

Bill Miner in Song

Tim Rogers

A curious story, to say the least. An incompetent thug, who had spent almost half his life in US prisons, comes north to Canada and robs the CPR not once, but twice. By the time all is said and done, he becomes a hero of the people, despite the high value placed on law and order in western Canada circa 1905. Why? Did he curry favour by doling out the proceeds of his deeds to the poor? No. Was he so clever that he outwitted the Mounties? No. Was he a strapping, handsome man, wooing womenfolk with his youthful charm? No. The fact is that one of the major reasons for Bill Miner's appeal, why he engendered such long-lasting fame in Canada, was because he was polite. "The gentleman robber" they called him, the stuff of numerous books, stage productions, songs and poems. Two of Canada's primary values, law and order and politeness, come head-to-head in this saga, and politeness wins, somehow trumping the blatant criminal acts of this old man from the States. A curious story indeed.

This paper examines the songs that tell Bill Miner's story. Here we gain a fascinating glimpse into which aspects of the story survived with the passage of time, offering a window on the elements of the tale that have captured the imaginations of the people of British Columbia over the last century. In doing this, we gain insight into some of the fundamental attitudes that make up this country: politeness and law and order for certain, as well as pride in our national police force (the Mounties did, indeed, "get their man"—eventually), the peculiar ambivalence we hold toward one of our major corporations, the CPR, and our sometimes unthinking reflection that exotic characters from away are more interesting than our own homegrown heroes and villains. All these swirl in the background as we examine the songs that tell Bill Miner's story.

The Historical Record

When Canada was formed in 1867, Bill Miner was a guest of San Quentin Prison in California, serving a three-year term for robbing stagecoaches. In 1872 he re-entered San Quentin, convicted of another set of stage robberies, and did not get out until 1880. Within a year he was back again, this time serving hard time until his release in 1902.

In October of 1903 an elderly gentleman, introducing himself as George Edwards, arrived in Princeton, BC. He began to cowboy and do farm cores in the area. Less than a year later, September 10, 1904, CPR Express #1 was robbed near Mission, BC, with \$6,000 in gold dust and \$914.37 in coin being taken. While not the first train robbery in Canada, it was the CPR's first, and a ponderous chase for the robbers was begun. The leader of the bandits was described as polite and kindly, prompting lawmen to consider that it may have been Miner. Despite the best efforts of local law enforcement, the Northwest Mounted Police, the CPR, and Pinkerton's Detective Agency from south of the border, the trail grew cold. Meanwhile, George Edwards was living the high life in Chilliwack, BC, living off the avails of his South American mining interests—at least that's what he said.

Early in 1905 Edwards/Miner returned to Princeton. The next spring, along with two colleagues, Shorty Dunn and Louis Colquhoun, he began a long hunting/prospecting trip that saw them camping in various spots east of Kamloops, BC. On May 8, 1906, another CPR train was robbed near Ducks Station. Bumbling all the way, the robbers failed to detach the express car that contained a lot of money. Then they overlooked a substantial amount of cash in the one car they did rob, leaving with a mere \$15.50 for their efforts. The bumbling continued when their horses, improperly hobbled, escaped one night of their getaway. On May 14, the Mounties captured the trio after a brief gunfight, in which Shorty Dunn was shot in the leg. Convicted and sentenced to life, Miner/Edwards entered Westminster Penitentiary on June 26, 1906.

A little over a year later, August 8, 1907, Miner and three others escaped by digging under a fence, with the kindly old gentleman disappearing as if by magic. On September 2, 1913, Bill Miner died in Milledgeville Prison, GA, after pleading guilty to train robbery in White Sulphur Springs, GA.

This, in broad brush strokes, is the story of Bill Miner, aka George Edwards. It is a rough chronology drawn from the three major works written about his life: Frank Anderson's *Old Bill Miner* (1963/2001), Mark Dugan and John Boessenecker's *The Grey Fox* (1992), and Peter Grauer's *Interred with*

Their Bones (2006). The latter is the most thoroughly researched treatment of Miner's time in Canada.

Dramatis Personae in the Bill Miner Saga

Deputy Warden D. D. Bourke: Superintendent of Westminster Penitentiary during Miner's stay. He was dismissed after the escape and fomented considerable controversy by trying to implicate the CPR in Miner's escape with a series of letters to the editor of The New Westminster Columbian.

Jack Budd: A friend of Miner in the Princeton area at whose ranch Miner often stayed. He was rumoured to have been Miner's brother.

Louis Colquhoun (pronounced "Calhoun"): One of Miner's accomplices in the Ducks Station robbery. He was originally from Clifford, ON, and had traveled to BC for his health.

George Edwards: The alias Miner used during his time near Princeton, BC.

Shorty Dunn: One of Miner's accomplices in the Ducks Station robbery.

W. L. Fernie: BC Provincial Police constable who tracked Miner after the Ducks Station robbery. He found Miner's gang near the Douglas Lake Ranch.

John William Grell: Shorty Dunn's real name.

A. D. McIntyre: Defense lawyer for both of Miner's trials. The first trial resulted in a hung jury, the second convicted the trio, with Miner and Dunn getting life and Colquhoun 25 years.

A. L. McQuarrie: Baggage clerk in the mail car robbed at Ducks Station, said to have lied to Miner about the existence of substantial cash in the sorting slots.

Sergeant John J. Wilson: Leader of the Mounted Police group that finally arrested Miner, Dunn and Colquhoun on Fernie's information.

Telling Miner's Story

Hints that Miner's northern exploits would be fodder

for songs and poems surfaced quite early on. Shorty Dunn, Miner's accomplice, wrote a poem while awaiting trial in Kamloops. This would be the first of many artful efforts to tell Miner's story.

