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Résumé: *Neil Rosenberg offre un rapport de la session de musique folklorique qu'il a organisée à l'occasion de la Reunion annuelle de l'Association Canadienne pour les Etudes de Folklore à l'Université du Nouveau Brunswick, Fredericton, le 3 juin 1977, et présente une identification des différents collaborateurs.*

W. ROY MacKENZIE AS A COLLECTOR OF FOLKSONG¹

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W. Roy Mackenzie was the first major collector of folksong in Nova Scotia and his work *The Quest of the Ballad* contains much information about himself in his relationships with singers.² My intention here is to review his works on folksong and explore his attitudes toward its collection and presentation in published form. Mackenzie, it seems, progressed, as a result of fieldwork experience, from a simple interest in texts to a fuller appreciation of context and performance.

Mackenzie was born into a middle-class family; his grandfather, an emigrant from Scotland, had established a ship-building business in River John, Pictou County, Nova Scotia, where Mackenzie was born in 1883. He graduated from Dalhousie University in 1902 and then studied at Harvard for an M.A. and a Ph.D. in English. While there, in addition to his interests in Shakespeare and Old English philology, he studied under G. L. Kittredge, the disciple and successor to Francis James Child. Kittredge encouraged him to return to River John to collect the songs which Mackenzie had heard there as a boy and which he now realized were, many of them, "English and Scottish Popular Ballads."³ He began collecting in Pictou County and continued over

¹The author wishes to thank Dr. Neil V. Rosenberg for his critical comments on this paper.

²W. Roy Mackenzie, *The Quest of the Ballad* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1919). For convenience in the remainder of this paper this title will be given as *Quest*, within the text following citations.

³For a discussion of G. L. Kittredge's influence in stimulating collection of ballads throughout North America see D. K. Wilgus, *Anglo-American Folksong Scholarship since 1898* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers Univ. Press, 1959), pp. 145, 147, 174.

the course of several summers.⁴ His findings were published in part in three articles in the *Journal of American Folklore* in 1909, 1912, and 1923; the earliest of these was a preliminary sketch of his fieldwork experiences and of the themes which he took up later in *The Quest of the Ballad*.⁵

Mackenzie's interest in folksong was never paramount in his life, however; in 1910 he began teaching English at Washington University, St. Louis, Missouri, and it may be that he looked upon his ballad collecting as a summer recreation from other academic work. After the publication of *Ballads and Sea Songs from Nova Scotia* in 1928 he seems to have done no further work in folksong. Helen Creighton was surprised and dismayed when she visited him in 1952 to find that he had preserved no working manuscripts from his collecting days. Mackenzie's manner in his writing is drawn from his scholastic background and is often a humorous reference to it in its density of literary allusion. It might be possible to read an ambivalent feeling about the worth of studying the ballad, as opposed to more conventional forms of literature, in Mackenzie's choice of this tone which mingles bathos, affection, self-parody, and respect for his informants.

When Mackenzie began collecting ballads in his home town of River John two of his first singers, Ned Langille and Dick Hinds, were men he had heard sing as a boy. He did not extend his search beyond the north shore counties of Pictou and Colchester. In his findings he reconstructs a picture of the state of the ballad-singing tradition in these counties during the nineteenth century. Scots settlers brought collections of broadsides from Scotland and newly printed broadsides from the "old country" were sent by mail: "Mr. Henderson remembers that ballad sheets were continually arriving from Scotland, for people throughout the district, and that they were always hailed with joy."⁶ The first settlers, of the latter eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, were "an active, roystering class of men, who cheerfully travelled miles to congregate for an evening's revelry, and drank gallons of Jamaica rum at a barn-raising."⁷ But the introduction of "fanatical" religion later in the nineteenth century wrought significant changes in this kind of social behaviour.

