TOWARDS A COLLECTION OF
COAL-MINING SONGS IN CANADA

JOHN C. O’DONNELL

My interest in songs of Canada’s coal mining industry began in 1966 when I was asked to conduct the newly formed Cape Breton coal-miners’ choir now known as The Men of the Deeps. Although I began to compile my collection at that time, my search for Canadian coal-mining songs was interrupted for a few years while I pursued further graduate studies. My journey towards a collection of coal-mining songs in Canada began in earnest around 1973.

The following list is selective and does not pretend to include all songs relating to the coal-mining industry in Canada. It contains no songs in French or Gaelic, for example, although I know of several coal-mining songs in both languages and plan to expand that aspect of my collection in a future publication. Because I have excluded French mining songs from this list, I have not included any by le chanteur-minuer du Québec, Réal Benoit, albeit any serious publication of coal-mining songs in Canada undoubtedly will include some of his compositions.

I have deliberately chosen to exclude many fine songs which relate specifically to other forms of mining (e.g., gold, hard rock, or cobalt), while I have included a number which refer only casually to coal mining or coal miners. The list also includes some songs which can be identified with more than one type of mining.

With the exception of the final category, all songs in the collection were composed by or contributed by Canadian song writers, singers, or collectors.

The Sources

I am indebted to established folksong collectors like Helen Creighton and Neil Rosenberg, and to singer/collectors like Ronnie MacEachern for their contributions to this collection.

A few of the songs have been chosen from published collections. When I began my search for coal-mining songs (in an effort to obtain singing material for The Men of the Deeps), I was delighted to discover some Canadian songs in two of George Korson’s famous books. Over the years I have arranged several songs for The Men of the Deeps from other published sources; all songs which have become a part of the choir’s repertoire have been included.

Initially, I was aided in my search by the Miners’ Folk Society of Cape Breton which organized a song-finding contest in conjunction with the erection of the original Glace Bay Miners’ Museum. Although only seven of the songs were awarded prizes, many of the non-winning entries provided additional material for my collection. Dr. Helen Creighton was one of the judges in that contest; she has
provided me with numerous songs, not all of which appear in her books, and her constant advice has led me to discover other primary and secondary sources.

Radio station CJCB in Sydney conducted its own song contests in the 1950s and 1960s and, although the quality of many of these songs is not as good as those resulting from the Miners’ Folk Society contest, some have found their way into my collection.

As a result of concertizing with The Men of the Deeps throughout many parts of Canada, I have acquired a variety of songs from the general public. Tapes or written manuscripts are often handed to me or to members of the group. Occasionally, a member of the choir will compose a song. Songs in the following list which name The Men of the Deeps as their source came in this way.

The Categories

In any classification of this nature the choice of categories is arbitrary. Some songs in the list that follows meet the criteria of more than one category. For example, most songs about mine disasters or tragedies could also be classified as HISTORICAL, as can some of those which I have catalogued under the heading UNIONS, UNION LEADERS, AND STRIKE SONGS. Songs have been listed in categories which best describe their ultimate message.

The largest of the categories, MINE TRAGEDIES AND RESCUE OPERATIONS, is dominated by accounts of the three major disasters which occurred at Springhill, N.S., in 1891, 1956, and 1958 respectively. Perhaps because of the very extensive media coverage, the tragedies of the 1950s generated more songs than any other mine disaster in Canadian history. On the other hand, the most tragic disaster in Cape Breton, the New Waterford explosion of 1917 which killed 65 miners, has to date contributed only two songs. “New Waterford’s Fatal Day,” which appears here in two separate versions, gives a detailed account of the happenings on that July day. A second song about this event, “The Omen,” is listed under the category SUPERNATURAL PHENOMENA.

The most recent mine tragedy in Nova Scotia happened in No. 26 Colliery, Glace Bay, in 1979. Again, because of extensive media coverage the tragic event has inspired several songs. I have included three which recall that event: “The Miner’s Song (Ten Men Died), “No. 26 Mine Disaster,” and “The 24th in 26.”

With the exception of “The Boys of the Rescue Crew,” which pays tribute to those who risk their lives to save others, all the remaining songs in this category speak in general terms about the ever-present danger of tragedy in the mine, or they are personal recollections of accidents which claimed one or two lives.