"Bill Miner Was a Bandit Neat"

by Shorty Dunn, 1906

from Grauer, 2006, p. 279

1. Bill Miner was a bandit neat
And used to posse alarms,
But Fernie tracked him by his feet,
So Bill threw up his arms.

2. "Shorty" to the dry belt's gone,
In Kamloops jail you'll find him;
This is the burden of his song—
"E left his magazine behind him."

3. In nineteen six we chased old Bill
Right into the Quincheena;
'Is day is done, 'e's 'ad his fill,
For Bill is an 'asbeener.

4. Lives of bandits all remind us
That the mail car's not the express;
They'll remind sadly beside us
For twenty years, or something less.

5. Lives there a man with soul so dead
Who has not all the extras read,
Nor wiped the sweat from off his brow?
For Bill's the guest of Teddy now.

6. The tale is told, Bill's had his day,
But Fernie's in an awful stew
Counting the quid the paper say
Is coming to him as his due

Verse 1 tells of Miner's surrender, while verse 2 bemoans the author's plight in Kamloops jail. In verse 3, Dunn labels Miner a has-been by making reference to the botched express car incident in the Ducks Station hold up (verse 4). Verse 5 documents the popularity of the story, with Teddy, in the last line, referring to King Edward (i.e., "The Crown"). Verse 6 refers to a then-raging controversy about how the reward money for Miner's capture should be divided up. Here, even before Miner was convicted, we find the beginnings of a tradition of storytelling that would last into the 21st century.

The Search for Songs

Bill Miner still proves elusive in the 21st century. Indeed, tracking down songs about Miner has, on occasion, been a frustrating experience, perhaps akin to that experienced by Fernie as he tried to track the elusive Grey Fox. In June 2008, I found an intriguing

entry in the BC Provincial Archives that referred to a cassette containing a “montage of songs about Bill Miner”. Said to have been submitted for possible inclusion in the soundtrack of the film *The Grey Fox*, the songs included “The Ballad of Bill Miner”, “Dogs and Trackers”, “George Edwards (Secret Identities)” and “Hands Up.” Unfortunately, the cassette did not contain these songs, but rather was the soundtrack from another film.¹ Archive staff speculated that the wrong tape had been inserted in the box prior to receipt and said that there is no hope of recovering the Miner songs. Frustrating, indeed!

Telling a tale such as Miner’s in song brings us into contact with a number of complex questions. Of particular interest is the difficulty of discerning where “historical truth” ends and where the needs of a good story/song begin. After all, these events happened when record-keeping was not as compulsive as it is today, and it was a long time ago. There’s a lot of wiggle room for poetic license, to be sure. One example is the Vancouver-based Mercury Pictures movie entitled *The Grey Fox*, based on Miner’s time in Canada. Directed by Philip Borsos, with a critically acclaimed performance by Richard Farnsworth as Miner, the film advertised itself as “a mixture of history, legend and myth.” It deviated from the historical record in a number of significant ways. As is always the case in creative historical recreation, there is a tension between what actually happened and the needs of a good narrative—and narrative often wins—as was the case with this film. Bill Miner’s story is certainly caught up in this tension, and examination of how the tale has been put to song, compared to the historical record, offers a wonderful opportunity to explore how this tension played out. Through this we gain insight into what might be considered a continuum; the varying shades of grey between the extremes of fact and poetic license, and how this plays out with artistic expressions intended to entertain and educate.

Patrick Smith is a singer and songwriter from British Columbia who performed in the 1980s with a group called *Under the Moss*. In 1985, as part of an educational program the group put on in schools, Patrick composed a song about Bill Miner that casts a rather wide historical net around the story.

“Gold Dust”

Patrick Smith

1. In a prison down in Washington
The year was nineteen hundred
Bill Miner was released from doing time
He robbed stages in the west
But those days were gone he guessed
So he thought he’d try his hand at robbing trains
There’d be ample compensation for his pains

2. They were waiting in the rain
For that gold dust laden train
They jumped aboard the tender as it passed
And about an hour later
They rowed ‘cross the muddy Fraser
Six thousand worth of gold dust they would stash
And a bag that held nine hundred more in cash

3. Bill lived quite well in Kamloops
With Colquhoun and Shorty Dunn
Two years later they had planned their second job
Stopped a train at old Ducks Station
But a gross miscalculation
Got them only fifteen dollars for this job
Of the hundred thousand they had hoped to rob

4. But the cops were hard behind them
Sergeant Wilson swore he’d find them
At Douglas Lake the gang was trapped at last
And the jury had good reason
To send them all to prison
But Bill Miner would escape in just one year
And ride south to carry on with his career

5. Bill ended his last days
Down in Georgia, so they say
Robbin’ trains on the Southern Railway Line
The year ‘thirteen he died in prison
As he went he lay there dreamin’
‘Bout the time he had waited in the rain
The night they robbed that gold dust laden train
He remembered how they waited in the rain
The night they robbed that gold dust laden train

This song faithfully follows the historical outline of Miner’s story, beginning with his release from prison (verse 1), the Mission robbery (verse 2), the Ducks Station robbery (verse 3), Miner’s capture, imprisonment and escape (verse 4) and the concluding chapter of Miner’s life in Georgia (verse 5). There are a few minor inaccuracies: e.g., verse 1 gives 1900 for his last release from a Washington prison, while historical sources indicate he was released from San Quentin (California) in 1902; Miner never lived in Kamloops, as indicated in verse 3, but rather in the Princeton area, only visiting Kamloops on occasion. Nonetheless, the song captures the overview of the story quite well. The near-documentary style of presenting the tale locates this song toward the fact end of what we might call the fact-poetic license continuum.

Several other songs have considerable historical accuracy as well, but they have chosen to focus on a single element of the story rather than the broad scope of Smith’s documentary.

Ronald Weihs, an actor and singer, wrote a musical production based on Bill Miner’s Canadian exploits. “Hands Up” was performed by the Caravan

Stage Company in the late 1970s. The song “Somebody Robbed the CPR” was the starting point for this production, treating the time immediately following the Mission robbery.