Mackenzie, who was careful to record any of his informants' terms that related to the ballad, quotes an informant's comment that his father knew some of those old songs but never sang them unless he was "feelin' guid"; Mackenzie observes: "The phrase, in fact, savors unmistakably of alcohol, and is about the strongest one employed by these people to denote a state of boisterous hilarity, a very rare condition with the self-respecting Scot."⁸ As a result of religious fanaticism the singing of ballads ceased to be seen as a respectable form of entertainment; they were frowned on as "rowdy songs."⁹

⁴For further biographical information see G. Malcolm Laws, Jr., "Foreword: W. Roy Mackenzie, 1883-1957," in *Ballads and Sea Songs from Nova Scotia*, collected by W. Roy Mackenzie (1928: rpt. Hatboro: Folklore Associates, 1963), pp.[i]-[ix], and Helen Creighton, "W. Roy Mackenzie, Pioneer," *Canadian Folk Music Society Newsletter*, 2 (1967), 15-22.

⁵W. Roy Mackenzie, "Ballad-Singing in Nova Scotia," *Journal of American Folk-Lore*, 22 (1909), 327-331; "Three Ballads from Nova Scotia," *Journal of American Folk-Lore* 23 (1910), 371-380; "Ballads from Nova Scotia," *Journal of American Folk-Lore*, 25 (1912), 182-187.

⁶Mackenzie, "Ballad-Singing in Nova Scotia," p.328.

⁷*Ibid.*, 329.

⁸*Ibid.*, 329.

⁹Mackenzie, "Three Ballads from Nova Scotia," p.380.

Mackenzie gives an interesting account of the process which followed in which French-Swiss Huguenot settlers adopted ballads that were becoming unfashionable and forbidden to respectable God-fearing Scots. The French-Swiss had come to Nova Scotia shortly after the initial Scottish settlement in the latter half of the eighteenth century. They took up land near the Scots at first but later joined in mixed communities along the coast.¹⁰ The children of the French settlers adopted English and, Mackenzie noted with some amusement, tended to become fervent British patriots. Acculturation seems to have occurred quickly:

... [they] immediately went to take over the traditions — folklore, patriotism and all — of the Scotch settlers with whom they were associated and from whom they learned the English language. Old Bob, Little Ned [two of his singers], and their fathers before them, received from their exiled ancestors of two or three generations back something of the French temperament, appearance, and manner of speech, but in the way of tradition and belief they had nothing which had not been borrowed from their neighbours in the adopted land. (*Quest*, 44-45).

The French-Swiss were regarded as “socially inferior” and Mackenzie found that the singers among them had often learned their songs from the Scots while working as servants in their farms and households. The adoption of ballads by the servant class set them even further beyond the pale to the Scots.¹¹

Mackenzie’s analysis of this process seems a significant, and early approach to the loss of “old country” and the acquisition of new traditions by an immigrant ethnic group. Here Mackenzie’s observation is original and ahead of his time for in 1973 Robert B. Klymasz could still point to lack of studies in Canadian folklore which considered an exchange between ethnic groups and M. Carole Henderson could also complain that only recently had the processes of assimilation, acculturation, and interchange between traditions begun to be studied.¹² It would be special pleading, however, to present Mackenzie as being thoroughly interested in such problems; his concern was primarily with the ballads themselves. His commentary on the phenomenon of transmission is rather the result of his usual careful observation and historical description of the ballad in what he considered to be its “last refuge.”

The Quest of the Ballad is an extension of the preliminary notes on singers made in Mackenzie’s article “Ballad Singing in Nova Scotia.” Kittredge’s headnote to the article commends it to all students of the popular ballad for the way that Mackenzie had been able to provide information on issues about which scholars had previously “been obliged to infer or to conjecture,” from “the recollection of living persons.”¹³ Mackenzie’s achievement in the *Quest* lies in his careful observation and presentation of the views of his informants.

Among such issues are the singer’s aesthetic, his attitude toward the songs, their social function, his role as a performer, and factors making for

¹⁰Mackenzie, “Ballad-Singing in Nova Scotia,” p.329.

¹¹*Ibid.*, 330.

