Edith Fowke and Traditional Music in Rural Ontario

By Allan Kirby

I have lived most of my life in Northumberland County in the Canadian province of Ontario. The northern border of Northumberland County is also the southern border of Peterborough County. For years I played country, folk and bluegrass music with various groups throughout both of these counties. For most of that time, I did not realize the significance of the places that I played or the people that I met. It was only when I began to study folk music and music history at Queen's University in Kingston, Ontario that I learned of the importance of Peterborough County in Canadian folk song history. I was surprised to discover that it was in Peterborough County where the noted Canadian folklorist, author, broadcaster, and song collector, Edith Fowke began her extensive fieldwork. Throughout her entire song collecting career she visited the county on a regular basis.

In February of 1998, while visiting the archives at Trent University in Peterborough, I came across a typewritten manuscript prepared by Edith Fowke. The eight page manuscript, titled "Folk Songs of Peterborough", is an essay which appears to have been written around 1956. In this work, Edith mentions that it was generally assumed in the 1950's that Ontario had few folk songs and it was probably too late to find any that might have existed. Nevertheless, she bought a tape recorder in the autumn of 1956 and decided to do some looking around. (Fowke, 1956)

Edith describes, in this manuscript, her first excursions to Peterborough County. She said that she started there because it had been settled by Irish colonists and friends had told her that descendants of these original settlers still lived in the area. In the fall of 1956, Edith went to Peterborough County and met with Nick Nickells at the St. Joseph's Roman Catholic Church and his customers by name. He readily recalls the visits of Edith Fowke to the store. He remembers 1956 when Edith recorded his mother Mary Towns and his grandfather Michael Cleary. Edith visited the store and the Towns home, located behind the store, on a regular basis for many years. Edith was impressed by the quality of the voice of Mary Towns. She was also struck by the fact that the singers was outstanding. Edith Fowke's field trips yielded studio quality recordings. A number of these were selected to produce an album titled Folk Songs of Ontario. The album was released by Folkways Records of New York City in 1959. Folkways released a second album, Lumbering Songs from the Ontario Shanties in 1961. This album was made almost exclusively from Edith's Peterborough area recordings.

An interesting characteristic that distinguished many of the singers in Peterborough County, according to Edith, was that they not only sang songs that could be traced to 19th century Ireland, but that they also sang newer songs that detailed the way of life of the pioneers and subsequent generations in rural Ontario. A large number of the songs told of life in lumber camps. There were also songs about farmers, politicians, accidents, illness, and leisure activities.

An example of a singer from Peterborough County, who had a combined knowledge of both the old and the more contemporary folk songs, was John Leahy. As far as I can determine, he was probably the third singer ever to be recorded by Edith Fowke, following Mary Towns and Michael Cleary. Edith became aware of John Francis Leahy, who had a combined knowledge of both the old and the more contemporary folk songs, when Edith traveled with a very high quality tape recorder. She preferred to record her informants in their own homes. She felt that this created a comfortable atmosphere in which the singers were readily able to recall and perform songs with ease. At times, the performances of these singers was outstanding.

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In February of 1998, while visiting the archives at Trent University in Peterborough, I came across a typewritten manuscript prepared by Edith Fowke. The eight page manuscript, titled “Folk Songs of Peterborough”, is an essay which appears to have been written around 1965. In this work, Edith mentions that it was generally assumed in the 1960s that Ontario had few folk songs and it was probably too late to find any that might have existed. Nevertheless, she bought a tape recorder in the autumn of 1956 and decided to do some looking around. (Fowke, 1965)

Edith describes, in this manuscript, her first excursions to Peterborough County. She said that she started there because it had been settled by Irish colonists and friends had told her that descendants of these original settlers still lived in the area. In the fall of 1956, Edith went to Peterborough County and met with Nick Nickells, the general store owner. He had considerable information about the older residents of the area and put Edith in touch with William Towns of Douro Township. Edith visited William Towns at his general store in the village of Douro and asked him if he could tell her of anyone interested in older songs. William replied that his wife Mary sang some old songs, as did his father in law, Michael Cleary. Edith's first recording session took place shortly thereafter, in the Town's home and would eventually select two more songs for a Folkways record album.

