to be so much of an influence on my music, or so indispensable to what I do. (Stan Rogers 1982c: 112)

Further proof of this strong relationship and Garnet’s importance appears in a letter written to me in November 1993 by Valerie, Stan and Garnet’s mother:



From my point of view, it is impossible to “talk” about Stan without including Garnet. Stan freely acknowledged Garnet’s importance constantly while he was alive. After Stan wrote the songs, he would play them for Garnet and say, “OK, kid, see what you can do with that.” Garnet is a multi-instrumentalist, and he did all of the arranging of the songs for the performances. (Valerie Rogers 1993)

As partners, Stan and Garnet worked together to document the history of Canada in the context of traditional Maritimes music. Eager for a sense of cultural identity, Canadians embraced the music of the Rogers brothers, finding in it a voice they could call their own. The Maritimes tradition revived by Stan and Garnet gave Canada a sense of common beginning, which is essential in renewing a culture’s identity.

Not many people have the luxury of seeing their music go through the folk process while they are still alive, as Stan and Garnet did in the 1970s. The process that Stan’s sea shanty, “Barrett’s Privateers,” underwent in just two years offers solid evidence that the music of Stan and Garnet Rogers will live on in tradition. According to Anne Lederman (1993: 161):

... the song followed a time-worn path of oral transmission, loss of known authorship, and alteration, bringing it truly into the realm of anonymous tradition, not just an imitation of such.

It was no accident that “Barrett’s Privateers” was mistaken for a traditional song. In a 1978 interview, Stan said:

I [wanted] to write stuff that [sounded] like what the people in the Maritimes play — when they’re not playing Country and Western . . . . I wanted to try to write the kind of songs that more closely reflected the Maritimes themselves than the stuff I’d heard before. There are fine Maritimes writers, but they tend to write in a very uptown style — they write pop songs about the Maritimes. I wanted to write some songs that would sound like anything from thirty to two hundred years old . . . . I’m very much interested in traditional music. (Greenhill 1993: 141)

In Pauline Greenhill’s opinion (1993: 143-44) :

Rogers was quite successful in his attempt to create an old-sounding piece. He took elements of traditional forms and crafted a design that

does not exactly match them structurally or stylistically, containing a number of unconventional features, but which nevertheless maintains sufficient echoes to leave the impression that his song is historically founded, not only historically motivated.

“Barrett’s Privateers” is historically founded. An authentic traditional work, the song is a perfect example of old traditional ballads breeding new ones. In “Barrett’s Privateers,” Stan, like Macpherson, consciously drew from tradition to create a uniquely Canadian nationalist ballad that should promote the oral tradition and last for centuries.

Stan’s version of the song is set in the period of the American Revolutionary War, a major conflict between Americans and the British Loyalists who eventually formed Canada (Greenhill 1993: 147). The American ship is referred to as “the Yankee,” which personifies the vessel in terms of its nationality, and reiterates the narrator’s identification of Americans in general as his adversaries, rather than one particular ship. In addition, Captain Barrett is a victim, “smashed like a bowl of eggs.” The antagonists are the Americans, not the Captain (ibid.: 147-48). Here is Stan’s version on *Fogarty’s Cove* (1976):

### **Barrett’s Privateers**

Oh the year was 1778.  
(How I wish I was in Sherbrooke now!)  
A letter of Marque came from the King  
To the scummiest vessel I’ve ever seen.

*God damn them all! I was told  
We’d cruise the seas for American gold.  
We’d fire no guns! Shed no tears!  
But I’m a broken man on a Halifax pier,  
The last of Barrett’s Privateers.*

O, Elcid Barrett cried the town  
(How I wish I was in Sherbrooke now!)  
For twenty brave men, all fishermen, who  
Would make for him the *Antelope’s* crew.

### *Chorus*

The *Antelope* sloop was a sickening sight.  
(How I wish I was in Sherbrooke now!)

She'd a list to the port and her sails in rags  
And the cook in the scuppers with the staggers and jags.

*Chorus*

On the King's birthday we put to sea.  
(How I wish I was in Sherbrooke now!)  
We were ninety-one days to Montego Bay,  
Pumping like madmen all the way.

*Chorus*

On the ninety-sixth day we sailed again,  
(How I wish I was in Sherbrooke now!)  
When a bloody great Yankee hove in sight,  
With our cracked four-pounders we made to fight.