¹²Robert B. Klymasz, “From Immigrant to Ethnic Folklore: A Canadian View of Process and Transition,” *Journal of the Folklore Institute*, 10 (1973), 131-139; M. Carole Henderson, “Folklore Scholarship and the Sociopolitical Milieu in Canada,” *Journal of the Folklore Institute*, 10 (1973), 97-107.

¹³G. L. Kittredge, headnote to W. Roy Mackenzie, “Ballad-Singing in Nova Scotia,” p.327.

change in tradition. Mackenzie elicited comments from singers on their songs and took note of their chance remarks as part of his general inquiry into the life of the ballad in tradition. He was always careful to distinguish his own tastes from those of his informants. At first glance this might be taken for a form of snobbery by a college professor taking vacations among, to use his own term, "low company." Indeed, Helen Creighton felt that "a certain damage was done" by Mackenzie's use of this term and by his references to the world beyond his fieldwork area as "civilisation."¹⁴ The recognition of cultural differences where they exist between collector and informants is essential, however, and Mackenzie scrupulously avoids distorting his findings about a singer's point of view by assuming that his tastes and theirs are identical.

He states categorically that the collector must not try to educate his informants: "His success will depend largely on his ability to regard every man's private opinions as his own sacred property" (*Quest*, 93), and he is aware that he, as an educated, sophisticated, person cannot respond to songs in the same way as his informants: "We are, to be sure, strongly influenced by our knowledge of the literature that has been produced in our more conventional world, and constantly apply to the poetry of the folk a sort of criticism that would never occur to the composers or singers themselves" (*Quest*, 13).

Thus he enquired for the singers' favourites; in the case of Dick Hinds, the ex-sailor, of River John, he describes his mixed repertory of traditional ballads current in Nova Scotia in the singer's youth, ballads and songs learned from other sailors, street and music-hall songs, and says: "This puzzling collection he himself regarded with great calmness and impartiality, and there were only two specimens that he marked out for special approval. These were 'Kelly the Pirate' and 'Jack Donahue'" (*Quest*, 66).

Mackenzie searches for links between a singer's taste in songs and other aspects of his life; here he compares the "fine resonance" and "rhetorical sweep" of Hinds's favourite two ballads with the same qualities in his speech which was similarly sententious (*Quest*, 69).

From his conversations with singers Mackenzie is able to show their general belief in the *truth* of ballads; thus Herbert Halpert could cite Mackenzie's work as one of very few investigations of the singer's aesthetic when Halpert's essay on "Truth in Folksongs" appeared in 1939.¹⁵ Mackenzie states: "Most of the singers whom I have presented in these pages were simple old men and women who not only loved and admired their ballads, but sang in the unquestioning belief that they were detailing faithful records of actual events" (*Quest*, 107). This observation had important consequences for the content of the ballad corpus, for, as he continues: "My firm belief, then, is that ballad-singers — who are of an entirely different race from other singers — perpetuate only those ballads which from their point of view are trustworthy records of actual and important happenings, couched in language that is fitting and effective" (*Quest*, 107).

He comments several times on the empathy shown by singers with characters in their ballads; a singer's remark on a missing stanza showed her imagina-

¹⁴Creighton, "W. Roy Mackenzie, Pioneer," p.17.

¹⁵Herbert Halpert, "Truth in Folk-Songs — Some Observations on the Folk-Singer's Attitude," Introductory Essay in John Harrington Cox, *Traditional Ballads and Folk-Songs mainly from West Virginia* (1939; rpt. Philadelphia: American Folklore Society, 1964), p.xv.

tive involvement in the song: "Here a whole stanza was gone, as Ann freely admitted, piecing up the imperfection with an explanatory comment: 'She would fall down in a faintin' fit, not knowin' that it was her own true lover she was talkin' to in the dark'" (*Quest*, 31). Another singer took "vicarious part" in the song, saying, of a foul murder: "I git so mad an' sorry every time I think o' that sneak of a Glengyle that it's jist as much as I can do to go on singin'" (*Quest*, 237). Mackenzie's noting of his singer's chance comments was relatively original and became the basis of his most valuable insights into the nature of the ballad tradition.

