

THE SONGS OF MR. O.J. ABBOTT: A SURVEY OF TUNE TYPES

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Edith Fowke has described Mr. O.J. Abbott as "an exceptionally fine traditional singer with an extensive repertory."¹ His singing is preserved as part of the tremendous body of field recordings of traditional Ontario song collected by Professor Fowke during the late 1950s and early 1960s.² In order to undertake a preliminary study of the melodies employed by Mr. Abbott, I have made transcriptions of his tunes and consulted the published transcriptions contained in *Traditional Singers and Songs from Ontario*,³ and *Lumbering Songs from the Northern Woods*. This paper will summarize the results of my study to date.

There are a total of 116 tune-items in Mr. Abbott's recorded repertory. Although they cover a broad scope within the Anglo-Canadian tradition (particularly the lumbering-song tradition of Ontario, Maine, and Michigan),⁴ many of their salient characteristics can be brought into sharper focus by identifying individual melodies according to their membership within a relatively small set of tune-groups. It is implicit in this paper that traditional folk-singers, like Mr. Abbott, draw upon a wide range of melodic resources; one of the hallmarks of the tradition is the process of variation which they carry out upon individual tunes within the frameworks which constitute the tune-groups.⁵ A clearer understanding of the melodic frameworks can lead to a clearer understanding of the process of variation.

The majority of Mr. Abbott's melodies may be initially described as belonging to either "Long Tune" or "Short Tune" groups.⁶ The former are four phrases in length, with eight metrical stresses per phrase (the 8th stress is usually occupied by a rest and/or non-accented pickup note); the latter are also four phrases long, but contain only four stresses per phrase. In other words, "Short Tunes" are one-half the length of "Long Tunes." "By Borden's Grove" is a "Long Tune," whereas "Chapeau Boys" is a "Short Tune." (Figs. 1 and 2) Although these two groups comprise the main bulk of Mr. Abbott's melodies, "Long Tunes" occur more than twice as often as their shorter counterparts.

Within the scheme defined by these two large groupings, individual melodies possess characteristics which suggest that they belong to some of the "tune-families" described by Samuel Bayard in his studies of Anglo-American folksong.⁷ A very substantial percentage of melodies fall into the "Lord Randal" group. These tunes are generally characterized by an authentic range; a first phrase cadence on the tonic after a small midpoint rise; a second

FIG. 1: BY BORDEN'S GROVE, FO 1-1.

FO 1-1 = Fowke, Reel 1, side 1 (Indexed at the Music Archive, York University).

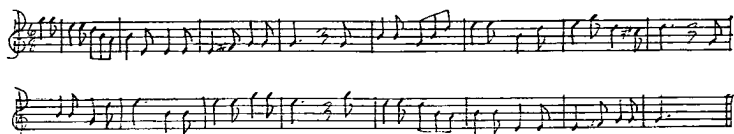


FIG. 2: CHAPEAU BOYS, FO 13-2, FM 4052.



FIG. 3: THE BANKS OF SWEET DUNDEE, FO 1-1.

FM 4051 = Folkways Record No. 4051, *Irish and British Songs from the Ottawa Valley*.

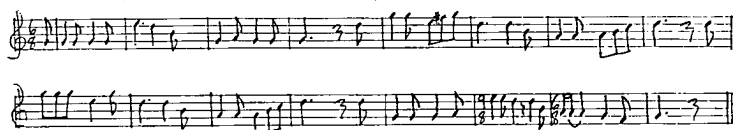


FIG. 4: HOGAN'S LAKE, FO 14-1, FM 4052.

FM 4052 = Folkways Record No. 4052, *Lumbering Songs from the Northern Woods*.

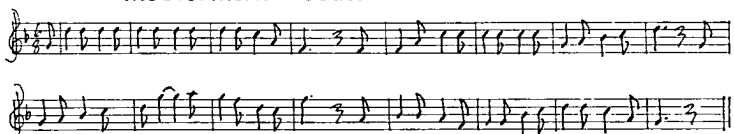


FIG. 5: THE LASS OF GLENSHEE, FO 15-2, FM 4051.

