Reviews/Comptes-rendus


In recent years Morris dancing has become popular among a growing number of Canadians. They may find this account of Morris dancing in the English Midlands of interest, although it concentrates on so many details that the pattern is hard to decipher.

Over three and a half centuries, the trend was for the dances, first performed in the Royal Court from 1480 to 1540, to shift to provincial towns from 1600 to 1750. Then between 1750 and 1900 it centred on the South Midlands.

The Midlands include six counties: Buckinghamshire, Gloucestershire, Northamptonshire, Oxfordshire, Warwickshire, and Wiltshire, and in them Morris dances were usually performed during the six weeks between Easter and Whitsun. The author discusses the relationship of the dancing to the social conditions in a region, finding that it became part of working class culture. It was a spectacle, both noisy and animated, and served as entertainment and street theatre. It was a cultural pursuit that served to bond various social groups, and was shaped by the increasing technological development in both industry and agriculture.

The author describes the musicians and their instruments, and the decline and revival of the tradition. There are several early photographs and an extensive bibliography.

This is the first in the Tradition Series of the Folklore Society, University College London, Gower Street, London WCIE 6BT, United Kingdom. No price is given.

Edith Fowke


For whatever reason, the bagpipe has become the butt of numerous jokes, and its image in popular culture and the imagination has often been of a most misunderstood musical instrument, subject to laughter and ridicule. Bagpipes, however, have a long and most honorable history, dating back thousands of years, and in some form or another, using many diverse names, the instrument is known from highland Scotland to the Middle East and from Ireland to India. As much as the harp and fiddle, the pipes have become synonymous with Celtic lore, particularly that of Ireland and Scotland, so that is why this volume of stories, tales, anecdotes, and legends concerning pipers is such a delight and a joy to anybody who enjoys the magic and majesty of the bagpipe in all its musical incarnations.

Asala has assiduously researched the lore and traditions of bagpipes and their exponents, particularly among Irish and Scottish traditions, even including several stories from the southern United States as part of this collection of tales, which run the gamut in mode and imagery from the whimsical to the mysterious and from the comic to the hauntingly bizarre. Pipes have often been associated with everything from roguish tricksters to messengers of war and death, and this volume includes an assortment of stories showing pipers in many differing aspects, from the ordinary to the supernatural. Here for example can be found such tales as the comic Irish story of "The Cow that Ate the Piper," while a number of Scottish stories show pipers in the context of their encounters with denizens of the Faerie world, as is often shown by the common belief that pipers emanate an other-worldliness about their personages. Asala does not, however, neglect the historic role pipers have played in military history, with a number of stories about pipers and their
involvement with wars, dating back to the days of Jacobite insurrections up to their doings on modern battlefields as late as the two world wars of the twentieth century. This collection of stories will truly delight any serious devotee of bagpipe music, lore, or traditions, and certainly Celtic buffs will enjoy this anthology of pipe stories just as much. This volume comes very highly recommended.

Robert Rodriguez

Close to the Floor: Newfoundland Dance Music. PIP CD 7327. Pigeon Inlet Productions, P.O. Box 1202, St. John’s, Nfld. A1C 5M9.

We almost lost Pigeon Inlet a few years back. Happily, they’ve resurfaced, and are now issuing lots of fine recordings, of which this one is an excellent example. It’s partly, but not entirely, a compilation of tunes from earlier Pigeon Inlet recordings, many of them now out of print. There are also some tracks which have never before been released. As the title indicates, the recording is devoted to music used for traditional dancing in Newfoundland.

There are many contrasts in Close to the Floor. Modern, well-known groups such as Figgy Duff and the Wonderful Grand Band are represented (the latter with a previously unreleased offering, "The Four Poster Bed"). At the other end of the spectrum is material from the Kenneth Peacock collection of field recordings, including what is probably the earliest recorded example of Newfoundland dance music — made in 1959! Before that so recent date when Mr. Peacock taped Joseph Aucoin’s "Growling Old Man", the wonderful tunes of Newfoundland were largely unknown to the rest of the planet.

Not all the tracks are instrumental — there’s an example of "chin music" as well. Nellie Musseau and other such performers were so highly regarded that they were often called upon to lilt tunes even when instrumentalists were available. Nellie growls out "I Got a Bonnet Trimmed With Blue" in inimitable fashion.

The liner notes are very exacting in detailing the musicians on each cut, the location of the recording session and the producer, engineer, etc., where the information is known. They also provide terse but informative comments on the music and the musicians. There’s not much concerning the dances which the music was used for (which I guess is outside the scope of the recording — it’s not about Newfoundland dance, but about the music played for it). However, some tidbits can be gleaned from the notes: for example, I learned that no Newfoundland traditional dances except the waltz are performed by a couple. Also, several of the cuts comprise sets of tunes used for particular dances: Ron Felix’s "Strip the Willow" and Figgy Duff’s "Kissing Dance Set". As well, Rufus Guinchard talks us through a set of examples of tunes which he would use for a typical evening of dancing, in a previously unreleased field recording, highly informative as well as showcasing Rufus’s tunes and playing style.