“Somebody Robbed the CPR”

Ronald Weihs

1. Somebody robbed the CPR
They’re spreadin’ the news, near and far
Somebody stopped it and robbed it of its gold
Now across the Dominion the story is told

Chorus: Somebody robbed the CPR
You can play it on your fiddle and your old guitar
Some people say it’s a terrible crime
But as for me, I think it’s just about time

2. Somebody robbed the CPR
Disconnected the engine and the express car
Ran it down the line and stopped it further on
And vanished in the shadows of the early dawn

3. The railroad boys in Montreal
Out to BC they sent out the call
Sayin’ get those Mounties, put them on the track
See if you can get us our money back

4. Wilfred Laurier in Ottawa
His eyes are red and his throat is raw
From calling for the capture of those dangerous men
The first ones to rob the CP train

5. But way out west, there’s lots of space
Those bandits have vanished without a trace
And in Kamloops where trains run down the main
street
Nobody weeps to see the CP beat

The first verse shouts out the news that the CPR has been robbed, followed by a chorus suggesting that, while some see this as a terrible crime, others feel “it is just about time.” The song then describes the Mission robbery (verse 2) and how the CPR “sent out the call” to chase the robbers (verse 3). The 4th verse has Prime Minister Wilfred Laurier calling for the capture of these dangerous men and the final verse tells of how the bandits vanished into the western wilderness. Resentment toward the CPR is articulated in the last line. This song provides a window on some of the post-Mission robbery sentiments and events, giving a relatively accurate portrayal of those moments.

Bill Gallaher is a singer/songwriter now living in the interior of BC. He wrote a song that does a wonderful job bringing the night of the Ducks Station robbery to life.

“The Hold Up”

Bill Gallaher

1. Oh the night was warm and smoky, those old
mountains were on fire
As the big eight-wheeler thundered down the line
Her whistle blowing lonesome sounding like some sad
desire
The smoking cinders trailing out behind
She’d seen the plains and the foothills of Alberta
The rugged mountain passes that she climbed
Now she was breathing easy on her way out to the
coast
In the valley where the Thompson River twines

2. She flew along that steel road chasing down her
lantern’s beam
Her mighty engine roaring like a lion
Stopped hard at Ducks Station in a cloud of smoke and
steam
An hour, maybe more, ahead of time
Her whistle blew as she rolled from the station
The driver straining hard to pull the load
She’d barely gathered speed up in the blackness of the
night
When the bandits stopped her four miles down the
road

Chorus: “Hands up,” old Bill Miner cried
That night he tried to lighten up our load
The road’s rough, any trainman rides
But sometimes, friends, it’s worth the trip to feel those
drivers roll

3. Now the clock was nearing midnight when old Bill
laid out the rules
To the trainmen as he took them by surprise
“You can trust me not to harm you, boys, if you don’t
play the fool”
You could see the glint of blue steel in his eyes
“Throw down all the mail for San Francisco
And all the gold dust you might have on board
And maybe we’ll be rich men far beyond our wildest
dreams
And robbing trains might be life’s great reward”

Chorus

4. Ah but nothing’s ever easy, nothing’s ever what it
seems
Sometimes it’s in the cards that we must fail
There wasn’t any gold dust, no mother lode of dreams
There was only disappointment in the mail
They rode away to the hills slapping leather
And left behind men older than their years
Driving trains can be a hard road and the pay is too
damned low
If the bandit’s words keep ringing in your ears

Chorus

5. There's a city reaching eastward where the bandits
 rode before
 The steam train disappeared way down the line
 You can buy your gas and coffee at a little junction
 store
 With few reminders of those olden times
 And those big fifth wheelers go smoking down the
 highway
 The tourist lines get longer every year
 The diesel trains go flying and the trainmen come and
 go
 But if you stop there long enough, you'll hear

Chorus (2x)

Verse 1 sets the stage with the CPR transcontinental having crested the Great Divide, running downhill to the coast beside the South Thompson River toward Kamloops. The bandits make their appearance at the end of the 2nd verse. The origin of term “hands up” used in the chorus has, in some sources, been credited to Miner, but there is some controversy about this. The phrase “old Bill Miner”, also used in the chorus, is drawn from the newspaper accounts of the time. Verse 3 places us squarely in the middle of the robbery scene with the “hint of blue steel in his eyes” being a documented feature of Miner’s appearance. The 4th verse tells of the gang’s disappointment at their meager take and the impact the robbery had on the trainmen (leaving behind “men older than their years”). Verse 5 fast-forwards the listener to the 21st century, with tourist vehicles cruising down Highway 1 past Ducks Station (now Monte Lake, just east of Kamloops). If you stop long enough, Gallaher tells us, you might hear echoes of the events of May 8, 1906. Like Smith’s song, “The Hold Up” has considerable historical accuracy. It differs from “Gold Dust” in its artistic recreation of the actual event by the use some evocative poetry and a number of specific details drawn from the historical record.

In 1956 Stu Phillips, a well-known country and western singer then located in Calgary, released a long-playing album of historical songs entitled *Echoes of the Canadian Foothills*. This was one of the first recorded albums to put Canada’s story into song. It included pieces written by Phillips such as “Albert Johnson”, “The Lost Lemon Mine” and “Ernest Cashel.” In 1952, while supervising production at CJIB, Vernon, BC, he encountered the story of Bill Miner. With the research help of Barry Nicholls, Phillips wrote “Bill Miner” and put it on the 1956 LP. Like “The Hold Up”, this song focuses on specific events. But in this case, Phillips featured two aspects of the Miner story: the Ducks Station robbery and Miner’s trial that was held in Kamloops during May and June of 1906.

