REVIEW

SONGS OF THE PACIFIC NORTHWEST


The people of Pender Harbour, like those of other coastal communities in British Columbia, work mostly in the industries of fishing and logging. In 1951, Phil Thomas, a young school-teacher who had come to the town the previous year from Vancouver, believed that he could best teach music to the children in his class if he gave them songs that related to their lives rather than just using standard pop tunes from the radio. He wrote to the National Museum in Ottawa, requesting any songs in their collection associated with the primary industries of Canada. The reply from the Museum expressed regret that "the words 'Canada's own songs from her primary industries' are not clearly understood", and asked for further clarification as "to which ethnical group they belong." Eventually he received from them copies of some of the British and French traditional ballads collected in Canada—good songs certainly, but not a very encouraging response.

During his stay in Pender Harbour, however, Thomas had heard someone sing "The Pender Harbour Fisherman", a funny, satirical song composed by members of a local logging family. Realizing that this song, and others of its type, were not widely known outside the community, he located someone who knew the entire song and, after his return to Vancouver in 1952, copied it down over the telephone. This led to further collecting, and now, almost thirty years later, this song can be found in Thomas' Songs of the Pacific Northwest, newly released by Hancock House of Vancouver.

Born in Victoria, B.C. in 1921, Phil Thomas moved with his family to Vancouver as a teenager. He took a degree in education at the University of British Columbia, and his main interest in education has always been the role of creative activity, particularly art and music, in teaching children. Besides teaching art in elementary schools, he has taught children's art classes at U.B.C. and directed a programme of Saturday morning classes for children at the Vancouver Art Gallery. Currently he teaches grade 5, 6, and 7 art, as well as a regular grade 5 class, at Beaconsfield Elementary School in Vancouver.

Thomas has always been interested in and involved with music as well. As a child he sang a great deal, but it was during the war in the R.A.F. that he came into contact with group singing and the exchange of songs within a group that is such an important aspect of folk singing. In the late 1940s, back in Vancouver, he was influenced by the music of the early folk revival, and helped to form the Highriggers, a Vancouver folk group. Later, he played an important role in the fostering of folk singing in the city through the Vancouver Folk Song Society.

Not only as a teacher, but also as a singer in Vancouver, he felt a need to have more songs about British Columbia. Continuing the collecting
he had begun with "The Pender Harbour Fisherman", he worked primarily through personal contacts. A friend in Vancouver told him of a tugboat skipper on Vancouver Island who knew some fine songs. The skipper in turn gave him the names of other people with songs, one lead producing another. Every summer he set aside the last week of August to follow up the leads and collect the songs. A few he obtained through scouring newspapers like the Cariboo Sentinel, and others by extensive work in the archives of the University of British Columbia.

Gradually Thomas amassed a collection of songs numbering several hundreds. While a small proportion of these represent traditional ballads transported to B.C., the rest are all indigenous songs of the province.

In the Foreword to Songs of the Pacific Northwest, he comments: "This book of songs attempts to bring to life something of the story of British Columbia and its people. In the Pacific Northwest setting from the days of the early fur trade to the present, people have used their own songs to express and share their reactions to events. That the story told through them is so full and varied indicates a rich heritage in a land not generally recognized as having an English language song tradition."

The organization of the book reflects this goal. The first four chapters contain songs from the period before Confederation—songs of exploration and the gold rushes, as well as political songs. In the rest of the book, covering the period since 1871, the songs are grouped by themes of pioneering, transportation, and the various primary industries of the province.

The forty-nine songs which have been included in this first book show in fact how successful Thomas has been in his collecting. The variety and quality of the songs give an immediate lie to the oft-heard remark that "there are no B.C. songs", and demonstrate that the problem has only been one of availability. Indeed, it is quite remarkable that, with the exception of only a couple of songs whose significance is largely historical, like "Cheer, Boys, Cheer, For the Dominion Nation", almost every song in the book is excellent and a delight to sing.

