

## C. MARIUS BARBEAU AND THE ORIGINS CONTROVERSY

JANET McNAUGHTON

In any analysis of the history of folklore scholarship in Canada, it is readily apparent that Marius Barbeau was a scholar of great significance. Barbeau was trained as an anthropologist and hired by the National Museum to study native Indian cultures in 1911. It would have been easy for Barbeau to confine his life's work to this area, but he was gifted with an intellectual curiosity which caused him to seek and collect the traditions of his own culture. His energetic enthusiasm for folklore enabled him to inspire others to also begin careful collection and analysis of traditional culture in Canada. Further, at a time when North American folklorists confined themselves almost exclusively to the study of folksong, Barbeau approached the discipline from a much broader perspective. In addition to the many hundreds of folksongs he collected, Barbeau also gathered folktales, including supernatural and local legends, information on material culture such as textiles, wood carving, and vernacular architecture, and minor genres such as nicknames. We are fortunate to have as the parent of folklore studies in Canada a scholar who showed such scope of imagination and great intellectual curiosity.

This paper will outline and provide a critical analysis of one aspect of Barbeau's scholarship: his theoretical approach to the songs he collected. The purpose of this paper is to place Barbeau's work in the context of previous and contemporary folksong scholarship. An assessment of the impact that this theoretical orientation had upon his work will also be made. To place Barbeau's work in historical context, it is necessary to briefly review developments in folksong scholarship prior to his work.

It is apparent that Barbeau was influenced by trends in anglo-phone scholarship. In the late nineteenth century, folksong scholars in the United States and Britain devoted themselves to literary and antiquarian concerns. Greatly impressed by the publication of the Child canon (1882-1898), they regarded folksongs as static printed texts rather than as part of a living tradition. Most of these folksong scholars were critics of literature who required the poetry of ballads to conform to their own aesthetic standards. D.K. Wilgus, in his *Anglo-American Folksong Scholarship Since 1898*, notes that during this time "the ballad was seen as a surviving literary fossil to be explained in light of historical evidence or by analogy with the verse of primitive peoples."<sup>1</sup> The manner in which ballads had been created was a chief concern of this generation of folksong scholars. On this question they divided into two camps: those who favoured the theory of composition by individuals; and those who believed that ballads had communal origins.

The so-called communal origins theory was more of an intellectual orientation than a clearly stated hypothesis, and was derived from pronouncements on folksong which had been made in eighteenth-century Germany by Johann Gottfried von Herder and the Grimm brothers. Because the theory of communal origins was never clearly stated, it was open to interpretation and a good deal of confusion resulted. The leading proponent of the communal theory was Francis Barton Gummere, an American who had been a student of Child. Gummere was active in the origins debate from 1894 to 1911. Though even he was not consistent in his pronouncements on this subject, he basically believed that folk poetry came before and was antithetical to art poetry, that folksongs sprang spontaneously from a people and were collectively composed.<sup>2</sup>

In opposition to this collective view of ballad origins, a group of literary critics put forward the concept of individual composition. This school of thought seems to have begun with W.J. Courthope's chapter "The Decay of the English Minstrelsy" in volume one of *A History of English Poetry* which appeared in 1895.<sup>3</sup> Courthope believed that "the art of metrical composition" had developed with the primitive bard who served as the poet, historian, and philosopher of his tribe. With the advance of civilizations, these functions became more specialized and there emerged "the epic, the dramatic (and) the lyric poet...the historian and the philosopher..."<sup>4</sup> By a process which Wilgus describes as "somewhat complex and irregular...to be sure" Courthope felt that the primitive bard gradually developed into the jongleur, the medieval minstrel.<sup>5</sup> By the mid-fourteenth century, when the oldest ballads in the Child canon are known to have existed, the upper classes had lost interest in the art of the minstrels and they could appeal only to less affluent people. Courthope felt that ballads found in the Child canon were composed by individual minstrels under these circumstances and passed into the oral traditions of those who heard them.

The debate that raged between these two camps of scholars is the origins controversy. Of this controversy among folksong scholars of the late nineteenth century Wilgus states: "As long as the ballad was a text in a book or a concept in the mind of a critic, the theory could control the evidence."<sup>5</sup> With Barbeau's generation this situation was completely altered as folksongs were rediscovered as part of a living tradition.

Barbeau's account of his own rediscovery of folksongs in Quebec is contained in his writings. When he began fieldwork as a young anthropologist among the Hurons of Lorette he was surprised to discover a large and varied repertoire of French folksongs and folktales in addition to the native lore of these people. This piqued Barbeau's curiosity and in the summer of 1916 he ventured down the St. Lawrence to the then-isolated county of Charlevoix to search for French-Canadian lore. During that summer he collected nearly 600 folksongs and variants.

Barbeau's discovery of a living song tradition in Quebec was paralleled by anglophone scholars in Britain and the United States. In Anglo-Canada, W. Roy Mackenzie had made similar findings a few years before in Nova Scotia. Wilgus believes that we cannot overestimate the significance of this discovery and its impact on folksong scholarship. In his words, this generation found that

the ballads refused to die (and) the folksingers refused to sing what the scholars said they should... The result was confusion, thirty years of acrimonious controversy and the beginning of considered and reasonable study of traditional songs.<sup>6</sup>

This exciting and confusing period of folksong scholarship formed the intellectual backdrop for Barbeau's early fieldwork. Although a francophone who collected in Quebec, it is clear that Barbeau was aware of and responsive to the origins controversy as it developed among anglophone scholars of his generation. Prior to his experiences in Charlevoix county, Barbeau had subscribed to the communal origins theory. He later stated:

Our discovery (of a living song tradition) lured us into the hope of spying folk songs in the making. Such compositions, according to a theory inherited from Grimm and still current in the English-speaking world, were the fruit of collective inspiration. A handful of singers would spontaneously burst into song on the spur of the moment. Genius, usually denied the individual, would at times grace the latent powers of the mob and give birth to poems and tunes that were worthy to pass on to posterity.<sup>7</sup>

This summary of the communal theory was written after Barbeau had rejected this idea, and it is possible to discern in this quote a lack of respect for this theory which had proven to be false.

