

## FOLK-SONGS OF OLD QUEBEC

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### ORIGIN AND VARIETIES OF CANADIAN FOLK-SONGS

FOLK-SONGS were once a feature of the daily life of the French Canadians. They were as familiar as barley-bread to the home-keeping villagers of Quebec, Acadia, Detroit, and Louisiana. They escorted the fur traders in their early explorations across the continent, and enlivened the echoes whenever the lumberjacks and the raftsmen appeared on the eastern Canadian rivers. Threshing and winnowing in the barn moved on to the rhythm of work tunes, as did spinning, weaving, beating the wash, or rocking the cradle by the fireside. Children, lovers, mothers, workers, drinkers, all had their songs. People were musical in the old days.

When the *coureurs des bois* started on their long journeys along the rivers and the trails of the Far West, one or two hundred years ago, their outstanding qualities were imagination, endurance, a love of fun, and a craving for adventure. Picking up the paddle, the canoemen burst into song at once, the better to work in unison and keep their spirits from flagging. Their songs were truly indispensable. A legacy of the past, they proved a valuable asset to the discoverers and the fur trading companies for over two centuries, and contributed much to the formation of the national character of the French Canadians.

Not many song records antedating 1865 have come down to us, however. At that date, Ernest Gagnon published his *Chansons populaires du Canada*, a small but valuable collection. The idea then went abroad that his effort, modest though it was, had drained the fount of local tradition. More songs might have been recorded before they had passed away, but modern life had hushed all folk-singers alike. Tale and legend had vanished forever. The impression among the musicians was that our folk-songs, as represented in the Gagnon collection, were very limited in number and of no great musical importance.

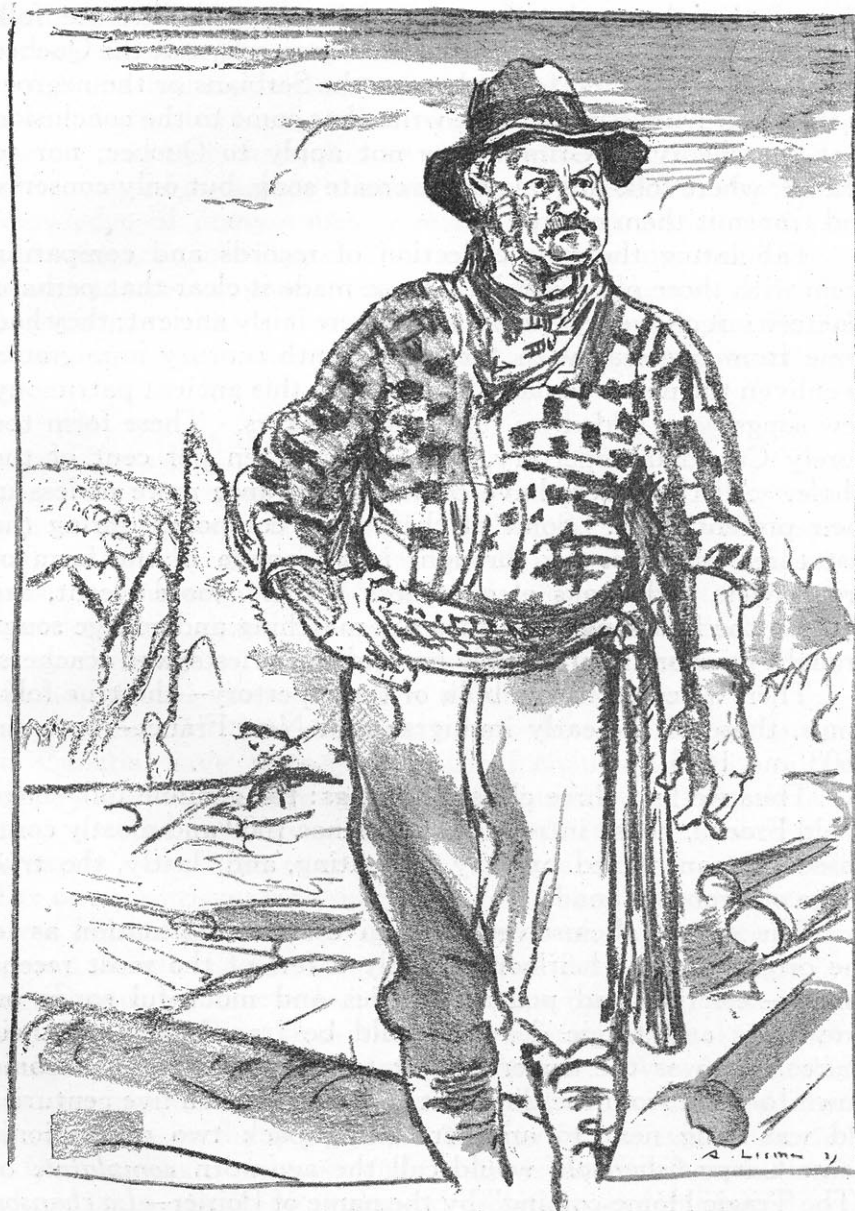
The writer was under this false impression for many years, until some interesting survivals by the roadside piqued his