The songs range all the way from "The Bold Northwestman", a late 18th century ballad of conflict between B.C. coastal Indians and Boston fur traders, through "The Dredger", a clever and quite funny 1860's political satire on the purchase of a non-functional harbour dredger, and on into the songs of logging, mining, fishing and ranching. The settlement of B.C. by non-native people is quite recent and the traditional, pre-industrial communities of eastern Canada are not found here. Communities in B.C. grew up around resource industries, and the songs reflect this fact. Each section of the book gives a brief, but at the same time profound, look into life in these communities.

The section on mining, for example, is truly an introduction to the world of the miner. It begins with an optimistic song about prospecting, "Way Up in the Monashee Range", then takes us into a song from a 1912 strike for union recognition in the Vancouver Island coal mines and another bitter satirical song from the
same period about the use of troops by the provincial government against the coal miners. Two more songs tell us in considerable detail about the work of hard-rock miners, and the section ends with an aging miner’s complaint, “I’m Only a Broken Down Mucker”.

According to Thomas, all these songs may be called folk songs, and his definition is both broad and practical. He comments that “In addition to traditional songs and ballads, the term ‘folk songs’ may be given to newer and authored songs of the same general type if the writer’s primary intent is social and communicative rather than commercial. Included are reworked or ‘parodied’ songs and topical songs using traditional or popular tunes.” This definition quite aptly describes many of the book’s songs which do not touch the world of commercial music at all, but exist within a small community or among a specific group of people and comment on or relate to the nature of life within that group. Of course, now that the commercial media have become so pervasive in our society, it is increasingly difficult to draw clear distinctions between commercially and non-commercially oriented music. However, such recently authored songs as “The Wreck of the C.P. Yorke” by Stan Triggs, who worked for some time on west-coast tug-boats and wrote songs for his workmates, fall clearly within Thomas’ definition of folk music, and rightly so.

Besides the quality of the songs, the feature which really distinguishes Songs of the Pacific Northwest is the nature of the notes accompanying each song and the care that has gone into their preparation. In many other collections of Canadian folk songs, the authors’ notes concentrate only on sources and dates for the songs. Notable exceptions to this are the extensive notes on the social context of Quebec songs in the works of Marius Barbeau, and the historical notes provided by Edith Fowke in Canada’s Story in Song and Folk Songs of Canada.

In Songs of the Pacific Northwest all the comments on sources are gathered into an appendix at the end of the book. Beside each song Thomas sets out, in extremely pleasant and informal style, a complete picture of the events and social context from which the song arises. The notes are the product of a tremendous amount of research, and are literally teeming with information. For example, in a five-page note to “The Doryman”, a song from the halibut fishery, Thomas describes the types of boats used in the fishery, the nature of the fish and the technicalities of fishing for halibut, a history of the fishery and political events surrounding it, and the social
relationships within the industry between large and independent companies, captains and fishermen, and companies and union. These are the elements that make up the lives of B.C. fishermen and, taken altogether, Thomas’ notes provide a fascinating social portrait and social history of the province. Equal care has gone into finding and selecting the scores of excellent photographs, maps, drawings and cartoons which serve as a visual complement to the notes. The notes and illustrations effectively bridge the gap of time or distance which separates us from the songs, and allows them truly to live again.

Phil Thomas’ knowledge of the background of the songs is so extensive and intimate that he is not afraid to interact with and comment on the material. With almost thirty years’ immersion in the subject, he can, and does when necessary, reconstruct lines missing from the texts of songs, or supply a tune which has been forgotten. In many cases the original writer simply took a traditional or popular tune of the day, and a similar tune, thoroughly in keeping with the period and character of the song, will in no way spoil the song. Rather it allows it to exist, not as an historical relic, but once again as a complete song which is sung by and is meaningful to a whole new generation.

Fred Weihs

The Columbia-Kootenay Mine boarding house c. 1896. Rossland, B.C.