

"The fiddlers will play on three strings for quite a while"

Dorothy Hogan

The Canadian fiddle world braved icy roads on February 6th, gathering together in the Bethel Community Church in Barrie, Ontario, to mourn the loss of two of Canada's renowned masters of the old time fiddle and to celebrate the great contribution they both made to the culture of this country. Organized by John Howard, pastor of the church, and by others including Willis G. McNeilly, president and founder of the Canadian Fiddlers' Hall of Fame, this historic tribute saw so many fiddlers turn up to play that they could not be accommodated on the large stage of the church. Some say there were at least 40 fiddlers plus guitarists and piano accompanists. Willis overheard one of them remark that the "fiddlers will play on three strings for quite a while" without the inspiration of Graham and Eleanor.

One of the highlights of the occasion was the playing of a waltz Eleanor had composed for Graham, which she had played during a special tribute to Graham last October 25th at the Orangeville Fair Grounds. Willis, who also organized this event as well as Graham and Eleanor's induction in the Canadian Fiddlers' Hall of Fame, was so touched by Eleanor's beautiful melody that he composed words to the tune, which she called "Into the Heart of the Mountains." Three of our finest fiddlers, Ed Gyurki, Donny Reed, and Randy Morrison, gave a touching rendition of this musical offering during the ceremony in Barrie.

Reminiscing on the induction ceremonies last October, Willis recalled: "The Townsend family were brought from their Barrie home in a stretched limousine to Orangeville. Graham commented to the limo driver on the return trip to their home that he always wanted to pull up to a Tim Horton's in a stretched limo. This dream came true when the driver stopped at the Tim Horton's in Alliston, letting the Townsends go in for coffee and a doughnut, all eyes watching."

As many of you are no doubt aware, Graham fought valiantly against cancer the last two years of his life, playing until he no longer had strength to go on. On December 3rd, this phenomenal fiddler, called by some a "walking encyclopedia" of fiddle tunes, laid down his bow for the last time at the age of 56. At his funeral on December 8th, there were tributes from media producer, Paul Mills; Kenneth Palmer, Director of the Home County Folk Festival of London, Ontario; son Gray, piano accompanist; granddaughter Nadia; as well as from the fiddling

fraternity. Seventeen fiddlers plus accompanists played that day, beginning with a young boy not more than seven years old who opened the musical tribute with a violin solo, showing the great influence Graham had on our future generations.

In one of the most tragic ironies of life, 54-year-old Eleanor and her five-year-old granddaughter, Isabella, lost their lives as the Townsend home burned in Barrie, Ontario, on New Year's Eve. They are survived by their son, Graham Jr., their daughter, Catherine and granddaughter, Nadia. Graham Jr., or Gray as he was called by his parents, followed in the footsteps of his musical family, turning to the piano to develop his talents.

The last time I heard them play as a family was in 1997 at the festival in Valleyfield, Quebec, *Les Violons d'Amérique*,

where Graham opened the program with a 20-minute potpourri of tunes, accompanied by Gray at the piano. At his father's funeral, Gray told me that during that potpourri Graham pulled a lot of Quebec tunes from the hat that Gray had never heard before, but this talented young musician never missed a beat. Gray also told me that he plans to make a recorded tribute to his parents which Eleanor's sister, Jewel Reed Eden, says will bear the title, *Honor Thy Father and Thy Mother*.

To detail their accomplishments is a daunting task. Eleanor and Graham began their love affairs with the fiddle when they were children, and both devoted their entire lives to the struggle for recognition and artistic excellence in Canadian traditional music.

Graham Craig Townsend was born June 16, 1941, in Toronto and was raised in the Ottawa valley (Buckingham, Quebec) before returning to Toronto. He met Eleanor in Shelburne at a fiddling contest in August 1963. Graham was a skilled musician, thrilling many across the world with his fiddling and his tunes. He won first place in the Canadian Open Fiddle Contest at Shelburne four times, 1963, 1968, 1969, and 1970, thereby earning the title of Canadian Champion. He gave two Royal Command performances for H.M. Queen Elizabeth and H.R.H. Prince Philip. Graham recorded 40 albums and was inducted into the Canadian Fiddlers' Hall of Fame on October 25, 1998.

My personal memories of the power of Graham's playing are many, but the image that tops them all is that of Graham in the campground at Shelburne where a crowd gathered, delighting



to his solo playing during a marathon four hours, non-stop. When he was thirsty, we poured water into his open mouth as he kept playing tune after tune!

One cannot say that Eleanor played second fiddle. Apart from her many recordings, compositions, and guest appearances at fiddle contests, she was also a dedicated educator. At Valleyfield, I was able to congratulate her on a publication which was twenty years in the making, a 56-page method book with accompanying cassette on how to play the old time fiddle, entitled simply *The Townsend Old Time Fiddle Method*. The inscription in my copy reads, "This book will not be bound in time—it will fly through time forever!"

When I worked with Eleanor in the 70s, students came from miles around, often accompanied by their families, to stay all day at the Townsend home in Toronto, carrying back home with them cassettes full of music to practice. Many of her students, after only a year's study, went on to enter and win first place in the Junior category at many contests in Ontario. As well, Eleanor had the distinction of being the first woman to win first place in the Open category at the famous contest in Shelburne in 1970, when more than 300 fiddlers competed for honors. One of her students, 18-year-old April Verch, the second woman to win in the Opens, in 1998, paid special tribute to Eleanor on February 6th; her playing itself was an impressive testimony to the quality of Eleanor's teaching.

