MacEdward Leach and the Songs of Atlantic Canada

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This essay describes a website that brought the earliest audio recordings made in Atlantic Canada to the attention of scholars, singers, and cultural historians: MacEdward Leach and the Songs of Atlantic Canada (http://www.mun.ca/folklore/leach). Among the many collections of traditional song that have been made in Newfoundland and Labrador, there was until 2004 a noticeable gap in their accessibility. Collections by Karpeles (1970), Greenleaf and Mansfield (1965 [1933]), Peacock (1965), and Lehr (1985)—as well as Leach's Labrador collection (1966) —were published in print editions, and selections from Peacock (1956) were released on LP, but the earliest audio recordings made on the islands of Cape Breton and Newfoundland by American folklorist MacEdward Leach were largely unknown.[1] His collections are important not only for their size but also for their geographic and generic range. Unlike the earlier collectors, Leach was open to local compositions, as well as songs of American, English, Scottish, or Irish origin. In the late 1940s Leach had traveled with his first wife, Alice May (Maria) Doane, to her native Cape Breton, where they recorded over 80 songs in Gaelic. In 1950 and 1951, he and his second wife, Nancy Rafetto, made two trips to Newfoundland, where they amassed a collection of more than 600 English-language songs largely from English and Irish communities on the Avalon Peninsula.[2] The original reel-to-reel recordings were in the custody of the Memorial University Folklore and Language Archive. When the Research Centre for Music, Media and Place was established in 2003 with a mandate to undertake "applied" projects that would respond to requests and needs in the province's communities, it became clear that local singers—both amateur and professional—sought greater access to archival holdings in order to enrich their repertoires and enhance their knowledge of local culture and tradition. Hence, a website project was developed to seek permission from the Leach estate holder to digitize and present the Leach collection online. We hoped that the project would prove to be a stimulant to the still vibrant oral

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[1] Leach (1966) had released a small selection of the Newfoundland songs (*Songs from the Out-Ports of Newfoundland*, Folkways 4075) on Folkways, and song transcriptions of his Labrador collection were published (1965) as *Folk Ballads and Songs of the Lower Labrador Coast*.

[2] There is no connection between the Cape Breton and Newfoundland collections other than the fact that Leach made both of them and that they constitute the earliest audio-recorded collections in Atlantic Canada. The two Newfoundland collections are related in that Leach returned to some families he visited on the earlier trip, but he also traveled to new communities, including Fermuse, Renews, Portugal Cove South, Biscay Bay, Trepassey, St. Shott's, Riverhead-St. Mary's, St. Catherine's, St. Vincent's, and Mal Bay. His trip to west coast communities was part of the 1950 fieldwork. Details of his fieldwork are explained in the online biography on the website.

traditions of Newfoundland and Labrador, as well as a means for enabling dialogue between culture bearers and researchers. Our hopes were amply fulfilled.

The project had an additional pedagogical motivation: to engage graduate students of folklore and ethnomusicology in archival material itself, training them in technological processes and issues of multimedia representation. In 2003-04 five students (including one Gaelic speaker[3]), coordinated and supervised by folklorist Ian Brodie (then a Ph.D. student at the Memorial University of Newfoundland [MUN]), developed content for the site from the 1950 collection. Ian undertook the difficult task of designing the site, with close attention to both functionality and attractiveness. In 2005-06 a second group of three graduate students (coordinated and supervised by ethnomusicologist Kelly Best, then an M.A. student at MUN) updated and augmented the content of the site with the 1951 collection. The students digitized the original tapes, transcribed song texts or located Leach's transcriptions, and combed the archives for interesting images, annotations, or other relevant research material.

We were cognizant of multiple audiences. As mentioned, we knew that Newfoundland families and particularly singers were eager to access this archival collection, and that cumbersome academic annotations might be at best distractions and at worst obstacles to easy use. But we also wanted to create a site with documentation that academics would find useful. Additionally we were concerned about "protecting" the collection from illegal exploitation—third-party downloads particularly for commercial publication. This concern was much more "in the air" ten years ago and less so now as digital archives proliferate[4] and largely foreclose on the need to commodify or sell the content. To address this perceived need to protect but at the same time enable singers to learn songs, we published full song texts but edited the field recordings, placing audio for only one or two stanzas of each song on the site. This arrangement also helped with an additional (self-imposed) mandate for accessibility: ten years ago, with broadband and high-speed internet less widespread—particularly in the outport communities from which these songs were originally collected—full-length, high-fidelity sound files would have made for cumbersome downloads. By keeping the files under a minute in length and at a low resolution, it was hoped that visitors to the site would get the tune and the aesthetics of the performance without needing what would then have been specialized equipment.

