

## FIRST PERSON SINGULAR: The Miramichi Folk Song Festival

THERE ARE ONLY THREE MAIN ROADS to Newcastle, New Brunswick. One leads down from the North Shore along the coast, one comes in from Moncton, and one follows the Southwest Miramichi River down from Boiestown and Doaktown, past the hunting camps owned by or operated for the legendary "rich Americans." The Southwest Miramichi, for almost its whole length, is a quite lovely river; the dying lumber industry supports fewer people with fewer mills than it once did, and the land has been lumbered but not cleared, so that trees – more aspen and birch than once – still cover most of the hills along it. At Blackville the road runs right through the mill. The river there is clogged with logs and the mill can be smelled for miles down the valley. Farther down, where the river widens out and the valley is a little shallower, you can see in the river the long streamers of waste floating down toward the Northumberland Strait. But from a distance you can't see this and the land looks, probably, not too much different than it did when lumbering began along the Miramichi.

Entering Newcastle itself you cross the Northwest Miramichi, which merges with the Southwest there, at Fraser's Mill. The unmistakable smell of a pulp mill hangs visibly over the river. You can smell it anywhere in Newcastle, but after a few hours it is only noticeable when shifts in the wind make it especially strong.

Driving into Newcastle on Tuesday, August <sup>19</sup>, there was no indication that the Miramichi Folk Song Festival was in progress. The town square, with its statue of Lord Beaverbrook, stood quiet in the nearly-autumnal rain. After asking at a number of stores, we were guided to Mitchell's store, a small grocery with a meat market in a separate room and a pop cooler next to the door. We inquired for Mrs. Mitchell, who is, since the retirement of Dr. Louise Manny, the founder of the Festival, the director of the event. She was busy, but a woman whom I inferred to be her daughter told us that the Festival was held at the town hall, that there was to be a children's informal concert that afternoon and a concert at eight Tuesday evening, with the more formal children's concert on Wednesday and the final concert Wednesday evening. She was enthusiastic about the previous evening's concert. "I was over there last night," she said. "It was really good. There was a family there, the youngest member was five years old and the oldest was fourteen. They were really good."

THE NEWCASTLE TOWN HALL is a relatively new building, of light colored stone, square and austere in the style of the fifties. The auditorium is a large room with a proscenium stage at one end and room for about three hundred folding chairs, which, for the concert, are arranged on either side of a wide center aisle. There is also an aisle across the back, with another row of chairs against the back wall. The left-hand wall is mostly glass, with two doors opening onto a walled-in patio. The stage is decorated with full-size cut trees of various kinds to simulate a forest. In the center is a stump with, imbedded in it, a bucksaw and a double-bladed axe; on either side of the stage are brightly-coloured, rather more than life-size, paintings of a logging-camp cook ringing a triangle on the left and a bearded lumberman toting an axe on the right. Distributed among the trees are a number of folding chairs. To the left of these are, in order, an electric organ console, a mammoth speaker-amplifier combination like those used by rock bands – the last advertisement I've seen for one was for a model called "The Exterminator" – and an upright piano. As we arrive the organ is being operated by a young man performing a pretty competent (except that the bass is turned up so high that the glass in my glasses frames rattles) version of "The Age of Aquarius" from the show Hair.

The audience, on the whole, arrives on time. Though a few drift in between songs later, the room is pretty nearly full as the show begins. There is a sprinkling of children, ranging in age from two to ten or twelve; almost all of the rest of the audience is composed of people who look <sup>45</sup> or <sup>50</sup> or older. They

are dressed neatly but not, generally, formally; for the men the standard costume is a light sport shirt and slacks; about a quarter, perhaps less, wear sport coats. There are almost no ties. The women – most of them plump and matronly, or perhaps maternal – wear print dresses decently to the bottom of the knee. What is so surprising to one used to city crowds is the individuality of the faces here; no one looks very much like anyone else. Perhaps this is a function of age; most people in city crowds seems to be between the ages of twenty-one and forty; and perhaps character has not succeeded yet in etching itself into the lines of the face. Or perhaps it has something to do with the availability of medical and dietary sufficiency during childhood; a face with two or three teeth missing generally has more "character" than one that has visited the orthodontist regularly since the age of five (though the face may not be as comfortable to wear). Another surprise is the noise as the audience enters; everyone knows and speaks to someone else. Most have been there the night before, and they discuss what is likely to be sung, and by whom, this evening. There are mimeographed programs in evidence, but only a few; they have either run out or simply failed to distribute them.

