

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.¹ 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-minier du Québec*, Réal Benoit,² 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.³ 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.⁴

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.⁵ 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,⁶ 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").

Nearly all the songs have tunes associated with them. About 10 percent of these are what might be classified as folk parody⁷ 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:

- B.P. L.P. Recording, *Rita MacNeil*. Big Pond, Cape Breton: Big Pond Productions, 1984.
- C.A.Y. McCawley, Stuart, *Cape Breton Songster*. Glace Bay, N.S.: Brodie Printing, 1929.
- C.B.S. MacDonald, Alphonse. *Cape Breton Songster*. (Sydney, N.S.: n.p.), 1935.
- C.C.B. Walsh, Lillian Crewe. *Calling Cape Breton*. (n.p.).
- C.D.F. Korson, George, *Coal Dust On The Fiddle*. Hatboro, PA: Folklore Associates, 1965.
- C.J.C.B. Radio Station CJC.B, Sydney, Nova Scotia.
- M.F.S. Miners' Folk Society Centennial Year Song Contest
- M.M.M. Gray, F.W. *Musings of a Maritime Miner*. Sydney, N.S.: n.p., 1940.
- M.M.P. Korson, George. *Minstrels of the Mine Patch*. Hatboro, PA: Folklore Associates, 1964.
- N.E.B. Joseph, N., and Winter, E. *New English Broad-sides*. London: Sing Productions, 1967.
- P.K. Palmer, Roy. *Poverty Knock*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974.
- Rr. L.P. Recording, *Come All You Coal Miners*. Somerville, MA: Rounder Record No.4005.
- R.O.M. Chicantot, E.L. *Rhymes of the Miner*. Gardenvale, P.Q.: Federal Publications, 1937.
- S.H. MacDonald, Dick. *Singing Headlines*. Montreal: n.p., 1967.
- S.M. MacGillivray, Allister. *Song for the Mira*. Sydney, N.S.: New Dawn Enterprises, 1979.
- S.W.P. Fowke, Edith, and Glazer, Joe. *Songs of Work and Protest*. New York: Dover, 1973.
- S.S. Supplement to the newspaper IN STRUGGLE, *Sing of Our Struggles, Sing of Revolution*. Montreal: April 1978.
- U.M.W.J. *United Mine Workers Journal*.

LIST OF SONGS

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

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

MINE TRAGEDIES AND RESCUE OPERATIONS

Argo Mine, The	Frank Horne (s/c)	Helen Creighton
*Ballad of Springhill, The (1958)	Ewan MacColl & P. Seeger (c)	Neil Rosenberg
Black Eyed Miner	anonymous	Men of the Deeps
Blood On The Coal	Don Weeks (c)	Men of the Deeps
*Boys of the Rescue Crew, The	George Merrill (s/c)	Men of the Deeps
Cape Breton Coal	Ray Holland (c)	Men of the Deeps
Coal Mining Days	Archie MacInnis (s/c)	Men of the Deeps
Cumberland Mine, The (Springhill, 1958)	L.C. Walsh & Ch. MacKinnon (c)	Neil Rosenberg
Disaster at No. 1 B	Anne Whyte (cl)	Men of the Deeps
Don't Go Below	Allister MacGillivray (c)	A. MacGillivray
Down In Springhill's Bumpy Mine	E. Chicanot (cl)	R.O.M.
Miner's Song, The (Ten Men Died)	David Woods (c)	David Woods
Miracle at Springhill (1958)	Ronnie Prophet (c)	Neil Rosenberg
Miracle at Springhill (1956)	Roy Rudolph (s/c)	Neil Rosenberg
Miracle at Springhill (1958)	Don Miller (c)	Neil Rosenberg
Miracle of Colliery No. 2 (1958)	Jack Kingston (c)	Neil Rosenberg
My Brother's Fate	Aubrey Martell (c)	Men of the Deeps
New Waterford's Fatal Day	Amby Thomas (s/c)	R. MacEachern
New Waterford's Fatal Day	Angus Timmons (c)	Men of the Deeps
*No. 12, New Waterford	Ray Holland (c)	Men of the Deeps
*No. 26 Mine Disaster	Allister MacGillivray (c)	S.M.
Rescue From the Springhill Coal Mine (1956)	Don Miller (c)	Neil Rosenberg
Springhill (1958)	Lorraine Phillips (c)	S.H.
Springhill 1958	anonymous	Men of the Deeps
Springhill Disaster (1958)	Maurice Ruddick (c)	Neil Rosenberg
Springhill Mine Disaster (1891)	Ruth Metcalfe (s/c)	Helen Creighton
Springhill Mine Disaster (1956)	Jimmy Dalton (c)	Neil Rosenberg
Springhill Mine Disaster (1956)	Eddie LeGere (c)	Neil Rosenberg
Tower City Tragedy	Bobby Burchell (s/c)	Men of the Deeps
24th in 26, The	Joe MacPherson (c)	Men of the Deeps