*Chorus*

The Yankee lay low down with gold.  
(How I wish I was in Sherbrooke now!)

She was broad and fat and loose in stays  
But to catch her took the *Antelope* two whole days.

*Chorus*

Then at length we stood two cables away.  
(How I wish I was in Sherbrooke now!)  
Our cracked four-pounders made an awful din,  
But with one fat ball the Yank stove us in.

*Chorus*

The *Antelope* shook and pitched on her side.  
(How I wish I was in Sherbrooke now!)  
Barrett was smashed like a bowl of eggs  
And the main truck carried off both me legs.

*Chorus*

So here I lay in my twenty-third year.  
(How I wish I was in Sherbrooke now!)  
It's been six years since we sailed away  
And I just made Halifax yesterday.

*Chorus*



Scottish singer-songwriter Brian McNeill, leader of The Battlefield Band, was exposed to "Barrett's Privateers" in bits and pieces, both orally and in written form, only two years after it was written. Thinking the song traditional, McNeill filled in the gaps of the versions he had heard. The result is fascinating (Reid and McNeill, *Sidetracks*, 1980):

### **Baratt's Privateers**

In 1812 in the month of May,  
(How I wish I was in Sherbrooke now!)  
When a letter of marque came from the King  
To the scummiest vessel I've ever seen.  
(God Damn them all!).

*I was told we'd sail the seas for American gold  
We'd fire no guns! Shed no tears!  
I'm a broken man on a Halifax pier,  
The last of Baratt's Privateers.*

"Ah, well," says Baratt through the town,  
(How I wish I was in Sherbrooke now!)  
"With twenty good men, all fishermen, who  
Would make for me the *Antelope's* crew."  
(God Damn them all!)

#### *Chorus*

On the King's birthday we put to sea,  
(How I wish I was in Sherbrooke now!)  
Went ninety-one days to Montego Bay,  
Pumpin' like madmen all the way.  
(God damn them all!)

#### *Chorus*

The *Antelope* sloop was a sickening sight,  
(How I wish I was in Sherbrooke now!)  
With a list to the port and her sails in rags,  
And the cook in the skippers had the staggers and the jags.  
(God Damn them all!)

#### *Chorus*

Baratt he worked us to the bone.  
(How I wish I was in Sherbrooke now!)  
We'd maggoty meat and weevily bread  
And watery rum. We'd be better off dead.  
(God damn them all!)

*Chorus*

On Christmas Eve in the afternoon  
(I wish I was in Sherbrooke now!)  
An American sloop came into view  
And Baratt cries to her "Heave to"  
(God damn them all!)

They came alongside to get on board,  
(How I wish I was in Sherbrooke now!)  
And the Yankee ship opened up broadside,  
And I lost one leg and most of my hide.  
(God damn them all!)

When they brought me home from sea,  
(How I wish I was in Sherbrooke now!)  
"No work for one-legged Jack," they'd say,  
And I curse Baratt to my dying day.  
(God damn them all!)

*Chorus*

God damn them all!

McNeill had never heard Stan's song in its entirety, and he wrote a logical conclusion to what he *thought* the song was about: the War of 1812. In doing so, he drastically changed the song's framework.

McNeill's song is clearly British, and the conflict lies between economic classes rather than nationalities. McNeill transforms Stan Rogers's nationalist parable to a story of exploitation for personal gain (Greenhill 1993: 149). The folk process and its impact on this contemporary song make clear the importance of a song's adaptability. McNeill's version is far more relevant to his own culture, and for that reason will live across the Atlantic. Interestingly, McNeill says he never would have changed the song had he known it was a contemporary piece.

Of traditional songs, he says: “We change them any way we feel like it” (ibid.: 153). But for contemporary songs, McNeill states (ibid.: 154):

Mostly if we’re going to pick a modern songwriter and do a song from them, we would stick very faithfully to the words . . . . If I’d known that Stan Rogers had written that song on the day when I got it, I would have made sure that I got the right version before I did it . . . . I wouldn’t be happy with someone changing one of mine, because at that point, let’s face it, there is a financial element in it, and we’re professional performers, and if somebody changes mine then they can challenge the copyright on it, who gets paid for it. And I certainly wouldn’t be happy with that.

