

REVIEW

LE CHANSONNIER FRANCO-ONTARIEN

*Germain Lemieux, S.J. 2 vols:
Centre franco-ontarien de folklore,
Université de Sudbury, Ontario,
1974.*

Is there such a thing as Franco-Ontarien folklore? asks Père Lemieux. A rhetorical question, as the life work of this collector and jesuit priest is dedicated to the belief that it not only exists but is one of the hardest and most creative outposts of French Canadian culture.

With the publication since 1973 of some ten volumes of franco-ontarien folk-tales in the series *Les vieux m'ont conté* (the old folk told me), and the twin volumes of *Le Chansonnier*, Père Lemieux has at last presented a rich and varied selection of the 'raw material' he has collected over the past thirty years throughout 'Le Nouvel-Ontario'—essentially the francophone communities around Sudbury. He is at pains to point out that it is the singers, the informants, who come from Le Nouvel-Ontario and that the songs, with very few exceptions, are variants of the wider french-canadian heritage of folksong.

The actual presentation of the songs and the design of the books bear witness to a meticulous and pragmatic approach. *Le Chansonnier Franch-Ontarien* is a model for a practical songbook: each volume contains some fifty songs, each song is on a two-page spread, in a brightly coloured softback edition with large,

strong, plastic ring-binding so that the book can be used and handled around cafe, campfire or club without fear of the back splitting and pages being lost. The songs are notated in a clear, uncramped hand, and the words are presented in the main in large type.

Père Lemieux not only gives the name and age of each of his contributors and the date of collection, but also notes when and from whom they themselves learned the songs—providing an important personal touch and element of continuity, as well as facilitating further studies based on the information. Thus the long and harrowing complainte "la morte du voyageur" is accompanied by the following:

Informant: Mme. Arthur Parent (Anna Bélanger, 75 years old, 1959). Sault Ste. Marie, Ont. Version learned when young from her mother Adeline Cloutier, born 1840.

Immediately the song acquires a living connection that stretches back well into the nineteenth century. At the end of Vol II there is a list of all the singers with page references to their contributions.

With the same concern for detail the songs are given, in almost every instance, just as collected, with any minor alterations duly acknowledged. Particularly useful is the indication at the head of each song of the recommended tempo: for "Vive l'amour", for example, we are told that ♩ = 104.

The issue of presenting chords for guitar and piano accompaniment is more problematic, and is not clearly

resolved. Père Lemieux' unequivocal attitude is that the songs must be able to stand on their own, *a capella*: "...beware of harmonization or piano accompaniment that would reduce all modes to major or minor scales." Having warned us, however, he proceeds to include a half-dozen songs with full (albeit simple) piano accompaniment by Placide Gaboury. But we are not told why these songs have been singled out or why guitar chords are indicated above the notes of some songs, but not others.

The material, naturally, varies from slow complaintes to lively dance songs and chorus songs. Of particular interest is the inclusion of several versions of certain well-known songs—thus we are able to compare no less than seven versions of "Les Trois Canards", with such intriguing choruses as:

La rézigne zign' boum! boum!
 boum! boum!
 Victoria, Victoria,
 La rézigne zign' boum! boum!
 boum!

Nor can I help quoting the refrain to one of the five versions of "Le Petit Mari": "My gosh, my soul, my poor little man", or, in French, "mai goch, mai sôl, mai pour litteul mann"—evidence of at least a derisory contact with the anglo-ontarians!

In the first volume, Père Lemieux has provided a twenty-page introduction to folksong, setting out his aims, his analyses and his attitudes. The intention of the book is above all "to restore part of the song repertory of the pioneers to our young people", but I feel that many would be put off by the occasionally patronising and even hectoring tone that

Père Lemieux unfortunately adopts as he attempts to deal with such thorny perennials as culture, folklore, and folksong: "the word 'Folklore' could be defined as the 'science of the people'; people in the somewhat special sense of illiterate, or with little academic culture." Though well-intended, such remarks as "a peasant will remain a peasant even if he puts on a prince's clothing", or "a cultured man is not necessarily an erudite man" sound awkward and banal at best. Further on we are told that "a well-chosen and well-interpreted song is a lesson in art and national pride."

His social attitudes appear quaint and antiquated as he deals with the subject matter of some of the songs: "a child loves its mother, as the wife loves her husband and children their parents"; and, worse still, concerning marriage: "to attack the subject in a logical way, one should first mention the fickle nature of certain young girls at the time." Such views prompt me to wonder whether some informants may not have held back more risqué, racy or downright bawdy songs for fear of offending the good father—the collection is indeed suspiciously 'clean'. The point is that Père Lemieux may be negating his own intentions: many young people turn away from folksongs because they believe them to be tainted at once with dry academicism and prurient quaintness—in a word, wholly out of touch with their own realities and aspirations.

Père Lemieux would do better to save his remarks for academic journals and to let the material he has so carefully collected and presented speak, or rather sing, for itself.

Tony Montague