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The history of this immigration helps to explain why Peterborough County is so rich in Irish folktale and story. In 1822, the British government decided to undertake an experimental emigration scheme to alleviate the distress in the south of Ireland caused by overcrowded conditions, poverty, and unemployment. Britain was particularly concerned with the rising crime rate in the area and with the possibility of a rebellion. The British Under Secretary of Colonial Affairs, Robert Wilmot Horton, wrote to Sir John Beverley Robinson, the Attorney General for Upper Canada, and asked him to appoint a suitable man to oversee a planned emigration. The man had to be a Canadian since he was to accompany the settlers from Ireland to Canada and help them establish themselves on their land. Sir John selected his brother-in-law, Peter Robinson, who at the time was a member of the Upper Canada parliament. (Bennett, 1987)

In the spring of 1823, Peter Robinson travelled to County Cork, Ireland to begin his recruiting campaign. The conditions were very straightforward. The head of each family who emigrated to Upper Canada would receive a ticket for 70 acres of land which he was to cultivate. If the land was cultivated within 3 years, he would receive a deed and an option to purchase another 30 acres for 10 pounds. If it wasn't cultivated, he would have to pay rent. (Bennett, 1987)

Peter Robinson limited the immigrants to those who had no assets or capital whatsoever. They had to be penniless. He also imposed an arbitrary age limit of 45 years old or less, although some exceptions were made to this. The final result was that just over 2,500 men, women and children were chosen for the emigration. The first group crossed the ocean in 1823 in honour of Peter Robinson. It was there that Robinson organized the settlers, gave them provisions for their first winter in the woods, and provided assistance for them to build their first home. (Bennett, 1987)

These settlers may have arrived in Canada with few worldly possessions, but they had with them a treasure of Irish folk song and story. When Edith Fowke recorded the songs of John Francis Leahy in 1956, she was recording the results of a British oral tradition that reached back four generations to his great, great, great, grandfather Michael Leahy. Michael Leahy was one of the few immigrants of 1823 who exceeded the arbitrary age limit. He was 56 years old when he came, with his family to Peterborough County. He had been selected, in spite of his age, because he had considerable agricultural experience, having been a tenant farmer. As well, his friendly character was considered to be of choice. They had travelled in Ireland for the Earl of Kingston who after renovating his estate wanted to be rid of his tenants. (Diamond, 1986)

Michael Leahy and his family cleared their Peterborough County land and soon their farm enabled them to live in considerably more comfort than they were used to in Ireland. As the family grew, more farms were acquired. By the middle of the 19th century, the Leahy family was a very well established and respected part of the Peterborough County farming community.

One member of the second generation of the family was John M. Leahy. He was a great grandson of the pioneer Michael Leahy. He was born in 1865 and because of his dark hair and complexion, he was given the nickname "Black Jack". Black Jack grew naturally into the farming life in Peterborough County. He was an entrepreneur. He sold beef, eggs, poultry, milk, and vegetables throughout most of the year. In the winter, however, Black Jack worked in the nearby lumber camps. (Diamond, 1986)

Edith Fowke noted that Peterborough was the centre of a flourishing lumber trade in the 19th century, and every little town in the vicinity had its own lumber mill. She attributes the survival of the Ontario folk songs to the lumber camps. She collected most of her songs from Douro. It is uncertain how Black Jack Leahy ever came to be in Douro. However, according to this local poem by Mary Milloy Harrington, Douroville did have a reputation as an excellent location to quench one's thirst. The following is a verse from the poem "The Hoeles".

'The Cross" was where the main roads crossed, in the village of Douroville.

There were three hotels located there, and every day they'd fill,

With men who came from miles around, who travelled near or far,

They would stop to have friendly chat, and a sip across the bar. By Mary Milloy Harrington (Diamond, 1984, p.155)

Ann and Black Jack had 3 boys and 2 girls. Their third son, John Francis Leahy, was born in 1862. Ann taught him to sing and dance. She taught him the songs of the Ontario lumber camps and taught him the old songs of Ireland. It is likely that she passed on songs that she had learned from her father, her husband, and other members of the family. A wealth of folk songs and stories were passed on to John Francis Leahy by his mother in the oral tradition. It was a gift that he carried with him for the rest of his life. It is possible that the songs and stories may have eventually been lost if it were not for Edith Fowke. As both would have it, in the fall of 1956, Edith Fowke found her way to the Leahy farm in Douro Township.