“Bill Miner”

Stu Phillips

1. It was years ago out of Kamloops
 When that great CP steamer rolled
 I wondered how many passengers
 Knew of the shipment of gold
 The fireman and engineer wondered that night
 What they’d do at the end of the run
 When out of the darkness three strangers appeared
 Each one was holding a gun

2. Now the bandits had a bold leader
 Billy Miner was his name
 He’d just come out of San Quentin jail
 And here he was stealing again
 The steamer was brought to a standstill
 And the crew was forced out of the cab
 The robbers made haste to the mail car
 And heard a story that near drove them mad

3. Well the mail clerk told them the money
 Had been shipped out the day before
 Somehow the bandits believed this tale
 And turned and stormed out the door
 The mail clerk was filled with excitement
 For he’d just told an enormous lie
 The forty thousand in gold was safe
 Said the clerk, “What a chisler am I”

4. They reported the hold up in Kamloops
 And the Mounties set off on the trail
 The bandits soon were arrested
 And the judge packed them all off to jail
 The thieves had a great sense of humour
 And it certainly showed at their trial
 For even the men who’d arrested them
 Were forced to give way to a smile

5. Life was the verdict for Miner that day
 To this the spectators did roar
 But Miner stood up in the courtroom and asked
 Why the old duffer hadn’t given him more
 Well the courtroom roared out with laughter
 Even the judge had a smirk
 Then Miner turned to the Mounties and said
 “I admire the way you boys work.”

Verses 1 and 2 set the scene for the robbery, with verse 3 telling the story of the mail clerk lying about the presence of cash in the car that Miner did rob. In verse 4 the bandits were captured and the scene shifts to the courtroom. Here we find a picture of Miner as a bit of a stand-up comic, in his wondering why the judge didn’t give him a longer sentence than “life” (verse 5). In the last two lines Miner is said to have complimented the Mounties on their work in capturing him. According to Grauer (2006, p. 315), it was Shorty Dunn who paid this compliment. However, Miner may well have said the same thing. As with “Gold Dust” and “The Hold Up”, Phillips’s “Bill

Miner” shows considerable effort to tell the story as faithfully as can be done in a creative narrative medium like song. The resulting song is engaging and has merit as a period piece.

Bob Bossin, a member of the 1980s group Stringband and now a writer and performer living on the west coast, added to the canon of Bill Miner songs on his 1993 album entitled *Gabriola Island VOR IX0*. He chose to focus on the time between the two robberies when Bill was living as George Edwards around Princeton.

“Bill Miner”

Bob Bossin

1. Did you hear Bill Miner robbed the CP train?
I figured Bill for dead or in prison in the States
But the Mounties said the robber was polite as hell
So everyone in Princeton knew it was Bill

2. The Pinkertons come after him, hot on the trail
But nobody in Princeton recalled meeting Bill
We answered all their questions politely as we could
Holding our hats in our hands just the way he would

Chorus: Down in Milledgeville, Georgia
They’ve got Bill Miner’s grave
But up in the Nicola Valley
He’s alive

3. They said Bill Miner was living in a shack on Jack
Budd’s farm
But nobody ever saw him or that valley girl on his arm
Why me and my father used to trap Jack Budd’s line
And we never saw Bill Miner half a dozen times

4. By now he’s in Greenwood or back across the line
If they never get that money, that’ll be just fine
He never robbed a poor man or woman to this day
And that’s a damn sight more than the CPR can say

Chorus

5. Did you remember when last summer somebody
robbed the train?
They know it’s not Bill Miner, he’s a long time in the
grave
But the Mounties say the robber was polite as hell
So everyone in Princeton figures it was Bill

Bossin begins by noting that many lawmen thought the Mission train robber was Bill Miner, more because of his politeness than any “hard” evidence. Yet, when Pinkertons came to the Princeton area, they found no one knew of Bill Miner. None of the residents associated the kindly old George Edwards with this desperate outlaw (verse 2)—even if they did, they weren’t about to tell Pinkertons. The chorus indicates that, while Miner is buried in Georgia, he is still alive in the memories of people in the Nicola

Valley, an area north of Princeton. In verse 3, Bossin makes reference to Jack Budd, at whose place Miner lived during the winter of 1905-1906. The 4th verse takes us to the time after his prison escape and articulates two of the major themes of the Miner story: (1) the CPR deserved what it got; and (2) Miner never robbed a poor person, constructing him as a gentleman bandit. This latter theme ably recapitulates historical fact in that Miner relieved J. Callin, the train engineer in the Ducks Station heist, of his watch and some money, only to return them to him later during the robbery. Bossin’s “Bill Miner”, then, provides considerable historical accuracy. But rumour, lore, and a hint of poetic license began to surface in the chorus, where Miner is said to still be alive in the Nicola Valley.

Gary Fjellgaard, one of BC’s best known balladeers and songwriters, collaborated with Valdy, another BC musical icon, on an album entitled *The Contenders: Two*. It contained a song, “Back When Billy Robbed Trains”, that is more of a thematic piece about the Grey Fox than an historical vignette.

“Back When Billy Robbed Trains”

Gary Fjellgaard

1. Have you heard about a bandit, by the name of
Billy Miner?
Slippery as a grey fox, running through the sage
Billy had a pistol, a big forty-four pistol
He had a hideout down in the cottonwoods, back when
Billy robbed trains

2. Billy was a gentleman, he never robbed a poor
man
Had a little bit of Robin Hood, running through his
veins
He rode into Canada, looking for his liberty
He spent half his life behind prison walls, back when
Billy robbed trains
He just robbed trains

Chorus 1: So saddle up cowboys, gather up the town-
folk
Get yourself a posse, gonna run him to the ground
Billy had a fast horse and he made his getaway
That was back in the boots and saddle days, back
when Billy robbed trains
He just robbed trains

3. You got your modern day outlaw, leaders of na-
tions
They threaten devastation, with a bible in their hands
If God blesses anyone, God blesses everyone
Oh Billy was a saint by comparison, back when Billy
robbed trains
He just robbed trains

Chorus 2: So saddle up your cowboys, gather up the
townfolk

Get yourself a posse, gonna run him to the ground
 You'd better get a fast horse, when they make their
 getaway
 T'was back in the boots and saddle days, back when
 Billy robbed trains
 We'd hang 'em high on the cottonwood, back when
 Billy robbed trains
 He just robbed trains

By thematic piece, I mean that Fjellgaard has sought to capture several of the general themes of the story, rather than draw on specific historical detail. For example, he constructs Miner as Robin Hood (verse 1) and a saint (verse 3), a major motif of many stories in circulation. There is an implication that Miner was not a particularly bad bandit because he “only robbed trains.” Verse 3 draws a strong moral from the story, suggesting that, compared to contemporary bible-thumping political leaders, Miner wasn't that bad.

