

THE GATINEAU VALLEY SINGING TRADITION: A CONTEMPORARY VIEW¹

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In the 114 years which have elapsed since the publication of the first Canadian folksong collection,² we have amassed a tremendous store of song texts, recorded from oral tradition and deposited in various archives and libraries across the country. This wealth of recorded material, however, vastly overshadows the available body of analytical works on the singing habits of Canadians, for until recently most researchers have been content to collect song texts with only a minimum of contextual information. It was this consideration which prompted me in 1977 to propose to the National Museum of Man a collecting project which would include a study of the total singing tradition of a community where song is still a vital part of the contemporary lifestyle.

Fieldwork for this project was carried out in the summer of 1977 within the anglophone community of the central Gatineau Valley in Western Quebec. The research area was defined by the boundaries of two Roman Catholic parishes which are contained within the townships of Lapeche and Low in Gatineau County. The majority of informants, like the majority of residents of the field area, were third- to sixth-generation Canadians, descendants of the Irish and Irish-Canadian settlers who homesteaded in the district in the mid-nineteenth century. As a social entity, the central Gatineau community is now composed of residents of the study area, mainly senior citizens, plus former residents. This latter group, the children and grandchildren of county residents, live and work in the Ottawa-Hull metropolitan district, but maintain close ties with the rural population. Thus not all of the informants for this project were current residents of the research area, although all had been raised there and continue to perceive themselves as part of the rural community.

The project resulted in a collection of 142 songs gathered from 23 informants ranging in age from 31 to 84; and a selection of interviews covering all aspects of the use of vocal music within the community, past and present. The collection, ranging from ballads of the 1798 Irish rebellion to popular hits of the 1940s, represents a sampling of the local repertoire rather than an exhaustive survey, for the pressures of time necessitated the curtailment of fieldwork long before all potential informants had been contacted.

The persistence of a folk song tradition within a fifty-mile radius of the national capital should present no surprise to anyone familiar with the geographic and cultural region of which Gatineau County is part — that is, the Ottawa Valley. Defined by the watershed of the Ottawa River system, "The Valley," as it is locally known, includes the Ontario river front counties of Renfrew, Carleton, Russell, and Prescott, as well as Lanark and the northern portions of Grenville, Dundas, Stormont, and Glengarry; and the Quebec counties of Pontiac, Gatineau, Hull, and Papineau. In spite of massive post-war growth within the Ottawa-Hull metropolitan area, the region has managed to maintain its cultural integrity to a surprising degree, and continues to exist

1. The research project on which this article is based was sponsored by the Canadian Centre for Folk Culture Studies, National Museum of Man, National Museums of Canada, and the field collection is deposited in the Archives of that institution in Ottawa. This article is a slightly modified version of a paper presented at the 1978 annual meeting of the Folklore Studies Association of Canada in London, Ontario. The editorial assistance of Martin Lovelace in preparing this paper for publication is gratefully acknowledged.

2. Ernest Gagnon, *Chansons populaires du Canada* (Quebec: Bureau du Foyer Canadien, 1865).

within a rural economy still based on the traditional industries of agriculture and lumbering. Recent political events notwithstanding, the Ottawa River serves as a boundary only in the political sense, for the economic, social, and cultural relationships of both official language groups continue to span the river, just as they have for the past 175 years.

This is not to imply that anglophone residents of Gatineau County are without a sense of Quebec identity. Their self-perception as Quebecers is strong, but is firmly linked to the conviction that the Quebec side of the Ottawa Valley is the superior part. Separated from other parts of the province by the Laurentian Mountains, and linked by major communication routes to Western Quebec and Eastern Ontario, the people of the Gatineau Valley relate closely to their region but not to their province as a whole.

From the earliest days of settlement by the founding peoples and by smaller representations of other European ethnic groups, music has been a central feature of Ottawa Valley life. In anglophone and francophone communities on both sides of the provincial boundary line, musical and related arts — singing, fiddling, step-dancing, and square dancing — have always been valued as prime elements of local culture. Given this strong sense of regional identity and cultural conservatism, the retention of a song tradition within the Gatineau Valley anglophone community is only natural.

Nor is the nature of the local singing tradition unusual, for it exhibits all those features which have been noted by collectors working in other regions of Canada. Solo unaccompanied performance is still acknowledged as the "real old-time way" of rendering a song, although some of the younger singers now provide their own guitar accompaniment. At present, only the most elderly performers speak the last phrase of a song, and this is done only for certain numbers — presumably those they first heard performed in this manner. Narrative compositions continue to predominate within the local repertoire. Ballads formed 60 per cent of the collection recorded for this project, and many of the complaints, ditties, and sentimental songs contained strong narrative elements. In terms of provenance, the collected repertoire reflects a balance between items of European and North America origin, with the majority of songs having been recorded previously in other parts of Canada. Within the study area, many individuals possess personal song collections. Some of the informants sang from *Family Herald* scrapbooks assembled during the thirties, forties, or fifties; others had handwritten notebooks of song lyrics. Younger members of the community are maintaining the practice by exchanging typewritten or Xeroxed copies of favourite numbers. Songwriting, a prominent feature of the earlier tradition, is also being continued. There are at least two active composers in the community at present. Recent local compositions, like the earlier ones, are predominantly satiric rather than tragic in nature, and tend to be relatively short-lived once the situation which inspired their creation has been forgotten. Males continue to dominate the local scene in terms of holding status as singers, although many women, especially those possessing song scrapbooks and notebooks, know more traditional songs than their male counterparts. As in other parts of the country where lumbering was once the chief industry, the practice of singing in the shanties played a significant role in reinforcing the song repertoire, although within this community the prime means of transmission was from parent to child within the home.

