

"And That's How It Began"

Richard Johnston

interviewed by Philip J. Thomas

Richard Johnston won the Order of Canada and died in 1997. Simple, bald words. I'm not going to be plain or decorous about it: Calgary won't be as much fun now. Since 1975, I've periodically run into Richard in one context or another, and I usually got a good story to tell from the encounter. My favorite: in 1980, I had to phone him regarding a committee on which we both sat, I as the recording secretary. As it happened, he'd just gotten back from Poland, which was at the height of the Solidarity strike, and he'd become a member of Solidarity, for which he was written up in the local paper. When I got him on the line, I referred to that article, and he responded, "Well, George, fools' names and fools' faces are often seen in public places, and that applies to me, and I'm afraid it applies to you, too, George." The lyrics are swell, but if you never heard how Richard's voice boomed through his beak, you won't get the tune, alas.

[Richard's response to this discourse was evasive—only a faint smile and a nod—but when I asked him to write a profile of Edith Fowke, a few months back, he responded, "George, Edith was a bitch. Edith was a bitch, and I was a bastard, so we got along great. We fought, and then we hugged each other." I might add that Richard was one of the few people I've met in recent years who could frequently insert my name into conversation without sounding as though he were trying to ingratiate himself cheaply.]

Folk music was a minor interest with Richard, but that was unavoidable in one who had many interests and was always willing to give something of himself to what seemed worthwhile, whether or not it meant a great deal to him. He has not been active in our Society for a long time, but remember that he told that committee we worked on in the 80s to be sure to send word of its activities to the Society's Journal since "... some interesting people read it." I've only had the opportunity to hear his music twice—both times were tribute concerts at the University of Calgary. "classical" musicians are still not supported, you know, and Canadian composers have a double handicap. (Even "simple folkies" would enjoy setting of "She's Like The Swallow," for string quartet, as I recall—it includes a section in which musicians and audience sing the verse together! Nevertheless, he leaves a substantial catalog of works (he was composing until his death, as well as sitting on more committees than you can baton at), and I hope his music will not die with him.

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FOREWORD: On June 6, 1994, in Calgary, during the annual meeting of the "CFMS" (then known as the CSMT, and soon to be the CSTM), I was fortunate in being able to interview Richard Johnston, a founding member of the Canadian Folk Music Society—and a number of other Canadian societies as well. People interested in folk songs know his work primarily through his collaborations in Canadian folk song publications with Edith Fowke. His life in music as a composer, collector, compiler and editor, in music education, in academia, is summarized in some two columns in the Encyclopedia of Canadian Music. The following excerpts from our interview treat several parts of his career which bear on the nature of the CSTM, and the corpus of folk music in this country. His energy and commitment in his work continues to affect us all.

RJ MEETS FOLK MUSIC: AS A CHILD, THEN AS A COMPOSER

PT—Dr. Johnston, you have been involved in music in so many ways.... Were you attracted to folk songs before you became involved with Edith Fowke?

RJ—As a matter of fact I was. In the first place before I even came to Canada I was an American and as an American I got interested in folk music principally because of my Scandinavian background. I remember as a small boy some of my shirttail relatives, my father's cousins and so on, coming over from Sweden and bringing—one of them actually brought with him what they call a *dragspel*, which is a peasant accordion, and we used to have Swedish folk dancing in our basement after that man came with his fantastic little box, and he played like a master. I think about it now; if I hadn't had the experience I would never have believed he knew those things because he was a house painter, and that's all he did when he came over—except that he could not leave his Swedish heritage alone. And it is a little bit more removed from my heritage, but I responded to it very much. My

father and my mother both did know a few Swedish folk songs. But then, you know, as a musician, as I became more and more interested in music, even long before I thought of it as a career, I did hear things about Pete Seeger and Aaron Copland's use of American folk songs, and I lived in a polyglot neighbourhood of Poles and Germans and Jews.

PT—What city was this in?

RJ—In Chicago, on the north side of Chicago, and it was a very nice neighbourhood, but we had this polyglot civilization there, and the Poles loved their folk dancing, and the Jews their line dancing and their singing of their wonderful songs, and there was a little German colony there too. We all sort of ignored each other but practiced our own ways without hiding them, so I was aware of these things.