Miners have a special sense of humour, and I’m always impressed at their ability to make light of some of the most serious of situations. In addition to the expected profusion of songs related to alcohol (Allister MacGillivray’s “Cape Breton Silver,” five versions
of the well-known “Government Store,” three separate accounts of “Percy Morris,” as well as “I Went to Norman’s” and “When I First Went to Caledonia” — two unique versions of one song), the category HUMOROUS SONGS lists several entries that grew out of some of the hardest times Cape Breton has ever known: the devastating strikes of the 1920s. The three songs on the “bootleg” coal theme and Nel Campbell’s “Plain Ol’ Miner Boy” are but a few examples.

Songs of protest have long been associated with miners and are undoubtedly the most ebullient of all those inspired by the mining industry. A few of the most rousing are included under UNIONS, UNION LEADERS, AND STRIKE SONGS, along with less militant songs which honour union heroes like J.B. McLachlan. The song “Remember the Miner” is a tribute to William Davis, the Cape Breton miner who was gunned down by government troops during the 1925 strike.

The categories NON-UNION MINERS and THE COMPANY STORE could very well be considered sub-headings of UNIONS, UNION LEADERS, AND STRIKE SONGS. “The Honest Working Man,” once described as the national anthem of Cape Breton, is hardly known today. “Kelly’s Cove” and “The Yahie Miners,” like “The Honest Working Man,” are songs which protest the importation of seasonal labour. “The Pluck Me Store” is a nostalgic look at the company stores in Cape Breton which, in frustration, were burned down during the strikes of the 1920s.

If miners are known for their humour and their readiness to jump on the “protest wagon,” they are also known for their faith; and although the category SACRED SONGS lists only six entries, the miner’s belief in a better life after death is evident in songs throughout the list.

Although the categories SUPERNATURAL PHENOMENA and CHILD LABOUR contain few entries at this point, I am confident that my search will eventually reveal more songs about these intriguing subjects.

The category HISTORICAL SONGS also contains relatively few entries; however, as previously pointed out, other categories also contain songs of historical interest.

Songs which are classified under MINERS AT WORK all offer some description of work underground or give some insight into the daily routine of a miner’s life.

The final heading, GENERAL AND MISCELLANEOUS SONGS, is a catch-all category. Many of these songs may be reclassified at a later date. Among others, this section contains songs lamenting hard times or the miner’s lot in life (“Come sit Down Here Beside Me, John,” “The Miner’s Lament,” “Hard-Working Miner Man”), personal histories (“George Alfred Beckett,” “I Work In The Pit”) and songs in praise of the miner (“The Man With A Torch In His Cap”).

—32—
Nearly all the songs have tunes associated with them. About 10 percent of these are what might be classified as folk parody while upwards of 40 percent are sung to traditional tunes. Approximately 42 percent of the tunes have been composed by contemporary songwriters, most of whom are from the island of Cape Breton. Composers such as Allister MacGillivray, Charlie MacKinnon, and Lillian Crewe Walsh have been steeped in Cape Breton tradition from their earliest years. I believe that much of their music and poetry reflects the spirit of Cape Breton's mining communities in the same way that oral tradition molds the spirit of a people. For this reason, I am proud to include their works in this collection.

I have tried to create a general impression of my collection of coal mining songs in Canada thus far. It is my hope to publish many of the following songs in a book which will offer informative notes on all entries. The list is necessarily heavily weighted with Cape Breton songs. I welcome suggestions and new entries which will make it more representative of Canada as a whole.

Abbreviations used in the following List of Songs:


C.C.B. Walsh, Lillian Crewe. *Calling Cape Breton*. (n.p.).


M.F.S. Miners' Folk Society Centennial Year Song Contest


Rr. L.P. Recording, *Come All You Coal Miners*. Sommerville, MA: Rounder Record No.4005.


U.M.W.J. *United Mine Workers Journal*. 

