

## WHAT WE SANG DOWN ON THE FARM: A FORGOTTEN MANUSCRIPT ON WESTERN CANADIAN SINGING TRADITIONS

DAVID A.E. SPALDING

In comparison with the rich musical heritage of central and eastern Canada, relatively little has been published on the English language folksong of western Canada.<sup>1</sup> There is only one substantial published collection, based on material from the P.J. Thomas collection of 499 songs and other items, collected in British Columbia.<sup>2</sup> Although some songs have been collected from Alberta, there is a relatively small corpus available for study.<sup>3</sup> Rogers<sup>4</sup> discusses the resources available to him in 1978, and argues that there is an untapped folk music tradition in Alberta which has not been collected. He gives particular attention to traditional cowboy songs and their commercial offshoots, and demonstrates the former existence of a small body of traditional folksong associated with ranching. By contrast, Hendrickson<sup>5</sup> suggests that Alberta has not developed a "strong, viable Anglo folk culture," and offers possible reasons for this.

Other Alberta studies give scant evidence of a strong tradition of folk song. Rogers and Rogers (1980) discuss prairie songs in the "Dirty Thirties," but provide little additional material with an Alberta origin.<sup>6</sup> A study from published sources of Edmonton music in the 1880s, when a substantial body of immigrants had arrived, also produced little definite information about traditional song material, though instrumental traditions were documented.<sup>7</sup>

Repertoire studies of individual singers are an important part of modern folklore, and a number have been made of such eastern Canadian singers as Larry Gorman<sup>8</sup> and O.J. Abbott.<sup>9</sup> No full repertoire analyses have been made of any western singer, but the repertoires of two singers who lived in Alberta have been documented. One, Angelo Dornan, well known as a maritime singer, actually lived most of his life in Alberta. The other, who apparently also came from the east to live in western Canada, is the anonymous source of the document published here.

Helen Creighton collected Angelo Dornan's recorded repertoire of 135 songs in New Brunswick. They play such a large part in her *Folksongs from Southern New Brunswick*<sup>10</sup> that she says the book "might have been called "the Dornan Book of Songs.""<sup>11</sup> Dornan was of Irish extraction, born in New Brunswick, but lived most of his working life in Alberta. After he retired in his sixties back to his maritime birthplace, his repertoire was collected in the 1950s. Creighton comments that his songs were unused in Alberta, where "... he found no exchange of the old-time songs. Only now and then when he was "teaming his horses" or was lost in silent thought did they come to his mind, but for the most part they lay dormant for 45 years."<sup>12</sup>

So inactive was his repertoire that, during recording, Dornan's wife "felt a growing pride in the range and scope of her husband's songs; for the strange fact is, that she had never heard him sing even one folksong."<sup>13</sup>

It is ironic that Hendrickson refers to Dornan's repertoire as evidence of the richness of Anglo cultures in eastern Canada in contrast to the Alberta situation. If Dornan's songs had been collected during his Alberta years, there can be no doubt that the corpus would be regarded as evidence of a strong song tradition in Alberta.<sup>14</sup>

Dornan's material has fortunately been collected and published, even if it has been unnoticed in the context of Alberta folk-song studies. The second individual repertoire is documented in an account preserved for some forty years in the archives of the Alberta Folklore and Local History Project, but not previously published. Rogers discusses material in the Glenbow-Alberta Institute collections in Calgary,<sup>15</sup> but he does not mention this Edmonton collection, so it is desirable to explain its background.

The Alberta Folklore and Local History Project ran from 1943 to 1945 at the University of Alberta. Its first director was Dr. Robert E. Gard, an American writer born in Kansas in 1910. Dr. Gard took a B.A. at the University of Kansas in 1934 and an M.A. at Cornell in 1938, and in 1942 came to teach playwriting to the summer session at the Banff School of Fine Arts. Gard made a proposal to the Rockefeller Foundation for a folklore study in Alberta, and in 1943 a one-year grant of \$5000 was made to the University of Alberta and Banff School. Following the 1943 summer session, Gard became the Director of the project, which was later extended for a further two years. It aimed at collecting oral history and folklore, and encouraging its use by writers of the area.

