THE MEN OF THE DEEPS


For thirteen years the Men of the Deeps have been singing ballads and songs of the Cape Breton coal mining industry. Only since 1976, however, as a result of an eighteen-day tour of the People’s Republic of China, has this Cape Breton coal miners’ choir become known to the majority of Canadians.

All of the members of the Men of the Deeps are currently working or have in the past worked in the Cape Breton coal mines. The choir was organized in 1966 under the initiative of Nina Cohen, a native of the coal mining community of Glace Bay, Nova Scotia. Mrs. Cohen wished to encourage a greater understanding of the history of mining in Cape Breton, and a preservation of that tradition. As a result of her work, the establishment of a Miners’ Museum in Glace Bay became the Island’s main Centennial project, and a Miners’ Folk Society and the Men of the Deeps chorus were formed. The first major performance of the choir was at Expo ’67 in Montreal. Since then they have performed in many parts of Canada, as well as at the 1976 National Convention of the United Mine Workers in Cincinnati. During the summer, the choir performs regularly in the Miners’ Museum.

The history of coal mining in Cape Breton extends back well over two hundred years. However, at the time of the formation of the Men of the
Deeps, only a small number of songs about mining had been collected on the Island. Therefore, a contest was held asking for the submission of original and traditional songs, and many of the songs received now form part of the standard repertoire of the Men of the Deeps. The choir has put out two recordings, and the choir’s director, John O’Donnell, chairman of the music department at St. Francis Xavier University in Antigonish, and President of the Canadian Folk Music Society, has compiled a songbook from the choir’s repertoire. All three items can be obtained from Waterloo Music Co., Box 250, Waterloo, Ontario. O’Donnell intends in the future to bring out a much larger anthology of songs of the Cape Breton mining communities.

The songbook serves several purposes. It is a souvenir for those who have seen the Men of the Deeps in concert; it is a preliminary collection of Cape Breton mining songs; and, along with the records, it can be used in schools for the study of the social life of the mining communities. The great strength of this collection is its focus on a small region and on one industry within the region, which allows a detailed picture of life in such communities to be built up.

There are three types of material in the book—traditional songs, recently composed songs, and poems. About a dozen traditional songs are included in the collection. While a few of these come from British and American sources, most of these traditional songs come from the Helen Creighton collection of Nova Scotia folk songs. One of the best of these is the gay, boastful “Jolly Miner” which begins:

Oh the huntsmen delight my boys the sounding of his horn
And the farmer delights my boys the sowing of his corn
But the miner’s delight my boys is to split the rock in twain
For his gaining of the treasure that lies in the vein.

Other traditional songs range from the “Pluck Me Store”—which describes the Caledonia Company Store and its system of credit whereby miners never really saw their paycheques—to a song in praise of “My Cape Breton Home”.

The book is really dominated, however, by the two dozen recently composed songs and poems. These include two haunting songs by Ewan MacColl and Peggy Seeger—the famous “Ballad of Springhill” about the 1958 Nova Scotia mining disaster, and “Schooldays End”. Almost all of the rest are songs written by Cape Bretoners who were themselves miners or who came from families associated with mining. Many of them describe the incredible hardships and dangers which the miners face working in tunnels that extend miles under the Atlantic Ocean. “Miner’s Epitaph” by James Lovelace conveys well this mood:

The land is damp here down by the sea
And the pit is dark and dreary.
I’ve lived it all, and now recall
As here I lie down by the sea.

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I've gone the long way, through this hard life.
There was many a spark, and a great deal of strife,
To earn for the miner (bootleg or shiner)
A wee bit of comfort (so long, long a-coming!)
Down by the sea.

The overall tone of the book is set by these composed songs and poems. They convey a sense of people in Cape Breton surveying the industry which supports many of their communities, and looking back over specific incidents in the industry’s history. Most of the songs do not carry us back and put us inside the events. For this reason, it would have been good if a few more older songs about specific events could have been included as a complement to the more recently composed songs. For example, the Cape Breton coal industry has had one of the most turbulent histories of labour conflict in all of Canada. Yet the book only contains one song about a union. Hopefully, further collecting will uncover more songs about specific strikes and other events in Cape Breton labour history that can be included in O’Donnell’s larger anthology. There are a few very fine descriptive notes in the book, but the songs beg for much more extensive historical and technical notes. While this lies beyond the scope of the present song book, one hopes it will also receive greater attention in the larger work.

The Men of the Deeps songbook is an important part of the process started by Nina Cohen—that is, encouraging Cape Bretoners to preserve, to sing and to write about their own industrial history. The songbook also gives people in other parts of Canada a chance for better understanding of this history and a chance to enjoy these songs.

Fred Weihs

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