

# REVIEW

## CANADIAN FOLK MUSIC BOOKS

In the course of poking around bookshops and libraries, some interesting books turn up which may not be well-known to other folk musicians. This short article discusses two rather obscure items; and one which is not obviously relevant to folk.

**FIDDLERS OF THE CANADIAN WEST**, *Harold J. Newlove. (Swift Current, Sask., published by the author, 844-8th Ave., Swift Current, Sask.) 272pp. \$6.*

A copy found by chance in a bookstore in (yes, you guessed it) Swift Current is the only one I have ever seen. Swift Current is the home of the Western Canadian Amateur Old Time Fiddling Championships, founded, appropriately enough, by Harold Newlove. The book is cheaply produced and weakly bound in paper, but is full of meat. It was published in 1976 and is, I hope, still available from the author.

The bulk of the text presents capsule biographies of many old-time fiddlers in the west. They come mainly from southern Saskatchewan and adjacent provinces and states, but there are quite a few in B.C. and one in Oregon; though in the main they have their roots in Saskatchewan. Most of these biographies are accompanied by portraits, and a text often written by the fiddler himself. Most are men, but there is a strong sprinkling of women. The stories are inevitably somewhat repetitious, but

in total give a fascinating picture of a musical movement in the society which nurtures it. They deal with pioneer life on the prairie, with the ways in which the first fiddle was obtained (many a gopher sacrificed his life for music), the hardships often undergone to get any sort of musical training, the various instrumental groups that were formed, and the social occasions for which they played. The fiddlers also often made their own instruments, from likely and unlikely material (plexiglass!)

The rest of the book has information about the fiddling contests, with lists of judges and winners, and related photographs and press clippings. There is too little about the music played, although many fiddlers mention a few tunes, and one original is reproduced.

As the nineteenth century advances, attention passes to the attempts to develop more formal music. Only Newfoundland folk song receives brief attention (p. 156), perhaps because that province was slowest in development of foreign opera and oratorio, and something was needed to fill up the space. With Chapter 8, attention moves west, and folk rises again. We learn that "the documents have many references to instruments, few to folk singing" (a view supported by my own researches), and that "the conditions of pioneer life on the prairies were not conducive to the preservation of folk song" (which is not). "A short history of folk song collecting" is a useful capsule of some of the pioneer work in this important field, with a brief supplement (p. 266) dealing with events after 1914.

The main story of the book is of

course the attempts of pioneer musicians to develop a formal music culture in Canada, based largely on imported talent and music. Ironically enough, some parallel situations will be recognized by those who are trying to preserve and give back to Canada's citizens something of this country's native folklore.

**FOLK SONGS OF THE AMERICAS**, ed. A.L. Lloyd & Isabel Aretz de Ramon y Rivera (Novella & Co., for the International Folk Music Council, 1965), 276pp.

An anthology of music from both North and South America, published fifteen years ago, this contains an interesting collection of twenty-four Canadian songs. This is another uncommon book; I have only ever seen the sale copy I picked up for \$2 a few years ago. One of the editors, Bert Lloyd, is a well-known singer/writer on the British and Australian folk scenes, often recorded on the *Topic* label, author of one of the standard works on British folk song, and of innumerable sleeve notes.

The Canadian songs come from ten different sources, some of which are well-known. Half are in French, half in English, and the French songs are accompanied by English translations, by Lloyd and Maud Karpeles, another eminent English folklorist. The translations attempt the difficult feat of retaining both the sense and the rhythm, and (as far as my not very good French goes) they do a reasonable job. Lloyd's introduction urges the would-be singer to attempt the songs in the original language, and a Spanish pronunciation guide is provided for the South American material. However, no suggestions are provided for

the speaker of Parisian French trying to cope with the glorious flexibility of French-Canadian verse.

Some highlights? A fine description of a school-house dance: delightfully named tunes—what does a “Little Burnt Potato” have in common with the “Flowers of Edinburgh”?—: playing dances for \$1.50: the South Side Hall, known by many as the “Bucket of Blood”: chasing the horse to replace the hair in a fiddle bow: a Stradivarius: a bread knife as prize for the contest.

This is not the definitive study of folk fiddling that needs to be made; there is no analysis of repertoire and its sources, no analysis of the relation of the fiddler to his or her social milieu, no technical discussion of playing styles. But until that study is done (please!) this book will help to fill an important gap.

**A HISTORY OF MUSIC IN CANADA 1534-1914**, *Helmut Kallman*. (Toronto, 1960: U. of Toronto Press), 311pp.

Published twenty years ago, and no doubt still available in paperback (my copy cost \$3 five years ago), this book is likely to be passed over by the folkie among sundry other works primarily devoted to classical/serious/ whatever-else-you-like-to-call-it music. However, it is not devoid of interest from the folk point of view. The cover shows a nice little pencil drawing from the sketchbook of James Duncan of a nineteenth century street fiddler, and the hint of interest within is sustained. Although it excludes native music, European-based folk music is not ignored.

The early pages include discussion

of the Huron carol (p. 13), seventeenth century French folk song (p. 23), and the social role of folk music (p. 31): “If a Frenchman has a fiddle, sleep ceases to be a necessity of life with him.” The earthiness of the voyageur’s song is mentioned, though there is implied disapproval, as the only examples quoted are the ersatz inventions of Thomas Moore and his contemporaries. Folk dancing and its instrumental accompaniment is given space: “A merry Canada it must have been.” (p. 37)

The selection is interesting: only one heavily-used French song (“En roulant ma boule”) among an interesting group, of which the first, the splendid ballad “Renaud”, is outstanding. The English language ones are (to me, at any rate) more familiar: all from the maritimes, alas, and including such standards as the “Gypsy Laddie”, “Bold Wolfe”, “She’s Like the Swallow” and “Mary Ann”. One lumber-camp song is the only characteristically Canadian song, though others of course have local allusions. However, all are good songs, and there are several unfamiliar ones. The book is worth looking for, especially if you sing in Spanish, too.

*David A.E. Spalding*

