AN INTRODUCTION TO THE PUCKETT COLLECTION OF ONTARIO FOLKLORE

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Newbell Niles Puckett was an American sociologist and folklorist, best known for his work in the field of southern black folklore. A native of Mississippi, he spent his teaching career at Western Reserve University in Cleveland, Ohio, where he was deeply involved in collecting the popular beliefs and superstitions of that state, and, in fact, was working on a definitive collection of Ohio folklore at the time of his death in 1967 at the age of sixty-nine. During his later years, Puckett had vacationed in the Kawartha Lakes district of Ontario, near the city of Peterborough. Between 1956 and 1963, he made a number of tape recordings with a variety of local citizens, tapes which after his death were deposited in the John H. White Department of the Cleveland Public Library. The committee appointed to supervise the assignment of Puckett's various materials to appropriate institutions decided to place the Canadian tapes with the Memorial University of Newfoundland Folklore and Language Archive. The work of transcribing and annotating the material, begun by Puckett, was taken up first by Dr. N. V. Rosenberg, Archivist, and eventually by this writer. Although still far from complete, it is sufficiently advanced to allow a general description of the collection and an appraisal of its importance to the study of Canadian musical traditions.

Contents of the Collection

The material forwarded to Memorial University consisted of twenty tapes plus some tentative transcriptions made by Dr. Puckett. Eighteen of the tapes were made at Bobcaygeon, and one was recorded at Lakehurst; the final tape consists of sample excerpts taken from the other nineteen tapes. Nearly all the recording dates fall into short periods in early July and early September, suggesting that the collector had only brief vacation periods in which to do his field work. Generally the technical quality of the tapes is excellent; incomprehensibility results more from an excess of conviviality among the informants than from any technical difficulties, although occasionally the opening or closing words of a conversation or song are lost.

Of the 25 informants interviewed (20 men and 5 women), 22 sing and 7 play instrumental music. The music and songs appear to have been acquired chiefly from three sources: from the informants' own families, from

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1 I am indebted to Dr. N. V. Rosenberg and Michael Taft for their assistance in the preparation of this article.
4 A checklist of songs and instrumental music is included at the end of this article.
5 Three informants who sing in German are not included in this count, nor is their material discussed in the article, since it appears that they are personal friends of the collector who are visiting the area.
phonograph records or radio broadcasts, or from fellow workers in the lumbercamps. The age range is quite broad; the oldest informant is 96, while the youngest appears to be in his late teens or early twenties. Generally the informants were born in the immediate vicinity of Bobcaygeon and had spent all of their lives there. Several, however, appear to be former residents who return from urban centres just for vacation. Four separate family groups are represented. It is evident that many of the informants are well acquainted with each other, as they combine in various ways to sing or play together, and some of them know Puckett quite well, while others have obviously just met him. Little information is given about present occupations except for scattered references to work as licensed guides, but most of the men at one time were employed locally in the lumbering industry. There is no indication that any of the women interviewed work outside the home.

Most of the recording time on the 20 tapes is given over to songs and instrumental music, including 157 recordings of 123 different songs which fall into most categories known to the folklorist. Although the collection had already received the appellation "Canadian Lumberjack Songs" before it reached Canada, only eight of the total number are songs directly related to the industry, and not all of the others were learned in the lumbercamps. The lumbering songs include local compositions such as "The New Limit Line" and "The Anstruther Township Lumbercamp Song," along with camp songs of wider provenance — "The Jam on Gerry's Rocks" and "Peter Emberly." The latter is often pronounced "Embly" or "Emerly," the result of a central Canadian tendency, most marked among people of Irish descent, to ease pronunciation by dropping or changing the central consonants in a name.

Two other local ballads appear in the collection, "Maggie Howie" and "Bill Dunbar." The former relates to a murder trial of the last century, in which a young Catholic man was tried for the murder of his Protestant sweetheart in Napanee, near Belleville. Interesting background material to the second ballad is given by Puckett's most elderly informant, a 96-year-old man who knew Bill Dunbar and Bob Cottingham, the two victims of the Pigeon Lake drowning accident.

Of the two Child ballads recorded, one is fairly rare in North America. More commonly known as "Henry Martyn" (Child 250), the informant calls it "Three Loving Brothers from Merry Scotland." In the Ontario version, the central character, the youngest of the three brothers, is not named, but his adversary (Charlie Stuart) is, suggesting a closer relationship to American than to Newfoundland or British versions. The only other Child ballad appearing is "Barbara Allen" (Child 84).