My days with the Townsends go back to 1973, when I invited Eleanor Reed Moorehead to help me produce a double recording destined for schools, *Maple Sugar: Songs of Early Canada*. This educational recording was developed as a companion to a poetry anthology entitled *Truth and Fantasy*, compiled by my husband, Homer Hogan, who was professor of English at the University of Guelph. Eleanor and her band graciously lent their talents to this project, which everyone assured me would not sell. But the folks at CBC got wind of it, and it was given generous air time by Max Ferguson, Judy Lamarsh, Harry Brown, Clyde Gilmore, and others. Sam Sniderman, president of Sam the Record Man, included us in his catalogue, making the recording available coast to coast. We also mailed a brochure to all the schools in Canada, some 15,000. Over the years, we sold over 10,000 copies to the general public, to libraries and schools here, as well as to the Canadian government's foreign outposts.

In order to promote this recording, which had included two bands and my 30-voice university choir as well as numerous guest soloists, we formed the touring group, *Maple Sugar*,

which featured Eleanor and her new love, Graham, as well as Graham's father, Fred, who called square dances for the late Don Messer. Touring Canada from coast to coast and down into the States, this group also included the "father" of Ottawa Valley stepdancing, Donny Gilchrist, and his daughter, Gina. Also included as a vocal/instrumental trio within *Maple Sugar* was Jim Gordon, Jeff Bird, and Randy Sutherland. Jim has gone on to produce the highly successful trio, *Tamarack*, which has some 15 records to its credit. Glen Paul, now of North Bay, Ontario,



accompanied on the piano, with Peter Kilpatrick on the bass. My role was that of founder, artistic director, MC, vocalist, guitarist, organizer, publicist, secretary, bookkeeper, shipping clerk, and mother hen; I was ably supported in the communications and financial departments by my husband, Homer Hogan.

The success of the *Maple Sugar* recording encouraged us to produce a second album in 1976 to pay tribute to the wonderful world of

the Canadian fiddle, *The Great Canadian Fiddle*. Graham and Eleanor demonstrated the different fiddling styles right across Canada with a musical assist from Maurice Bolyer (Beaulieu) of the *Tommy Hunter Show* on tenor banjo and guitar, Bobby Brown on piano and accordion, Don Wood on the bass, Matt Watson on drums, Jim Hardy on guitar, Mike McCurlie on 5-string banjo and myself on guitar and vocals. Considered by Clyde Gilmore to be the finest fiddle record produced up until that time, this too was warmly received. Our success, due in no small degree to the exciting music of the Townsend family, enabled us to bring the cultural treasure of Canadian traditional music to the attention of a truly international audience. We even had a request from Sri Lanka to include cuts from our albums on a special Canada Day broadcast.

Both records were ultimately placed with the Waterloo Music Company around 1980, when my efforts to include Quebec music in our offerings led me to Quebec and to the great Montreal accordionist, Philippe Bruneau, who had played with us from time to time. Another ten years passed, my role changing to that of piano accompanist for Philippe. I now make my home just outside of Montreal, where I continue to promote Canadian music—Quebec style, teaching and playing piano now for various artists, groups, and dance troupes.

When I think back on those heady years with the Townsend family, the Gilchrist family, the Bruneau family, and all the good folks we met along the way, I know I was touched by greatness. Many have gone along the road to join our forebears in what must be a goodly gaggle of fiddlers, accordionists,

stepdancers, singers, and musicians off somewhere in "the heart of the mountains." But they will be sorely missed by those of us "still plugging away the best we know how," in the words of Pete Seeger. We will wait a long time, playing on our three strings, before we see such giants again in our traditional music world.

But, I tell myself, life goes on. In this state of melancholy, I listlessly went to the monthly square dance in Montreal on January 19th, a *soirée bénéfice* organized by the *Société pour la promotion de la danse traditionnelle québécoise* to raise funds for our annual folk festival, *La Grande Rencontre de musique et danse traditionnelle*. I had been asked to accompany whatever musicians showed up who lacked pianists. It was a blustery, snowy evening which nevertheless did not prevent the hall from being jammed with over 300 enthusiastic dancers and musicians.

My last volunteer appeared just before the end of the dance at about 12:30 a.m. It was the 22-year old Danny Perreault from

Granby, Quebec, in the Eastern Townships, whom I met for the first time. He took up his bow and ripped into music from Graham and Eleanor's repertoire, showing the same kind of forceful authority and astonishing power as my dear friends, the Townsends, whom he had met at fiddle contests in Ontario. Most recently Danny recalls Graham's performance at the Canadian Grand Master's Fiddling Championship in Nepean, Ontario, August 29th, 1998. In spite of his weakened condition, he played, seated on a bench, a remarkable potpourri of tunes from each section of Canada.

As my fingers searched the keyboard for the chords to accompany Danny's tunes, I was comforted to know that though Graham and Eleanor have left us, their spirit lives on in our hearts and in our children by their music. As Eleanor said so eloquently, this music "will not be bound by time—it will fly through time forever!"

Both *Maple Sugar: Songs of Early Canada* and *The Great Canadian Fiddle* are available (on vinyl) from Bill Brubacher, Waterloo Music, 3 Regina Street N, Waterloo, Ontario. If you need further information, you may contact me by fax at 1-800-582-8054 or by e-mail at <chaine@microtec.net>.

The Townsend Old Time Fiddle Method, book and cassette, is available through Mayfair Music, 2600 John Street, Markham, Ontario L3R 3W3.



The Maple Sugar Troupe: Dorothy Hogan, James Gordon (seated), Donny and Gina Gilchrist, Graham Townsend, Glenn Paul