

WHERE THE RIVERS FLOW

PHILIP J. THOMAS

British Columbia is indeed a land of mountains, but to the people who live there it has always been more a land of rivers. The waterways which drain those slopes and peaks were from early times, and are still today, at the centre of life. The ridges mark and separate, but the rivers are deep in the people's sense of place.

Although the names of the rivers often appear today as headlines in fights over the future of salmon fisheries, hydro-power, sewage and industrial pollution, and flood control, the rivers mean more than money. The Indian peoples, fur-trade explorers, gold seekers, railway builders, and interior loggers all followed them. Before sternwheelers were made obsolete by rails and roads, they plied the rivers, often through white water. River valleys determined where people went and where they made their homes. It is not surprising then that many waterways have found their way into the song lore of the province.

The earliest verse about a British Columbia river has a very warlike tone. It appeared in a Washington Territory paper on November 5, 1858, a few weeks before the creation of the Crown Colony of British Columbia. Its form suggests a song, but no tune was indicated. The last stanza printed below with its chorus follows a denunciation of Governor James Douglas's requirement that Americans crossing the 49th parallel must purchase a mining licence from his officials if they wished to join the gold rush:

Soon our banner will be streaming
Soon the eagle will be screaming
And the lion – see it cowers,
Hurrah, boys, the river's ours.
 Then hurrah, nor wait for calling
 For the Frazer's (sic) river's falling.

Another song of the first Fraser River gold rush written by a "W.H.D." in July 1859 was put to a popular tune of the day, "Home Again." Against a backdrop of the great river it pictures the comfortless life of the miners, and expresses, often mawkishly, their yearning to return to California. The first stanza and chorus set the scene:

Where mighty waters foam and boil
And rushing torrents roar,
In Frazer (sic) River's northern soil
Lies hid the golden ore.

Chorus: Far from home, far from home,
On Frazer River's shore
We labor hard, so does our bard,
To dig the golden ore.

This song, set to a new tune, has been sung by increasing numbers of people in the province over the last dozen years. Its growing popularity may well be traced to the fact that like the miners many of the province's present population come from elsewhere.

"The Lakes of Ponchartrain" was brought into British Columbia around the turn of the century and by the mid-1920's had become "The Banks of the Similkameen" (a tributary of Okanagan River). The B.C. version has been collected with variations in four places. Another interesting specimen was put to the tune of "Old Folks at Home," probably by an Industrial Workers of the World (or "Wobbly") organizer during the struggle to improve conditions in logging camps in the Northwest. One stanza was remembered by Mrs. Bartlett Burns of Olympia, Washington from construction camps in 1920-1 in central Oregon.

All up and down the Kootenay River
The bosses sadly roam –
They can't have their way forever,
'Cause we're making the camps like home.

Both the Similkameen and Kootenay Rivers flow south across the Canada-U.S. boundary, the Kootenay crossing again into British Columbia. Old-time residents on both sides of the border have friends and relatives on the other side; these family connections resulted from settlement and migration along the valleys. Nor did migrant loggers and "Wobbly" organizers pay much attention to the international boundary.

The most remarkable cluster of songs which identify river regions of British Columbia sprang from Tin Pan Alley's "Where the River Shannon Flows." The earliest of them is another IWW song, "Where the Fraser River Flows." Joe Hill wrote it to support construction workers, who had struck the camps from Hope to Kamloops on MacKenzie and Mann's Canadian Northern Pacific Railway. Two other songs came from the same period, but have to do with the construction of the Grand Trunk Pacific between the Yellowhead Pass and Prince Rupert. These two are textually similar, one being for the Skeena River, the other for the upper reach of the Fraser River as it flows north along the Rocky Mountain Trench and on to Prince George. A fourth song of this industrial group, connected textually both to Hill's song and to the Grand Trunk songs, is for the Lardeau River, a mining region north of Kootenay Lake. "Where the River Shannon Flows" was also the basis for "Where the Great Peace River Flows" which has been collected in ten slightly varying texts from the Peace River areas of Alberta and British Columbia. Before looking at these two groups of songs, it would be well to recall the original to see what survived the folk process.