Stan Rogers had a completely different perspective on the matter, and saw people changing his songs as an indication that those songs would live on long after he was gone. Stan’s mother, Valerie, explains (1993):

Ian Robb . . . has written a parody of “Barrett’s Privateers” titled, “Garnet’s Home Brewed Beer.” . . . . Stan’s songs started going through the folk process while he was still alive. He really loved that!

Folk music often makes the ordinary person heroic, and for this reason inspires ordinary people. Stan and Garnet understood this and frequently made the ordinary heroic in their music. Stan’s song “The Mary Ellen Carter” is about a sailor who is determined to raise a sunken ship that had served himself and his friends for twenty years, and had “saved [their] lives so many times, living through the gale,” As Stan says in his notes for the song on the recording *Between the Breaks* (1979):

I really like the guy in this song. He’s every person who ever had experts tell him that what he wanted to do was impossible, then did it anyway. May you always be like the Mary Ellen Carter.

The power of inspiration in this song is proven in the experience of Robert Cusick. Cusick was the chief mate of the “Marine Electric,” a ship that went down off the coast of Boston on February 12, 1983 (McNeil 1993: F1). He was alone in thirty-nine degree Atlantic waters for two hours. Cusick recounts that remembering the song kept him alive (Lang 1993):



As the night wore on and the seas kept smashin' down on top of me, and I finally got to feelin' that I just couldn't make it anymore . . . all of the sudden the words came into my mind:

*Rise again, rise again,  
That her name not be lost to the knowledge of men.  
No matter what you've lost, be it a home, a love, a friend,  
Like the "Mary Ellen Carter," rise again.*

And I just kept sayin' that over and over, and when the water cleared away I shouted it out and sang it out. Then another sea'd come down on top of me. And I firmly believe that if it wasn't for that song . . . I just was in the position where I couldn't have come through . . . And that song made the difference of me livin' through that night. There isn't any question in my mind whatsoever about it.

Like Macpherson, Stan and Garnet Rogers were nationalists. The best testimony to this is "Northwest Passage," a song written by Stan which many, including prominent writers (e.g., Salutin 1993), have said should be the new Canadian national anthem. The song describes the attempts of explorers to find a passage through northern Canada to the West Coast. It is yet another metaphor for the ordinary person achieving the heroic (Stan Rogers 1980):

### **Northwest Passage**

*Ah, for just one time, I would take the Northwest Passage  
To find the hand of Franklin reaching for the Beaufort Sea,  
Tracing one warm line through a land so wide and savage,  
And make a Northwest Passage to the sea.*

Westward from the Davis Strait, 'tis there 'twas said to lie,  
The sea route to the Orient for which so many died,  
Seeking gold and glory, leaving weathered broken bones  
And a long-forgotten, lonely cairn of stones.

#### *Chorus*

Three centuries thereafter, I take passage over land  
In the footsteps of brave Kelso, where his "sea of flowers" began,

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Watching cities rise before me, then behind me sink again,  
This tardiest explorer, driving hard across the plain.

*Chorus*

And through the night, behind the wheel, the mileage clicking West,  
I think upon Mackenzie, David Thompson, and the rest,  
Who cracked the mountain ramparts and did show a path for me  
To race the roaring Fraser to the sea.

*Chorus*

How then am I so different from the first men through this way?  
Like them I left a settled life, I threw it all away  
To seek a Northwest Passage at the call of many men,  
To find there but the road back home again.

*Chorus*

This song was the title track to Stan and Garnet's fourth album together, the album that convinced Stan of the true power of the ballad and its ability to create a sense of national identity for a country. Stan wrote (Stan Rogers 1982c: 85):

We started touring even farther afield, particularly in Western Canada, and these new scenes had a profound effect on my writing and indeed on my whole attitude toward what I do for a living. I began to discover that I can empathize with, say, prairie grain farmers as much as Nova Scotia fisherman, although I have very little direct experience with either occupation . . . .

My next project is under way at this writing, a collection of new songs about the Great Lakes Region, and when I've finished this, I'll tackle the Far North and then improve my lame high school French to the point where I can write an album of songs in both English and French about Quebec. After that I'll go back to Nova Scotia and start all over again.