When I became a doctoral student at the Eastman School of Music [Rochester, NY], I got interested again in certain kinds of folk music, more or less American type of folk songs, and the first piece I ever wrote as a graduate student was a set of variations for piano and orchestra on an American folk tune. I don't

know what it was now, and I've lost the score. They performed the damn thing in Rochester, and the score and parts went into the Eastman School Library as did a number of my other works, and a few years back I wrote to them and said "Would you please send me my score and parts?" and they wrote back and said they had cleaned out the library and burned thousands and thousands of scores of student's works—without even trying to find us and say, "Would you like to have them back?"

PT—Before we leave Chicago entirely, what was your familiarity with Carl Sandburg's work? [He was from Chicago.]

RJ—Only as a poet—I have always been interested in poetry.

PT—I was just wondering about his American Song Bag?

RJ—I didn't know the American Song Bag at all. I only knew his poetry. I met with the Song Bag after I came to Canada.

RJ COMES TO CANADA

RJ—I came to Canada quite accidentally. [To University of Toronto in 1947]

I was professor of music theory at the University of Toronto, and I taught theory, and all the people in the music education courses. So, naturally, I became very well acquainted with people like Major McCaul and Roy Fenwick, who was one of the early music educators in Ontario and a very important one and a good one.

PT—Did you have much to do with Sir Ernest MacMillan?

RJ—He was my boss. He was the person who hired me—and, you know, I didn't want to come to Canada. I really wanted to go to Oklahoma. Sir Ernest came to Rochester to interview candidates—and he chose me, and Arnold Walter did, and Howard Hanson, the director.

PT—You were in Toronto for a number of years.

RJ—Twenty-one. I was very much involved in radio work. I got to know Geoffrey Waddington who was music head of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation at the time. He and I became great friends. It was thanks to him that I was on the radio all the time. I was freshly married after two years in Toronto, and my salary wasn't great. Geoffrey decided that he would give me all sorts of help. I did a lot of judging of new talent, and he appointed me conductor of the chorus for the Canadian premiere of Benjamin Britten's *Peter Grimes*. So I've had a wonderful time.

After my year in Saskatchewan, I was given one of those three-hour CBC Wednesday night programs, and I did a three-hour stint on nothing but my work in folk music, concentrating on Saskatchewan. At that time I also, thanks to Frank Willis,

met Helen Creighton. He brought us together.

RJ AND EDITH FOWKE: THEIR MEETING AND COLLABORATION

RJ—[At U. of T.], one of my students, William Avery, came to me one day and said he was a member of a folk singing club in Toronto, and there was a curious lady there by the name of Edith Fowke, and she was asking around to see if there was a musician who would be willing to work with her on Canadian folk music. So Bill Avery came to me after that particular meeting and told me about it, and asked if I'd be interested, and I said, "Oh, sure," because I was a bachelor, and I was determined to be as much of a Canadian as I could be in the short time I was going to be here, which was only about two years—and that was only about 45 years ago now! [Laughs]

Anyhow, I met Edith, and we liked each other more or less, not a hundred per cent—we had lots of fights. We're much better friends now than we have ever been over our whole careers.

But we worked together on about six or seven different books. We had mountains of fights. There were times when I think she would have loved to have shot me dead—and I her.

PT—What would be an example?

RJ—It was a matter of choice. When you are doing a book you have only so much space to fill, and there were certain songs that she wanted for the socialistic or for the literary or historical reasons and were attached to tunes that were sheer garbage. And I would say, "No, Goddammit, I'm not going to have anything to do with putting that song, that melody, in a book that has my name [on it]." We had that kind of battle. Sometimes I won, and sometimes I lost.

PT—Do you remember one that you rejected?

RJ—No, can't remember.

PT—If you lost one, there must be one in a book which has one of these simple tunes which you do not find interesting musically.

RJ—Well, I can't remember. It's over forty years—those details have not stuck with me.

PT—Two strong wills.

RJ—Yes, she was very political at that time and she was much more acquainted with the Canadian scene than I, naturally. She was acquainted with the folk scene here. I was not at all acquainted. I had to have a very quick education in this sort of thing. Then there were times when the musician in me said, "I'm sorry, this may be very important from the point of view of your words, but if it's a songbook, it ain't goin' in." And we



had battles like that. She despised my guts—oh, but beautifully!—and I hers. I returned the compliment, and now, of course, we're the best of friends.

The other day when I met her here [Calgary], she saw to it that I got a free copy of her new book. She didn't know that I had been one of the local readers of her manuscript, which was a very good manuscript—very, very little to fix up. Well, in the meantime, she has had a lot of experience too. She's a real authority now. She was becoming an authority at that time.