curiosity. A systematic search during the summer months nearly twenty years ago opened wide vistas. There were still good folk-singers, and many of them. They possessed a treasure-house of songs, over a hundred songs to one singer alone—more than the whole Gagnon set itself. The tunes were fresh, rhythmic, and spirited, as if they had been sung for the first time. The panorama of ancient French life at the Court, in town, or on the country roads, was brought back into existence. The miracles and dark tragedies of mediæval times were retold as if they had happened yesterday. No survival of the past could be more vital and inspiring. It seemed no longer possible that the traditions of a people could sink overnight into oblivion.

In the past fifteen years, over 6,700 versions of songs have been recorded by the writer and a few collaborators—Messrs. E.-Z. Massicotte, Adélar Lambert, A. Godbout, Gustave Lancôt, and Father Arsenault. The songs were taken down in writing from various parts of Quebec, the Maritime Provinces, and New England, where Canadian emigrants are numerous; and about 4,000 melodies were recorded on the phonograph. In the same period, 3,000 records were made of Indian songs from all over the country.

The folk-singers were talented; their memory was prolific; their stock of songs was novel and inexhaustible. But they never gave free rein to improvisation, never ventured into new paths. They did not compose poems and melodies, but simply repeated what they had learned in childhood. That improvisation to their knowledge never happened was repeatedly confirmed. True enough, they spoke of some poets of the backwoods who could string rhymes and stanzas together on a given theme to suit local demand. But these were mere individuals, without mystic powers. They plodded over their tasks and matched their lines to a familiar tune. The result was uncouth and commonplace. There was nowhere a fresh source of inspiration, only imitation, crude and slavish.

It became obvious that a wide discrepancy existed between the actual facts and the theory of Grimm, still current in the English-speaking world, that folk-songs and perhaps tales are the fruit of collective inspiration. How puzzling it seemed when the Quebec singers were compared with American negroes



Vincent-Ferrier de Repentigny, folk-singer, Beauharnois and Montreal.

and Balkan peasants who are said to break into poetic outbursts when gathered together for group singing. If illiterate folk truly possess the gift of collective utterance, why not the Quebec singers as well as their forefathers or the Serbians or the negroes of the lower Mississippi? The writer has come to the conclusion that the theory of Grimm does not apply to Quebec, nor to France, where folk-singers do not create song, but only conserve and transmit them orally.

Tabulating the first collection of records and comparing them with those of provincial France made it clear that perhaps nineteen out of twenty Quebec songs were fairly ancient; they had come from overseas with the seventeenth century immigrants to enliven the new woodland homes. To this ancient patrimony new songs were added by rustic song-makers. These form the purely Canadian repertory, perhaps only ten per cent of the whole. All the others have come from France more or less in their present state. Some of them were composed during the last three centuries and brought into Canada in the form of broadsheets and books of canticles. Others, more recent, are truly in the folk-song vein; they are marching and college songs brought over orally after 1680 by soldiers, priests, and teachers.

Then we come to the bulk of the repertory—the true folk-songs, those of the early immigrants of New France—between 1608 and 1673.

Thus we find three classes of songs: the genuine folk-songs of old France, those introduced here since 1680 and mostly composed or transmitted by way of writing, and, lastly, the true songs of French Canada.

The singers themselves could give little information as to the origin of their heirlooms. Only a few of the most recent songs — election and political ditties and mournful songs on drownings and tragic deaths—could be traced back to their source. It was the singers' habit to rehearse what had come down to them from the dim past. A composition five centuries old was sung next to another dating back two generations. Some Gaspé fisher-folk would call the age-worn *complainte* of "The Tragic Home-coming" by the name of Poirier—*La chanson de Poirier*. Poirier was still remembered by the elders, as if he were its author. Others claimed that the canticle of "Alexis"

was as much as a hundred years old, when it was more nearly a thousand. The singers' notions of origin were not worth serious consideration.