For versions of these songs from the same informant, see Edith Fowke, Lumbering Songs from the Northern Woods (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1970), pp. 54, 58.

A recording of this song appears on Folkways FM4005; see also insert notes supplied by Edith Fowke.

This song appears in Lumbering Songs from the Northern Woods, pp. 143-145.

The largest single category is that of the British broadside, with 20 songs falling into this classification, only 10 of which are listed by Laws as current in North America. Of the 9 native American ballads included, all are listed by Laws with the notable exception of the Civil War song, “The Boy Who Wore The Blue” (“The Soldier’s Letter”). Appearing in only a few American collections, it appears to have a fairly wide provenance in Canada; it has been recorded in Newfoundland\(^\text{10}\) and is known also in the Gatineau area of western Quebec.\(^\text{11}\)

The second largest category is that of the sentimental nineteenth-century or turn-of-the-century song. Mothers die (“The Banks of the Clear Crystal River”), fathers drown (“Why Don’t My Father’s Ship Sail In?”), children expire (“The Blind Child’s Prayer,” “The Dying Message”), sons are imprisoned (“A Mother’s Plea for her Son”), and drunkards see the error of their ways (“The Drunkard’s Dream”) in swift succession throughout all the tapes. In the same emotional vein, there are more recent country-western songs, learned by the singers from records and the radio. Among the better-known singers represented are Vernon Dalhart (“Floyd Collins”), Jimmie Rodgers (“When the Cactus Is in Bloom”), Roy Acuff (“The Great Speckled Bird”), Wilf Carter (“Hobo’s Song to the Mounties,” “The Capture of Albert Johnson”), Hank Snow (“A Rose from the Garden of Prayer”, “The Prison Cowboy”), Ernest Tubb (“The Soldier’s Last Letter”), and Bobby Helms (“Fraulein”). The fact that this list covers forty years of recording history suggests that the acquiring of new songs from records is a well-established tradition in the area.

Almost half the songs are very light-hearted in tone, and form a sharp contrast to the ballads, broadsides, and sentimental songs previously mentioned. Music-hall songs figure prominently, with many stage-Irish numbers represented (“Me Tipperary Daisy,” “Pat McCarthy, Hale and Hearty,” “My Name Is Johnny McNaulty”). There are also many nonsense songs, such as “When the Clock Struck Seventeen,” and “The First Time in Twenty-Four Years.” But perhaps the most interesting of the light-hearted group are the bawdy songs. In collecting this material, Puckett apparently did not encounter the difficulties often met by other folklorists, who are not well known to their informants. Thus, he was able to acquire complete and uncensored versions of “Girls, for my Sake Never Wed an Old Man,” “The Keyhole in the Door,” “The Red Light Saloon,” “There Was a Jolly Barber and He Lived in Aberdeen,” and “Molly Machree.” Because several of the tapes were made in a socializing rather than a formal interviewing situation, Puckett was able to collect some songs which a collector might otherwise miss, but which are a definite part of the common repertoire for this type of occasion. These include the ubiquitous “You Are My Sunshine,” which seems to pop up on every other tape, but also several interesting song parodies such as “Maggie Jones” (“In the Shade of the Old Apple Tree”) and “Two Schoolteachers” (“Where the River Shannon Flows”).

\(^{10}\)Memorial University of Newfoundland Folklore and Language Archive, Accession 69-36, Shelf C587, Rev. 303.

\(^{11}\)Author’s personal experience.
Finally, the collection contains a handful of hymns and religious or moralizing songs, which are often sung in close conjunction with some of the racier material but with equal gusto and enthusiasm. There is also a small body of songs which one informant claims to have written, but at least some of these appear to have been previously written by someone else; for example, "The Coupon Song," which was recorded by Bill Monroe in 1941.12

In addition to this wide range of vocal material, the tapes provide 72 instrumental recordings of 52 identified tunes and 5 untitled ones. These are played on fiddle, guitar, banjo, piano, ukelin (a commercially produced bowed zither), and a tin-can instrument devised by one of the informants from burnt matches and piano wire, with a sound that is not describable. All of the above are used as solo instruments, suggesting the possibility of a broader instrumental tradition in the province than was previously believed to exist.

As with the vocal music, there is great variety in the melodies played. They range from the well-known Irish and Scottish jigs and reels to more modern waltzes and breakdowns to commercial successes of the 1950s and early '60s, all played in a rhythm designed to make them suitable for dancing. While the artistic quality of the instrumental music is not as high as that of the singing (the instruments, for example, are not always in tune with each other), the recordings as a whole give a good indication of the nature of the instrumental tradition in that part of the province.