Rufus Guinchard and Newfoundland’s other famous (and recently passed on) fiddler, Emile Benoit, are represented both in person and through their tunes played by revival groups. One neat contrast is obtained by Emile’s tune "Arriving to St. John’s", played in his scrappy solo style, fading into a more polished multi-instrumental arrangement by The Crowd. The tune holds up magnificently in both settings. Other tunes which took my fancy include "Half Penny Reel," played on the accordion by Ray Johnson, who more recently has become know as "The Other Feller" with Buddy Wasisname. Ray apparently learned the tune from Don Messer, but it’s hard to imagine bland old Don giving it the verve, drive and intensity with which it’s treated here. There are a couple of beautiful waltz tracks: Minnie White’s "Midnight Waltz" and Art Stoyles’s "Portuguese Waltzes," so called because they were learned from sailors of the Portuguese fishing fleet.
A track from Red Island let me cold, however. They're described as "one of the first local groups to successfully combine contemporary rock music sounds with traditional and original music," so I guess there's some historical interest here. But for my taste Rufus Guinchard's "Centennial Highway Reel" can do without rock guitar solos and jazz fiddle breaks dumped heavy-handedly into the middle of it. Current Newfoundland groups such as The Plankerdown Band are much more successful at seamlessly blending modern and traditional sounds. (One member of that band, Don Walsh, was part of Red Island as well, so it seems the apprenticeship was well served!)

A sad note is struck by the recurring phrase "no longer available" appearing with almost all of the Pigeon Inlet recordings from which many of these offerings are taken. Let's hope the masters are still around, and that some day Pigeon Inlet will see fit to reissue these fine recordings. Meanwhile, let's applaud them for coming out with delightful material such as Close to the Floor.

John Leeder

[We received the following unsolicited review of Six Mile Bridge at the same time as George was working on his, so we have the luxury of looking at the recording from two different slants. Please don't hesitate to send us unsolicited reviews! -- J.L.]

Six Mile Bridge. Canal Records, P.O. Box 57029, 797 Somerset St. W, Ottawa, Ont. K1R 1A1

This current sixpiece has been labouring in the vineyards of the Ottawa music scene for numerous years, and in almost as many configurations. This, its first commercial release, well illustrates the dizzying potential of the group. The five songs and seven sets of tunes range from traditional Celtic material (just to show the grey-rinse set that they can still play without electric guitars) to WorldBeat (whatever that is) to RunRig-esque stadium anthems. To me, this variety is a major advantage, although I know it is frustrating for those who buy their music the way they buy their wood screws -- one narrowly-fashioned variety at a time.

The strength of the release is truly in the instrumentals, and one will not need to listen long to hear the catholic (small-c, please) influences which Six Mile Bridge can reflect. The recording opens with a brilliant track that more than hints at India ("Bombay Revisited"), accompanied by a French-Canadian horo ("Marioro"). ["Horo" is the term used by Emke and by the group itself in their liner notes. We are not familiar with the term. Could it be a misprint for "Hora"? Can any reader enlighten us on this? —GWL] The second track, the crowd-pleaser "Banks of Lough Gowna", slowly brings the seemingly-disparate threads (or threats?) of synthesizer and percussion together to triumphantly exploit the melody of the tune. The set ends with some South African guitar riffs in "More Power to Your Elbow". Other instrumental standouts are the three fiddles in "The Gravel Walk to Stravinsky's House" and the jig-to-funk of "Blarney Pilgrim/President's Choice".

Just a note to recognize the work of the percussion on this release. The Celtic world (and especially its local manifestation, the informal music session) has been plagued by hordes of bodhran players who purport to be percussionists. As the old joke goes, "What do you call 50 bodhran players up to their necks in sand?" Answer: "Not enough sand." Thus the percussion on this release stands out, with different sounds and rhythms on almost every track. It's good to hear someone who approaches percussion as an instrument rather than as a glorified metronome.

At the risk of making a generalization (even though that is what reviews are all about), I like the instrumentals better than the songs. The singing is workpersonlike — not particularly inspired but
acceptable. The choice of songs leans toward the original rather than the traditional. This will excite some. Songs like "Temagami" will certainly sit well with those who can bear to be reminded of the cutting of old-growth forests in Ontario.

Those who had followed Six Mile Bridge's live career looked forward to this release, but we were all surprised at just how good it was in the end. This one I know made it to several "Best of 92" lists. And no longer do we have to stand in crowded, smoky bars to hear Ottawa's finest. Count it fortunate that you won't have to either.