If the melody in these songs of the land is usually superior to the words, it is because these melodies are derived from good prototypes, and the rustic bards to whom we owe them were better versed in melody than in lyrics. Talent and the familiar knowledge of many tunes were fair musical guides. Rhythm and tune are more elemental than grammar and verse; they are nearer nature. A good instance is *La Plainte du coureur des bois*. Musicians are likely to respond to its moving appeal. But the lines, stripped of their melody, will not be mistaken for good poetry.

#### LA PLAINTÉ DU COUREUR DES BOIS (Page 28)

Tunes are more fluid than song texts. They can easily be altered without an irreparable loss. Several variants of a melody may be equally good; it is not usually possible to tell which is closer to the original. But a poetic word cluster once lost is irretrievable. A scar takes its place, with words casually thrown in by the singers to hold up the tune. Such lacunæ—some of them quite old—disfigure many of our best records.

In the past three hundred years, the ancient French tunes in Canada have undergone marked changes. They do not always resemble closely their French equivalents. Parallels, indeed, are the rare exception, particularly in the old songs; this is partly due to the paucity of French records for comparison. The same words may be sung to several tunes, according to their use. Few of these tunes, on both sides of the Atlantic, correspond, though the poems are much alike, despite variations.

Because of this melodic fluidity, the tunes in our repertory are more Canadian than the words; their local colour is pronounced, yet they retain a mediæval flavour. Whatever gradual changes happened, the character and technique remained largely the same as at the beginning. Singing in the remote districts of Quebec, like Charlevoix and Gaspé, is more archaic than elsewhere, as a result of prolonged isolation and ingrained conservatism.

The distinction between the newer and older French songs in Canada was not very clear. The elimination of some was necessary, for the songs, particularly at points within easy reach of a town, were not all of folk extraction. A singer's repertory was like a curiosity shop; trifles and recent importations vied with old-time relics.

The French "romances" of 1820-40 were once the fashion. Not a few of them, like the satires on Bonaparte, had somehow found their way into America, in print or otherwise, and filtered down into the older strata of local lore, where they still persist long after their demise in the homeland. Many songs passed from mouth to mouth until they no longer remained the exclusive favourites of school and barracks, and country folk were on the lookout for just such novelties.

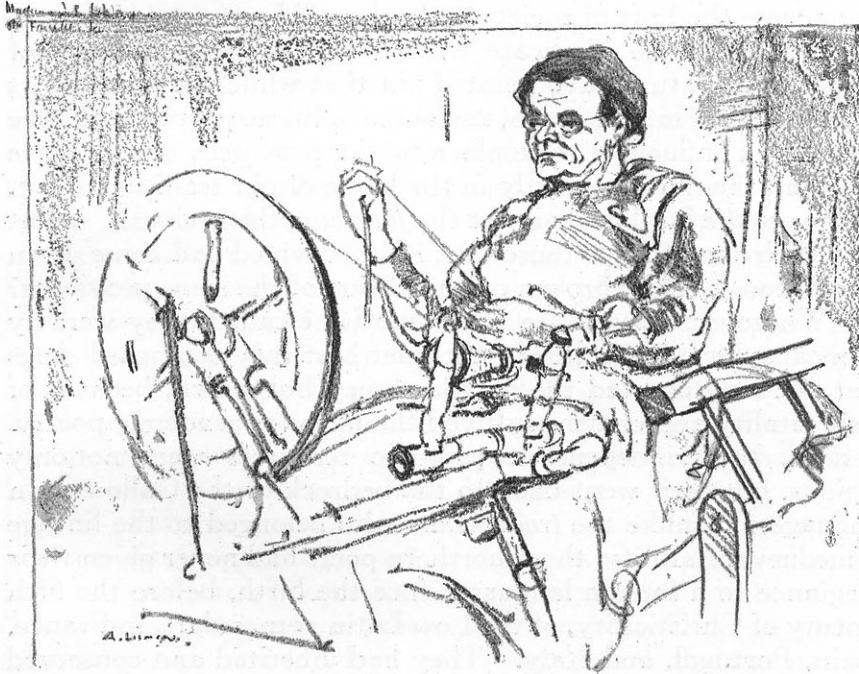
Compilations printed in Canada and ballad sheets imported from France (*imageries d'Epinal et de Metz*) spread their influence to many quarters. Among the additions from this latter source we count *Pyrame et Thisbé*, on an old Greek theme, *Damon et Henriette*, a mediæval story, *Cartouche et Mandrin* and *Le Juif errant* (the Wandering Jew). The length of these exceeds that of ordinary folk-songs. They also have a literary turn in the manner of *Aucassin et Nicolette*. *Pyrame* and *Damon* both consist of more than two hundred lines, whereas ordinary folk-songs seldom pass beyond forty or fifty.

