Marius Barbeau

compiled by Tim Rogers

Marius Barbeau, the founder of our Society, was born 100 years ago. After considering law as a career, this Rhodes scholar became interested in anthropology. He studied at Oxford and the Sorbonne before returning to Canada. Once home, he became a true cultural pioneer with his prolific documentation of the folklore of numerous groups in the country. During the 58 years he spent collecting and documenting folklore traditions in Canada, Barbeau became an internationally renown and respected scholar. His warm encouragement of those showing an interest in folklore and his unceasing efforts to preserve and promote our Canadian heritage have left a legacy unparalleled in the country today.

Perhaps the best way of coming to know this man is to reflect on some of his words. In my own work I have often been told that there aren’t very many Canadian folk songs - and yet.....

There are plenty of folk songs everywhere. We have only to go to a village, a concession somewhere and enquire, and we find that there are more folksongs, more folktale tellers all the time. It is surprising how they have been preserved in the memory of the old people. The younger generation now are interested in radio, television and such entertainments, and they give up. We think they have, but you only have to gather these people together and start them in a “veillee du bon vieux temps” (old time evening) and they give you a good evening of old folksongs. In my own collection there are about 6,000 melodies and about 13,000 texts now. (quoted from the National Museum publication Oracle, 1982, 44).

At other times, particularly in university settings, I am assailed by the criticism that folklore is useless - just the collection of dusty old antiques - and yet.....

Folksongs and traditions, as collected today, are materials for the future arts of Canada, either musical, literary or plastic. They are the basic materials. These are available to all Canadians and the modern arts cannot develop in a
way that reveals originality unless these are known by our artists and creators of the present day. In order to create good music you have to have a basic material somewhere and this is our folk music either Indian or French-Canadian or Scottish or Irish. These have to be consulted and absorbed by the creators, the composers. If they don’t do that, they miss the boat. In the past it has happened that way. All the great composers have used the music they knew in their own churches, in plain chants, in Georgian chants. From Vivaldi on, they all based themselves on the knowledge of their own native music (ibid).

And then there is the fundamental issue of Canadian identity and the place of folkloric traditions in its pursuit and definition.....

Canada is a very rich country from the point of view of its traditions of the past. It has inherited, it’s inheriting still at present, the traditions of Siberia, of Mongolia, of China that have come with the Indians over Bering Strait or over the sea into our continent and are now preserved in our country. Or they are the traditions of Europe that have come from the other side across the Atlantic with the settlers and are to be found everywhere here. And not only the materials themselves but the talents, the ability to think or to feel, inherited in each household is of very considerable importance. It will be the wealth of the country. They are indispensable if Canada is to survive (ibid).

Lanie Melamed indicated that she has found some of Barbeau’s thoughts useful in her teaching. She writes: “When I learned that the next issue of the Bulletin would be dedicated to Marius Barbeau, I recalled the one piece of Barbeau’s that I used frequently in a Community College course I taught several years ago, entitled ‘Folklore in Action.’ The student body was ethnically diverse, including Greek, Italian, Chinese, Portuguese and French Canadian students. (How much I learned from them was surely equal or greater than what the teacher-expert had to offer.) In the introductory sessions, there was the somewhat desperate attempt to find a definition of folklore that students could hold on to, or at least explain to their parents or friends. Everytime I thought I came up with one, some folklore friends would shoot holes in it, and I would be back to square one. It finally seemed best to choose several definitions recognizing that the field is too broad and too narrow, too personal and too objective to ever find a ‘correct’ resolution. The definition which follows is poetic and global. What it lacks mostly is the newer anthropological interpretation of folklore which affirms folkways as an intrinsic part of the habits, customs and procedures of everyday life, whether this life be rural or urban, transmitted from old to young, from young to young, from animate to inanimate object, or any combination thereof. The strength of the definition is that it includes relationship, context, and community in the teaching, learning and constructing of human knowledge. As one who is currently studying how adults learn, Barbeau’s definition has a comforting and instructive relevance for me“.....

Whenever a lullaby is sung to a child; whenever a ditty, a riddle, a tongue-twister, or a counting-out rhyme is used in the nursery or at school;
Whenever sayings, proverbs, fables, noodlestories, folktales, reminiscences of the fireside are retold;
Whenever, out of habit or inclination, the folk indulge in songs and dances, in ancient games, in merrymaking, to mark the passing of the year or the usual festivities;
Whenever a mother shows her daughter how to sew, knit, spin, weave, embroider, make a coverlet, braid a sash, bake an old-fashioned pie;
Whenever a farmer on the ancestral plot trains his son in the ways long familiar, or shows him how to read the moon and the winds to forecast the weather at sowing or
harvest time;

Whenever a village craftsman - carpenter, carver, shoemaker, cooper, blacksmith, builder of wooden ships - trains his apprentice in the use of tools, shows him how to cut a mortise and pen in a tenon, how to raise a frame house or barn, how to string a snowshoe, how to carve a shovel, how to shoe a horse or shear a sheep;

Whenever in many callings the knowledge, experience, wisdom, skill, the habits and practices of the past are handed down by example or spoken word, by the older to the newer generations, without reference to book, print, or school-teacher;

Then we have folklore in its own perennial domain, at work as ever, alive and shifting (Folklore on the American Land, by Duncan Emrich, p. 10 - 11).

In the words of Barbeau we find a man of compassion and vision. He saw what many today still have difficulty seeing - namely, that the folkloristic traditions of Canada - all of Canada - are valuable and viable. But not only did he see this, he dedicated his life to demonstrating it to us and to the world. Within his prolific written output we find testimony to not only a great man, but also to a great cultural reality - Canada.