The effect of this truth-centred aesthetic on the continuance of a ballad in tradition is shown in Mackenzie's account of a singer's reaction to "The Cruel Mother" (Child, No. 20). The singer had been reluctant to admit that she knew the song and performed it only after protesting that it was "foolish" and "indecent" and untrue: "At my expressed delight in its interest and mellow antiquity, however, Ellen was inclined to be sardonic. The story, she asserted, must be an out-and-out lie. There might be such things as ghosts, though she had her doubts even of that; but when it came to a game of ball and a long sermon from two babies who had been killed and buried, the person who made up the lie was going a little too far." The song's refrain "Down alone by the greenwood siding" was also interpreted in contemporary terms and found unacceptable: "And as to the song being an old one, it was well known that sidings were synchronous with railroads, and it was not so very long since railroads had been started."¹⁶ It is one of Mackenzie's strengths that he is not content to speak generally of the replacement of ballad singing by more "modern" amusements but enquires into some causes of the shift in popular taste.

Mackenzie drew a general theory of change in ballad texts from his observations and interviews with singers and found that unfamiliar words are replaced by familiar ones, and that rhyme is less important than sense. Yet unknown words might be retained, he felt, for the enjoyment of their sound or from the folk singer's general textual conservatism (*Quest*, 172-173).

Through his conversations with singers Mackenzie also achieved a sense of the social rewards and egoistic gratifications brought by being a recognised ballad singer. Possession of a broad repertoire was highly valued; one of his informants paid tribute to another singer in these terms: "He could sing steady all day an' never sing the same song twict" (*Quest*, 38).

Mackenzie reconstructs one of the most overtly aggressive social contexts for singing in his account of a "singing match." He describes a gathering of travellers, delayed by a storm, at an inn where one proposed a singing match: "This was to last all night if necessary, and if it did, so much the better." The singers sang alternately giving different songs until, long after midnight, only one had not exhausted his repertoire and was declared the winner. Mackenzie learned of the event from a man whose fervent recollection showed the importance of winning: "... the old man during the narration showed a fire of enthusiasm which made it quite clear to me that the supremacy thus gained was not one to be lightly esteemed. Indeed, I have more than once, in my conversations with old men and women throughout Pictou and Colchester, been assured that the man who, forty or fifty years ago, had the biggest stock of 'old songs' in his district was to be regarded with a good deal of veneration."¹⁷

¹⁶Mackenzie, "Ballads from Nova Scotia," p.186.

¹⁷Mackenzie, "Ballad-Singing in Nova Scotia," p.328.

Mackenzie was also dispassionate enough to record the discarding of the ballad tradition when it no longer provided the singer with social prestige. Mr. Henderson, the singer who had won the contest, had possessed "an unusual collection of broadsides" but they had been lost and the singer did not regret it; "Indeed, why should he?" says Mackenzie, with admirable detachment. The singer had dropped ballads from his repertoire when he moved from West River to Tatamagouche where musical taste was more influenced by mass entertainment styles; yet he remained active as a performer: "Possessed of a good voice and a fondness for performing at the little social entertainments and local concerts of the village, he soon outgrew such an antiquated practice as ballad-singing, and the few ballads that he can still sing are retained almost by accident."¹⁸ Mackenzie selects unromantic similes to depict this change in popular taste: "When the change came they treated their ballads, including broadside sheets when they happened to possess them, as we treat our worn-out hats and coats and the popular novels that we read with enthusiasm a year ago" (*Quest*, 234). That he does not lament the loss nor curse their poor judgement is commendable; a member of one group or class has no right to criticise the cultural property of another. Mackenzie takes his objective tone from his informant who showed no regret: "His tone, when he referred to them, was neither enthusiastic nor supercilious, and he repeated or described them, in so far as his memory would serve him, with the usual remark that they were 'very good old songs'" (*Quest*, 236). Mackenzie chooses to play the role of the detached chronicler of the end of a tradition which he has no power to resuscitate.

