RAMBLES THROUGH THE MARITIMES

Last November, Jon Bartlett and I flew out to Fredericton for the Annual General Meeting (AGM) of the Canadian Folk Music Society on November 16, 17 and 18. This gave us a great opportunity to spend a week in the Maritimes and explore what's happening there. The Fredericton Folk Collective was hosting the AGM and because of their work (especially Ron Lees and Marc Luham), it was one of the most well-organized, interesting weekends I've ever attended.

Many people in this country feel removed from and indifferent to national organizations. It's hard enough to keep things going in your own community without worrying about some vague, stretched-out national society. That's why it was so gratifying to see the turnout of local people for this year's AGM. The Fredericton Folk Collective has obviously aroused a strong enough interest in Canadian folk music among its members that they're willing to sit through and participate in hours of reports, motions, amendments, etc.

One of the most interesting parts of the meeting was the regional reports, where members from across the country filled us in on what's been happening in their region. Then we elected the new Board for 1980—President: Jon Bartlett; Vice-President: Sister Charlotte Cadoret; Secretary: Rika Ruebsaat; Treasurer: Tim Rogers; Directors: Robert Bouthillier, Edith Fowke, Alice Lingard, Marc Luham, Ian Robb, Neil Rosenberg, David Spalding, Phil Thomas—and extended a vote of thanks to Past President John O'Donnell and retiring Board members Barbara Cass-Beggs, Charlotte Cormier and John Murphy. With the new Board in place we discussed ongoing work and future projects, most notable of which is a proposed two-record set of Canadian folk songs. Next year's AGM was set for Calgary, hosted by the Rocky Mountain Folk Club.

Besides the meeting itself, the Fredericton Folk Collective organized an incredible party on the Friday night, some workshops on Saturday afternoon and a banquet on Saturday evening. But the highlight of the weekend was the concert on Saturday night. Anyone who wanted to signed up to perform, and music from across the country was well-represented by CFMS members. But most important (and most exciting) was the local input. There were people there from all over New Brunswick and the evening felt like what I imagine the old Parish Hall Saturday nights to have been—local people enjoying each other. The audience of about 200 had people from the ages of 3 to 80, and they all sang along on the choruses and listened attentively to everyone, seasoned performers and inexperienced singers alike. Once again I was
impressed with the work of the Fredericton Folk Collective. Audiences like that don’t fall from the sky. They are built through hard work.

The high point of the evening was the singing of Marie and Pearly Hare from Newcastle N.B. Marie is quite a well-known traditional singer, having been featured on a Folk-Legacy album (‘Marie Hare’, FSC-9) and Pearly used to be a logger on the Miramichi before he retired. Marie has a beautifully clear voice and unaffected but commanding singing style. Pearly sang a number of Miramichi lumbering songs, including a moving rendition of “Guy Reed”, about a young man who is crushed when a landing of logs gives way.

Sunday afternoon we drove along the Saint John River down to Hampton. That part of Southern New Brunswick is incredibly beautiful, with rolling, wooded hills, and the river sweeping broadly through it all. Having just done a lot of reading on the eastern lumbering woods, I kept imagining what the river looked like covered with logs and logdrivers.

In Hampton we stayed with John Murphy, founder of the Saint John Folk Club. For the past year, John and several other club members have been collecting songs from the Saint John area (see Atlantic Report this issue). When you’re used to learning songs from books and records where the material has been collected in what always feels like the distant past, and has been edited and interpreted, it’s pretty exciting to go through the original transcriptions of songs that have been collected within the past year. The collection so far is a really interesting hodge-podge of traditional, Music-Hall/Vaudeville and original songs.

Cape Breton has always been a special kind of place for me, perhaps because it’s at the opposite end of the country and yet has so many parallels with British Columbia: logging, fishing, coal mines with a long and turbulent history of union activity (the history of the Cape Breton coal mines is almost a mirror image of those on Vancouver Island. Both saw repeated strikes for union recognition in the early part of the century, with the militia being called in several times to protect the coal company’s interests). We went to Glace Bay and stayed with Aubrey and Tel Martell. Aubrey is an examiner in his seventies and a member of “The Men of the Deep” coal miners’ choir (see reviews this issue). He told us about his years in the mines. What really stuck in my mind was his stories about the horses they used to haul up the coal carts. The tunnels were just high enough for the horses, which meant that the driver of the cart had to scrunch sideways on the front of the cart since there was no headroom for him to sit up. The horses never left the mines. At the end of the day they went back to their stables which were underground. As a result, most of them were blind since they never saw daylight. When miners were finally granted holidays, the mines closed down for a couple of weeks and the horses were brought to the surface. Tel told us that when she was a child, it was a big event to go out and watch the horses, stumbling blindly in their pasture.
Reg Hayes of the Fredericton Folk Collective (m.c. for concert).

The Beaton Institute is a part of the College of Cape Breton in Sydney, and contains a vast archive of aural histories as well as tapes of the Island's wealth of folk songs (in English and Gaelic), tunes and folk tales. Doug MacPhee, who works at the Institute and is an excellent pianist (he plays traditional Cape Breton tunes), has been a regular contributor to the Bulletin, with news of all the local parish festivals and highland games that take place all over the Island during the summer. It's always nice to meet people you've been corresponding with, and Doug was extremely helpful. He showed us the index of the Institute's tape archives and I was really impressed with the clarity and thoroughness of the indexing system. We were also given 4 records of Cape Breton music (including 2 of Doug's) which we will review in the next issue. We also talked with Sheldon MacInnes about some of the College's programmes which incorporate local fiddlers and stepdancers into the education system. What I find most exciting about Cape Breton is the wealth of thriving traditional folk culture, and local people's high level of awareness of its value.

They are keeping it alive, rather than having to revive it like so many of us have to do.

Unfortunately our visit was very rushed and after just a week in the Maritimes, we had to rush back to Fredericton to catch our plane. But we hope to return to Cape Breton next summer for a longer visit.

Riha Ruebsaat