---33---
**LIST OF SONGS**

*An asterisk (*) indicates that the song is included in the repertoire of The Men of the Deeps*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Composer (c)</th>
<th>Collector (cl)</th>
<th>Singer/Contributor (s/c)</th>
<th>Source</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>HISTORICAL SONGS</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Caledonia</td>
<td>F. Crewe &amp; L.C. Walsh (c)</td>
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<td>M.F.S.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cape Breton Coal</td>
<td>Marie MacMillan (c)</td>
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<td>Men of the Deeps</td>
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<tr>
<td>*Cape Breton Coal Miners, The</td>
<td>Ray Holland (c)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Men of the Deeps</td>
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<tr>
<td>*Coal By The Sea, The</td>
<td>Gerard MacNeil (c)</td>
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<td>Men of the Deeps</td>
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<tr>
<td>*Coal Is King Again</td>
<td>Ray Holland (c)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Men of the Deeps</td>
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<tr>
<td>End of An Industry, The</td>
<td>Anne Whyte (cl)</td>
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<td>Men of the Deeps</td>
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<tr>
<td>Farewell to Caledonia</td>
<td>Hattie Bateman (c)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>M.F.S.</td>
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<tr>
<td>*Little Pinkie Engine</td>
<td>Ida MacAuley (s/c)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>M.F.S.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mining Coal</td>
<td>anonymous</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>C.J.C.B.</td>
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<tr>
<td>*No. 26, One Million Ton</td>
<td>Ray Holland (c)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Men of the Deeps</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nordegg Ballad, The</td>
<td>Al Owchar (c)</td>
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<td>Men of the Deeps</td>
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<td><strong>MINERS AT WORK</strong></td>
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<td>Black Is the Coal Dust</td>
<td>James Nipper Oliver (c)</td>
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<td>R. MacEachern</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cape Breton Coal Will Always Be</td>
<td>J. Rodie (c)</td>
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<td>Men of the Deeps</td>
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<tr>
<td>*Cape Breton Miner Man</td>
<td>Leon Dubinsky (c)</td>
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<td>L. Dubinsky</td>
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<tr>
<td>Chain Runner song</td>
<td>Edward Penney (s/c)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>R. MacEachern</td>
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<tr>
<td>*Coal Town Road</td>
<td>Allister MacGillivray (c)</td>
<td></td>
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<td>S.M.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Down Deep In the Mine</td>
<td>Marie MacMillan (c)</td>
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<td>M.F.S.</td>
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<tr>
<td>In The Pit</td>
<td>Leon Dubinsky (c)</td>
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<td>L. Dubinsky</td>
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<td>Long Wall Miner, The</td>
<td>Rick French (cl)</td>
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<td>R. French</td>
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<td>Men Underground, The</td>
<td>anonymous</td>
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<td>C.J.C.B.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Miner, The</td>
<td>Donna Troichuk (c)</td>
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<td>M.F.S.</td>
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<tr>
<td>*Thirty Inch Coal</td>
<td>Mike Paxton (c)</td>
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<td>Rr.</td>
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<tr>
<td>*Workin' Man</td>
<td>Rita MacNell (c)</td>
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<td>B.P.</td>
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<td><strong>UNIONS, UNION LEADERS AND STRIKE SONGS</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Are You From Bevan?</td>
<td>Phil Thomas (cl)</td>
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<td>Jon Bartlett</td>
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<tr>
<td>Arise Ye Nova Scotia Slaves</td>
<td>Bob Stewart (s/c)</td>
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<td>C.D.F.</td>
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<tr>
<td><em>Ballad of J.B. McLachlan, The Bower's Seventy-Twa</em></td>
<td>Charlie MacKinnon (c)</td>
<td></td>
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<td>R. MacEachern</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jim McLachlan Song</td>
<td>Fred Willis (c)</td>
<td></td>
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<td>Jon Bartlett</td>
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<tr>
<td>*Miner's Lifeguard</td>
<td>Peter Flosnick (c)</td>
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<td>S.S.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1925 Strike Song</td>
<td>Mrs. L. Guigliotta (s/c)</td>
<td></td>
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<td>C.D.F.</td>
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<tr>
<td>On Cumberland's Rugged Mountain</td>
<td>Amby Thomas (s/c)</td>
<td></td>
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<td>R. MacEachern</td>
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<tr>
<td>*Pluck Me Store, The</td>
<td>George Scott (s/c)</td>
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<td>Men of the Deeps</td>
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<tr>
<td>Step by Step</td>
<td>Ida MacAuley (s/c)</td>
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<td>M.F.S.</td>
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<tr>
<td>United Front</td>
<td>UMWA Constitution</td>
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<td>S.S.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>NON-UNION MINERS</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Honest Working Man, The</td>
<td>Stuart McCawley (cl)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>C.A.Y.</td>
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<tr>
<td>*Kelly's Cove</td>
<td>Mrs. D.J. MacDonald (s/c)</td>
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<td>M.F.S.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Yahie Miners, The</td>
<td>Stuart McCawley (cl)</td>
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<td>C.A.Y.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Yahie Miners, The</td>
<td>Alphonse MacDonald (cl)</td>
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<td>C.B.S.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
MINE TRAGEDIES AND RESCUE OPERATIONS

Argo Mine, The  
*Ballad of Springhill, The (1958)  