The young man at the organ finishes and exits, whereupon a lady seats herself at the piano and strikes up "O Canada" in the stiff style reserved for public functions. After a local functionary's very graceful speech of gratitude and tribute to Dr. Manny, Alex Milson, the master of ceremonies for all the concerts this year, announces that the Percy Aubey family wants to play first so that they can leave and go down to Chatham to take in the exhibition there. They play two bluegrass tunes, sounding slightly reminiscent of Flatt and Scruggs. The audience has not quite settled yet but the response from a number of points in the hall is enthusiastic. As the Aubey's leave, Milson calls up a number of people who come and take places on the stage to wait their turn to perform. During the evening, whenever the stage empties, another three or four people are called up; that they come up from the audience and, when their song is done, return to their seats in the audience, gives the festival quite a communal atmosphere. Presently a fiftyish man, Nicholas Underhill, comes forward to sing the evening's first genuine Miramichi song. In a halting and unsure voice, he begins an a capella celebration of the people who live around tide-head. The audience, inattentive at first, gradually subsides and his voice gains sureness until, in the middle of a stanza, he forgets the words. A long pause ensues; he begins again, then stops. He stands straight, hands folded, before the silent microphone, thinking. From the back row, along the wall, a friendly voice calls, "Okay, keep her rollin! Keep on!" He remembers, suddenly, the words; goes back a couple of stanzas and starts again. The audience is with him now; he finishes:

You want a song for the Festival,  
I hope this fills the bill;  
I live three miles beyond tide-head,  
I'm Nicholas Underhill.

Applause is warm, and the evening is underway. After this, most of the evening is composed of songs sung without accompaniment by older men. There are all sorts of songs, of course; lamentations and love songs and come-all-ye's, lumbering songs and satire. But the songs that you instinctively feel belong at the Festival all have certain things in common; their melodies are derivative and uninteresting on the whole, and the voices of the performers fall quite a lot short of professional musicianship. But both performers and audience value the songs not for their musical value but for their stories and their sentiments and for the sheer joy of singing and listening. The joy is most evident when someone like Paul Kingston comes forward; an old, old man, no longer strong, carrying a three-foot birchbark moose call like a weapon. He sits to sing, with the moose call ominously on his lap; beginning "The Rosy Banks of Green" he waits an opportune moment, and, with a Herculean effort and the timing of a master comedian, blasts the audience back into their seat with his horn. By the time he throws the last three or four words of the song away in the traditional Miramichi manner, the audience is roaring with

laughter and can't hear the end anyway.

Most of the music is traditional Miramichi balladry; some is Irish ("Kevin Barrie") or English ("The Four Marys," beautifully sung by Marie Hare) folk music and some is French. Since Mrs. Mitchell is in charge, I am told, there is more French. I don't know whether it is traditional, but French songs are sung with the sort of nasal intonation that an Almeda Riddle or Jean Ritchie might use to sing an Appalachian folk song. There is fiddle-playing and step-dancing, though less than one might expect. I can't help wondering if the step-dancers haven't mostly aged too much for that sort of exertion. There is comedy: an old man, G. William Elder, come all the way from Sussex, sings:

So boys, keep away  
From the girls, I say,  
And give them plenty of room;  
For when you're wed  
They'll bang on your head  
With the bald-headed end of the broom.

During the evening, thirty or thirty-five songs are sung, mostly by people who know the songs because they love them and sing them because they enjoy singing. There are others, of course; women singing because they fancy themselves artistes, the professional condescender come back from Ontario night club success to demonstrate his superiority by dispensing magisterial compliments and dribbling out samplings of the songs that wow them in Upper Canada.