In Barbeau's writings we can also see the confusion of a young scholar who earnestly set out to test this theory, only to discover no evidence to support it. He reported that he and his collaborators

overlooked no likely opportunity, on the seashore or in our fields, by the fireside or in occasional festive gatherings. Our folksingers were genial and talented, their memory was prolific and their stock of songs nearly inexhaustible... But they would not give free rein to impulse or fancy... would not venture beyond the mere iteration of what had passed down to them ready-made from their relatives and friends, from untold generations of peasant singers.<sup>8</sup>

Barbeau abandoned the communal origins theory as a result of his field experiences. The ultimate rejection of this theory by Barbeau and his anglophone contemporaries ended the controversy which had absorbed so much of the energy of the previous generation. This left scholars free to discover new areas of study in folksong.

But the rejection of the communal theory did not automatically solve the question of ballad origins and Barbeau continued to seek a conclusive resolution to this question. Like most of us, Barbeau was

influenced by the scholarship of those who came before him and, from the arm chair critics of the previous generation he had inherited a romanticized view of the older ballads. Although there is no French-language equivalent to the Child canon, it is apparent that Barbeau felt folksongs from old France to be equivalent to the Child ballads and more significant than folksongs native to Quebec. He stated:

Among...our songs from ancient France — we count our most valuable records, and they are many. The bulk is of a high order for both form and content. The style is pure and crisp, the theme clear-cut and tersely developed. There prevails throughout a fragrance of refinement, sometimes there is a touch of genius.<sup>9</sup>

Barbeau did find song-makers in the course of his fieldwork. However, because of his romantic bias, he was unable to believe that the older French ballads could have been produced in a manner similar to that of his informants. He stated:

True enough, we heard some poets of the backwoods who could string rhymes and stanzas together on a given theme to suit local demand. But these were without mystic power. Their manner seemed not unlike that of ordinary poets, but far cruder. They plodded individually over their tasks and tallied their lines to a familiar tune. The outcome was invariably uncouth and commonplace. There was nowhere a fresh source of inspiration; only imitation obvious and slavish.<sup>10</sup>

Barbeau therefore rejected the ballad-making process as he found it among rural Québécois as a means of understanding the circumstances which had produced the European French ballads he collected. Then, apparently influenced by the theory of individual origins as enunciated by Courthope, Barbeau turned to examination of the Middle Ages. He at first accepted Courthope's assertion that ballads were composed by minstrels, but examination of manuscripts from the Middle Ages forced him to reject this theory. The troubadour compositions seemed too far removed in language, style, and theme from the songs collected in Quebec. Barbeau was unable to abandon the idea that these ballads had been composed by individuals with some formal education, and he continued to study the Middle Ages. While Courthope has used the terms minstrel and jongleur interchangeably, Barbeau found in the writings of Jeanroy, a scholar of medieval French history, that the term jongleur was used to refer to a lesser class of minstrels who had lived in the Loire River valley in northern France. These jongleurs were thought to have been freer from Latin influence than the court minstrels to the south and were, as Barbeau said, "apparently not addicted to writing."<sup>11</sup> Barbeau concluded that these men must have originated the old French ballads that he found in Quebec.

This was Barbeau's personal resolution of the origins controversy: ballads were composed by individuals, but not by common folk in the manner he encountered in his fieldwork. These songs were instead produced by a lesser class of minstrels called jongleurs. Their compositions had subsequently passed into oral tradition, and made up most of the repertoire of songs that Barbeau collected in Quebec in the early decades of the twentieth century.

That Barbeau was too willing to accept the values and aesthetics of the generation of scholars who came before him must be seen as a significant flaw in his scholarship. Had he been able to see beyond these inherited biases he might have been more willing to study the song-making processes he observed in the course of his fieldwork. However, through his research Barbeau was able to dispel the idea that folksongs were created by some mystic communal process which differed significantly from the production of other forms of art. This paved the way for future generations of scholars to explore other aspects of folksong. Thus Barbeau, through his exhaustive documentation of a living song tradition and his rejection of the communal origins theory, began the era of modern folksong scholarship in Canada.

*Memorial University of Newfoundland*  
*St. John's, Nfld.*

## FOOTNOTES

- 1 D.K. Wilgus, *Anglo-American Folksong Scholarship Since 1898* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers Univ. Press, 1959), p. 4.
- 2 Wilgus, p.4.
- 3 Wilgus, p.36.
- 4 Wilgus, p.36.
- 5 Wilgus, p.
- 6 Wilgus, p.54.
- 7 Marius Barbeau and Edward Sapir, *Folk Songs of French Canada* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1925), p. xiv.
- 8 Barbeau and Sapir, p.xv.
- 9 Barbeau and Sapir, p.xvi.
- 10 Barbeau and Sapir, p.xv.
- 11 Barbeau and Sapir, p.xvii.