Edith recorded John Francis Leahy on the original farm that had been given to the family when they came to Douro as part of the Peter Robinson settlers in 1823. When John sang in the Edith, he sang both the older Irish folk songs and the more contemporary songs that told of the lumberjacks and life in the woods. For example, in 1958, Edith recorded John singing a song that she considered to be quite rare:

Lumber shanty in Peterborough County, circa 1865: Courtesy Peterborough Centennial Museum and Archives

either from men who worked in the woods or from men and women whose fathers, uncles, and grandfathers had gone to the lumber shanties. (Fowke, 1961)

It is quite probable that when Black Jack worked in the lumber camps, he learned a significant number of shanty songs. These songs would complement the older Irish ballads as part of the Leahy family oral music tradition. Other influences in the family music tradition came through marriage. Ann Milloy was another descendant of the settlers who had come to the area through the Peter Robinson immigration. She lived in the village of Douroville and in 1894, she married Black Jack Leahy. Ann loved music and carried with her a abundance of songs learned in the oral tradition. She hosted parties and dances at the Leahy farm house. She played the violin, sang, and told stories. A song composed by Michael Diamond tells of Ann Milloy, the following is the first verse:

I've travelled all over the country, in the States and Ontario too, I've danced in the backwoods of Douro, and I've found a young lady to woo.

She's a step-dancin', fiddlin' lady, as sweet she makes my heart thrill, And she sings like a lark in the morning, young Annie from sweet Douroville.

(Diamond, 1986, p.149)

Douroville is located east of the Peterborough County Line, a considerable distance

An original Peterborough County Homestead:

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The Canadian Folk Music BULLETIN de musique folklorique canadienne

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The history of this immigration helps to explain why Peterborough County is so rich in Irish folklore and song. In 1822, the British government decided to undertake an experimental emigration scheme to alleviate the distress in the south of Ireland caused by overcrowded conditions, poverty, and unemployment. Britain was particularly concerned with the rising crime rate in the area along with the possibility of a rebellion. The British Under Secretary of Colonial Affairs, Robert Willmot Horton, wrote Sir John Beverley Robinson, the Attorney General for Upper Canada, and asked him to appoint a suitable man to oversee a planned emigration. The man had to be a Canadian since he was to accompany the settlers from Ireland to Canada and help them establish themselves on their land. Sir John selected his older brother, Peter Robinson, with the time a member of the Upper Canada parliament. (Bennett, 1987)

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Peter Robinson limited the emigrants to those who had no assets or capital whatsoever. They had to be paupers. He also imposed an arbitrary age limit of 45 years old or less, although some exceptions were made to this. The final result was that just over 2500 men, women and children were chosen for the emigration. The first group crossed to Ireland in May of 1823, Peter Robinson accompanied with them. The conditions were very exhausting when they docked in Quebec City in June. By the end of July they had been moved to Kingston, Ontario. They camped there for a few weeks and were organized into groups. In August, 1825, 560 of the settlers travelled to Cobourg, Ontario by steamboat and then north to Rice Lake by ox cart. The final leg of the trip was by rowboat from Rice Lake to a place on the Otonabee river where they disembarked. This place on the Otonabee river would be named Peterborough in 1836 in honour of Peter Robinson. It was there that Robinson organized the settlers, gave them provisions for their first winter in the woods, and provided assistance for them to build their first home. (Bennett, 1987)

These settlers may have arrived in Canada with few worldly possessions, but they had with them a treasure of Irish folk song and story. When Edith Fowke recorded the songs of John Francis Leahy in 1956, she was recording the results of a Canadian oral tradition that reached back four generations to his great, great, great, grandfather Michael Leahy. Michael was one of the first immigrants of 1825 who exceeded the arbitrary 45-year-old age limit. He was 56 years old when he came, with his family to Peterborough County. He had been selected, in spite of his age, because he had considerable agricultural experience, having been a tenant farmer. As well, his family was considered to be of fine character. They had lived in Ireland for the Earl of Kingston who after renovating his estate wanted to be rid of his tenants. (Diamond, 1989)

Michael Leahy and his family cleared their Peterborough County land and soon their farm enabled them to live in considerably more comfort than they were used to in Ireland. As the family grew, more farms were acquired. By the middle of the 19th century, the Leahy family was a very well established and respected part of the Peterborough County farming community.