HUMOROUS SONGS

A Shirt Tale	Dan Boutilier (s/c)	C.D.F.
Bootleg Coal	anonymous	C.J.C.B.
*Bootlegger Me	John McIntyre (c)	M.F.S.
Bootleg Truckman	anonymous	C.J.C.B.
*Cape Breton Silver	Allister MacGillivray (c)	S.M.
*Drill Ye Tarriers, Drill	E. Chicanot (cl)	R.O.M.
*Goin' Down Clean	Leon Dubinsky (c)	L. Dubinsky
Government Store, The	Alphonse MacDonald (cl)	C.B.S.
*Government Store, The	Capt. Cecil Jeffries (s/c)	Helen Creighton
Government Store, The	Hugh MacLean (s/c)	Helen Creighton
I Went to Norman's	Malcolm Bluc (s/c)	Helen Creighton
*Jolly Miner, The	Freeman Young (s/c)	Helen Creighton
*Jolly Wee Miner Men	Bob Stewart (s/c)	C.D.F.
*Just A Jolly Miner	Eddie Nicol (c)	Men of the Deeps
Lay That Piece Can Down, Ma	anonymous	C.J.C.B.
New Aberdeen Government Store	Stan Deveaux (s/c)	R. MacEachern
New Aberdeen Government Store	Amby Thomas (s/c)	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 Me John	R. MachEacher & J. MacLean (c)	R. MacEachern
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
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)	Lillian Crewe Walsh (c)	C.C.B.
Miner's Alphabet Song	Mrs. A.G. Hattie (s/c)	Helen Creighton
*Miner's Lament	Nel Campbell (c)	Men of the Deeps
Safety Is Our Goal	Ray Holland (c)	Men of the Deeps
Some Say That I'm A Miner	Ronnie MacEachern (c)	R. MacEachern
We're The Boys Behind the Guns	Augustine MacDonald (s/c)	Helen Creighton
When You're Done Loading Coal	Charlie MacKinnon (s/c)	R. MacEachern

NON-CANADIAN SONGS SUNG BY THE MEN OF THE DEEPS

Canny Miner Lad, The	Ian Campbell (c)	N.E.B.
Coal Miner's Heaven	Joe Glazer (c)	U.M.W.J.
Coal Tattoo	Billy Edd Wheeler (c)	Men of the Deeps
Collier Lad, The	Johnny Handle (s/c)	J. Handle
Collier's Rant, The	Joseph Ritson (cl)	J. Handle
Dark As a Dungeon	Merle Travis (c)	S.W.P.
Down Among the Coal	Roy Palmer (cl)	P.K.
Down in a Coal Mine	J.B. Geoghagan (c)	M.M.P.
Dust in the Air	Johnny Handle	J. Handle
Miner's Lifeguard	Mrs. L. Guigliotta (s/c)	C.D.F.
Rap 'Er to Bank	Johnny Handle (s/c)	J. Handle
Schoolday's End	Ewan MacColl (c)	J. Handle
Sixteen Tons	Merle Travis (c)	S.W.P.
Thirty Inch Coal	Mike Paxton (c)	Rr.
Which Side Are You On?	Florence Reece (c)	S.S.

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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.
2. Cf. *Le Compositeur Canadien/The Canadian Composer*, no. 26, January 1973, pp. 5-7, 46.
3. George Korson, *Minstrels of the Mine Patch* (Hatboro, PA: Folklore Associates, 1964 and *Coal Dust on the Fiddle* (Hatboro, PA: Folklore Associates, 1965).
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.
6. Stuart McCawley, *Cape Breton Come-All-Ye* (Glace Bay, N.S.: Brodie Printing, 1929), p. 10.
7. For an interesting article on this subject see Peter Narvaez, "The Folk Parodist," *Canadian Folk Music Journal*, 5(1977), 32-37.

Resumé: John O'Donnell, directeur d'un chœur 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 chœur 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.