In this brief description of the main elements of the Gatineau Valley singing tradition, one notes many features which have been commented on extensively by other folklorists in discussions of various aspects of the song tradition

of other Canadian regions. Ives, for example, has examined in detail the satiric song tradition of the Atlantic provinces.³ Both Ives and Pocius have discussed sexual differentiation in the attribution of status to male and female performers.⁴ Rosenberg has noted the importance of personal song collections in relation to Maritime singers,⁵ and Fowke has described the use of song within Ontario and Quebec shanties.⁶ There are several aspects of the Gatineau Valley tradition, however, which have not been touched on in other discussions of traditional music in Canada, but which are significant enough to merit consideration.

First among these is the question of cultural identity as reflected in the use of song. Within the study area, both vocal and instrumental music are closely related by the people to their sense of Irishness, although Irish material predominates in neither the song nor the dance tune repertoire. This sense of ethnic identity, however, is of a very particular brand, for the recent sectarian troubles in Ulster have served to erase any lingering traces of a sense of political allegiance to Ireland, except among a very small percentage of the most elderly residents. To the rest of the community, their Irishness is of a Canadian kind, and is related geographically not to Ireland but to the Gatineau Valley. This total identification of ethnic origin with present nationality has been noted among the Scottish Canadians of Glengarry County by Ottawa historian Marianne McLean, who, while conducting an ethnographic survey for the Canadian Centre for Folk Culture Studies, observed that these people viewed their Scottishness as the essential part of their Canadianism.⁷ For both the Scots of Glengarry and the Irish of the Gatineau Valley, music remains a prime expression of this sense of identity.

Music, however, operates within the local culture as more than an expression of identity. For this community, as for many others throughout the Valley, music retains its place at the heart of life. It is seen as an essential element of existence, an activity as natural and as necessary as eating or breathing. The persistence of this outlook, wherein music is perceived as one of the central elements of culture and not merely a peripheral addition for purposes of entertainment, was evident from all my fieldwork experiences. The collecting project was greeted with widespread enthusiasm, but not with surprise, for members of the community found it only just and proper for the National Museum to be interested in such an important aspect of their way of life. I was constantly overwhelmed by the zeal with which singers and non-singers alike discussed musical traditions in minute detail, and never seemed to tire of the subject. I was equally impressed by their ingenuity in contriving means to witness an interview, or participate in a singing occasion. No one was the least bit interested in the report I was to write for the Canadian Centre for Folk Studies, but everyone wanted to know when the words to the songs would be published and where they could obtain a copy.

3. Edward D. Ives, *Larry Gorman: The Man Who Made the Songs* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1964); "Satirical Songs in Maine and the Maritime Provinces of Canada," *Journal of the International Folk Music Council*, 14 (1962), 65-69.
4. Edward D. Ives, "Lumbercamp Singing and the Two Traditions," *Canadian Folk Music Journal*, 5 (1977), 17-23; Gerald Pocius, "The First Day That I Thought of It Since I Got Wed: Role Expectations and Singer Status in a Newfoundland Outport," *Western Folklore*, 25 (1976), 109-122.
5. Neil V. Rosenberg, "Listening, Reading and Singing: A New Brunswick Songbook," paper presented at the annual meeting of the Canadian Ethnology Society, Vancouver, 1976.
6. Edith Fowke, *Lumbering Songs from the Northern Woods* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1970).
7. "An Ethnographic Survey of the Scottish Community of Glengarry County," unpublished report, Canadian Centre for Folk Culture Studies, National Museum of Man, Ottawa, 1977, p. 1.

This perception of music as a central element of culture is all the more remarkable when one considers that the contemporary lifestyle has obliterated many of the singing occasions provided by the traditional way of life based on agriculture and seasonal woods work. It appears, however, that with the loss of many of the older musical occasions, singing, when it occurs, has taken on a heightened significance. It is an important feature of all major social events involving family or community: weddings, reunions, birthdays, or anniversary celebrations. Even though actual song performance may be relegated by circumstance to a relatively brief time period within the context of the total social occasion, for many individuals of all ages, the essence of the celebration lies in the performance of songs from the traditional repertoire in a communal setting. The vital importance of this exercise of group culture on an occasion of social significance is apparent to anyone witnessing a country wedding. The emotional climax of the event is reached when the family and guests, having dispensed with the formal conventions of church service and hotel reception, retire to the home of the bride's parents to spend the rest of the night feasting themselves on old-time song and music.