One member of the second generation of the family was John M. Leahy. He was a great-grandson of the pioneer Michael Leahy. He was born in 1865 and because of his dark hair and complexion, he was given the nickname "Black Jack." Black Jack grew naturally into the farming life in Peterborough County. He was an entrepreneur. He sold beef, eggs, poultry, milk, and vegetables throughout most of the year. In the winter, however, Black Jack worked in the nearby lumber camps. (Diamond, 1985) Edith Fowke noted that Peterborough was the centre of a flourishing lumber trade in the 19th century, and every little town in the vicinity had its own lumber mill. She attributes the survival of the Ontario folk songs to the lumber camps. She collected most of her songs either from men who worked in the woods or from men and women whose fathers, uncles, and grandfathers had gone to the lumber shanties. (Fowke, 1951)

It is quite probable that when Black Jack worked in the lumber camps, he learned a significant number of shanty songs. These songs would complement the older Irish ballads as part of the Leahy family oral music tradition. Other influences in the family music tradition came through marriage. Ann Milloy was another descendent of the settlers who had come to the area through the Peter Robinson immigration. She lived in the village of Downeyville and in 1894, she married Black Jack Leahy. Ann loved music and carried with her a abundance of songs learned in the oral tradition. She hosted parties and dances at the Leahy farm house. She played the violin, sang, and told stories. A song composed by Michael Diamond tells of Ann Milloy, the following is the first verse:

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And she sings like a lark in the morning, young Annie from sweet Downeyville.

Downeyville is located east of the Peterborough County Line, a considerable distance from Douro. It is uncertain how Black Jack Leahy ever came to be in Downeyville to meet Annie. However, according to this local poem by Mary Milloy Harrington, Downeyville did have a reputation as an excellent location to quench one's thirst.

The following is a verse from the poem "The Hotels":

The Cross was where the main roads crossed, in the village of Downeyville,
There were three hotels located there, and every day they'd fill,
With men who came from miles around, who travelled near or far,
They would stop to have friendly chat, and a sip across the bar.

By Mary Milloy Harrington (Diamond, 1984, p. 55)

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An original Peterborough County Homestead: A Kirby

Lumber shanty in Peterborough County, circa 1865: Courtesy Peterborough Centennial Museum and Archives

The Canadian Folk Music BULLETIN de musique folklorique canadienne

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was an accepted part of the culture well into the 20th century. By most accounts, learning songs in their youth was a necessary skill. Mary Towns recalled how she had learned some of the songs from her father:

It was so nice in the winter with the fire on and the lamp lighted with an orange glow. My father took me to do our homework and my father singing away with perhaps his feet up on the front damper of the wood stove. Then maybe some relatives or friends would drop in for a while, which made a nice little party of singing, and always a nice cup of tea and lunch before they left. We would often sing on the stove in the winter going visiting. My father told us many times that when he was young they would go, a group on a wagon or sleigh and when they arrived to the house, they would not have a song finished. They mostly always finished it before anyone got off the wagon or sleigh.

(Prunes, 1917)

Edith Fowke not only recorded these Irish descendants, she also befriended them. Michael Towns told me Edith Fowke regularly exchanged songs and stories with the Towns. Edith also encouraged these folk singers to perform for the public. She felt that folk music was meant to be shared. Edith invited Mary Towns to Toronto Islands in 1969. In his book, The Children of the Settlers, Michael Diamond describes John Leahy's first appearance at the festival:

If the water don't drown me while over it I'll live full I die dry. If the water don't drown me, I'll live full I die dry. One evening last June as I rambled, all over the hills and valleys alone, The mosquitoes notes was melodious, how merry the whippoorwill song. The frogs in the marshes was croaking, and the tree toads were whistling for rain, The partridge around me were drumming, John and several others from Douro were invited to appear there in 1969. Thinvitation was by Mrs. Edith Foke, an expert in the field of folk music. This union was a turning point in her life. Gathered at the Rustic was an assortment of musicians, singers, fiddlers, and poets and took to earth