WHERE THE RIVER SHANNON FLOWS

There's a pretty spot in Ireland I always claim for my land,
Where the fairies and the blarney will never never die;
It's the land of the shilelah, my heart goes back there daily,
To the girl I left behind me when we kissed and said goodbye.

Chorus:

Where the dear old Shannon's flowing, where the three leaved
Shamrock grows,
Where my heart is I am going to my little Irish rose;
And the moment that I meet her with a hug and kiss I'll greet her,
For there's not a colleen sweeter where the River Shannon flows.

There's a letter I'll be mailing for soon I will be sailing,
And I'll bless the ship that takes me to my dear old Erin's shore.
There I'll settle down forever, I'll leave the old sod never,
And I'll whisper to my sweetheart, "Come and take my name ashore."*

(*ashore: Irish for "forever.")

Words and music by James J. Russell. Published by M. Whitmark & Sons. Copyright 1905.

Although Joe Hill's "Where the Fraser River Flows" has not, to my knowledge, been collected orally in British Columbia, it did have some currency here in 1912. The IWW newspaper *Industrial Worker* (May 9, 1912), published in Spokane, Washington, reported it as one of a number of songs being sung "on the Canadian Northern as they carry on the strike." Further, in correspondence in 1967 one of the strike organizers Louis Moreau, recalled both it and fragments of a few other songs, all, he claimed, written by Joe Hill, whom he saw at the strikers' headquarters at Yale, B.C. The text printed below is as it appeared in the *Industrial Worker* in May, 1912, and in the 1912 edition of the IWW pocket songster, *IWW Songs or Songs of the Workers to Fan the Flames of Discontent*.

WHERE THE FRASER RIVER FLOWS

Fellow Workers, pay attention to what I'm going to mention,
For it is the clear contention of the workers of the world
That we should all be ready, true-hearted, brave and steady,
To rally 'round the standard when the Red Flag is unfurled.

Chorus:

Where the Fraser River flows, each fellow worker knows,
They have bullied and Oppressed us, but still our Union grows.
And we're going to find a way, boys, for shorter hours and better
pay, boys!
And we're going to win the day, boys; where the River Fraser flows.

For these gunny-sack contractors have all been dirty actors,
And they're not our benefactors, each fellow worker knows.
So we've got to stick together in fine and dirty weather,
And we will show no white feather, where the Fraser River flows.

Now the boss the law is stretching, bulls and pimps he's fetching,
They are a fine collection, as Jesus only knows.
Buy why their mothers raised them, and why the devil spared them,
Are questions we can't answer, where the Fraser River flows.

(‘River Fraser’ in the chorus was changed to ‘Fraser River’ in later editions of *Songs of the Workers*. ‘Fraser’ was also spelt ‘Frazer’ in the early editions.)

This text varies slightly but significantly from that which became known to audiences in British Columbia and elsewhere in Canada during the ‘folk song revival’ of the 1950’s and 60’s. The altered text seems to have first appeared in a 48-page songbook, *Songs of Joe Hill*, edited by Barrie Stavis and Frank Harmon (New York: Oak, 1955). Why were the words changed? Perhaps it was in reaction to John Greenway’s attack on the uncritical acceptance of Joe Hill’s songs. In his *American Folksongs of Protest* (Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia, 1953) to show that much of Hill’s verse was mediocre, Greenway quoted the first stanza and chorus of the original “Where the Fraser River Flows.” Stavis and his advisers at People’s Artists apparently thought the first stanza would be improved by substituting “fixed intention” for “clear contention” (1.2) and “And I hope you’ll” for “That we should” (1.3). The first change, with its syntactical compression, is more incisive than the original. The second carries the ‘I-you’ relationship of the opening line into what was originally a solemn affirmation of the One-Big Union concept; in so doing it creates a separation between singer and audience uncharacteristic of the IWW’s syndicalist thinking, where a ‘we-they’ or ‘Fellow worker – Capitalist’ division was typical. Regarding the actual singing of the song, Stavis and Harmon’s songbook also initiated the tune which today’s singers generally use. Since Russell’s Shannon melody was still under copyright in 1955, Harmon produced a new one which, although related to Russell’s, is more suited than his to be sung with militant drive.

