REVIEWS

THE SINGING MINERS OF CAPE BRETON

THE MEN OF THE DEEPS
Waterloo CSPS 898

THE MEN OF THE DEEPS II
Waterloo WR-7 CSPS 1011

I must confess to a deep personal prejudice against choral renditions of folk songs. To hear forty stalwart males simultaneously proclaiming identical emotional responses to the same girl seems to me to be innately absurd; to hear a whole chorus recounting as their own experience incidents that manifestly could involve only one man and one woman seems to me quite ludicrous. Thus, the reviewing of two choral folksong records was a task I approached with some trepidation.

The fact that I have survived, and even enjoyed, the experience is a tribute in part to the choice of materials on these two records, in part to the fact that the musical director of the group, John O'Donnell of St. Francis Xavier University, Antigonish, has in general managed to retain an air of spontaneity and avoid a sense of overrehearsal. There is no feeling of overtraining, of complexity for its own sake, of the "Aren't we clever to sing like this?" feeling that so many choirs impose; nor are soupy strings plangent in the background. Instead, with only a few exceptions, the songs are sung as they might have been sung in a club, a barroom, or at a gathering at a miner's house.

Though miners' choruses are common enough in Wales and exist also in England and Scotland, they are rare on this side of the Atlantic; indeed, the Men of the Deeps are claimed to be the only such chorus in North America. The group was formed from among the coal miners of Cape Breton Island in 1966, when Centennial Year was fast approaching, and have gained a growing and deserved fame since.

An asset of both records is that the musical backing is simple and essentially features folk instruments. On the first, the accompanists are Murray Graham (gtr), Dave Coleson (bass gtr), Danny Macintyre (accordion), Bob Roper (hca) and Alex MacDonald (dms). The accompanists on the second record are not specified, but may well be the same since the instrumentation is identical, save the addition of a piano (mercifully used sparingly).

On the first record, all the songs relate to the life of a miner. Six are recent compositions from Cape Breton Island, three by Ray Holland, who leads the chorus in several songs: "The Cape Breton Coal Miners" (yet another song to the tune of "Villikins and His Dinah") and "One Million Ton" both have Centennial Year echoes, whilst "No. 12—New Waterford" chronicles a disastrous fire in a Cape Breton mine. Another of these six songs, "The Omen," enshrines the belief that the crowing of roosters at dusk presages a mine disaster. "Little Pinkie Engine" celebrates one of the coal-fired engines that served the mines; but this tune is overdressed and the lyrics hard to
hear. "The Pluck Me Store" is a rather ambiguous remembering of the days of the company stores; regretted but also, it seems, lamented.

Merle Travis' familiar "Sixteen Tons", containing an unambiguous condemnation of that lamentable system, is sung solo and well by Ray Holland. The rendition of Travis' equally familiar "Dark as a Dungeon" is, in contrast, strangely dreamy and gentle. The version of Ewan MacColl's Radio Ballad song "Schoolday's End" is, quite frankly, turgid. Four songs on this record are truly traditional, in the sense that their authors are not known; the Gaelic "Oran Do Ceap Breattain" and the cheerful chant "Down Deep in a Coal Mine" are improbably fused, whilst the almost Welsh sonority of the "Miners' Memorial Hymn" contrasts sharply with the brief cheeriness of the last song on the record, "Jolly Wee Miner Man".

The first side of the second record again predominantly features miners' songs. Two are songs of the familiar genre in which one vaunts one's own trade against all others. One is new, "The Man with a Torch in his Cap"; the second much older, "The Jolly Miner"—and surely originating, not from coal, but from metal miners, lead or tin miners maybe, in view of its reference to "the gaining of the treasure that lies in the vein." "Kelly's Cove" is a clear derivative of "The Blackleg Miners"; I find the last lines of its chorus "Join the Union or you'll die/Among the happy miners" quite bizarre!

The version of "Mary Anne"—not originally a miners' song, of course
—has an especially sensitive harmonica accompaniment; the version of Ewan MacColl's song "The Ballad of Springhill" is, in contrast, not at all adventurous. "The Government Store," the last song on this side, is surely one of the few commemorating the opening of a liquor store—at New Aberdeen, Cape Breton—and is properly cheerful!

Only one miners' song is featured on the second side; "The Coal by the Sea," traditional it seems but sounding modern and artificial. The remaining five songs include three folksongs (the hymnlike "Isle Royale," "The Banks of Newfoundland" and "Drill Ye Tarriers Drill"); the spiritual "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot," well but conventionally sung; and a very strange version of "The Battle Hymn of the Republic."

Both records are well worth hearing. The first might be chosen for its greater proportion of coalminer's songs; the second, though, has a higher component of traditional folksongs; and both contain fine singing and sensitive accompaniments.

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