Overall, the song does a masterful job of capturing the positive opinion that many people hold of Miner. This piece shows the influence of American tradition, more so than the previous ones, by virtue of the reference to vigilante hangings in the 2nd chorus. The presence of the NWMP and the valuing of law and order by the citizenry of the time made it so that hanging “'em high in the cottonwoods” was not a part of Canadian tradition—more something read about, and later seen, in American movies.

Jack Godwin's “Bill Miner's Jailbreak” deals with the events surrounding the 1907 escape from Westminster Penitentiary.

“Bill Miner's Jailbreak”

Jack Godwin

1. The train line passed the prison walls that held Bill Miner in
 Stealing from that CPR just didn't feel like a sin
 “Why this railway robs the common folk every single day
 Seems fair to turn the tables,” Old Bill was heard to say
 “No jail you build will hold me,” he boasted at his trial
 “Do your best, it ain't no test. I'll be out in just a while”
 And out the door and down the road, Bill Miner he broke free
 The story of this strange escape is steeped in mystery

2. He didn't need to file the bars. He didn't dig or scrape
 That old grey fox used cunning to pull off his escape
 He bragged of all those railway bonds that he'd stashed away
 A fortune that, if ever found, the CPR must pay
 The warden played the middle man, that's how the deal went down

And the railway never paid a cent, I guess their bonds were found
 Out the door and down the trail with no one on his trail, yeah
 Old Bill Miner's jailbreak makes a most suspicious tale

3. The prison gate was open wide, one hot August day
 Bill, who was out for exercise, just moseyed on his way
 Three convicts who broke with him were quickly back inside
 But Bill was never seen again, 'cause jailbreaks were his pride
 That warden retired early to quiet luxury
 And Bill assumed his rightful place in outlaw history
 Out the door and down the road Bill lived to rob again
 But this time down in Georgia never more a CP train

Verse 1 sets the scene, offering some justification for Miner's robberies (the CPR “robs the common folk every single day”), along with the bandit's brag that he will escape (he had, indeed, escaped prison several times south of the border). But, according to Godwin, the Canadian escape was “strange” and “steeped in mystery.” He suggests that Miner effectively bribed the CPR to abet his escape, by bragging about “a fortune” worth of bonds he claimed to have stolen during the Mission robbery. The warden is said to have played the “middle man”, making Miner's escape a “most suspicious tale” (verse 2). Verse 3 indicates that Bill escaped through an open gate.² Godwin indicates that that the warden (Deputy Warden D. D. Bourke) “retired early to quiet luxury”.³

In his liner notes, Godwin, a member of the performing group “The Kettle Valley Brakemen”, states that Bill Miner carried out the first two train robberies in Canadian history.⁴ He says that Miner stole \$350,000 in Australian bonds during the Mission robbery, in addition to the more liquid assets mentioned earlier. Here the line between fiction and fact begins to blur, not so much because this story of the bonds was not told at the time, indeed it was, but because there is absolutely no “hard” evidence that these bonds ever existed (see Grauer, 2006, pp. 477-497). The story Godwin has put to song relates to a political scandal in which a BC member of parliament, James Davis Taylor (a Conservative in Laurier's Liberal government), accused the government of “handing off” Bill Miner, allowing him to escape so the CPR could recover the bonds. The original stimulus for this incident was a series of letters to the editor written by Acting Warden D. D. Bourke, trying to recover the pension he lost by being fired. Once the “hypothesis” of CPR's complicity in Miner's escape became known in Ottawa, calls for an inquiry echoed through the House of Commons (February 11, 1909).

Even today there is no resolution to this story, with any evidence of the bonds being lost.

Godwin's song contains more poetic license than the previous ones because many of the assertions in the piece cannot be documented. Indeed, an equally plausible case could be made that the whole "bonds story" was simply a cover-up of the obvious embarrassment about Miner's escape. And the delicious part of this is that we will never know, leaving a legitimate space for speculative works like Godwin's.

John Spearn is a songwriter from Edmonton who specializes in educational songs composed to illustrate aspects of Canadian history. His "Bill Miner's Betrayal" employs the greatest amount of poetic license of any of the songs presented here.

"Bill Miner's Betrayal"

John Spearn

1. "Bill Miner, my love, won't you come to the table," she said
"It's been a long night and it's time to make up my bed"
"I'm glad that we had such a fine time," said Bill
"How long has your husband been dead?"
"I've been a widow three times now," she answered instead

2. "Oh there was a pony man here asking where you'd been
I told him you'd been here all night, so he scratched his chin"
She cried, "Billy, I can't tell you stories no more
For I'm in a family way
A child needs a father, and I need to pray"
She awoke to find Billy was gone the very next day
Long gone

3. Bill's gang blocked the tracks down on Deadman's Flats in the rain
And a quick as a whistle they collected the loot from the train
Their booty was full and they went chasing beauties in Trail
Once again, his plan worked out to the last detail

Chorus: Bill Miner, Bill Miner, there's a CPR train, on time
And I've heard rich old fossils afford, and this carrier's fine
But there's two G's reward on those heads said the sign
That was posted along the telegraph line
And the white widow on money had her designs