Mackenzie was selective in what he recorded and published. His definition of worthwhile material broadened, however, as a result of his collecting experience; he found it impossible to dismiss as mere doggerel songs that he had seen performed in full seriousness: "I, who have heard it delivered with conviction by one who was in his own way a severe enough critic, cannot regard it so lightly" (*Quest*, 51). While he had begun by seeking only for versions of the Child ballads he came to feel "that no popular version of any sort of ballad, ancient or modern, can be regarded as common or unclean" (*Quest*, 51). Nevertheless he presented his material in the "Child and other" format stigmatised by D. K. Wilgus.¹⁹

He did not find much interest or merit in local songs and these fall near the end in his published collections. Mackenzie observed that it was only the ballads brought from the British Isles that were worthy of our "gratulation" since "the art of ballad making . . . has never risen to any great heights in any part of this western continent."²⁰ In this attitude he is not alone; Helen Creighton has shown a greater interest but has not presented a proportionate quantity of the many local songs she has recorded in her published works. Thus the schools of both Kittredge, represented by Mackenzie, and Cecil Sharp, represented by Helen Creighton, have provided only a selective record of folksong tradition in Nova Scotia.

Mackenzie has also been recognised as a superb annotator of ballad variants; his headnotes in *Ballads and Sea Songs* have been acclaimed by G.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, 330.

¹⁹Wilgus, *Anglo-American Folksong Scholarship since 1898*, p.145.

²⁰Mackenzie, *Ballads and Sea Songs from Nova Scotia*, p.xxiii.

Malcolm Laws as being extremely valuable for their annotation to traditional broadsides. *The Quest of the Ballad*, however, contains so much evidence of Mackenzie's understanding of singers and their relationships to their songs that we must regret that he wrote no more on the subject. His holistic sense of the ballad in performance was in advance of the thought of his time; consider the following passage:

This is one of the few occasions on which I have witnessed the satisfactory — I might say the ideal — rendition of a ballad, and my memory of the composite performance of old James and his wife is to me rather more valuable than is the somewhat debased and sentimentalized ballad which I carried away. It is only when a ballad is rendered by a singer of the old school in the presence of one or more listeners who have by chance survived with him that the full significance of ballad-singing can be realized. The total effect is infinitely greater than that suggested by the unaccompanied ballad which is transmitted to the printed page, or even by the words with the music. It is both of these plus the emotion of the singer and listeners, an emotion manifested by the latter, sometimes in ejaculatory comments, and sometimes in an unconscious or excited joining of forces with the singer in the rendition of a line or a refrain. In this harmony between the singer and his audience one may see, if one is as fortunate as I have been, a clear suggestion of that older and more complete harmony which the dust of many centuries has so obscured for us, and which we vaguely define as "the spirit of the throng" (*Quest*, 41).

Mackenzie's oblique reference to communalist ideas of ballad creation shows his theoretical background. His interest in the "total effect" of the ballad in performance, however, shows the broadening influence of fieldwork experience on the mind of a scholar who might otherwise have been simply an excellent annotator.

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Résumé. *Martin Lovelace: "W. Roy Mackenzie comme collectionneur de chansons folkloriques."*

Cette communication rendra hommage aux résultats obtenus par W. Roy Mackenzie dans la cueillette et l'étude de ballades et de chansons en Nouvelle-Ecosse. Elle examinera les hypothèses critiques concernant la ballade telles qu'il les avait étudiées à l'école de Child et de Kittredge, et décrira ses modifications apportées à ces hypothèses à la suite de ses expériences personnelles d'enquêteur. L'intérêt qu'il portait à l'esthétique du chanteur, au contexte de l'exécution des chansons, au phénomène d'acculturation dans son effet sur le répertoire, permettent à Mackenzie de paraître bien en avance sur les connaissances de son époque.