

Book Reviews



Grit Laskin. Lilia Jig. Fogarty's Cove Music - FCM-009.

If the current folk music scene in Canada is truly alive and well, one major reason for its success has to be the work and excellent, credentials of Grit Laskin, alias 'The Masked Luthier of Dupont Street', a fine singer-songwriter in his own right, interpreter of some of the best traditional songs on both sides of the Atlantic, multi-talented instrumentalist on instruments as diverse as the Northumbrian smallpipes, tenor mandolin and guitar.

Laskin has the knack for knowing where to find and unearth the neatest songs and tunes this side of a good ceilidh. His songs can be a comic as 'The Photographer' or as haunting as 'At the End of a Pointed Gun' or as weird as 'Cosmic and Freaky', but all are penned with hand that only a master songsmith can attain.

On this, his second solo disc to date, Laskin takes up where he left off on Unmasked. Aply assisted by such supporting musicians as Anne Lederman on fiddle and piano and Ian Robb on several different types of concertinas, Laskin manages to play and sing his way through as cunning and varied a set of songs and tunes as one might find anywhere. Laskin's ability to find songs that make a

point are amply demonstrated on this recording: everything from his grand rendition of Gilbert and Sullivan's 'When I was a Lad', a song which tells us that incompetence is no barrier to success as long as one has the right connections, to his futuristic fable of the final disappearance of male chauvanists, 'Macho Man', to several powerful musical statements of social concern: Nancy White's 'Sewing Machines', a tale of an immigrant family's search for riches in Canada and how often hopes are dashed by reality, as in the case of a woman's entrapment in the sweat-shops of the garment industry, to 'Shut off the Power and Say Goodbye', a musical plea for the right to die with dignity and not be kept artificially alive by massive impersonal technology.

If the songs reflect Laskin's ability to say important things through music, then his ability to compose original tunes that sound traditional comes across equally with great success on this album. Polkas, jigs, reels and slow airs are equally crafted with skill and masterful musical touches; here are tunes as diverse as the all-purpose 'Generic Jig', and a set of jigs in honor of such personal loves as wine and coffee. Here are polkas and slow airs composed in honor of family members (the album's title track is a case in point), old friends and personal acquaintances. A particular personal favorite is 'The Old World and the New', a tune that traces an immigrant's journey from Eastern Europe to Canada, with definite Balkan, Celtic and Canadian influences thrown in.

This is an album that, once put on the old turntable, may be hard to take off any time soon.

Song and tunesmith, Grit Laskin manages to prove that, even when a song is new and a tune is just recently composed, it can sound as traditional as all get-out; this is one of the best albums to come down the musical pike in a long, long time. Thanks to the folks at Fogarty's Cove Music, for once again showing that Canadian folk music is alive, well and thriving. As long as Grit Laskin is part of that music, it will continue to do so.

Robert Rodriguez

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Margaret Bennett. The Last Stronghold: Scottish-Gaelic Traditions in Newfoundland. Breakwater Books, Saint John's, Newfoundland, 1989, pp.200

Scottish-born Margaret Bennett is no stranger to the world of traditional folk music, folklore and folk culture. Raised in the Hebrides and having lived on both the islands of Skye and Luis, she is steeped in traditional music, lore and customs of her Scottish family, who have lived for generations in the Hebrides. A fine singer of traditional Scottish songs in her own right, Bennett is equally at home in both English and Gaelic; she is also a folklorist extraordinary, a field collector, historian, and has been a lecturer and well-respected staff member for the most prestigious School of Scottish Studies in Edinburgh, itself a monumental and integral force in the preservation and dissemination of traditional Scottish music and lore.

This love and knowledge of Scottish traditional folk culture was to be of invaluable help in the summer of 1969, when Miss Bennett became friends with Allan MacArthur, an 84-year-old resident of the Codroy Valley on the southwestern tip of Newfoundland. The Codroy Valley is the last thriving and surviving pocket of Gaelic-speaking folks in Newfoundland. MacArthur and his family would become quite friendly with Bennett, and in the following several subsequent years she would make several trips to the Codroy Valley; the result is this most delightful book, in which Bennett gives to her readers a brief but incisive look at various elements of Scottish-Gaelic traditions still found there. The book is delightfully entertaining and yet retains a scholarly atmosphere, without being overly didactic, as many such volumes often tend to become. Bennett's style is warm and gentle, and every page takes us into the MacArthur living room or kitchen, or, as often as the case, right into the middle of a good old fashioned ceilidh gathering.

There are chapters devoted to early Scottish migration to the Codroy Valley in the early decades of the 19th century, a look in brief at the physical features of the valley, its geography, its climate, and the resources to be found there, and a brief look at the interaction of the various groups who have lived in the valley from the original Micmac inhabitants to settlements by Scottish, French and English migrants. Again what comes through, over and over again, is the ability of Bennett to take the actual words of MacArthur, who himself can boast of his family's residence

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in the valley for many generations, and make these words come alive on the printed page. Bennett's collecting techniques are impeccable and true to the folklorist's trade.

What also comes across in this excellent work is the true sense of community as seen through eyes of MacArthur, himself a fine piper, singer and storyteller. MacArthur is a modern bard, a true oral historian, and his sense of the love of the Gaelic traditions is mirrored in Bennett's eyes and her words. One of the most illuminating characters is the one in which MacArthur gives his own family history, and goes into some detail on the importance of community in preservation of the Gaelic way of life, even as other pockets of such tradition were slowing down or rapidly disappearing from view. Much is made of the importance of the local ceilidh in Gaelic life and tradition. Music, dancing, storytelling and general merrymaking were the order of the day, and Bennett spent many a happy night enjoying these get-togethers.

Other chapters in the book deal with such interesting subjects as family recipes and cooking traditions, traditions and customs of the Yuletide and Christmas season, and to me the two most interesting sections, those dealing with the art of the traditional storytelling and oral narrative and the traditions of music and singing in the Codroy Valley.

Both the storytelling and music play a major role in the preservation of the Gaelic culture. MacArthur himself was an excellent narrator and raconteur,

and his knowledge of "Sgeulachdan", the general term for Gaelic narratives, including history, legend and folk tales, is amply demonstrated by his retelling of a number of tales, including ghost stories, legends of the faery folk and personal narratives, plus several dealing with origins of place names, and even a modern legend or two. The book's final chapter is a look at the importance which music and song played in the general atmosphere of the valley's folk, especially during such communal gatherings as the shearing of sheep and the making and milling of the cloth, practiced equally by both men and women, as opposed to the traditional waulking customs practiced in Bennett's home islands. A number of songs, both in Gaelic and with English translations, are included for the reader's delight and benefit. Again what comes through with clarity and forethought is the deep and abiding love for the Gaelic tradition by both Allan MacArthur and his family and, of course, Miss Bennett.

In the final analysis, this excellent look at a traditional culture still exists in today's modern world; the Gaelic traditions in Newfoundlands' Codroy Valley will be enjoyed by true lovers of folklore and the Scottish tradition, and anyone who enjoys such community studies. This is an important resource in the study of Canadian folklore, and it is a must for any fan of this folklore and its Gaelic predecessors. This book comes very very highly recommended.

Robert Rodriguez