Feedback

State of the Art

In the feature article of the January Bulletin there was a discussion of how the institutional nature of Canada could lead to a devaluing of folklore and music (pp 23-24). A most interesting example of this happening was published in a recent issue of Atlantic Insight. In an article entitled "The CBC Network's 'way-down-east Sound is Dead. Here's Why" (February, 1983, 5-7), Stephen Kimber outlines the fate of TV shows such as "Singalong Jubilee" which had always contained significant eastern Canadian music. Apparently the Toronto moguls decided to spruce up these "quaint" shows, and sent producer Ted Regan to Halifax. He promptly hired an outside writer to create between-song repartee and a choreographer to teach the chorus how to dance while they sang. A number of the regulars were uncomfortable with this and quit the show. Ryan's Fancy were rehearsing "Roddy McCorley" and told to "have some sparkle" by the director. Dermot O'Reilly's response is worth quoting: "Sparkle me ass! Look dearie, the fellow in this song is being lookin' hung. So I can't smile and I can't sparkle! Understand?" This is an example of how an institutional decisionsprucing up the production values of a local show - can have a very damaging effect on regional representation. Kimber suggests that the fundamental issue is that the CBC (a national institution) has decided that its mandate is to promote "the development of a single national consensus" rather than trying to explain the various regions of the country to each other. This "centralist" position in in clear opposition to a "regional" approach, and of course anything uniquely regional is devalued and eventually dropped from programming - like Singalong Jubilee. Folk music is regional, and it is going to be one of the first things to go if an institutional centralist position becomes the guiding philosophy of the CBC.

Railroad Songs

John Leeder has passed on a copy of a railroad song entitled "Reesor Siding" that was published in the third issue of Hoot Magazine. Dated 1963, this song was written by Peter Wyborn and concerns a labour dispute on the railroad. Don Freed has written a train song too. "The Long Red Train" is based on Don's experiences as a brakeman on the CPR in Saskatchewan.
New Managing Editor for the Bulletin

We are pleased to announce the appointment of our first Managing Editor in the person of Fran Keevil (PO Box 94, Rosseau, Ontario POC 1J0). She will be handling advertising accounts for the Bulletin as well as single issue sales of our publications. Any inquiries about our advertising rates and retail sales of the Bulletin should be directed to her.

Un centre de musique et de danse traditionnelle à Québec

L’an dernier, à la même époque, nous avions parlé des activités des Danseries du Québec (vol. 16, no 4). Une année de plus d’organisation a permis à ce groupe de se doter d’une structure permanente de fonctionnement. C’est ainsi que depuis six mois, ils travaillent à mettre sur pied le premier Centre de musique de danse traditionnelle au Québec. Après s’être considérablement impliqué dans l’organisation de la partie folklorique au Festival d’été de Québec, ils démarreront leur année avec une équipe élargie, plus expérimentée, forte de ses nouveaux acquis.

Barbeau’s Legacy

I was interested to read Donald Deschenes’ editorial comment, “Barbeau’s Legacy” (Bulletin 17, 22) in which he describes, with, I think, a certain degree of scorn, “the more popular orientation which those in charge would like to see the Society take”. At the risk of starting a fight between the Society’s scholars and its ordinary member, and in the interest of bringing a few latent tensions to light, I would like to make a few points.

Firstly, Deschenes refers to “a certain slackening of the Society’s activities” after the rigours of the 1961 International Folk Music Council meeting. It surely must have been a tiring meeting because, as far as I am aware, the Society’s activities remained pretty slack for over 15 years, until a movement was made to recruit more performance-oriented people to the board. Since then, the Society had admittedly not exactly soared in its activities but we do have an excellent Bulletin; our annual meetings have been well-attended and, for most of the non-scholars at least, stimulating affairs, which have attracted community interest in and around the host cities; and most important of all, our membership has increased dramatically. The fact that most of our new members are non-academic, anglophone folk music enthusiasts clearly reflects the fact that we are expanding to fill the area of greatest need. As Deschenes points out, the “popular” folk music community in Quebec does not need our help; one only has to see the prominence of folk music at Quebec City’s Festival d’été to appreciate that. Judging by the lack of participation emanating from the academic community, it must be assumed that they also find all necessary sustenance from other sources. So, we are left to fill the needs of the Anglophone “popular” (a poor choice of adjective) folk music adherents; those people who look upon folk music as instilling a certain sense of cultural identity into the ethnic soup which is English Canada; those who see it as a vehicle for social or political commentary, and those who simply value its esthetics and the sense of community it often
engenders. Perhaps more than anything, this group has needed a publication, and many of them regard the Bulletin as the major raison d'être of the Society. Scoff at this if you wish, but these are our members and we cannot ignore them.

It is difficult to argue with the view that the Society could be making more of a contribution to folk music scholarship, but it seems to me that the blame for this shortcoming must be laid squarely on the shoulders of the scholars themselves; those who did little or nothing when they were at the helm of the CFMS and those who abandoned the Society when their control of its direction seemed to be threatened by "popular" insurgence.

It is unrealistic to expect great enthusiasm for folkloric or ethnomusicological research from a member who is much more concerned with what folk music can achieve socially, politically or recreationally than with analysis of its content or context. I include myself in this category, and while the content of our Journal interests me and has some relevance to my own pursuits, it is hardly the major reason for my membership. In this sense I consider myself an incompetent director, given the stated aims of the society. On the other hand, there is work to be done, and I don't see any line-up of scholars waiting to take my place. In the last few years, outside of Donald Deschenes' own tireless efforts, those of Journal editor Edith Fowke and of one or two other present and past directors, I have seen little inclination to contribute to the CFMS from Canada's folk music scholars. The old cliche that you get out of something no more than you put into it seems very appropriate. Donald Deschenes has my sympathy, but I think he needs to look closer to home for the solution.

As a believer in the importance of a scholarly component within the society and with my tongue removed from its usual resting place in my cheek, I would be happy to offer my seat on the board (subject to election, of course) to any energetic scholar who feels he or she could better serve the aims of the CFMS. Perhaps he or she would also care to take over the treasurership. Yes folks, you too can be "filled with your own importance", and spend your evenings signing away vast sums of money! No folkies need apply.

- Ian Robb
Treasurer, CFMS

Song Ballads Review

The review of Edith Fowke's Sea Songs and Ballads from Nova Scotia (in the April, 17(2) Bulletin, p.32) regrets that there was no music with the songs from William Smith. I recorded Mr. Smith in 1948 for the Library of Congress. There are six of his chanties on my Folkways record FM 4006 (Folk Music from Nova Scotia). We recorded 27 songs in all and were grateful to get them while his memory and voice were still working well. You may find some individuality in his manner of singing, although that now seems pretty conventional. The tunes are similar to those in the usual song books. Some of the songs are of local origin. The entire set is housed at the Library of Congress Archive of American Folksong. They are around No. 105 by my original numbering.

Helen Creighton