Another important question in any examination of a contemporary singing tradition is the nature and extent of media influence. While some folklorists may tend to view records, radio, and television as an intrusion on the song tradition of an area, the people of the Gatineau Valley exhibit no such prejudice. They use commercial music as a source of additional repertoire, and since they are very selective in adopting only items which reflect established local taste, they quite rightly consider such adaptations as an extension of the old tradition, rather than a break from it. With few exceptions, songs borrowed from the media fall into one of two categories of commercial music — country-western or folk-revival Irish — categories which indeed represent extensions of the local tradition, for both types of music reflect strong narrative elements and a pronounced tendency towards sentimentality, two predominant qualities of the older tradition. In favouring these two categories of song, members of the community are maintaining a repertoire which, while in a constant state of change, continues to reflect a balance between items of North American and European origin, and to mirror two prime factors in their sense of identity — their Irishness and their ruralness.

It is to be noted that a significant number of songs by contemporary Canadian composers have entered oral tradition within the study area. Writers such as Ian Tyson and Gordon Lightfoot, whose lyrics evoke images of the landscape or suggest the basic experiences of rural life, are particularly popular. Nor is the influence of Canadian media a recent phenomenon, for, judging by the recorded collection, Wilf Carter had a much greater impact on the local repertoire than any other recording artist of the 20s, 30s or 40s. Television has been influential in discouraging the practice of evening house visiting, a custom which up until the 50s had provided a prime occasion for the use of traditional song. The direct impact of television on repertoire, however, has been limited to the introduction of several traditional songs from the Atlantic provinces, such as "Farewell to Nova Scotia" and "The Star of Logy Bay," which are now known and performed by people of all ages. Having a strong feeling of brotherhood towards the people of the Atlantic region whom they perceive as sharing a culture very similar to their own, the members of the community now watch programs from "down East" as religiously as they used to listen to "Don Messer and his Islanders" a generation earlier.

While we, as folklorists, tend to be very aware of the impact of media on the folk tradition, we often ignore the other side of the coin — what happens to the commercial composition as it enters the folk repertoire. A song is first adapted to the local style of unaccompanied performance. The rhythm loses its regularity as the singer speeds up in the middle of each phrase and suspends musical time completely at the end of it. A chorus may be dropped completely, or sung as a verse. Quatrains are frequently reduced to couplets, as half of the musical pattern is discarded. Verses are eliminated, half forgotten, or placed in reverse order. Local expressions or place names are substituted for terms unfamiliar to the singer. In addition to all these types of internal transformation, songs are subjected to external forces which serve to divorce them from their origin and set them drifting in time. Chief among these in the Gatineau Valley is a method of dating songs which bears little relationship to chronological reality. Songs are classified as either “old” or “really old.” “Old” songs are those which an individual first heard at an early age. If the performer at that time was an elderly person, then the song is deemed to be “really old.” Since this dating method is used by people of all ages, individual songs, even those of fairly recent provenance, are quick to assume the hoary respectability of advanced age, and, subjected to the internal transformations suggested above, soon sound remarkably like everything else in the repertoire. The thoroughness of this process of adaptation was brought home to me when I came upon the original 1930s recording of a song which I had collected from three informants, none of whom remembered where they had learned it. The song was “The Gangster’s Warning,” and Gene Autry himself would have been hard put to sing along with any of my informants, or even to provide guitar accompaniment for their renditions of his composition.

A final consideration in the examination of a contemporary singing tradition is the possibility of its continuation into the future. The oldest elements of the local repertoire are undoubtedly passing slowly out of oral circulation, but for reasons different from those usually cited in such situations: namely, memory loss on the part of the performer, or lack of interest on the part of the audience. The types of singing occasion provided by the contemporary lifestyle are not always conducive to the performance of the old ballads. Some, like “The Flying Cloud,” are too long for current tastes; others, like “Paddy O’Donnell,” reflect sectarian sentiments which are distasteful to present audiences of mixed religious and ethnic backgrounds; a few of the older ballads and songs have already disintegrated to such a state of garbled incoherence that it is highly unlikely that anyone would bother learning them. In addition, the settings for many social affairs — community centres, parish halls, or hotels — serve to discourage performance by the older singers who are very shy. While there is much family visiting between city and country, and much family singing, there is not the continuous contact between generations which encourages the transmission of repertoire. On the other hand, many of the younger singers interviewed for this project, those in the thirty to forty age group, are vitally interested in learning the songs of their elders, a task greatly simplified by the universal possession of cassette tape-recorders. Whatever the eventual fate of specific items in the repertoire, it seems safe to predict that, given the strong sense of local identity and feeling for music evident among the younger generations of community members, the Gatineau Valley tradition of song will endure.