Since Stavis’s and Harmon’s *Songs of Joe Hill* seemed to be a fairly scholarly treatment of not easily accessible material, it was accorded a research status it did not deserve. In the case of “Where the Fraser River Flows,” this was unfortunate, for its notes and text were used without question in Joyce L. Kornbluh’s IWW anthology, *Rebel Voices* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1964), in Paul Phillips’ labor history of British Columbia, *No Power Greater* (Vancouver: Boag Foundation, 1962), and in Archie Green’s “Appendix A” to Gibbs M. Smith’s *Joe Hill* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1969). It is to be hoped that anyone using the song as a document of Joe Hill or pre-World War I labor struggles in British Columbia will refer to Gibbs Smith’s writing or at least to the “Little Red Song Book” as *Songs of the Workers* is commonly known.

One phrase in the song has echoed down through the years. Although ‘gunnysack contractors’ has only an indirect connection with the Grand Trunk Pacific songs, it appears in ‘Where the Lardeau River Flows.’ In the Canadian Northern Pacific construction camps in 1912 it must have been a highly charged and pointed term, for Hill used it in two other songs he wrote

for the strike. 'Gunnysack' itself is still current among British Columbia miners and loggers to indicate an employer is second-rate or stingy and that the outfit he runs is ill-equipped or poorly managed. Who then were these gunnysack contractors faced by the Wobblies in 1912?

By 1912 the dominant railway builders in British Columbia (and probably the continent) were Tim Foley, Pat Welch, and Jack Stewart. Under one or other of their many corporate names, they were contractors for the Grand Trunk Pacific, the Pacific Great Eastern, parts of the C.P.R. being rebuilt, and much of the Canadian Northern Pacific. On the P.G.E. their manipulations of the government-backed financing ended in a \$5,000,000 scandal and the work only half done. Two of their companies had the overall contract for the Great Northern section up the Fraser River canyon where the strike took place. If the Fraser's waters were muddy, so were the matters of money. The railway promoters and capitalists, Mackenzie and Mann, who owned the Canadian Northern, also held an interest in one of the F.W. & S. companies; in addition, Mann's brother was a partner in another F.W. & S. enterprise. Mackenzie and Mann had perfected a technique of siphoning off money acquired from government-backed bonds before it got to the lower levels of sub-contractors, let alone the workers.

To the workers the 'gunnysack contractors' were these sub-contractors with whom they had direct contact. A number of them had solid reputations in the construction business but, when faced with the rapacious tactics of Mackenzie, Mann, and their friends, were to some degree victims themselves. By the spring of 1914 they feared bankruptcy and petitioned Ottawa to pressure Mackenzie and Mann to pay them. From the other side the sub-contractors faced a group of workers no longer willing to be bullied and cowed as had long been the pattern among the unskilled. As tensions rose in the strike of 1912, the sub-contractors played out their class role and welcomed the provincial police who arrested large numbers of the Wobblies.

When building the Grand Trunk Pacific, Foley, Welch, and Stewart were given the nickname "Frig 'em, Work 'em, and Starve 'em." Although the workers tried two unsuccessful strikes in 1912, the fragment of the song from the period contains neither reference to them nor any of the Wobblies' rancour. Rather, Tim Foley, 70 years of age in 1912, an old-time railway builder who had worked on Jim Hill's Great Northern, is given something of a heroic stature. It may be that the G.T.P. was the last railway on the continent built in the old style where the railroad builder took on the aura of a superman and where a foreman could in a crunch control the men with the handle of a pick. This fragment of "Where the Skeena River Flows" was sung for me in 1964 at Smithers by R. Jeffrey who had learnt it from teamsters in 1914.

There's a railroad up in Canada they call the GTP
Also a mighty army a-working in B.C.
Our leader is Tim Foley and he swears by all that's holy
That he'll take her to Prince Rupert where the Skeena River Flows

Where the Skeena River's flowing in a land of ice and snow
Where my heart is I am going . . .