I didn't just write piano accompaniments and harmonizations. I assisted in the choosing of the material. The books that we worked on together really were a joint effort.

PT—You did both the English and French books?

RJ—Oh, yes. I had the school contacts at that time, and that's why we did the melody versions.

RJ MEETS MARIUS BARBEAU; THE FOUNDING OF THE CANADIAN FOLK MUSIC SOCIETY

RJ—While Edith and I were working on our very first book, she said we really should go to Ottawa and explore the holdings of the National Museum of Canada as it was called then. And so one weekend we took off and did this, and, of course, I met Marius Barbeau and Carmen Roy.

I made a couple of trips to Ottawa, one or two on my own because Barbeau and I had become very good friends, and there were times I wanted to know something, and Barbeau was terrible at writing letters, so I would hop in my little [Volkswagen] bug and go to Ottawa for a weekend. He was wonderful; he always had lots of time for me.

One day as I was driving to Ottawa, I thought, "You know, we should really have a Canadian folk music society." I had been meeting some of the French [Quebec] men and had been hearing about Helen Creighton and hearing about several other people. So when I got to Ottawa, Barbeau and I were talking and I said, "You know, I think we should really have a Canadian folk music society." He said, "But, you know, there is one. We organized one years ago," he said. "But, you know, it's dead. It's absolutely dead. We do need a new one. I will be president, and you will be vice-president. Let's do it right now." I said, "How do we do it?" He said, "Well, we shake hands." So we shook hands, and we had a society.

Now I said, "Just a minute. A society has to be more than two, and a society has to have money." And I said "I know you're a rich man, but I'm a poor professor." He said, "I am a very poor man." So I said, "Here we are, two paupers with no money and a society, and we've already formalized it with a president and a vice-president. We don't even have a secretary." "Oh, yes, a secretary," he said. "Well, Carmen Roy is just across the hall; we will appoint her

secretary." [Laughs] So we had a secretary.

PT—I think this was about 1956.

RJ—We can track it down to the exact date, and I'll tell you how, because Barbeau looked at me with that funny twinkle he'd get, you know, and he said "I think we're in luck." He said, "You know today is the last day that Dr. Alcock is in office as the Director of the National Museum. It's a Saturday, but he's in his office, and he wants to be remembered. Why don't we go to him and have the Canadian Folk Music Society registered under the umbrella of the National Museum and then we'll get the money from the National Museum." So he picked up the phone and called Dr. Alcock, who had nothing to do at the moment, and he said, "Come." We went to see Dr. Alcock and he said, "What a splendid idea. Of course we will support it." [The date, according to a quotation in the first issue of *The Newsletter of the CFMS* (Vol.1, No.1, July, 1965) was September 26th, 1956.]

He was magnanimous; he was building a reputation for himself with a Society that hadn't existed for five minutes. [Laughs] And that's how it began.

[He] knew Blodwyn Davies, so he declared Blodwyn a member of the Society, and Blodwyn was amused, as we all were, but this is the way Barbeau worked, you know. He was wonderful.

PT—By the way, was Edith's name mentioned at the time as a member of the Society?

RJ—Frankly, I'll tell you, honestly, I think Edith and I were having a fight at that time, and Edith's name was not mentioned, but it was only a week or so after that. When I got back I told Edith. "Well," she said, "aren't I a part of it?" I said, "Oh, of course you are, Edith." So I immediately phoned Barbeau and said, "You know, Edith's a part of this," and he said, "Oh, yes, she is, of course." And also before I left Ottawa that weekend, Barbeau said, "You are one of the vice-presidents, but we should have two vice-presidents. And", he said, "I'm French and I'm President. We should have two English vice-presidents and, you know, Graham George in Kingston has done some work with folk music. We'll declare him a vice-president." And so all of a sudden we had a nice set-up and I think he also called—who was the great Frenchman at that time?

PT—Luc Lacourcière.



RJ—He called Luc Lacourcière, and so Luc Lacourcière and Carmen Roy and Barbeau took care of the French part, and Edith and Graham George and I took care of the Anglo side. So suddenly we had a bilingual group. It was wonderful. [Laughs] I mean, when I thought about it later I just had to go off in gales of laughter because it was the most wonderful way of organizing anything I ever heard of in my life. But when you had Barbeau at the head of it, anything could happen.