4. So they set up a trap at the railhead that day
And the Mounties were there to take Billy away
But he soon outwitted the warden at Westminster Pen
He was much too clever for him and escaped from the fed
Long gone

Chorus

5. Bill laughed as he snuck his way south to the Georgia line
But the marshall knew a trooper knew a white widow so fine
And they caught Bill Miner and then
To the Macon maximum prison they sent
Bill Miner, Bill Miner, never to come out again
Bill Miner, Bill Miner, never come out again
Never to come out again

It begins with a conversation between Bill Miner and a widow with whom he is involved (verse 1). She mentions that a "pony man" (Pinkerton's agent?) had been asking about him, forcing her to lie. Being pregnant, she puts pressure on Bill, who ups and disappears the next day (verse 2). Verse 3 describes a train robbery (Mission?), with details that do not match the historical record (e.g., it is said to have happened in Deadman's Flats and Miner is said to have gone "chasing beauties in Trail.") The "white widow" then betrays Miner for the posted reward of \$2,000 (chorus) and a trap is set which captures the bandit (Ducks Station?), landing him in Westminster Penitentiary. Then he escapes (verse 4). With the reward now \$3,000, she betrays him again, resulting in his capture in Georgia (verse 5).

John indicated that: "The song is loosely based on Bill's much glorified lifestyle while in Canada. He had a lady friend named 'Miss MacNeil' over the winter of 1904/5."⁵ According to Grauer (2006, p. 82), Miss MacNeil was, indeed, Miner's lady friend, whom he brought back from Spokane on one of his trips down south. They were an "item" during the inter-robbery winter, during which Miner disposed of a considerable amount of money gambling and hosting various soirées. After this introduction to the "good life" Miss MacNeil went on to her own life of notoriety. However, I've been unable to locate any reference to her being pregnant or her cashing in on the rewards posted to capture Bill Miner.⁶

The central elements of John's story, the betrayals of Miner by a widow, do not appear in the historical record. While this song has all the makings of a good short story, Spearn's rendition takes us the furthest from the historical record of any examined so far. This does not compromise John's song as a piece of art, so long as it is understood to be a work of fiction, not a historically accurate piece.

So far we've seen songs with varying degrees of poetic license. There is little doubt that the story of Bill Miner has been subjected to "the folk process" and many and varied versions of the story have emerged, some close to the truth, others not so much so. For the musical production *Hands Up*, Richard Newman composed a song poking fun at this aspect of the Bill Miner story, a commentary on how the

story took on a life of its own in the years after Miner's departure from Canada.

"Bill Miner Song"

Richard Newman

1. Bill Miner was an outlaw, Bill Miner was my friend
Bill Miner killed his very first man when he was only ten
Bill Miner never killed a man, no he never took no knocks
Bill Miner was tall, and he chopped down trees and he had a big blue ox
2. Bill Miner lived for twenty years behind San Quentin's walls
Don't pay no mind to all that stuff, he never done that at all
He sailed around to Turkey, thirteen days on a wooden raft
He did him some slave trading, and he wound up with the clap
3. You're talking 'bout Bill Miner, well son I knew him well
He beat me within a inch of my life when I was a child of twelve
He ran off with my daddy's watch in the middle of the night
Had a wife and thirteen children and he didn't even write
4. Bill Miner died in prison, no he never died at all
He's still living in Argentina, playing poker with De Gaulle
And he should ever hear the half about him has been said
He'd probably start in laughing, and he'd laugh until he's dead

The tongue-in-cheek nature of this song is clear in the second line, playing on the hyperbole associated with some tellings of the Miner story. The main device Newman uses involves sets of claims and counterclaims, leaving the listener in limbo about the truth of the tellings. For example, the second line claims Miner was a child prodigy murderer while the next line indicates he never killed anyone, leaving the listener to wonder what is really the case. In verse two, claims-counterclaims are presented with reference to Miner's time in prison and a trip around the world. Verse 3 exaggerates Miner's procreative achievements, while verse 4 alleges that he is still alive. The last line indicates that Miner would probably "laugh until he's dead" were he to hear all the stories that have been made up about him. Newman's song, then, is a commentary on some of the tales and songs that have been written about Bill Miner, clearly poking fun at the legend and folklore that moved in to fill

in the gaps left by an incomplete historical record. To someone addicted to the truth and fact, all of this may seem somewhat silly, even contemptuous; but to someone who enjoys a good story, it is fascinating, helping to show how, over time, the story of Bill Miner evolved into one of Canada's premier outlaw tales.