In addition to the musical material, the collection contains a wide variety of verbal lore of various sorts. There are recitations of toasts and poetry (although the latter is hardly comprehensible as the informant is in an advanced state of inebriation), and various forms of prose narrative which would be of interest to the legend and folktale scholar. On eight separate occasions amid the singing and music-making various informants spin tall tales about fishing, or experiences in the lumberwoods; one informant tells Paul Bunyan stories which he obviously learned orally in a lumbercamp setting. Another informant tells a circular tale, the type of endless story which, like the tall tale, is intended to put the listener on. The informants jokingly reveal that they delight in using these stories against visiting American sportsmen. In a more serious vein, the informants recount anecdotes from local history or describe the district during their childhoods, giving many details of the social history of the area, and a great deal of information about the local logging industry is contributed by men who worked in the woods or in related industries. Local folk medicinal practices are also mentioned in the way of charms and blood-stopping devices. And finally, of greatest importance to the folk-music scholar, many of the informants reveal the sources of their repertoires and contribute anecdotal material about the musical traditions of the area.

Significance of the Collection

It appears that Newbell Niles Puckett had planned to publish just the songs from this collection. Presumably the "lumberjack" title had been

assigned by him (the word, incidentally, is never used by any of the
informants), and before his death he had begun transcribing the songs that he
found most interesting. Many of these, however, have already appeared in
print in Ontario collections, and most of the others are readily available
elsewhere.

Having worked with this material over a period of twenty months, during
which time I have become acquainted with the field of Canadian folklore
scholarship, it seems to me that the importance of this collection goes far
beyond the value of any one rare and interesting item. This body of material
indicates that there are aspects of our musical traditions that our scholars
have yet to examine seriously.

In the first place, the collection forces us to take a second look at the
province of Ontario. As Edith Fowke has already pointed out, we can no
longer accept the image of staid, stodgy, and unmusical Ontario. Nor is the
music limited to any one ethnic or national group: the informants on these
tapes represent Irish, Scottish, English, French, German, Ojibway, and
American bloodlines. But perhaps more importantly, we can no longer accept
the old folkloric maxim that a traditional singer must be ancient, uneducated,
isolated, perhaps a bit backward, and most definitely an anachronism in the
modern world. These singers are very typical of rural and small-town Ontario
straightforward, knowledgeable, communicative, able to express themselves
effectively, at times much more effectively than the collector who either
naturally speaks bad grammar or assumes it in a misguided effort to put his
informants at ease.

In direct contrast to what is usually seen as good song-hunting territory,
Bobcaygeon is not an isolated enclave; located in one of the most popular
vacation areas of southern Ontario, it experiences a yearly influx of summer
residents, chiefly from the Toronto region. While basically conservative, as are
most rural areas, the society here is adaptive to change, having had to cope
with constant change from the early days of settlement; Ontario colonists
came to the new world, not from a peasant society, but from a Europe
already undergoing the transformations resulting from industrialization and
urbanization. Living within a basically stable society which experienced
constant gradual change, the people of this district, and of many others in the
southern and eastern areas of the province, have been able to selectively
retain old traditions and to adopt new ones on the basis of their relevance to
their way of life. In the context of this pattern of settlement and growth, the
fact that ancient and modern materials exist side by side in the repertoire of
one singer is not all that remarkable.

In addition to forcing us to look again at the lore of our most heavily
populated province, this collection raises questions about our knowledge of
traditional singing on a national level. We have tended to ascribe the
prevalence of a singing tradition in any specific area of the country to some
demographic or geographic characteristic of that area; thus, Newfoundlanders

13 Edith Fowke, *Lumbering Songs from the Northern Woods; Traditional Singers and
Songs from Ontario* (Hatboro, Pa.: Folklore Associates; Don Mills, Ont.: Burns and
MacEachern Limited, 1965).

sing because they are isolated and live near the sea, whereas in Quebec it is because they are French and Catholic. The fact that many of the performers on these tapes are highly musical without any such ethnic or geographic excuse suggests that the Canadian singing tradition is not restricted along occupational, religious, or ethnic lines as we had previously believed. Moreover, as my own experience in three provinces has taught me, there is an amazing similarity in repertoire across widely separated areas of the country, a similarity that cannot be accounted for simply on the basis of availability of songs. It appears that in emphasizing regional cultural diversity, we have built up an image of the country as a series of fragmented old-country transplants, totally overlooking the fact that among ourselves we share both a widespread interest in musical self-expression and a common taste in lyrics and melodies.