Another early decision was for each song to have its own page. This seemingly predictable choice meant that we were treating the song as the default item of interest—not the genre[5] or chronology of either the recording or the repertoire.[6] This organization was unsettling, as it potentially separated the song from the moment of performance and the performer. The benefit of hypertext, however, is that connections between songs can be made in any number of ways. The site was designed to think of the songs less as "songs" and more as "instances of

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[3] To ensure accuracy, we also commissioned Gaelic specialist Dr. Lori MacKinnon to do further work on the Gaelic texts and translations.

[4] The complete Leach recordings from Newfoundland are now accessible through Memorial University's Digital Archive Initiative on the Library website.

[5] There is also a web page on "genre" but we chose not to emphasize distinctions—between traditional, country, or commercial popular music, for instance—that are most often very cloudy in practice.

[6] It also made sense from a design perspective, allowing for easier indexing and linking of files.

performance": there was indeed a text and a tune, which could be presented through transcription, audio, and cross-references, but it was *this* text and *this* tune brought together at *this* moment by *this* singer of *this* place. These instances of performance occurred within particular contexts and, with the help of hyperlinks to pages for each singer and community, we tried to place them more clearly within local contexts. Bearing in mind the multiple audiences, we tried to anticipate the possible ways a user might approach the site while inviting them to explore further questions.

A folksong revivalist might be interested in variants: he or she would have an already established song repertoire in mind and proceed to look for versions from Newfoundland, Cape Breton, and elsewhere. For that person we provided the standard access points of a title index and a classification by genre (which impelled the team to reconsider "genre" as a system of categorization). For example, someone looking for the ballad "Barbara Allen" (Child 84; Roud 54[7]) would find a version from Cape Broyle (a small community on the Avalon Peninsula in Newfoundland, an hour south of the capital, St. John's) as sung by Gerald Aylward. The text of Aylward's version resembles many variants published in other collections, but the tune is a highly unusual one. Were the scholar so inclined, he or she could explore more of Aylward's songs (Leach collected six from him) or those of the other 17 Cape Broyle singers. The song becomes a potential entry point to the person and the community.

But social historians would approach with different questions, and would begin by looking at the community: they would turn to the Cape Broyle page to discover what songs were sung at this place at this time and who were the tradition bearers in the community. The singers reflect different social milieux. Some were fishermen, while others worked at the local fish oil plant, delivered the mail, edited the local newspaper, inspected roads for the government, traveled to work on the American base at Fort Pepperall, or took seasonal employment in the lumber camps. The repertoire of the community is also diverse with many of the great ballads of the Anglo-Irish tradition, comic songs, and some commercial covers. Perhaps the social historian would come across "Tidal Wave at Burin," a locally composed song narrating the titular event (which occurred on November 18, 1929) with details both factual—the time of day and damages —and emotional. And perhaps they would begin to ask questions concerning the personal and community repertoire: why do "Barbara Allen" and "Tidal Wave at Burin"—one the romantic-tragic English, the other the historico-tragic local—each hold a place in the worldview of early 1950s Cape Broyle? The song becomes a potential entry point to the nature of expressive performance. A third audience involves, of course, people with a direct and personal connection to the places and singers themselves. A descendant of Gerald Aylward is less concerned with the songs as "texts" (as would be true for the revivalist) or "accounts" (as in the case of the social historian) than as Aylward's own, particular, idiosyncratic performances. Their value is genealogical and affective, and they need not provide insight into anything beyond that. But the descendant might wish to explore more about Aylward's community through other singers, or the

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[7] Child numbers refer to the index (1882-98) made by American folklorist Francis James Child in the late nineteenth century; Roud numbers were assigned by Croydon librarian Steven Roud to tens of thousands of folksongs in the English language, constituting the largest index (2006-) of English-language folksongs to date. An invaluable tool for documenting songs in the collection was the Traditional Ballad Index (http://www.fresnostate.edu/folklore/BalladSearch.html) maintained by California State University, Fresno.

types of songs he chose to sing, and perhaps through reading the song notes about "Barbara Allen" discover more about traditional ballads. The song becomes a potential entry point to consider how Aylward sat at the confluence of a variety of musical traditions.