A garbled fragment of a variant of the Skeena song was sung for me in 1974 by an old Wobbly, Jack Maki of Houston, who had worked on the G.T.P. construction. He had heard neither the Joe Hill song nor the Skeena song but said that Joe Hill had written the one he remembered:

Where the Fraser River flows, it's a land of ice and snow,
 But there is a mighty army working on the G.T.P.
 The foreman's name is Tim Foley, and he swears by all that's holy
 (Spoken) "I'll be late in reaching Prince Rupert with that
 goddam gang of hoboes!"

Maki, a clear-headed octogenarian, told me that, although he had not seen Joe Hill himself, he had never doubted he was there with the men. "He was with us," he insisted. It is possible that Joe Hill went north after the breaking of the Fraser strike.

The next of these Shannon songs, "Where the Lardeau River Flows," has been preserved in a prospector's manuscript (circa 1950) and is still sung by former residents of Beaton, a settlement flooded by the waters backed up behind the Keenleyside Dam on the Arrow Lakes. It dates from at least the late thirties and has for antecedents the Shannon song, Hill's song, and possibly (through the 'ice and snow' phrase) the G.T.P. song(s). George Lindsley, who sang the song for Helen Manning Embry in 1967 at Beaton, and for me at Revelstoke in 1973, appeared never to have heard the Hill song. In four renditions both the words and their order varied. The following text is collated from the singing of George and his brother Stewart.

WHERE THE LARDEAU RIVER FLOWS

(Transcribed by Shirley Cox from the singing of George Lindsley, recorded at Beaton, B.C., 1967, by Helen Manning Embry.)

Now you gun - ny - sack con - trac - tors you've all been dir - ty ac - tors; And it's
 not our be - ne - fac - tors as Je - sus on - ly knows. And it's
 why the mo - thers raised them; and it's why the de - vil spared them For it's
 ques - tions we can't an - swer where the Lar - deau Ri - ver flows.

Now you gunnysack contractors, you've all been dirty actors,
And it's not our benefactors as Jesus only knows;
And it's why their mothers raised them, and it's why the devil spared them.
For it's questions I can't answer where the Lardeau River flows.

Now that dear old Lardeau's flowing through the land of ice and snow
For the sheenies and the reprobates are everywhere you go –
There's the Mammoth Mine, Sunshine where the lead and silver flows
And the town of New Jerusalem* in the valley far below. (*Ferguson)

Where the dear old Lardeau's flowing through that land of ice and snow,
Where they mine the ground with college punks and two-way radios,
And the moment Bennett needs you with his bullshit he will greet you
And the wildcats nearly eat you where the Lardeau River flows.

But we're going to win the day, boys, shorter hours and a little more
pay, boys,
And we'll show them no white feather where the Lardeau River flows.

This song is sung when the drink is flowing freely and a topical new couplet is welcomed. The 'Bennett' in Stewart Lindsley's verse is the ex-Premier of the province who in 1964 through the Columbia River Treaty with the U.S.A. sold out the Arrow Lake communities for ready cash to put into his Peace River hydro-electric development. Thus the song seems to have originated in the Lardeau mining communities and after the decline of those mines to have been carried on in Beaton until it was inundated by the rising waters.

The last song of this group is, like the Shannon original, a song of sentiment; but unlike the commercial product it is not merely a stereotype. Because it is rooted in actual experience and attitudes shared by pioneer settlers of the Peace River region the song is remembered by old timers in one form or another along some 200 miles of the great river up the Alaska Highway, and over on the Fraser at Quesnel. "Where the Great Peace River Flows" was written by the type of pioneer who preferred the fringe of settlement to those areas which promised farm and land speculators as well as ambitious farmers prosperity. Such men were usually bachelors who were content with a subsistence livelihood; they were among the early settlers to take up homesteads around 1910, and continued to arrive in the region until around 1930. As civilization pressed in upon them, many moved on to the quieter frontier.

