

Maurice Ruddick: In Memory

In the December 1989 issue of the Bulletin John Leeder introduced the music of the Ruddick family of Springhill, Nova Scotia by printing a song (No More Pickin' Coal) by Valerie Hope MacDonald, née Ruddick, along with his story of the family based on material from Gerry Taylor. I agree with Taylor that the name of Maurice Ruddick needs to be restored to the public consciousness, but regret that this cannot now be done before he goes to his reward. Ruddick died in the summer of 1988 at the age of seventy-five; an obituary appeared in the July 11, 1988 issue of Maclean's.

I would like to contribute to the restoration of the Ruddick name by printing the text and tune of his most widely-disseminated composition. I have always found it ironic that the best-known and most widely recorded song about the 1958 Springhill disaster is the only one not composed by a Canadian (I'm referring to "The Ballad of Springhill," composed mainly by Peggy Seeger, with some assistance from Ewan MacColl), particularly when such a moving song as Maurice Ruddick's "Springhill Disaster" is available. What follows is an excerpt from my work in progress on a study of Springhill mining disaster songs.

Maurice Ruddick was one of the seven trapped miners who were freed last in the 1958 disaster. Ruddick, known in Springhill as "The Singing Miner," performed locally with a quartet, composed songs, and was well-known among his fellow miners for leading songs during rest periods in the mine. According to Leonard Lerner (Miracle at Springhill) [NY: Holt, 1960], pp. 17-18) he is said to have been singing one of his compositions, "The Curse of Old Number 2," as he and his fellow miners descended to work on the 23rd of October, the day of the disastrous "bump". That they chose to sing a hymn while trapped as line 4 of verse B relates is not unusual; this was the song type preferred by most of the miners. Note the use of

"dungeon" in the same line, no doubt a reflection of Merle Travis's widely known "Dark As A Dungeon." Verse C describes the death of one of the group and the birthday of another; with the exception of the Seeger-MacColl "Ballad" which made Caleb Rush-ton famous, this is the only Springhill ballad in which the names of miners are given. Ruddick later came to believe that he had made a mistake in mentioning names.

Most of the song focuses upon the miners and provides a view of the rescue from inside; in this it contrasts with all of the other Springhill ballads which place the rescue effort in the foreground. Ruddick's often quoted statement in line 4 of verse D was, originally, "Give us a drink and I'll sing you a song," a statement often heard in traditional song performance contexts (Lerner, pp. 173-4). According to Lerner, Ruddick began composing the song while trapped, thinking of the quartet, and of the possibility of marketing it for publication and broadcast (pp. 117-8). However, Ruddick's wife told me that several days after the rescue, while he was still recuperating in the hospital, Virginia bluegrass performer Bill Clifton called him and asked him if he would write a song about the disaster. This he did; the song was published by Ft. Knox Music and Clifton recorded it in Nashville. It was released simultaneously on Phonodisc in Canada and Kapp in the U.S. two or three weeks after Ruddick composed it (discographical references are given below). Ruddick believed that the song did not become a hit because of this delay. The meager royalties from the recording went to a miner's relief fund. Although the song speaks in line 2 of verse E of survivors remaining "to go digging again," in fact the mines were completely closed after this incident.

I am pretty certain that the chorus, with its minor chords, was added by Bill Clifton and Paul Clayton, whose names appear on some of the copyright documents; it lends

a touch of their folksong revival style to what is otherwise a country song (a fourth name in the copyright credits is that of C. Graham Pembroke, whose role in the song's creation is unclear to me). The recording was played extensively on Halifax radio, and even made it onto the "Western Airs" hit parade at CHNS, run by a DJ who had refused to play at least one of the other country songs about the disaster. In Nova Scotia during the months following the disaster, the Clifton recording

of Ruddick's song was the most frequently heard song concerning the event. It was reissued several times on LP albums, most recently on an anthology which I edited for New World Records; that album is still in print. Ruddick continued to perform after the disaster, often in a quartet with his daughters. At least once during the mid-eighties one of his daughters performed this song on a Saint John, N.B., television broadcast.

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"Spring Hill Disaster"

by Maurice Ruddick, as performed by Bill Clifton and the Dixie Mountain Boys on Kapp K-251X, Nov. 1958

♩ = 128

The twen - ty third of Oct ob - er we'll re -
 mem - ber that day Down the shaft un - der
 ground in our us - u - al way In the
 Cum ber - land pit how the raf - ters crashed down
 And the black hell closed 'round us way down in the
 ground The twen - ty In that dark black
 hole in the ground

A The 23rd of October we'll remember that day
Down the shaft underground in our usual way
In the Cumberland Pit how the rafters crashed down
And the black hell closed round us way down in the ground

B Now when the news reached our good neighbors nearby
The rescue work started their hopes were still high
But the last bit of hope like our lamps soon burned dim
In the three foot high dungeon we joined in a hymn

CHORUS In that dark, black, hole in the ground

C Only God will ever know all that happened down there
How we watched Percy Rector die gasping a prayer
And young Clarke had his birthday he thought in his grave
After days of cruel torture we'd no hopes to be saved

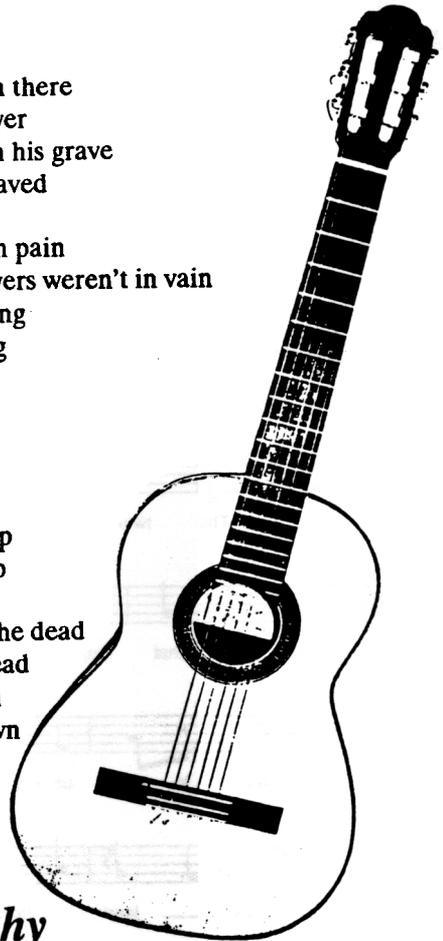
D We sang all together though racked through with pain
When they broke through we knew that our prayers weren't in vain
I crawled through the tunnel they helped me along
I said give me some water and I'll sing you a song

CHORUS Of that dark, black, hole in the ground

E I'll sing you a song of the bravest of men
Of those who remained to go digging again
To bring the coal up from ten thousand feet deep
And the others who stayed there forever to sleep

F Oh be thankful you fellows brought back from the dead
And pray for your friends who have gone on ahead
And you boys up in heaven as you look on down
Don't forget to remember Springhill mining town

CHORUS And that dark, black, hole in the ground



Discography

(1) 45 rpm discs:

"Springhill Disaster"/"Girl I Left In Sunny Tennessee." Kapp 251X (Nashville, 1958); Same recordings issued in Canada on Phonodisc K251X (Toronto, 1958).

(2) LP albums:

"Bill Clifton, The Bluegrass Sound of Bill Clifton (Starday SLP 159, 1962).

Tragic Songs of Death and Sorrow (Starday SLP 168, 1962).

Hills and Home (New World NW 225, 1976).