A major objective of the project was to focus on people and places—the singers and communities. Each community was represented with a short local history on its own page, complete with photos, some newly shot for the project and others archival. Each singer similarly was given their own page with what biographical information we were able to glean. We managed to contact some of the families, and in some cases they generously shared photos and further bibliographic information. Good examples are pages for the family of Jim Rice, Ned Rice, and Monica Rossiter of Cape Broyle, whose house served locally as a gathering place for music makers and a site of various "times." Jim's great-granddaughter provided family photos and even a piece of poetry written about the times at the Rice house.

We also created a Leach biographical page, attempting to provide both factual details and also qualitative information, exploring the relationship an outsider sought to establish with the people of Newfoundland. Since his wives played an active role in the collecting process, we wrote briefly about their often unacknowledged contribution. Both women were impressive academics in their own right, and while there is not audible evidence of Maria Doane on the field tapes, Nancy Rafetto's voice is clearly heard on some of the Newfoundland recordings, and she was clearly gracious and personable.

To create documentation for scholarly purposes, we prepared Song Notes, printed in small type at the end of the song text as published collections often do; the notes contained Roud numbers, song text summaries, sources, history, text, and tune notes. Webpages with other information—archival accession numbers for photos and recordings, as well as a bibliography of sources consulted—were located in a different part of the site for those who sought such detail. A selected number of transcriptions were linked to the song pages, but transcription was not a priority since we believed that the majority of singers preferred to use the audio sources. We reproduced (with permission) an excellent overview of the collection history of traditional music in the province, written by folklorist Peter Narváez (1995) but published in a source that is not widely disseminated, particularly outside Canada.

We were excited by the new possibilities for social interaction that the Internet afforded —albeit in a much less developed form than would appear in the years to follow with the growth of social media. We began to think of the site not as a "publication" in the print-oriented sense of an endpoint for research, but as a mid-point: a site for sharing and inviting other information. We put our designated email address for correspondence on every page of the site—definite overkill in retrospect. But it worked. When the site first went live, we could expect eight to ten emails each week.

The responses bifurcated, as we predicted, along the lines of local community users and non-local academic users, but we had not anticipated the specific ways in which they digressed. Academics were focused on the songs themselves, often adding information about variants. On the other hand, although we know of many singers who began to use the site, they were not the ones who sent us email. Instead, family members were the most numerous correspondents, sometimes offering corrections or providing additional information, including such things as the names of singers' children or spouses, places of residence, community hosts when collectors

stayed in the communities, or subsequent generations of good singers. Most often, they thanked us for this way of connecting to previous generations. Among the dozens who sent email, one person described their encounter with the website as "an amazing coincidence . . . until today I never heard his voice . . . an amazing experience."[8] Another wrote that "I was six years old when he [grandfather] died in 1958 and to hear his voice after all these years is amazing." Clearly they saw the site as a genealogical tool, a means of representing cultural history through families of song carriers, and they validated our care in taking this additional information seriously.[9] But the effect of those old voices—the surprise hearings or memories recovered—was for many the most important aspect of their online encounter.

Songs have re-entered the repertoires of contemporary traditional performers and scholars have written appreciatively about the usefulness of the information. Thus we fulfilled our primary goals in creating the site. But, the site has additionally proven to be a space of connection between the academic community and the families whose relatives contributed such fascinating renditions of song over sixty years ago, and between contemporary Newfoundlanders and their musical ancestors. These important connections, in our view, have ultimately demonstrated the potential of digital interaction as a vehicle not simply for preserving, but also for reflecting on public memory through song.

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[8] See Diamond 2007 for more information about responses to the website.

[9] We have not been entirely successful in responding to this correspondence as funding for the project ran out and we lacked the staff and time to do regular updates.

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