In June 1983, Stan died in a tragic plane fire. His long-term project of building with Garnet an arsenal of poetic songs that documented all of Canada was abruptly cut short — but not before Stan and Garnet had recorded six albums together, and not before they had

inspired hundreds of Canadians and other Canadian songwriters to join them in their revival of Canadian cultural identity. Three are “theme” albums, each focusing on a separate part of Canada. The first, *Fogarty’s Cove*, concentrates on Eastern provinces; the second, *Northwest Passage*, on Western Canada; the third, *From Fresh Water* (1982, released posthumously), on the Great Lakes Region.

After Stan’s untimely death, Garnet, despite tremendous grief, decided to continue his career in music. Garnet took the stage only one week after Stan died, and quickly gained a reputation as “Canada’s greatest songfinder”(Moss 1986).

Garnet’s response was tremendously courageous. He had just lost his brother, his best friend, and his partner. In addition, he had never sung alone on stage. His role in their partnership was largely behind the scenes. He had difficult and painful obstacles early in his solo career, including being introduced on stage as Stan Rogers. Since their music had been mainly associated with Stan, Garnet had to re-establish himself. Many Stan Rogers fans had no idea of the essential role Garnet played in Stan’s music (Campbell 1993):

People come up to me and say, “I’ll never forget your brother and the wonderful show he did in such-and-such a place.” They’ll go on at such length how that concert changed their lives. Then they’ll ask, “Did you ever play together?”

Stan’s reputation as a great songwriter of national importance made Garnet very wary of releasing any self-penned songs. In Garnet’s words, “It’s been difficult to write as myself, knowing that that would bear a resemblance to Stan’s writing” (Alarik 1993), continuing with the observation:

He and I read the same books growing up, had a lot of the same musical interests. We both have something of an archaic vocabulary . . . . Who has a better right to sound like him than I do? (*Boston Globe*)



Over the years, Garnet has become more comfortable with this inevitable and logical reality, and his last two albums, *Small Victories* (1990) and *At a High Window* (1992) include many of his own songs.

Just as "Barrett's Privateers" shows that songs which live on give birth indirectly to new songs that should also stand the test of time, so too does the process Garnet Rogers has undergone. Garnet started as an interpreter of songs, doing his part to move them forward through the folk process. This led to his creation of entirely new songs. Garnet sees this process as a chain reaction (Donnelly 1992):

I started out interpreting other people's material, choosing material that corresponded with something that had happened to me. I got to the point where I eliminated the middle man and ended up telling the story in my own song.

Garnet's highly acclaimed original songs were worth the wait, and he remained faithful to the tradition of making the ordinary heroic. The title track of his album, *Small Victories* (1990), demonstrates the heroism of a thoroughbred, who is past her racing prime, and of the narrator, who saves her from slaughter. The story ends with the most universal, miraculous, and heroic act of all: new birth.

### **Small Victories**

"You've no business buying a mare like that, but buy her if you must."  
He bit the end off his cigar and spat it in the dust.  
"She's old and lame and barren, too. She's not worth feed and hay.  
But I'll give you this"—he blew smoke at me—"she was something in her day.

"I recall her well ten years ago; she was a winner in her prime.  
She was fast and lean and willing, but they raced her past her time.  
And though she had the heart, her legs were gone, and it wasn't hard to see,  
They kept her at it in the hopes of just one more small victory.

"She was shunted 'round from track to track, from Kentucky up to Maine.  
They'd run her in cheap 'claimers,' all doped up to mask her pain.  
And if it's my advice you want, I'd say, the poor thing's had her day.  
You'd be throwing good cash after bad. It's best you turn away."

Well they led her 'round the auction shed, and the bidding started low.  
"She'll for dog food," someone said, "the market's been that slow."

But she raised her head and pricked her ears, and before the hammer fell,  
She was mine. My friend turned round to me: "You're softheaded, I can tell."

"But she's been shoved from pillar to post," said I, "and always done her best.  
They used her up, they wrung her dry; you'd think she'd earned a rest.  
So if she does naught but end her days beneath some shady tree,  
I'll have saved her from the knacker's yard, and that's enough for me."

Well, that was near two years ago, and she's filled out some since then.  
The more so since she's been in foal, she eats enough for ten.  
And this morn as I crept to the barn, around 'bout half past three,  
There stood nursing on still trembling legs, one more small victory.