The ancient canticle of *Alexis* occurs in two forms: the first, out of the *Cantiques de Marseille*, the oldest song-book in Canada—well before 1800; and the second from hitherto unrecorded sources of the past. Under its literary form it goes back to the tenth or eleventh century; it is the first known religious song in the French language—*lingua vulgaris*—at its very birth as a written and church language.

The true folk-songs arrived in Canada before 1680 with the early settlers from the provinces of Normandy and the Loire river. These songs far exceed all others, and they are incomparably the best. Their style is pure and crisp, their themes clear-cut and tersely developed. Their prosody differs widely from that of the *troubadours* and from literary French. Grace and refinement prevail throughout, and in some there are flashes of genius. Here is decidedly not the work of untutored peasants,

nor a growth due to chance, but the creation of poets whose consummate art had inherited an ample stock of metric patterns and a wealth of ancient lore common to many European races.

Our best folk-songs are not a direct legacy from the *troubadours*, for *troubadour* songs were written on parchment for the privilege of the nobility; they belonged to the aristocracy and



Mme. Jean-Baptiste Leblond, spinning and singing folk-songs, Sainte-Famille, Island of Orleans.

the learned, not to the common people. They affected the *finesse*, the *philosophy* and literary mannerisms of the Latin decadence; and they were composed in the Limousin and Provençal dialects of *oc*, in southeastern France. The *troubadours* themselves wrote their songs between the eleventh and the fourteenth centuries, whereas many of the best folk-songs belong to the two hundred years that followed. Our songs could not be translations into *oil* of compositions originally in an *oc* dialect. The spirit, the technique, and the themes of the *troubadour* poems

have little or nothing in common with those of our songs. Here we are dealing with two worlds apart: the one, the high Latin tradition, and the other, the earlier influx of southern culture through folk channels, after the Roman conquest.

On the other hand, there were the *jongleurs errants* and *jongleurs de foire* of ancient times, whose pranks were derided in the manuscripts of the *troubadours* and the minstrels. The *jongleurs* were the butt of society. As they did not use writing, no evidence is left to vindicate their memory. But students of mediæval literature have pointed out that while the *troubadours* had their day in the south, an obscure literary upheaval, free from Latin influence, took place in the provinces of the Loire river and the north—exactly in the home of our traditional lore. Who were the local poets if not the *jongleurs* themselves? What were their songs if not those that have survived and come down to us through the unbroken oral tradition of the same provinces?

Whatever those Loire River bards be called, they were by no means devoid of culture. At their best they composed songs that not only courted the popular fancy but which, because of their vitality and charm, outlived the forms of academic poetry. Besides, their independent prosodic resources were not only copious, but they went back to the bedrock of the Gallo-roman languages. Unlike the *troubadours* who belonged to the lineage of mediæval Latinity, those northern poets had never given their allegiance to a foreign language since the birth, before the fifth century of Christianity, of the Low Latin vernaculars, in France, Spain, Portugal, and Italy. They had inherited and conserved the older traditions of the land. Presumably they were the heirs of the ancient Druids and the Celtic culture that had undergone a mutation without altogether going out of existence.

In other words, the folk-songs of France as recovered in America—more numerous and better preserved than at home—mostly represent an ancient stratum of French literature, one which despite discredit was never wholly submerged by the influx of Neo-Latin influences from the south.

But the *jongleur* art went out of existence in France itself before the dawn of the seventeenth century, with the appearance of printing and broadsheets. If we have true folk-songs of the sixteenth century—those of *Le Prince d'Orange* and *Le Prince*



*Eugène*—it seems that later compositions are in the literary style that belongs to writing. At least, not one of the early settlers was endowed with the *jongleur* tradition, for we lack any historic reference to the art or any native song disclosing the presence of *jongleur* traditions in the New World. The *troubadours* died out in the fourteenth century; the *jongleurs* seem to have vanished in the sixteenth.

LE PRINCE D'ORANGE (Page 31)

LE PRINCE EUGÈNE (Page 34)

The old repertory of folk-songs is quite varied. It does not consist, like that of the Mediterranean border, of lyric songs exclusively, nor of narratives and ballads, like that of Scandinavia. But it is mixed, both types being generously represented.