Black Eyed Miner  
Black Blood On The Coal  
*Boys of the Rescue Crew, The  
Cape Breton Coal  
Coal Mining Days  
Cumberland Mine, The (Springhill, 1958)  
Disaster at No. 1 B  
Don’t Go Below  
Down In Springhill’s Bumpy Mine  
Miner’s Song, The (Ten Men Died)  
Miracle at Springhill (1958)  
Miracle at Springhill (1956)  
Miracle at Springhill (1958)  
Miracle of Colliery No. 2 (1958)  
My Brother’s Fate  
New Waterford’s Fatal Day  
New Waterford’s Fatal Day  
*No. 12, New Waterford  
*No. 26 Mine Disaster  
Rescue From the Springhill Coal Mine (1956)  
Springhill (1958)  
Springhill (1958)  
Springhill Mine Disaster (1958)  
Springhill Mine Disaster (1891)  
Springhill Mine Disaster (1956)  
Springhill Mine Disaster (1956)  
Tower City Tragedy  
24th in 26, The  

HUMOROUS SONGS  

A Shirt Tale  
Bootleg Coal  
*Bootlegger Me  
Bootleg Truckman  
*Cape Breton Silver  
*Drill Ye Tarriers, Drill  
*Goin’ Down Clean  
Government Store, The  
*Government Store, The  
Government Store, The  
I Went to Norman’s  
*Jolly Miner, The  
*Jolly Wee Miner Men  
*Just A Jolly Miner  
Lay That Piece Can Down, Ma New Aberdeen Government Store  
New Aberdeen Government Store  

Frank Horne (s/c)  
Ewan MacColl & P. Seeger (c)  
anonymous  
Don Weeks (c)  
George Merrill (s/c)  
Ray Holland (c)  
Archie MacInnis (s/c)  
L.C. Walsh & Ch. MacKinnon (c)  
Anne Whyte (cl)  
Allister MacGillivray (c)  
E. Chicanot (cl)  
David Woods (c)  
Ronnie Prophet (c)  
Roy Rudolph (s/c)  
Don Miller (c)  
Jack Kingston (c)  
Aubrey Martell (c)  
Amby Thomas (s/c)  
Angus Timmons (c)  
Ray Holland (c)  
Allister MacGillivray (c)  
Don Miller (c)  
Lorraine Phillips (c)  
anonymous  
Maurice Ruddick (c)  
Ruth Metcalfe (s/c)  
Jimmy Dalton (c)  
Eddie LeGere (c)  
Bobby Burchell (s/c)  
Joe MacPherson (c)  
Dan Boutilier (s/c)  
anonymous  
John McIntyre (c)  
anonymous  
Allister MacGillivray (c)  
E. Chicanot (cl)  
Leon Dubinsky (c)  
Alphonse MacDonald (cl)  
Capt. Cecil Jeffries (s/c)  
Hugh MacLean (s/c)  
Malcolm Bluic (s/c)  
Freeman Young (s/c)  
Bob Stewart (s/c)  
Eddie Nicol (c)  
anonymous  
Stan Deveaux (s/c)  
Amby Thomas (s/c)  

Helen Creighton  
Neil Rosenberg  
Men of the Deeps  
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Men of the Deeps  
C.D.F.  
C.J.C.B.  
M.F.S.  
C.J.C.B.  
S.M.  
R.O.M.  
L. Dubinsky  
C.B.S.  
Helen Creighton  
Helen Creighton  
Helen Creighton  
Helen Creighton  
C.D.F.  
Men of the Deeps  
C.J.C.B.  
R. MacEachern  
R. MacEachern
Percy Morris Alphonse MacDonald (cl) C.B.S.
Percy Morris Amby Thomas (s/c) R. MacEachern
Percy Morris Evelyn Smith (s/c) Men of the Deeps
Plain Ol’ Miner Boy Nel Campbell (c) R. MacEachern
*Plain Ol’ Miner Boy Willi Odo (s/c) C.J.C.B.
When I First Went to Caledonia Amby Thomas (s/c) R. MacEachern
When They First Came In The Pit Murdock Clark (c) R. MacEachern

**SACRED SONGS**
Miner’s Epitaph, The James Lovelace (c) M.F.S.
*Miners’ Litany George Porter (s/c) G. Porter
*Miners’ Memorial Hymn H. Hichen (s/c) Men of the Deeps
Miner’s Prayer, The Ron Hynes (c) Richard Comber
Miner’s Prayer, The R. Tune (c) Men of the Deeps
*Unknown Miner’s Grave, The Mary Olive Chiasson (c) M.F.S.