The influence and support of Stan and Garnet's mother, Valerie, has been indispensable to their success. Her immediate family and relatives are from Canso, Nova Scotia, and the Rogers brothers visited the east coast of Canada regularly when they were growing up. Stan writes in the introduction to his debut album, *Fogarty's Cove* (1976):

Mama's brothers, most of them, anyway, played or sang, or both, and I guess it naturally followed that one of my earliest memories would be of my uncles sitting around my grandparents' kitchen, "half-shot," playing guitars (some of them home built) and singing old tear jerkers . . . . It was one of these uncles, Lee Bushell, who made me my first guitar when I was five, out of Ontario Birch, welding rods, and an old toothbrush . . . I guess you might say that my roots are pretty firmly set in that part of the world. So much so, I suppose, that when Aunt June (by now Ms. Sam Jarvis) suggested I start writing about the place, I couldn't resist, and "Fogarty's Cove" came along.

In addition to introducing her sons to Maritime traditions, culture, and songs:

Valerie invested her life savings to bankroll Stan's recording career and completely devoted herself to building Stan's independent label, Fogarty's Cove Music, into a successful company. It was a rare concert when he didn't go out of his way to credit Valerie for much of the behind-the-scenes-work that went into his success. (Regenstrief: 75)

The traditional album Stan and Garnet recorded together, *For the Family* (Stan Rogers 1982), gives further testimony to the impact

Valerie's family had on her sons and to Garnet's importance. Three songs on the album are written by Stan and Garnet's uncle, Lee Bushell, and one is a poem by their grandfather, Sidney Bushell, which Stan set to the music of another traditional song: "Save Your Money When You're Young." The album's closing song, "Three Fishers," marks Garnet's first original music to be recorded.

## CONCLUSION

With the help of their mother, the Rogers brothers sparked an ongoing process which will leave a permanent mark on history. They understood the importance of songs and poems and the concept of oral tradition. Like Macpherson before them, Stan and Garnet on their own revived Canada's sense of cultural identity. Their impact has been profound, and many respected musicians throughout North America cite Stan as their major inspiration.

John Gorka, whom *Rolling Stone* magazine calls "the pre-eminent male singer/songwriter of what has been dubbed the New Folk Movement" (Wing 1991: 71), declares Stan his "musical hero" (Gorka 1994) and wrote a song about Stan and Garnet titled "That's How Legends Are Made" (Gorka 1990). He also performs adaptations of two of Stan's songs, "Lock-Keeper" (*From Fresh Water*) and "Lies" (*Northwest Passage*). Peter Yarrow, of Peter Paul and Mary, says "Stan Rogers was an extraordinary talent, the likes of which we have not seen since Bob Dylan" (Gudgeon 1994: book cover). Sylvia Tyson, of Ian and Sylvia, writes, "He changed the way all of us—not just folk music fans—appreciate traditional music, and how we see and understand our country" (Gudgeon 1994: 13). Highly acclaimed songwriter Tom Paxton says of Stan, "He was to Canada what Woody Guthrie was to the United States" (Gudgeon 1994: book cover). Together the Rogers brothers gave Canada a foundation of music it could call its own. Garnet continues to build on that foundation, along with the countless others he and Stan have inspired over the years.



## NOTE

1. James Macpherson published the poems of Ossian in three installments: *Fragments*, in 1760; *Fingal*, in 1762; and *Temora*, in 1763. The nature of their origin caused heated debate in Ireland, Scotland, and England. Many, not understanding the nature of "oral tradition," were concerned that Macpherson had altered or even written from scratch the poems and ballads he published.

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**Résumé:** *Zak Morgan nous expose divers moyens par lesquels les processus de la tradition orale parviennent à façonner l'identité nationale culturelle. M. Morgan compare de récentes interprétations, par l'Écossais James Macpherson, de publications "Ossiennes" du 18<sup>e</sup> siècle qui prêtent à controverse, avec des chansons que le regretté Stan Rogers ancrerait délibérément dans l'histoire du Canada, et surtout en Nouvelle-Écosse, et dont le point de vue persiste dans le travail récent de Garnet Rogers, frère et proche collaborateur de Stan. M. Morgan, qui a rassemblé des sources et commentaires tels que critiques littéraires, études sur l'historiographie et le folklore, publiereportages et autres textes publicitaires, et allant de la littérature pré-romantique aux enregistremens sonores et vidéo contemporains, fait ici un exposé sur la valeur idéologique des pratiques orales que la plupart des historiens et philologues ont jugé avec scepticisme pendant plus de deux siècles.*