

Madeleine Béland. *Chansons de voyageurs, coureurs de bois et forestiers*. Québec: Les Presses de l'université Laval, 1982. 432 pp., musique (Collection Ethnologie du l'Amérique française).¹

Traditional songs are aural documents of people's lives. The words and tunes contain evidence of a community's occupations, cultural origins, social life, environment, and beliefs. That is one of the major reasons I am interested in traditional songs. It was therefore with pleasure and anticipation that I took on the task of reviewing this book.

The cover attracted me immediately. On the front is a print of a nineteenth-century lithograph of a raft of logs on the St. Lawrence River. The back cover is a reproduction of a Frances Hopkins painting of a brigade of canoes on Lake Superior. Both pictures have a depth to them, they draw the viewer into their world. This is exactly what the book itself does. It draws the reader into the world of the voyageurs.²

In her preface, Madeleine Béland notes that:

In the minds of most people in this province, (our oral traditions) originated in ancient France and were transplanted and continued to survive in the adopted country. But traditional songs not only survived, they also evolved and adapted to the new ways of life. . . . Our curiosity pushed us to seek which of (these) songs portrayed the lives and feelings of (the voyageurs) who were considered legendary heroes and who played a crucial role in the development of the country at each period of its history. We have therefore attempted a complete examination of the songs of the voyageurs. (from the preface)

This "complete examination" concerns itself primarily with the texts of the songs as aural histories of the lives of the voyageurs. In fact the first half of the book, "La vie des voyageurs," is an exploration of the various aspects of the voyageurs' lives as communicated in their songs. The second half of the book is a collection of 91 voyageur songs.

La vie des voyageurs

"La vie des voyageurs" is divided into three chapters, each dealing with a stage in the working life of a voyageur: "L'engagement et le voyage" (The Hiring and the Trip), "La vie dans les bois ou les chantiers" (Life in the Woods or in the Logging Camps), and "Le retour" (The Return). Within each chapter are subsections detailing the various aspects of each stage. The chapter on returning home, for example, contains details about "waiting for the return," "the anticipated pleasures," "deceptions" (by sweethearts or bosses), "alcohol," "love and relationships to women," and "voyageurs and farmers." Madeleine Béland integrates information on the lives of the voyageurs of the fur trade and those of the lumber industry. It makes perfect historical sense to do so. The decline of the fur trade during the first half of the nineteenth century

corresponded with the growth of the forest industry in Quebec. As jobs in the fur trade diminished, many *coureurs de bois* became loggers:

Although the nature of the work (in the forest industry) differed completely, the same “*esprit*” existed and the same name, “*voyageurs*,” was applied to the loggers. . . . Throughout this history, this name will apply to nomadic workers as opposed to peasants, colonists, farmers — called “*habitants*” — whose lives are stationary. (p. 3)

The “*La vie des voyageurs*” section is a story told by two narrators: Madeleine Béland and the *voyageurs* themselves. Béland describes and discusses an aspect of the *voyageurs*’ lives. She rarely continues for more than a few sentences before allowing the *voyageurs* to speak for themselves through their songs. Béland’s skill in putting together this section is that she uses song texts as part of the narrative rather than as illustrations of a point she has already made. The song excerpts move the story forward and many pages contain more song excerpts than they do Béland’s prose. Occasionally she includes a few sentences from written historical sources, but she does this only when she wants to “support or fill out themes which are under-represented in the songs.” (p. 4) Her intent is that the *voyageurs* tell their own story.

There is almost no aspect of *voyageurs*’ lives that is not expressed in song. One of the most moving sections of the first part of the book is that on “*L’ennui*” (an untranslatable term that can mean anything from boredom to longing, loneliness or weariness). The loggers were away from home throughout the long winter and the *coureurs de bois* could be away for as long as two years at a time. Their work was monotonous, their bodies were abused by hard work and poor living conditions, and they were far from their loved ones. Judging by the number and variety of songs on the subject, the *voyageurs* never got used to their *ennui*:

| | |
|--------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| Petit oiseau que tu es heureux | (Little bird how happy you are |
| De voltiger là où tu veux. | To fly where you want to |
| Oh! si j’avais ton avantage | Oh! if I could do so |
| De pouvoir prendre ma volée, | If I could take flight, |
| Sur les genoux de la belle | I would come to rest |
| J’irais m’y reposer. (p. 89) | On the knees of my loved one.) |

J’ai-t-un de mes confrères qui me fait enrager.

Quand il pense à sa blonde, il ne fait que pleurer. (p. 90)

(One of my comrades makes me mad.

When he thinks of his sweetheart he does nothing but cry.)

Many were so overcome that they “jumped” camp:

C’est Jos Francoeur, s’ennui beaucoup,

S’ennuie beaucoup de son p’tit chou.