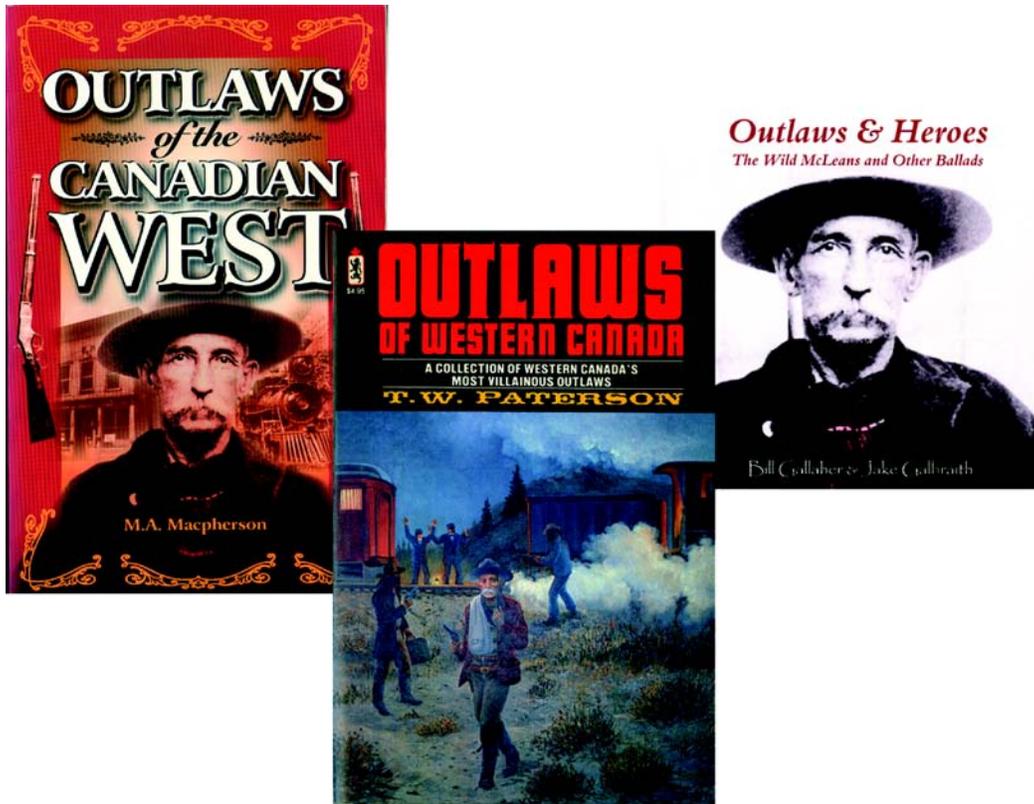
The Legend of Bill Miner

Bill Miner has emerged as a modern-day legend in Canadian history and lore. His story has been told in multiple ways, in multiple media, and has evolved to have all of the characteristics of a true legend. The Grey Fox emerges as a larger-than-life hero, besting the CPR, and working his way into the hearts of those who know his story.

Looking at Miner's legend, we see a number of important elements. The construction of the Grey Fox as a modern day Robin Hood is the most frequently observed theme in the songs, clearly evident in the songs by Bossin, Fjellgaard and Godwin. This accolade is, of course, completely unwarranted. Miner was a hardened criminal, leaving a trail of ruined lives behind him. For example, Louis Colquhoun died in prison, Shorty Dunn lived only 12 years after his eventual release in 1915, Deputy Warden D. D. Bourke lived a miserable life after he was fired. The "poor folk" gained no financial rewards from Miner's time in Canada, nor did he serve any important political end such as the return of King Richard to his throne. Indeed, Miner was no Robin Hood, he was a tough, self-centered criminal who had a flair for manipulating people and who did so with no compunction whatsoever.

Bill Miner as Icon

Bill Miner has become the most popular of western Canadian outlaws. Not only is this revealed in the tremendous number of songs about him, the most of any individual in Canadian railway music, but also in the manner in which he has become the visual poster boy for Canadian outlawry. For example, two books, T. W. Patterson's *Outlaws of Western Canada* (1982) and M. A. Macpherson's *Outlaws of the Canadian West* (1999), present histories of many outlaws and bandits. In both cases, Bill Miner adorns the cover, making him an icon of the outlaw set. As well, Bill Gallaher chose to put Miner on the cover of his CD entitled *Outlaws and Heroes*. In part, this is due to some excellent photos taken by Kamloops photographer Mary Spencer. So not only did the gentleman bandit work his way into our folklore and history, but also into the iconography of the Canadian west.



Of course, we have to bear in mind that the legend of Robin Hood itself has its warts. Based on multiple English outlaws, Robin Hood is hardly a factual story. Rather, in both cases, the stories told have converged on an essential theme that allows people to see the good in even the most unwholesome of characters. Perhaps this allows us to hold onto the idealistic notion that there are no “really bad” people out there, even the worst have their virtues. The legend of Bill Miner, as articulated in many of the songs presented here, as well as in film, serves to articulate this legend, offering space for us to see the good in all people.

The legend of Bill Miner speaks to specifically Canadian issues in the manner in which it casts the Canadian Pacific Railway as the villain of the piece, getting what it deserved by being robbed. In western Canada, the CPR was the premier institution encountered by the people, not only in getting themselves and their goods to different places, but also in the availability of supplies and, in many cases, the very purchase of land. Whether it was seduction of unsuspecting immigrants to the west with pamphlets advertising an easy life in a milk-and-honey land, exorbitant freight rates that kept farmers and ranchers under their thumb, or real estate schemes based on their over-generous land grants, the CPR frequently was in conflict with the needs and desires of the

common folk. Added to this was a kind of arrogance associated with the institution that, in the west, created considerable resentment of this eastern-based company. Yet, the CPR provided essential services without which the West would never have grown. This led to a complicated set of attitudes toward the CPR, a kind of love-hate relationship that became an important part of western culture. Bill Miner played into this complex mindset by besting the CPR. He offered a tale that had a welcome place in the hearts of those who had experienced difficult times at the hands of the railway. In talking about Bill Miner, it became possible to gain some sense of control over the great CPR that had such a powerful influence over their lives. The idea of this bandit, a polite and non-violent man who ran rings around the railway company, was a true delight for many western Canadians. No doubt, Miner’s legend has grown and flourished because of this.

Perhaps, as well, this explains why some of our local, homegrown villains have not received the same welcome as Bill Miner. For example, the Maclean boys and Alex Hare, another gang of western outlaws, are constructed in song as the violent criminals they were, with none of the generosity of spirit shown to Bill Miner.⁷ Perhaps some of this relates to them not being as polite as Miner. However, I suspect that a goodly part of the reason for this is that the

Macleans did not contact the complex and important set of attitudes that western Canadians hold about the CPR. This allowed the sung record to stay closer to the historical record for these homegrown villains.

The songs presented here about Bill Miner provide a wide range of takes on this intriguing story. We find historically-grounded ballads, both general and specific, thematic pieces, as well as several that have employed considerable poetic license. There is even one that speaks to the embellishment of stories

that have been told. Overall, Miner's legend has been well-served in song, with his story finding a number of excellent renderings.⁸ A listen to these tunes transports us into the very heart of a story that has captured our imaginations for over 100 years. By listening carefully, it is possible to hear the heartbeat of western Canada. Elements of its landscape, lifestyle, history and fundamental attitudes are all there for the listening.