Ivan Emke

New Year's Eve at Lac La Biche, 1895: I do not believe that I was ever in a more advanced state of exhilaration than on first viewing the unsightly cabins of the La Biche post. Farther along on my trip I felt a deeper thankfulness, when hope had almost fled, and mind and body were too jaded to rejoice, but now I was as a boy given an unexpected holiday, who wanted to shout and throw his cap into the air; for here at last I beheld the actual frontier, and the real starting point of my journey. Not that the trip from Edmonton had been so long or so hard, for, as a matter of fact, it was pleasant and easy, but it was the realization of being on the scene of the action, so to say.... I think ... [Gairdner, the Hudson's Bay Officer in charge] was glad to see us (especially Grierson, who brought along a flask), and he certainly shared the best of his house with us. He told us we had come at the best time of the year to see the Indians; that they were always given a feast and dance on New Year's, and that some of them, hearing of our arrival, would probably drop in that night to dance a little-for us. Well, they did "drop in," and they did dance, though not a "little." How those natives danced, and what an atmosphere and a racket they created in that house! They began to arrive shortly after we had finished supper, shaking hands with us solemnly on entrance, and eyeing us stealthily after seating themselves in rows against the walls. Then one of them produced a fiddle, and from the time the first measure was sounded there was no cessation until about two o'clock the following morning.

For a while the exhibition was rather interesting, though never very novel. The common dancing of the Indians appears to be about the same the country over; there is but one type, though it may assume different expressions, according to prejudice or locality. Either they shuffle around in a circle or they hop from one foot to the other in lines or separately, or they do all three, with more or less vigor and with or without costuming. At La Biche the dancing is not of the Indian type, but rather of the kind one sees in the half-breed camps of Canada, and consists of a species of jigs and reels gone through at a pace that makes you dizzy only to watch. They have their dances where several couples perform, but the most popular seemed that in which separate couples engaged — as many as the floor would accommodate. These face one another, and the man enters upon a vigorous exploitation of the double-shuffle, which he varies with "pigeon-wings" and other terpsichorean flourishes, always making the greatest noise of which he is capable. Noise and endurance, I was given to understand, are the two requisites to good dancing; but men and women of course wear moccasins, and only on occasions have board floors to dance on. It was my luck to happen along at one of those "occasions," and to be further tortured by a half-breed company servant, whose great pride was a pair of white man's heavy boots, which he never wore except when treading the giddy maze.

In front of the fort's stockade were gossiping groups that grew with each fresh arrival, while scattered all about the enclosure, just where their drivers had left them, were the dog trains of the Indians who had come...
to fill Gairdner's house and eat the Hudson's Bay Company meat. There was no housing nor feasting for these dogs; in a 24-degree-below-zero atmosphere they stretched out in the snow and waited, without covering and without food. The Indians with their blanket coats or capotes, and the dogs and sledges and "jumpers," made a picturesque whole against the unbroken background of snow. (conc'd. on page 35)

These people had never before seen a camera, and many of my plates show them scurrying away or turning their backs. It was only after the most elaborate descriptions to Gairdner, who instructed the interpreter, who explained to the Indians, that we induced one or two "types" to sit in our presence while Heming sketched them. They thought we were making "medicine" against them, but were won over by Heming drawing the moose and caribou, while they watched the animals they knew so well develop under his pencil.

When we returned to the house the dance was still on; it was always "on" during the first thirty-six hours of our stay at La Biche. Formerly the Hudson's Bay Company officers merely "received" on New Year's Day; but as the Indians have a custom between sexes of kissing on meeting, and as it did not become an impartial officer to distinguish in this respect between old women and young, unattractive and attractive, the feast was substituted. The custom of kissing the ladies on New Year's Eve still prevails in Lac La Biche.

I hope that New Year's night will not be recorded against me. Those Indians danced until four o'clock in the morning, and they danced to my utter demoralization. We sat around and watched the "gymnastics" and pretended we enjoyed them until about one o'clock; then we retired. We all three slept in Gairdner's office, a tiny apartment separated from the main room by a thin board partition, of which a good quarter section in the centre was removed to admit of the two rooms sharing a single stove. There was a piece of loosened sheet-iron tacked to the partition to protect it from the heat, and my head was against that partition, and our blankets sprinted and jumped and shuffled!

Caspar Whitney, Lac La Biche Yesterday and Today (Lac La Biche, Alberta)

[In many respects, the points of view expressed above do not reflect those of the editors or, we assume, most readers of the Bulletin. We include this anecdote because it vividly relates a cultural encounter often replayed in the history of Canada.]

During one wedding in the early hours of the morning, Woldemar Missal was disturbed by a little girl bawling her head off at his side. Stopping his fiddling, he saw that it was his niece Selma Jantz, whose folks had gone home without her. Whether they couldn't find her sleeping on a pile of coats in some corner or if they had forgotten her is hard to say, or maybe they had miscounted.

Adalbert Missal, South Edmonton Saga (Edmonton, Alberta)