Gard solicited input from the public through the press, radio, and speaking engagements, and many manuscripts were submitted. A periodical, the *Alberta Folklore Quarterly*,<sup>16</sup> was published from 1943 to 1945, presenting much of the material that was collected. Many of the stories are incorporated in Gard's book of Alberta folktales and local history, *Johnny Chinook*,<sup>17</sup> published in 1945. CBC radio programs and stage plays also resulted.

Following his period in Alberta, Dr. Gard returned to Wisconsin, where he has had a distinguished career as a teacher and dramatist, and now lives in retirement. Following his departure in 1945 the project was taken over for a short time by another writer, Phillip H. Godsell, who died in Calgary in 1961. Despite hopes that it would lead to an Alberta Folklore Society, the project died after 1945, when there was no further funding.<sup>18</sup>

Materials gathered by Gard and Godsell are now stored in the collections of the Alberta Folklore and Local History Project in the University of Alberta Library. Although collected primarily in a non-scholarly way, and as a writer's resource, the collection includes much interesting traditional material, mostly in the field of tall tales. Examination of the archive has revealed some material on folk music. Of greatest interest is the document presented here, entitled *What We Sang Down on the Farm*.

The document is a 21-page typescript of about 6,000 words, anonymous and undated. The author describes and lists some 81 songs, apparently from his own repertoire and those of singers known to him. Some 70 titles are mentioned by name, and many are briefly quoted. The described repertoire is a mixture of traditional material (about a quarter) from Britain and eastern Canada, mixed with "national" melodies and patriotic songs, and popular songs of the nineteenth century.

From internal evidence the author was of Irish origin, lived in eastern Canada and travelled in the eastern States, and was apparently resident in western Canada from the 1880s. Since he was presumably still resident in Alberta at the time of the Alberta Folklore Project (at the earliest in 1943), he seems to have spent some sixty years in Alberta. His repertoire was therefore influenced by his childhood in Ontario or the Maritimes, as well as by songs sung by his friends and neighbours in Alberta. The document may have been anonymous when submitted, and no reference to it has been located in the project files, which include little correspondence. Dr. Gard, after many years, does not remember who the author was.<sup>19</sup> Critical analysis of the document in relation to the complete content of the archive could provide a clue to its origin, but in the absence of such intensive study or other evidence it must be assumed the author is unlikely to be traceable. This is unfortunate, as the document adds interesting evidence to the scanty story of folksong in Alberta.

In the absence of certain information about the source, it is difficult to be certain how far "What We Sang" can be trusted as evidence of an Alberta folksong tradition. The traditional material it refers to is all from eastern Canada, or dates even further back to the British roots of so many of Canada's maritime settlers. The document was presented to the Alberta Folklore Project, and was thus collected within the context of a search for Alberta material. The internal evidence suggests that the author lived in Alberta for most of his adult life, and thus implies that he is reporting on a local singing tradition, even if he himself did not sing all the songs. Yet the more clearly documented case of Angelo Dornan shows that it is at least possible for a large repertoire to remain totally dormant for many years, and it is impossible to be sure how far the manuscript refers back to eastern Canada.

It is gradually becoming possible to sketch in a picture of Alberta Anglo-folksong traditions. It is clear that a limited number of long-established traditional songs were brought to Alberta from eastern Canada in the nineteenth century. They were carried by such isolated singers as Dornan and the anonymous author of "What We Sang," but there is little evidence that many of these songs were regularly sung or played any significant part in community life, even as early as the 1880s. At the same time, American immigrants into the ranching community of southern Alberta brought a cowboy song tradition along with the cows, and this survived into the beginning of commercial music on the radio. A limited home-grown tradition (largely based on parodies) developed in other areas of agricultural life up to the nineteen-thirties. Compared with the splendid tall-tale tradition and the still-thriving genre of folk poetry, Alberta folksong did not generally capture popular interest, and there were probably few widely sung folk songs which have not been recorded.