It seems obvious that, given this new view of the province and the nation, the direction of our research has to change; and perhaps we can learn something from this sometimes kindly, sometimes condescending American tourist who wandered so unprejudiced into rural Ontario. With no preconceived notions of what he should find, Puckett collected everything, and thus the tapes present a fuller picture of the total musical tradition of this area than that presented in any printed collection of any Canadian area. While it is true that financial considerations always make the total publication of a collection next to impossible, we must admit that our collectors, let alone our editors, have often been too selective. In addition, because Puckett collected songs where and when he could find them, many are seen in the social context of a group of acquaintances getting together on a summer’s evening to make music; contrast this with the earlier practice of lining up informants and paying them off with a drink of rum for each song produced. The collections compiled as a result of this latter field method tell us a great deal about the tastes of the collectors, but very little about the singing habits of the people, or about the significance of music in their lives. Moreover, they have tended to promote the old regional stereotypes — the “folksy” Maritimer, the super-cool urbanized Upper Canadian — which have distorted our view for much too long.

A real understanding of our cultural traditions can be founded only on a sound base of comprehensive collecting in all areas of the country, and the publications produced must be geared, not towards looking impressive on the shelf of some antiquarian-minded scholar, but towards telling us something important and vital about ourselves. Edith Fowke’s listing of the total repertoire of each of her informants in Traditional Singers and Songs from Ontario was a strong step in the right direction; the publication in some form of this collection would be a second one.

CHECKLIST

(*)indicates that Edith Fowke collected the song from the same informant)

Songs:

Adam’s Last Race
Anstruther Township Lumbercamp Song*
Anything
The Baggage Coach Ahead
The Banks of the Clear Crystal River*

Barbara Allen (Child 84)
The Battle of Mill Springs* (Laws A13)
Beautiful Sunday
Bill Dunbar*
The Black Bottle**
The Soldier’s Last Letter
The Soldier’s Song (The British Soldier’s Grave)*
That Is True
There Was a Jolly Barber and He Lived in Aberdeen
Three Loving Brothers from Merry Scotland (Henry Martyn)
(Child 250)
Till We Meet Again
The Trip We Took over the Mountain
True Blue Bill
Two Schoolteachers
What a Friend We Have in Jesus
The Wheelbarrow Song
When the Cactus Is in Bloom
When the Clock Struck Seventeen (My Freckle-Faced Consumptive Mary Jane)
When the Roll Is Called up Yonder
Who Killed Cock Robin?
Why Don’t My Father’s Ship Sail In?*
The Wild Colonial Boy (Laws 120)
The Wild Side of Life
The Wreck of the Old Ninety-Seven (Laws G2)
The Yellow Rose of Texas
You Are My Sunshine
Young Harriette Brown
Young Sailor Bold (I) (The Rich Merchant’s Daughter) (Laws M19)

Instrumental Music:
Banjo Jig
Bridget O’Brien
The Bully of the Town
Charlie McCann
Cock of the North
A Country Dance
Crooked Stovepipe
Davy Crockett
Devil’s Dream
Durango’s Hornpipe
Flowers of Edinburgh

The Golden Slippers
Goodnight Ladies
The Great Speckled Bird
Guitar Boogie Breakdown
Hell Among the Yearlings
The Highland Fling
Home Sweet Home
Irish Washerwoman
The Little Brown Jug
Liverpool Hornpipe
Macdonald’s Reel
Macleod’s Reel
Mcllmoyle’s Reel
Merrily We Roll Along
Money Musk
Nigger in the Woodpile
Ninety-Nine Years Is a Mighty Long Time
Oh, My Darling Nellie Grey
Oh, Susannah
Old Opera Reel
Over the Waves
Peek-a-boo Waltz
Red River Valley
Red Wing
Rickett’s Hornpipe
Rippling Waters
Rock Valley Jig
Showers of Blessing
Silver Bells
Soldier’s Joy
Strawberry Roan
Swamp Lake Breakdown
There’s a Star-Spangled Banner Waving Somewhere
Three O’Clock in the Morning
Turkey in the Straw
Virginia Reel
Walking Uptown
Where the Bluebird Hollers and the Jaybird Sings
Where the River Shannon Flows
Wildwood Flower
Woodchoppers’ Breakdown

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Resumé: Laurel Doucette donne des détails au sujet de la collection d’un folkloriste Américain, Newbell Puckett, collection recueillie dans la communauté de Bobcaygeon, Ontario. Elle souligne la variété des chants et airs instrumentaux et présente une liste des items de cette collection.