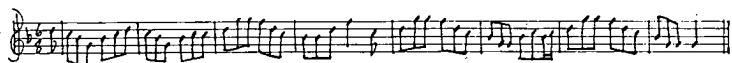


FIG. 6: THE DRUNKARD'S DREAM, FO 13-2.

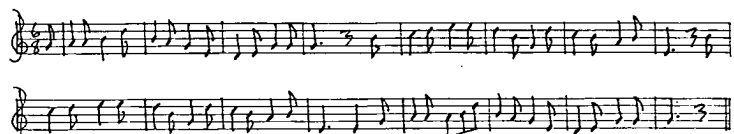


FIG. 7: THE FARMER'S BOY, FO 14-1, FM 4051.

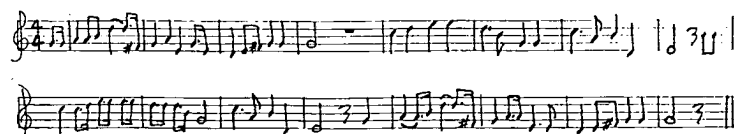


FIG. 8: AS I ROVED THROUGH AN IRISH TOWN, FO 1-1.

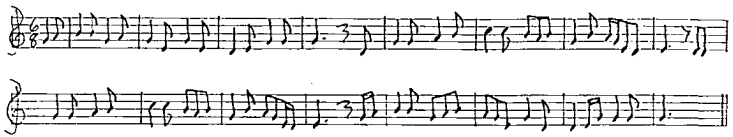


FIG. 9: TERRENCE'S FAREWELL, FO 13-1.



FIG. 10: COLLEEN DHAS CRUITHE NA MBO, Kidson ii 736b.

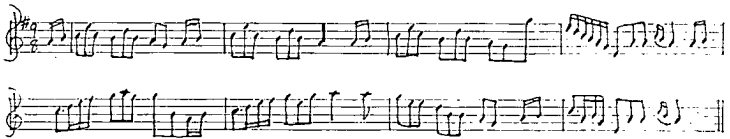
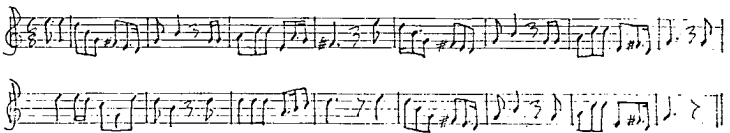


FIG. 11: THE BROOKLYN THEATER FIRE, FO 13-2.



and third phrase cadence on the upper fifth after a longer ascent to the upper tonic (in some cases the middle phrases cadence on the upper second, four or sixth); and a final phrase cadence on the tonic, often preceded by a descent from the upper register. One of Mr. Abbott's many "Lord Randal" tunes is "The Banks of Sweet Dundee." (Fig. 3)

There are additional isolated examples of tunes belonging to the "Bailiff's Daughter" group, the "Child I/II" family, "Boyne Water," etc., but they do not represent a large portion of Mr. Abbott's repertory. Aside from the "Lord Randal" melodies, there are, in fact, a number of tunes which cannot be found within Bayard's classifications at all. The groups into which these tunes fall will be the subject of the remainder of this paper.

Many of Mr. Abbott's melodies employ what Norman Cazden calls the "subtonic juncture," which he defines as "a ground plan (which) may be described as a junction of adjacent triads separated by a whole step."⁸ One example of the use of the "subtonic juncture" is found in the song "Hogan's Lake." (Fig. 4).

Another group of melodies which employ two disjunct triads as a melodic framing device are those which oscillate between a minor triad and a major triad separated by a minor third. The shift to the major triad usually occurs in the second and third phrases of the tunes, as can be observed in "The Lass of Glenshee." (Fig. 5)

Tunes which cadence on the tonic in their first phrase, then contain cadences on the lower sixth in the second and third phrases, and, finally, repeat the first phrase at the end are exemplified by the song "Drunkard's Dream." (Fig. 6)