19th century Peterborough County Barn: A.Kirby

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was an accepted part of the culture well into the 20th century. By most accounts, learning songs in the oral tradition was fun. In 1977, Mary Towns recalled how she had learned some of the songs from her father:

"It was so nice in the winter with the fire on and the lamp lighted with oil, or paraffin. We'd do our homework and my father singing away with perhaps his feet up on the front damper of the wood stove. Then maybe some relatives or friends would drop in for a while, which made a real little party of singing, and always a nice cup of tea and lunch before they left. We so often sang on the sleigh in the winter going visiting. My father told us many times that when he was young they would go, a group on a wagon or sleigh and when they arrived to the house, they would not have a song finished. They mostly always finished it before anyone got off the wagon or sleigh."

(Quinn, 1977)

Edith Fowke not only recorded these Irish descendants, she also befriended them. Michael Towns told me Edith Fowke regularly exchanged letters and visits with his singing mother, Mary Towns. Edith also encouraged those folk singers to perform for the public. She felt that folk music was meant to be shared. Edith recorded him at his farmhouse. She transcribed it and it was published in Lumbering Songs from the Northern Woods as "Johnny Murphy". The first verse of seven is as follows:

"If the water don't drown me while over it I dry, If the water don't drown me I'll live fill I die, If the water don't drown me I'll sing another song."

(Quinn, 1970, p.203)

Edith noted that this song was not common to the Peterborough County Jail during the term of the magistrates. The song had originated in Wisconsin in the 1870's and travelled east through the lumber camps.

Once Edith started recording in Peterborough County, she couldn't stop. One informant led to another. For example, Mary Towns or John Leahy told Edith about Dave McMahon, another local farmer with an extensive repertoire of songs and stories of the shantyboys.

As Edith increased her Peterborough County song collection, she found songs with a strictly local focus. These were usually known by a large number of the local singers. Typical of the local songs was "Johnston's E'otes". It discussed the finer points of the Peterborough County Jail during the term of Magistrate Dalton Johnston. The following is a verse:

"The frogs in the marshes was croaking, and the tree-towds were whistling for rain, A silence descended upon the crowd while the frogs croaked in the marshes and the tree-towds were whistling for rain."

(Quinn, 1967, p. 29)

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"One evening last June as I rambled, all over the hill and valleys alone, The mosquitoes notes was melodious, how merry the whooping willow song, The frogs in the marshes was croaking, and the tree-towds were whistling for rain, And the partridge around me were drumming, on the banks of the Little L'eu Pleine."

(Quinn, 1977, pp. 180-182)

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Michael Leahy, who departed County Cork, Ireland in 1825 to settle in Peterborough County, Canada. In the liner notes for the 1961 Folkways Album, Lumbering Songs from the Ontario Shanties, Edith Fowke writes: "The most fruitful area for song collecting I have discovered so far is the region around Peterborough, some ninety miles north-east of Toronto. There among the Irish-Canadians whose ancestors first came to this land in 1825, I found some of the best traditional singers that I have ever heard."

(Fowke, 1961)

Alan Kirby, a past contributor to The Bulletin, is a musician living in Northumberland County, Ontario.

Good News for Child Ballad Lovers!

First, there is now a website containing all the versions of all 305 Child ballads. It lacks the notes of Dr. Child himself, but this a major boon to devotees of the Child ballad.

http://ling.hawaii.edu/faculty/stampe/Don14/English/Child-Ballad/child.html

Second, as we all know, the printed collections of the Child ballads have been out-of-print for eons. They've been selling at astronomical sums in used bookstores and on eBay. But, Loomis House Press is now in the process of re-printing all five volumes. The first volume (with additional notes) is currently available in paperback at $25 (U.S.), a great bargain.


The Address given last issue for Reta Coel Productions (review of From the Inside Out, 35.3-4, p. 25) is no longer extant; they're now at 20 Nineteenth St., Etobicoke, Ont M8V 3L3.

Bibliography:


Fowke, E. (c.1965). Folk songs of Peterborough, unpublished manuscript. Peterborough, ON: Trent University Archives. manuscript # 97-1016.