Discography

- Back When Billy Robbed Trains: Gary Fjellgaard and Valdy. *Contenders two: Still in the running* (CD available at www.fjellgaard.bc.ca/latest-cd.php).
- Bill Miner Song: Ron Weihs (1977). *Ladies and escorts*. Vernon BC: Caravan Stage Company CSC07 (45 RPM disc).
- Bill Miner: Bob Bossin (1994). *Gabriola VOR IX0*. Gabriola Island BC: Bob Bossin (CD available at www.bossin.com).
- Bill Miner: Stu Phillips. *A journey through the provinces*. Bear Family BEAO15721 (CD available at www.bear-family.de/).
- Bill Miner's Betrayal: John Spearn (1999). *Northern sightlines*. Edmonton AB: Reidmore, NS-0699 (CD available at www.canadasongs.com/johnspearn2.html).
- Bill Miner's Jailbreak: Kettle Valley Brakemen (2000). *Climb aboard!* Naramata BC: Jack Godwin, KVB-CD01 (CD available at www.kvbrakemen.com).
- Gold Dust: Under the Moss (1997). *Raking the coals*. Vancouver BC: Orca Productions, OR 001 (CD available at ptarmigan@gulfislands.com). Also on: Dave Baker (1997). *Songs and sounds of Canadian steam*. Vancouver BC: Coast Country Productions (CD available at www.capcan.com/railroad.htm).
- Somebody Robbed the CPR: Ron Weihs (1977). *Ladies and escorts*. Vernon BC: Caravan Stage Company, CSC07 (45 RPM disc).
- The Grey Fox: The Chieftans (1983). *The Grey Fox*. New York NY: DRG Records, SL 9515 (LP of movie soundtrack).
- The Hold Up: Bill Gallaher and Jake Galbraith. *Outlaws and heroes: The Wild McLeans and Other Ballads*. Victoria BC: Bill Gallaher (CD available at www.members.shaw.ca/billgallaher/).

Notes

¹ The soundtrack for the film eventually included a considerable amount of original music written and performed by the Irish Celtic group the Chieftans.

² This appears to be inaccurate. Grauer's (2006) painstaking recreation indicates that Miner and his co-escapees did indeed "dig and scrape" to exit under a fence (see Chapters 22-23).

³ This is inaccurate as well. The main reason why the bond story ever came to light was because Bourke was quite active fermenting political unrest in order to get his retirement funds reinstated after his dismissal from the prison system.

⁴ This is historically incorrect. In 1874, near Port Credit, ON, five thieves robbed the Great Western Railway of \$45,000 (Grauer, 2006, p. 43). A number of earlier sources (e.g., Patterson, 1982; Macpherson, 1999) also indicated that the Mission train robbery was Canada's first.

⁵ Email, July 25/08.

⁶ In the film *The Grey Fox*, Bill was teamed up romantically with a woman photographer (perhaps based on Mary Spencer, who was responsible for much of the photographic record of Miner). It would seem that fashioning a "love interest" is an important part of after-the-fact stories about Bill Miner.

⁷ Ian Tyson and Bill Gallaher have both written songs about the Macleans and Hare.

⁸ I'm still pursuing another musical about Miner that was performed on the Rocky Mountaineer (Two Rivers Productions) circa 2000, as well as several other songs (one by Katy Moffat). Any further information about other Bill Miner songs would be greatly appreciated (tbrogers@ucalgary.ca).

Treasures from Our Archives

Twenty Years Ago

Bulletin 22.2-4 was published in December 1988; I'll conveniently defer writing about it to a future issue.

Fifteen Years Ago

Bulletin 27.2 (June 1993). As this issue was a Festival Directory issue (it came out once a year, back then), we left the "newsletter" style (which economics had begun to dictate) for a booklet format with a cover, much as the magazine appears today. In addition to the Directory, the issue contained Allan Thrasher's article "The Society's Name and Its Membership", which explained reasons for the change away from "Canadian Folk Music Society" which had recently taken place, as well as "Learning About Folk" by Vic Bell, who was then artistic director of the Calgary festival. Musical items for this issue were Norm Walker's "The Prairie Pagans" and George Lyon's tune "Mr. & Mrs. Jamieson" (accompanied by a memoir about the couple for whom it was written). Reviews of recordings *On Wings of Song* (a compilation of Yiddish songs), Brendan Nolan's *Across the Great Divide* and storyteller Mary Eileen McClear's *O Canada* were included.

Ten Years Ago

Bulletin 32.2 (June 1998). George Lyon interviewed Phil Thomas for this issue; Phil contributed a couple of songs from his collection ("Are You From Bevan?" and "Hard Rock Miner") and a short piece about his wife, Hilda ("Hilda Herself"). Also appearing was Ada-Marie Atkins Nechka's account of the University of Calgary's celebration of the work of the late Edith Fowke. A number of reviews of books and recordings, plus the Festival Directory, showed up.

Five Years Ago

Bulletin 37.2 (Summer 2003). This issue had a Newfoundland flavour; Anna Kearney Guigné's article "An Operative Model for Analyzing Kenneth Peacock's Newfoundland Song Collection" led up, followed by Philip Hiscock's "Ten Things to Consider About 'The Star of Logy Bay'". Phil Thomas told us about "Folksong at FSAC". The Festival Directory made an appearance, as did some letters, reviews and housekeeping.

These issues (and all back issues, either in original form or as photocopies) are available from CSTM Back Issues, 224 20th Ave. NW, Calgary, Alta. T2M 1C2. For pricing, see the Mail Order Service catalogue or website (www.yorku.ca/cstm and follow the links), or contact john.leeder@nucleus.com. Cumulative Tables of Contents of all issues since 1982 are available on the website as well. [JL]