PT—*And with the National Museum?*

RJ—Well, it all happened in Ottawa out of a Saturday morning just before Dr. Alcock went to lunch and quit his job. [Laughs]

RJ WANTS TO COLLECT FOLK MUSIC, MEETS BLODWYN DAVIES; THIS LEADS TO COLLECTING IN SASKATCHEWAN

PT—*You were in Toronto, and then you went to Saskatchewan. Tell me that storv. please.*

RJ—I wanted to do some collecting myself, and I had a wife and a couple of children, and I had no money. I had to collect around the Toronto area. I had made a contact with the old man who started Waterloo Music, old Professor Field. He liked me—I think he liked my wife better than he liked me, but it does not matter; we had a very good relationship. Whenever we went to Waterloo to see old Field, I would meet his second-in-command who was a Mennonite, and he and his wife used to take Yvonne [RJ's wife] all around the Mennonite area in Waterloo County, and so when I got to the point of wanting to do some collecting, I thought, "Well, what about the Mennonites?" I did some collecting out there among them, but it took me away from my life and family. One of the boys at the CBC said, "You ought to get to know Blodwyn Davies, who knows a lot about the Mennonites and who lives in Cedar Grove, which is a little nothing of a place on the edge of Toronto." I got to know her and Blodwyn was magnificent. She was a folklorist in her own kind of way. I mean, she wrote kind of folkish histories of Quebec and Ottawa and certain angles [sic] around the Toronto district. We became very great friends, and one day she said, "Oh, a friend of mine who is the Director of the Saskatchewan Arts Board is going to take a leave of absence, and she has asked me if I would be her substitute for that year". And so she said "I'm going to Saskatchewan with the Saskatchewan Arts Board," and she said, "How would you like to come to Saskatchewan and collect music from the English speaking people in Saskatchewan?"

I said, "Well, it's a long way from Toronto. We'll see what happens." Well, Blodwyn got a grant for me from the Saskatchewan Arts Board, and there was a woman by the name of Henderson, who was a librarian from Regina and who coughed up a couple of hundred dollars, and I got a little grant from the National Museum in Ottawa thanks to Marius Barbeau.

PT—*What year was this?*

RJ—It was 1957, when my son was just 8 weeks old. Anyway, we ended up in a lovely little house in Fort Qu'Appelle. Now this is very important because I started crossing Saskatchewan in my little Volkswagen Bug. I went to Scandinavian areas, and to Ukrainian areas, and I had the wrong kind of lead-ins, and I never met one person who was a good source of ethnic folk music. But Fort Qu'Appelle was just on the edge of the Piapot



Indian Reserve, and thanks to Brodwyn and the Indian Agent, I met Abel Watach [sp?], who was one of the senior Indians on the Piapot Reserve. I got going collecting from the Indians. They were wonderful. They put on Pow-wows for me, and Abel Watach gave me access to all of the Indians who had interesting things to record—and all that stuff is now in Ottawa.

PT—*What type of tape recorder did you have?*

RJ—It was 5" reels and was heavy as lead.

PT—*Did you borrow it from the National Museum?*

RJ—Yes, they sent it out to Saskatchewan for me. One day Blodwyn said, "Now, look, you've been doing a lot with the Indians in the Reserve, but what about the Métis?" I said I'd love to get into the Métis Colony right next to Fort Qu'Appelle in a little tiny place called Labret on the edge of a Métis Colony. Well, we got very well acquainted with some of the people, and there was one absolutely fabulous Métis who had been in the army and had gone to Europe for the war. He was a very intelligent man. Before he left Europe, he made a trip to Paris to find a good violin—not just the old junky fiddle he'd had before he left—because he was a wonderful fiddler, and he knew all of the Métis dance tunes. And I took miles of tape of him playing his wonderful, wonderful jigs and reels.

PT—*And that's all up in Ottawa?*

RJ—That's all up in Ottawa. One day I said, "Is there not somebody who knows some any particularly Métis songs?" And they said, "Oh, you should know Monsieur Jeanotte who lives in a cabin down by the river." And so I went to see Jeanotte. He had been primed and he sang for me. I didn't get very many songs from him. It was at the very end of our stay there, and I could only spend a day and a half with him at that point. But I did get about six songs.

When I got there, there was the old man. He had put on a string tie because he was getting a visitor from the city, and he had a little hut, and there was electricity, and he sang his songs. He sang six songs for me. They're on tape, and I played these songs for Blodwyn, who said, "Oh, that's great! That's lovely. Why don't we share these things with Barbara Cass-Beggs?" So we went to Regina, and there she was. She was very gracious and all the rest of it, and that was the end until.... Later her book *Eight Songs of Saskatchewan* [Canadian Music Sales, Toronto. 1963] came out. and





Songs of Saskatchewan, (BMI Canada Limited, Don Mills, 1967).]