Que le diable emporte la cabane!

Pour moi, je m’en vas voir ma p’tite femme. (p. 90)

(Jos Francoeur was so full of ennui,
He missed his little cabbage (sweetheart).
The devil take him from the cabin!
Me, I'm leaving to see my little wife.)

| | |
|--------------------------------|----------------------------|
| N'y a que de l'ennui | (Nothing but ennui |
| (. . .) | I'm never coming back here |
| Jamais plus je n'irai | To this damned country |
| Dans ces pays damnés, | To do nothing but |
| Pour tant m'y ennuyer. (p. 90) | Be filled with ennui.) |

It is partly because of this ennui that there is such a wealth of music and songs:

À danser tous les soirs pour se désennuyer. (p. 91)

(We dance every night to get rid of our ennui.)

Qui c'qu'a composé la chanson, c'était un homme ah! du
chantier,

Le soir au son de la musique, c'était pour se désennuyer. (p. 91)

(He who composed this song was a logger

In the evening he makes music to get rid of ennui.)

All of the songs in this book are in Conrad Laforte's *Catalogue de la chanson folklorique française II: Chansons strophiques*. Every song excerpt quoted in "La vie des voyageurs" is followed by reference numbers corresponding to the song's place in the *Catalogue*. I would also like to have seen references to the song's place in this book so that readers who wish to could refer to the entire song as they read the first part of the book.

The Songs

Madeleine Béland has presented the ninety-one songs in this collection according to the stages of the voyageurs' lives they present. The beginning contains songs of departure: "Le Départ pour le bois carré," "Les Voyageurs sont tous rassemblés," "Le Départ pour les chantiers des hauts d'Ottawa." Next come songs of life in the woods: "Dans les chantier nous hivernerons," "La Misère dans les chantiers," "Le Chantier au lac Noir," as well as songs about accidents, illness, and ennui: "La Nostalgie de l'engagé," "Le Frère mort de la fièvre," "Le Bûcheron écrasé par un arbre," followed by songs of the logdrive and homecoming: "Le Retour des chantiers," "Le Retour du voyageur," "La Drave au Vermillon," "Les Draveurs de la Gatineau." The order of the songs correspond roughly with the stages of voyageurs' lives described in "La vie des voyageurs." Only 6 of the 91 songs come from the coureurs-de-bois. The passage of time between the height of the fur trade and the first song collecting means that many of the coureurs-de-bois songs have been lost.

Some of the songs are presented in several variants. At the end of each song is information on where, when, from whom and by whom the song was collected, in which collection it can be found

(the collections are listed at the back of the book) and the total number of known variants. Because many songs are found only in manuscript or some old field recordings are at times un audible, several songs are published without musical transcriptions. There are a small number of transcriptional errors. Some of the songs have extensive footnotes on regional variations of the song and consequent differences in text.

The back of the book contains a classification of the songs according to their subject ("Coureurs de bois et voyageurs des pays d'en haut," "Chantiers forestiers (général)," "Bûcherons," etc.), a glossary of voyageur terms contained in the songs, a bibliography of song collections, books, and papers, and a song-title index. The glossary of voyageur terms contains many English words ("beans," "black hole," "jumper," "raft," etc.). Judging by the names of people mentioned (particularly bosses), French-speaking loggers worked for and with English-speaking loggers. Béland does not discuss this biculturalism and its effect on the lives and songs of the voyageurs. It is a subject in which I have long been interested (particularly with regard to its effect on Quebec traditional music) and I wish she had said more about it. I could also not discover Béland's criteria for choosing the particular versions of the songs she includes in the collection. Are they the most complete/representative/singable versions? She does not say.

As I read this book I tried to determine who it was aimed at. It is at once an aural history of the lives of the voyageurs as well as an examination of their songs from a folklorist's point of view. As a singer, an educator, and someone who is more than marginally interested in folk music, I found that it contained more information than I needed. In English Canada the readership for a book of this depth would be no more than a handful of people. I would be very interested in the size of its potential readership in Quebec. If, as I suspect, it is substantially larger than that of English Canada, then we are truly "deux nations" when it comes to an awareness of our indigenous traditional music.

Rika Ruebsaat

NOTES

- 1 This book is entirely in French. All passages and song excerpts quoted in this review have been translated by me (Rika Ruebsaat). Song translations are literal and do not follow the rhythm or rhyme scheme of the original French.
- 2 To anglophones the word "voyageur" refers to the workers who paddled and portaged their way across the country during the fur trade. In French Canada the term applies to both the travellers of the fur trade — the "Coureurs de bois" or "voyageurs des pays d'en haut" — and to loggers ("forestiers," "bûcherons") who travelled upstream to the woods where they worked.