The ballads and narratives of the North sea belong to Normandy and northern France. Some of them slipped across the *oïl* frontier in central France into the southern provinces; some few passed the mountains into Spain and northern Italy—"Le Roi Renaud," for instance. The lyric songs thrived in southern France and on the Loire river, and invaded Normandy at an early date. In spite of this ready interchange, ballads in France remain northern to this day, whereas the lyric poem is typical of the provinces to the south. This is the outcome of ancient classic culture, more philosophic and abstract in its trends, more firmly rooted in southern France than in the north. This contrast between northern and southern France assumed particular significance when it was found that the eastern districts of Quebec had far more ballads and *complaintes* (come-all-ye's) than those of Montreal, to the southwest. Quebec proper is predominantly Norman, whereas Montreal owes more to the Loire river. The earliest immigrants after 1608 and 1634 embarked for New France at Honfleur, Havre, and St. Malo, on the British channel, and settled in the neighbourhood of Quebec. Many of the others, after 1642, sailed from La Rochelle, on the Atlantic, and proceeded to the upper river settlements of Three Rivers and Montreal. This diversity of origin has left many traces to this day. The singers of Charlevoix and Gaspé to the northeast differ from the others; they are the Canadian Normans. Their songs have an archaic tang, and



FOLK SINGERS  
FROM GASPE

A. LIMON

François Saint-Laurent and Joseph Ouellet, fishermen and folk-singers,  
La Tourelle, Gaspé.

lean by preference towards the narrative type. An instance, though not very ancient, is that of "The Return of the Soldier Husband", also familiar in Great Britain through Tennyson's Enoch Arden.

LE RETOUR DU SOLDAT (Page 37)

French folk-songs, particularly as preserved in Canada, have some points in common with those of England, and this is only natural. A good many of them are practically the same, except for the idiom. Centuries after the Normans had conquered the island, the British for many years ruled over northern France, even Aquitaine to the southwest. Some geographic names in Normandy (such as Dieppe = Deep) are English, whereas many more in England are French. Were it not for the rise of Joan of Arc, both France and England might have been joined together under the same Norman crown. The songs of one nation would have been those of the other, for many were common possessions in those days of unborn nationality.

Canadian songs like those of north and central France were applied to almost every phase of daily life. There were cradle and wonder songs, play-parties and round dances—for the nursery; love songs of every conceivable type—many of them quite gay; dialogues and vaudevilles; a large number of anecdotal and comic songs; rigmaroles; work and dance songs; and, in the religious vein, Christmas carols, miracles, and folk canticles.

Foremost was the working song with its invigorating rhythm, intended to sustain the energy of the toilers. It is the best known at large. It was used by canoemen, wood-cutters, and ploughmen; and again, fullers, spinners, and weavers. Typical among these songs are *A la Claire fontaine* (page 40), *Le Plongeur et la bague d'or*, *Le Fils du roi s'en va chassant*, *La Fille du roi d'Espagne*, *La Rose blanche* (page 42), and *Dans les haubans* (page 44). *Le Miracle du nouveau-né* (page 46), which follows, is not so well known, nor is it a characteristic work song as it combines elements that belong both to the canticle—it relates a miracle—and to the work song: a refrain of short lines (eight beats, cut in two by the cæsura), and fair rhythm. The rhymes are consistently masculine, as in ancient poetry.

- A LA CLAIRE FONTAINE (Page 40)  
 LA ROSE BLANCHE (Page 42)  
 DANS LES HAUBANS (Page 44)  
 LE MIRACLE DU NOUVEAU-NÉ (Page 46)

Among the numerous love songs of varied age and description, three or four types may be singled out as ancient and typically French: the shepherd song, the *rossignol messenger* (nightingale messenger of love), the aubades, and nocturnes. Although they rest upon short narratives, their intention is lyrical. They are mediæval, perhaps largely from central France, and they embody some of the finest melodies we know.

Though not of *troubadour* origin, their themes were far from unfamiliar in southern France; they were also used in the written literature of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. These lyric songs underwent a peculiar evolution in the course of their long history. Like many other songs of the Middle Ages they spread from France to neighbouring countries.

- ROSSIGNOLET SAUVAGE (Page 49)  
 QUI N'A PAS D'AMOUR (Page 51)  
 LÀ-HAUT, SUR CES MONTAGNES (Page 54)