Irrespective of its significance for Alberta folksong, "What We Sang" is a fascinating document. It provides an interesting picture of the place early folksong traditions held in relation to other songs (a picture often distorted for other singers by collectors seeking only Child ballads and other ancient material). It also gives some insights into the social use of songs, and the gradual impact on folksong traditions of commercial music.<sup>20</sup>

*Brandywine Enterprises,  
Edmonton, Alberta*

## NOTES

1. Edith Fowke and Carole Carpenter, *A Bibliography of Canadian Folklore in English* (Toronto, Univ. of Toronto Press, 1981) and shorter reference lists by the Canadian Folk Music Society provide the most convenient listing of sources.
2. Phil Thomas, *Songs of the Pacific Northwest* (Vancouver: Hancock, 1979). Thomas is now working on a collection of songs from the prairies.
3. Rogers and Spalding have both prepared unpublished lists of Alberta folk and near folk songs, and an unpublished University of Calgary thesis also lists Alberta material.
4. T. B. Rogers, "Is there an Alberta Folk Music?" *Canadian Folk Music Journal*, 6 (1978), 23-29.
5. Cheryl J. Hendrickson, "English Language Folk Music in Alberta." *Canadian Folk Music Journal*, 10 (1982), 34-39.
6. Tim Rogers and Patricia Rogers, "The Folksong Tradition of the 1930s." *The Dirty Thirties in Prairie Canada* (Vancouver: Tantalus Research, 1973), pp. 141-61.
7. Spalding, D. A. E. "Music in Edmonton in the 1880s". A Preliminary Report for Fort Edmonton, p. 86, 1983. Unpublished.
8. Edward D. Ives, *Larry Gorman, The Man Who Made the Songs* (Urbana: Indiana Univ. Press, 1964)
9. Edith Fowke, *Traditional Singers and Songs from Ontario* (Don Mills: Burns & MacEachern, 1965).
10. Helen Creighton, *Folksongs from Southern New Brunswick* (Ottawa: National Museum of Man, 1971).
11. Creighton, p. 1.
12. Ibid.
13. Ibid.
14. Hendrickson, p. 35.
15. Rogers, p. 23.
16. *The Alberta Folklore Quarterly* is to be found only in a few libraries, such as the Historical Resources Library in the provincial Archives of Alberta.
17. Gard, Robert E. *Johnny Chinook. Tall Tales and True from the Canadian West* (Toronto: Longmans, Green, 1945).
18. Includes information about the Alberta Folklore and Local History Project. Gard, Robert E. "Alberta Folklore and Local History Project," *Journal of American Folklore*, (1946) 480-1. David Leighton and Peggy Leighton, *Artists, Builders and Dreamers. 50 years at the Banff School* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart. 1982). Some of this material was used in workshops the author gave at the Canadian Folk Music Society conference in Edmonton in 1983, and for TALES (The Alberta League Encouraging Storytelling in 1984).
19. Unpublished correspondence with Dr. Gard, 1984, in which Dr. Gard attempted to recall his work so many years ago.
20. The original of *What We Sang Down On The Farm* is in the Alberta Folklore Collection, in the Bruce Peel Special Collections Room of the University of Alberta Library. Librarian John Charles has kindly given permission to print the document.

Resumé: *David A. E. Spalding traite de l'histoire de la chanson traditionnelle dans les prairies et nous fait part de la découverte aux archives albertaines d'un fort intéressant manuscrit. Il s'agit du premier témoignage que nous ayons des chansons qui étaient chantées en Alberta vers la fin du XIXe siècle.*