The song was probably written about 1915 by one of the many bachelors who left their "little moss-chinked cabin(s)" to serve overseas in World War I. There are several names suggested as the original author, but despite the vehemence of some claims this matter is unsettled. Texts of the song from both British Columbia and Alberta differ in interesting details. In length they average five stanzas, varying in those included. Four refer to the "flag of freedom"; three (all from B.C.) use the "flag of Britain." The place to which

the settler would have the “Judge of all the Judges” return are: Fair Alberta (4), Pouce Coupe, Taylor Crossing, and the Rockies(2). The places mentioned show that the song moved from Alberta westward. The prairie rose, the floral emblem of Alberta, seems to be claimed, at least by the British Columbia singers, as the emblem of “our (Peace River) country.” A fair number of the early settlers did come from or by way of the United States, where “the starry banner blows.”

I first recorded a verse in 1964 from Cecil Pickell, of Fort St. John. After much fretting to recall the rest of the words he’d first learned orally from a trapper in 1932, Mr. Pickell appealed in 1972 through the *Alaska Highway News* of Ft. St. John for the missing song. The response produced the ten texts of which the following is a collation.

WHERE THE GREAT PEACE RIVER FLOWS

(Transcribed by Shirley Cox from the singing of Cecil Pickell, Ft. St. John, B.C., recorded by P. J. Thomas, 1965.)

The musical score consists of four staves of music in a single system. The lyrics are written below the notes. Chord markings (C, F, D7, C7) are placed above the notes. The lyrics are: "There's a ri-ver that is flow-ing up to-ward the north-ern sea; It's not famed in song or sto-ry, still it has a charm for me. It has called me from the south-land where the star-ry ban-ner blows, And I've set-tled down for-ev-er where the great Peace Ri-ver flows."

There's a river that is flowing up toward the northern sea;
 It's not famed in song and story, still it has a charm for me.
 It has called me from the southland where the starry banner blows,
 And I've settled down forever where the great Peace River flows.

I've a little moss-chinked cabin just beyond its northern shore
 Where I hope to live contented till this span of life is o'er.
 May life's cares pass lightly o'er me, all its troubles and its woes
 Be to me a fleeting memory where the great Peace River flows.

In this little bit of Eden where the sun at midnight gleams
 All our girls are just like visions from the pleasant land of dreams.
 Pretty as our dainty bluebells, fair as our native rose,
 They make all our lives seem brighter where the great Peace River flows.

We have come from every nation, we have done our very best
To uphold the flag of Britain in this great and glorious west.
And no foeman's feet dare trample on our true prairie-rose,
'Tis the emblem of our country where the great Peace River flows.

Where the great Peace River's flowing, where the pretty bluebell grows,
And the prairies they are glowing with the beauties of the rose,
Here the sun is always shining, no-one sits down here repining
And each cloud has a silver lining where the great Peace River flows.

When I get the final summons from the courthouse in the skies
From the Judge of all the Judges, may He deem it no surprise
If I ask Him just one favour – He may grant it – no one knows:
“Send me back beside the Rockies where the great Peace River flows!”

There is nothing to suggest that any other tune than Russell's original was used. In fact it may be said that the tune is the one common root of all the Shannon songs. In British Columbia immigrant populations were, with few exceptions, very mixed, with few shared musical traditions. They did however, share the desire to make songs out of their own lives, and often turned to the popular commercial culture for tunes. The Shannon songs are just one of several examples.

In the few other songs which mention British Columbia's rivers, four protest the damming of rivers. Three of these were produced at the height of a recent campaign to stop the raising of an American power dam which would flood the Skagit Valley north of the border. The main spur behind these songs is concern for environmental and ecological factors. To conclude, I will quote one stanza from a little song I recorded at Princeton in 1963. It dates from at least the early years of the century before few of our rivers and their valleys were threatened by our technology:

Oh, there's gold in the Tullameen, there's platinum in the sand,
Berries for the pickin'. Why wander o'er the land?
There's grouse upon the mountain and deer come to the door.
You're welcome here, old timer. Don't wander anymore.

Vancouver, B.C.

Resumé: Philip Thomas présente quelques chants en relation avec les rivières de la Colombie Canadienne et commente à propos de l'origine historique et des variations du chant "Where the Fraser River Flows", chant que Joe Hill a écrit pour les travailleurs du chemin de fer alors en grève en 1912.

Miners' Songs

Men of the Deeps is the title of a pamphlet edited by John C. O'Donnell and also of a record sung by Cape Breton Miners. Waterloo Music Company, 1975.