RJ—When I was in Saskatchewan I saw Blodwyn almost daily, certainly several times a week, because, while her office was technically in Regina, there was a house in Fort Qu'Appelle which belonged to the [Saskatchewan Arts Board], and she had an apartment there. She and I got along very well, and she liked my wife, and we were out there with our three children, and we had a ball, we really did.

PT—You were on leave from the University of Toronto?

RJ—Well, it was summer holidays [1957]. It was the summer time. I was only there for about three months. It was summer

AFTERWORD: The above are excerpts from some two-and-a-half hours of Richard Johnston's recollections, together with some discussion. For continuity in context a few passages have been moved in the editing. Richard is such an animated raconteur that transcribing the interview was a delight. There is, of course, much more in the long interview that should be shared. If anyone has any questions, or can supply the proper spelling, for which in two cases I am unsure, I would welcome hearing from you via the Bulletin. Richard Johnson's tapes from the summer of 1957, as he said, are in the Museum of Civilization in Ottawa/Hull. Their catalogue listings are JO-At-18, 19, and 20.

Vancouver, BC

August 16, 1997.

Photographs courtesy of Philip J. Thomas

WHEN WAS THE CFMS BORN?

For the record, the first issue of *The Newsletter of the CFMS* (Vol.1, No.1, July, 1965) contained an item under the heading *THE PAST* with a quotation answering the question of the origin of our Society. It does not tell us the first name used. Given our subsequent name changes, it is interesting to note that the question of what to call us seems to have been with us from the start. The first newsletter gave an historical perspective of the Society, past, present and future. Here are the first paragraphs of the item on the past:

A memorandum of January 25, 1957 issued from the Canadian Museum of Human History, announced that "at a meeting held in the office of the Director of the National Museum on September 26th, 1956 it was decided to establish a Canadian branch of the International Folk Music Council; this was done at the request of Dr. Marius Barbeau, acting on behalf of Miss Maud Karpeles, Secretary of the IFMS. At a later date the title of the branch was changed to 'Canadian Folk-Music Society'. The activities of the Society will be under the patronage and with co-operation of the National Museum of Canada.

"The purpose of the new Society is first to bring Canada into line with other countries that have already organized local folk-music societies; second, to achieve further progress in research and the utilization of folk songs in the country; third, to uphold the interests of folk-music with the new Canada Council now being established by the Government."

The date of the origin coincides, according to Dr. Richard Johnston elsewhere in this Bulletin, with the final day as Director of Dr. Alcock. The Encyclopedia of Music in Canada/2 has the date as September 20. For our purposes the year is what counts: "CFMS Established 1956". When I discussed the origin with Dr. Johnston and asked him if any mention was made of the IFMC, he said it was not. It may well be that at the meeting with Johnston and Alcock, Barbeau did not reveal the IFMC interest—or, if it were mentioned, Dr. Johnston did not take note of it.

break between classes.

THE FIRST AGM OF THE CFMS

RJ—One day Blodwyn said, "I have just had a letter from Barbeau who said it's time for the annual meeting, and he said, you know, 'I don't have time to do the annual meeting and besides,' he said, 'why don't the two of you have a meeting, have our first annual meeting? And why don't you get a few other people in Saskatchewan involved?'"

So Blodwyn and I laughed about this for a few minutes, and she suddenly said, "Well, now look, it's not so funny because, you know, there's Barbara Cass-Beggs in Regina. Her husband is the head of the Saskatchewan Power Corporation, and he will do anything that Barbara wants, so we will declare Barbara a member of the association, and we will also for no fee at all get her husband [David Cass-Beggs] and the man who was in charge of the money for the Power Corporation (a wonderful man) and his wife. We'll get them all in as members and we'll sign them up as members of the association, and we'll have the first annual meeting of the Canadian Folk Music Society in Saskatchewan."

And I said, "Look, I want one of Indians here." "Oh," she said, "What about Abel Watach?" I said, "Fine, and Abel can bring one of the singers and dancers." So we had two Indians at the meeting, and Blodwyn put together some sandwiches, and Yvonne made the coffee, and we got baby sitters for the children and had the first meeting. And out came the big wheels from the Power Corporation. It was very impressive. We were all amused and had a good time. It was truly great.