**SUPERNATURAL PHENOMENA**
*Omen, The Marie MacMillan (c) M.F.S.
Phantom Pan Crew, The anonymous C.J.C.B.
Seven Lamps North Charlie McIntyre (s/c) Men of the Deeps

**CHILD LABOUR**
At 14 I’m Trapping Laura Donaldson (s/c) Men of the Deeps
*Billy Come With Me Leon Dubinsky (c) L. Dubinsky

**GENERAL & MISCELLANEOUS SONGS**
Bumps, The Stuart McCawley (cl) C.D.F.
Coal Miner Under the Sea, The F.W. Gray (c) M.M.M.
Collier’s March, The F.W. Gray (c) M.M.M.
Come Sit Down Here Beside R. MacEacher & J. MacLean (c) R. MacEachern
Me John
Comrades Together Joe MacPherson (c) Men of the Deeps
*Dark As A Dungeon Idris Griffeth (cl) Geoff Drake
Donald From Bras d’Or Dan Livingston (s/c) Helen Creighton
Election Song Mrs. Ruth Metcalfe (s/c) Helen Creighton
George Alfred Beckett Amby Thomas (s/c) R. MacEachern
Hard Working Miner Man R. Young (s/c) Men of the Deeps
I’m Only A Broken Down Mucker Phil Thomas (cl) Jon Bartlett
Mucker
I Work In The Pit Stan Deveaux (c) R. MacEachern
*Man With A Torch In His Cap, The Helen C. MacDonald (c) M.F.S.
Miner, The (Harder Than Nails) Bob Shulman (c) Men of the Deeps
*Miner, The (With A Shovel in His Hand)
Miner’s Alphabet Song Lillian Crewe Walsh (c) C.C.B.
*Miner’s Lament Mrs. A.G. Hattie (s/c) Helen Creighton
Safety Is Our Goal Nel Campbell (c) Men of the Deeps
Some Say That I’m A Miner Ray Holland (c) Men of the Deeps
We’re The Boys Behind Ronnie MacEachern (c) R. MacEachern
the Guns
When You’re Done Loading Augustine MacDonald (s/c) Helen Creighton
Coal
Charlie MacKinnon (s/c) R. MacEachern
Canny Miner Lad, The
Coal Miner's Heaven
Coal Tattoo
Collier Lad, The
Collier's Rant, The
Dark As a Dungeon
Down Among the Coal
Down in a Coal Mine
Dust in the Air
Miner's Lifeguard
Rap 'Er to Bank
Schoolday's End
Sixteen Tons
Thirty Inch Coal
Which Side Are You On?

Ian Campbell (c)  N.E.B.
Joe Glazer (c)    U.M.W.J.
Billy Edd Wheeler (c)  Men of the Deeps
Johnny Handle (s/c)  J. Handle
Joseph Ritson (cl)  J. Handle
Merle Travis (c)   S.W.P.
Roy Palmer (cl)    P.K.
J.B. Geoghanan (c)  M.M.P.
Johnny Handle       J. Handle
Mrs. L. Guigliotta (s/c)  C.D.F.
Johnny Handle (s/c)  J. Handle
Ewan MacColl (c)   J. Handle
Merle Travis (c)   S.W.P.
Mike Paxton (c)    Rr.
Florence Reece (c)  S.S.

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Antigonish, N.S.

FOOTNOTES

1. The Men of Deeps is a chorus of coal miners assembled from the mining communities of New Waterford and Glace Bay, Nova Scotia. The group was organized in 1966 as an effort by the people of Cape Breton to honour Canada's Centennial Year, 1967. Its purpose was, and is, to help preserve in song the rich folklore of that island's coal-mining communities. The group has released three long-play recordings on the Waterloo label.


4. When The Men of the Deeps perform weekly at the Glace Bay Miners' Museum each summer, many children from the local area attend regularly, joined by thousands of tourists. I've noticed over the years that the youngsters memorize the words of many songs after only a few performances, and they often join in the singing. I like to think that in some small way The Men of the Deeps are contributing to a singing tradition amongst the people of Cape Breton's mining communities which might otherwise be lost. For this reason, I feel all the songs in the repertoire of the choir belong in any collection of Coal Mining Songs in Canada.

5. The original building which was opened in 1967 was destroyed by fire in 1979. It was rebuilt in 1980.


Resumé: John O'Donnell, directeur d'un choeur de mineurs de charbon Men of the Deeps, fournit une liste de chansons canadiennes ayant rapport aux mines de charbon; Il les divise en catégories et indique celles chantées par le choeur qu'il dirige.

Abstract: Françoise Grenier's article is a careful analysis of the five volumes of Chansons d'Acadie to show their importance as educational source material. In discussing their texts, melodies, and rhythms she throws light on the whole subject of music in the schools.