

Come and I Will Sing You: A Newfoundland Songbook. Ed.
Genevieve Lehr. Comp. Lehr and Anita Best.

John W. MacKay

Volume 4, Number 2, Fall 1988

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/nflds4_2br02

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Faculty of Arts, Memorial University

ISSN

1198-8614 (print)

1715-1430 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

MacKay, J. W. (1988). Review of [*Come and I Will Sing You: A Newfoundland Songbook*. Ed. Genevieve Lehr. Comp. Lehr and Anita Best.] *Newfoundland Studies*, 4(2), 203–204.

Come and I Will Sing You: A Newfoundland Songbook. Ed. Genevieve Lehr. Comp. Lehr and Anita Best. St. John's: Breakwater Books; Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1985. xiv, 210 p. \$14.95.

JOHN W. MACKAY

MOST OF THE 120 songs in this "Newfoundland Songbook" were tape-recorded by editor Lehr and Anita Best from nearly forty singers between 1975 and 1983. These and four Franco-Newfoundland songs collected by folklorist Gerald Thomas were musically transcribed by Pamela Morgan and the music copied by Robin Charles. Ten stark, often eerie illustrations (apparently woodcuts) by Elly Cohen, each an image based on one song, are sprinkled throughout the book. Breakwater has produced a handsome volume, the eleventh in its Atlantic Folklore-Folklife Series.

Many of the songs use a commonplace "Come-all-ye" to open a narrative based on a (usually local) event, and conclude on a homiletic note. These are stories of resilience, of bold ordinary people absorbing tragedy, fighting back and living to sing about it. The few songs that dwell on social inequality are sharply critical of capitalist forces and privilege.

Any song collection demands criteria of selection from its editors. As one of the richest repositories of traditional song in North America, Newfoundland has attracted more collectors from "away" than perhaps any region outside of Appalachia. These scholarly stripminers tended to seek out some types of song and neglect others, pioneering academic interest in Newfoundland's song tradition while misrepresenting it. The present collection has been collected by Newfoundlanders rather than culled from afar. Its strengths and weaknesses are different from those of earlier collections. The editor's apparent rejection of external criteria gives the book both its charm and its frustration.

Consistent with the "untouched" manner in which the songs are presented, their order is alphabetical and the contributors merely listed. To see Jim Payne and Pius Power Sr. "sharing the bill," though perhaps democratic in intent, obscures some important differences between them. Most song collections are divided into groupings by theme or origin. As the majority of

songs here tell of tragedy at sea, and are listed by name of ship (when it is known) rather than title of song, these sea disaster narratives could usefully have formed one such grouping. Lehr might have separated those composed in Newfoundland from those of broader currency, or those of known composition from those passed on through anonymous "deputies of the public voice." Between Powers' rendition of "The Glen Alone," learned in the 1920s, and Payne's "In Memoriam," composed in 1983 about the *Ocean Ranger* disaster, lies not only a number of generations, but an era.

The most longstanding and controversial of such divisions among folksong scholars has been that of "Child and other," based on the nineteenth-century ballad collection of Francis James Child. *Come and I Will Sing You* includes collected versions of "False Limkin" (Child 93) and "Lord Bate-men" (Child 53), yet Child's work is not even cited in the bibliography. This may well be a political exclusion rather than an oversight.

The songs are transcribed with musical and linguistic care, though the linguistic footnotes are scattered and selective. Perhaps a larger glossary, marginal dictionary or linguistic headnote to each song would have satisfied Lehr's intention to render the text meaningful. Notes to the songs are uneven, usually providing gems of background but sometimes overlooking the most elementary information. Comparative reference only to Paul Mercer's *Newfoundland Songs and Ballads in Print, 1842-1974* may lead the lay reader to assume that these songs are uniquely Newfoundland in origin; though most are, it forces the comparativist or annotator to use Mercer's index as an intermediary between this collection and others. As *Come and I Will Sing You* is meant also for a national audience (given its co-publication by University of Toronto Press), readers west of the Cabot Strait will need to acquire Mercer or be prepared to dig for other versions. The sensitive notes on context beg for a companion sound tape, photos, biographical sketches and interviews with contributors. Overall, the folksong scholar would want more consistent and extensive notes, even if as appendices (leaving the flow of songs uninterrupted).

But this is a songbook, and despite its physical awkwardness for this purpose, the detail provided is excellent. Singer's key is provided if different from that of transcription, dialect is retained in print when necessary for rhyme or rhythm, incomplete texts are supplemented by other oral versions and tunes are provided for all but two.