All of the tune groups we have cited thus far constitute relatively loose frameworks in which a wide degree of variation may occur. The details which lend stability to the groups are generally cadential and other stressed pitches, which define framing intervals; range (authentic vs. plagal); and, in some cases, the ordering of phrases and the presence of phrase repetition within individual tunes. Similarities in pitch sequence (contour), rhythmic figuration, scale type, etc., aid in defining smaller sub-groups within these larger frameworks. For example, although the "Drunkard's Dream" group constitutes a substantial number of melodies in Mr. Abbott's repertory, it consists of smaller sets of individual tunes which bear a closer resemblance to each other than do all the tunes in the group taken as a whole. Compare "The Farmer's Boy" (Fig. 7) with "Drunkard's Dream," and it will be seen that the two melodies are very similar with respect to the details listed above. On the other hand, "As I Roved Through an Irish Town" (Fig. 8) diverges in detail from these two melodies, while still remaining part of the larger tune-group.

As an additional example, we will cite the tune to "Terrence's Farewell." (Fig. 9) It bears a general similarity to a set of melodies which will be discussed below, but it is also almost identical to the old Irish tune, "Colleen Dhas Cruithe na mBo" (Fig. 10)⁹ and belongs to a group of melodies identified by Norman Cazden, which includes tunes to "Erin's Green Shore," "The Blooming Bright Star of Belle Isle," and "The Green Mossy Banks by the Lea."¹⁰ In other words, individual melodies may share similarities on different levels with more than one tune-group or "tune-family."

Before we conclude this summary, there is one final group of tunes in Mr. Abbott's repertory which must be mentioned. Unlike most of his other melodies, this group is characterized by a framework of tonal triadic harmony, an abundance of melodic skips, and definite rates of harmonic change (usually per half measure in the third phrase). A comparison of "The Brooklyn Theater Fire" (Fig. 11) or "Terrence's Farewell" with the other examples cited will clarify the singularity of this particular group of tunes.

As we stated earlier, this paper was intended to provide a summary of the kinds of tune-groups into which O.J. Abbott's melo-

dies fall. In order to undertake a more extensive analysis of the tunes, their characteristics melodic and rhythmic figurations, the processes of variation which Mr. Abbott renders upon them, and, finally, the details of performance style which define him as one of the "finest and most representative of the Ontario folksingers,"¹¹ it is necessary to perceive some of the larger patterns which underlie his repertory. It is hoped that the information provided in this paper may be useful not only to those interested in studying the songs performed by O.J. Abbott and other traditional Ontario singers, but also to anyone concerned with the role of Anglo-Canadian folksong within the overall context of North American song and balladry.

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FOOTNOTES

- 1 Fowke, *Lumbering Songs from the Northern Woods* (Austin: American Folklore Society, 1970), p. 217.
- 2 Copies of Professor Fowke's field recordings are located at the Music Archive, Department of Music, York University, Ont.
- 3 Fowke, *Traditional Singers and Songs from Ontario* (Hatboro, PA: Folklore Associates, 1965).
- 4 Norman Cazden, "Regional and Occupational Orientations of American Traditional Song," *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, 3 (1950), 120-34.
- 6 *Ibid.*
- 7 Samuel Bayard, "American Folksongs and Their Music," *Southern Folklore Quarterly*, 17 (1953), 122-39.
- 8 Norman Cazden, "Notes on the Analysis of Traditional Song Tunes," in Fowke, *Lumbering Songs*, p. 18.
- 9 Frank Kidson, "Irish Music," in *Grove's Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, 1903 edition, II, 736b.
- 10 This is one of nine groups of melodies identified by Cazden in a paper delivered to the Graduate Programme in "Musicology of Contemporary Cultures," York University, Fall, 1979. The paper focused on the analysis of melodic variation in British and North-American traditional song.
- 11 Fowke, *Traditional Singers*, p. 11.

Résumé: *Henry V. Hadeed analyse les airs de chansons de O.J. Abbott, en signalant que beaucoup appartiennent aux familles-d'airs décrits par Samuel Bayard, mais que d'autres ne peuvent être trouvés dans les classifications de Bayard. Il décrit et groupe ces airs pour démontrer les grands modèles sous-jacents au répertoire de M. Abbott.*