

Dorothy H. Farquharson, *O, For a Thousand Tongues to Sing*. A history of singing schools in early Canada. Waterdown, Ontario, 1983. (114 pp.)

A collector of Canadian music, Dorothy H. Farquharson's curiosity was piqued by her discovery in 1978 of an illustrated, handwritten tunebook dated 1813 found in a county museum in southwestern Ontario. The author then followed her nose, beginning with historical collections near her home in Waterdown, in a hunt for information and artifacts to piece together the history of early Canadian singing schools. This book is a self-published account of her findings — a potpourri of original research and excerpts drawn from secondary sources to flesh out her story of what is essentially a Protestant music tradition. The author declares that her purpose is to "present the role of the singing school in Canada's formative years; to present information collected on schools in the Maritimes and the Canadas between the years 1790 and 1850; and to introduce the reader to this important movement — the first form of musical education." She describes herself as a "music-lover and music collector who has delved into the subject for the pure joy of it." Her perspective, therefore, is that of a generalist working in the field of Canadian sacred folk music. The result of her work is an informal, yet informative, survey of an important aspect of Canadian social history and musical folklore.

After a brief historical introduction on the singing school movements in Britain and America, Mrs. Farquharson proceeds to develop her story chronologically by region, beginning with the Maritimes. As most of her research is focussed upon Ontario collections it is not surprising that a large portion of the text is devoted to discussion of her "finds." Nevertheless the book provides a

good, if brief, overview of the activities of singing masters elsewhere in the country. The chapter on the Maritimes includes a description of two early tunebooks — Stephen Humbert's *Union Harmony*, the first Protestant tunebook published in Canada, appearing in Saint John in 1801, and James Dawson's *Harmonicum*, printed, after several attempts to build up a subscription, in Pictou in 1835. One interesting excerpt quoted from a letter to the author by the daughter of a Nova Scotian singing master describes his teaching circuit in the Pictou area late in the 19th century.

Although Mrs. Farquharson was unable to locate any documentary evidence of singing schools held in Lower Canada, she does cite three musical instruction books and an anonymous volume entitled *A Help to Country Congregations in the Diocese of Quebec* (Montreal, 1865) known to have been used in the province. The fact of their existence suggests that singing schools may have been conducted in Lower Canada, but much more primary research is required.

The author presents her research into Ontario's singing school history between 1813 and 1950 in particular detail. One chapter describes several early "tunesmiths" and their books. Among them are — Samuel Moyer, a Mennonite schoolteacher at "The Twenty," whose pupils produced fractur-decorated tunebooks; Mark Burnham, an Anglican Loyalist and merchant, compiler of the *Colonial Harmonist* (Cobourg, 1832) with a figured bass; and Alexander Davidson, whose *Sacred Harmony* (Toronto, 1838) was the first official Methodist hymnbook published by the Wesleyan Conference in Upper Canada. In her second chapter on Ontario singing schools the author identifies examples of different systems of musical notation used in these schools — Lancashire solfa and the ziffern notation



(a European numerical system) as well as the American shape notes. She also describes an example of Scottish practice verse, short moral texts used by Presbyterian Scots to learn new psalm tunes, found in the 1813 Simcoe tunebook. Nineteenth century newspaper advertisements quoted reveal the teaching schedules, curricula and fees set out for forthcoming singing schools. Finally an informative discussion of Mennonite singing schools concludes this section.

Singing schools first appeared in the west in the mid-1850s, in the Red River District and on Vancouver Island. Again some newspaper advertisements are quoted and the author discusses the transition which occurred about 1900 from singing schools to choral workshops and festivals as the venue of choral instruction in Canada.

O. For a Thousand Tongues to Sing contains a short glossary of terms related to the singing school movement and an eclectic bibliography citing some useful local histories. The appendix includes reproductions of the title page and eight tunes from Mark Burnham's *Colonial Harmonist* and the title page, preface, entire introduction and five tunes from the Methodist Committee tunebook, the *Canadian Church Harmonist* (Toronto, 1864). It is a good sampling of the format of early Canadian tunebooks.

In sum, Dorothy Farquharson has provided an informative account of the history of Canadian singing schools. It is the first such survey available in monograph form and well worth reading. The author makes no claims to having produced a definitive account of her subject. Indeed, she strongly urges more study of the early Canadian tunes and hymn texts found in these oblong tunebooks.

Copies of *O. For a Thousand Tongues to Sing* may be purchased *only* from the author herself. The price is \$12.00 plus \$1.50 for postage and handling. Orders may be addressed to: Mrs. Dorothy H. Farquharson, R. R. 2, Waterdown, Ontario, Canada L0R 2H0

- Margaret A. Filshie
Reviewer

About the reviewer:

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