As the evening proceeds, an interesting fact becomes clear – no one who sings a genuine Miramichi song is much under fifty years old; many of the artists, and most of the good ones, are a good deal older than that. Younger people play bluegrass or hillbilly or commercial "folk" songs – all, presumably, heard on the radio or the television rather than in the kitchen. And in any case there are few younger people either performing or in the audience. Another fact of some interest is that the audience is almost completely composed of local people. In spite of the widespread publicity and the importance of the Festival, almost no one has come from farther than the borders of New Brunswick, very few from farther than Chatham. There is no way of knowing how many might have come – as one family did, on Wednesday, from Maryland – if advance publicity had been at all specific about times and places, or if Newcastle itself had, instead of ignoring it, pasted up posters and flown banners as they do at the Shediack Lobster Festival, an event of much less intrinsic importance than the Folk Song Festival. On the other hand, one wonders what the result might be of turning the Festival into a mini-Newport, dominated by souvenir dealers, bluegrass, hillbilly, urban folk and pop music, refreshment stands, and so forth. Most of the artists who perform do so, it seems clear, for their friends; I can't imagine them doing it for an audience of thousands of Upper Canadians and Americans – nor can I imagine that audience sitting through all the stanzas of "The Lost Babes of Halifax" without demanding that it be livened up with dancing, slide projections or at least a male chorus. A few years ago, I am told, Pete Seeger offered to appear at the Festival; Dr. Manny turned him down on the grounds that the Festival was limited to nonprofessional performers. In the short run, this is clearly a mistake; Seeger himself would hardly change the nature of the Festival. But in the long run, it is the only alternative; the people who would come to hear Seeger and the inevitable other professionals in succeeding years would certainly do for the Festival what radio and television have done for the generation raised on them; made them incapable of doing more than giggle when asked to sing.

The question remains, however, whether there is any point in thinking about the long run in the case of the Miramichi Folk Song Festival, whether the growing tightness of a culture where the CBC pipes Ed

Sullivan and Jimmy Rogers into the Miramichi has not already made the maintaining of this tradition impossible by dramatizing the difference in musicianship between Nicholas Underhill and the artists and singers seen nightly in the little black box. Some sort of answer to the questions might be found in what happened at the children's concert Tuesday afternoon. The memory comes back at various times during the evening, particularly when, during intermission, a little girl perhaps three or four years old sings, with evident sincerity, part of a simpleminded, saccharinely sentimental country and western song.

THE AFTERNOON BEGINS with a wait outside the auditorium in the rain and then another, longer wait inside the lobby before, at last, the doors are opened. As we enter, a man in a neat dark blue suit, white shirt and conservative blue tie says to the probably <sup>45</sup> people present, "Now if you'll sit in just the first couple of rows or so, so the janitor don't have too much work to clean up tonight before the show . . . and don't leave any papers or cups or anything around." When we are seated the man in the suit, who turns out to be Alex Milson, the master of ceremonies, leans against a table rather than going up on stage ("as long as we're being informal"), opens his guitar case, and begins the program by singing "This Land is My Land." He sings the Canadian version, of course:

From Bonavista to the Vancouver Island,  
From the Arctic Circle to the great lake waters,  
This land was made for you and me.

Milson chords along behind himself with a flat pick. He is an adequate guitarist, little more, with a pleasant, slightly rough voice.

Finished, he asks for volunteers from the audience to sing a song. The audience, composed of three or four older people, twenty-five or so children, and some visitors, shifts uncomfortably. The row of girls in front giggles. "Now just come on up and sing, no need to be frightened, now." A long pause. Milson sings "Do What You Do Do Well" and tries again. "Anyone else? Any of you older people want to come up and sing a song?" A graying man at the end of the second row demurs: "Well, yes, I've got a song, but I'll sing that later." Milson sings Tom Paxton's "A Lesson Too Late For the Learning." The man again refuses: "Well, you're just gettin' warmed up. I've got a really cold song. About young Charlotte. They ain't nothin' colder'n that. But you just keep the show goin' on now, you just keep 'er rollin'. I'll sing that a little later. One of you girls there, you just go on up and sing or dance or recite a story." Giggles again from the front row. Milson tries again, and sings "Nova Scotia Farewell" and Ian Tyson's "Four Strong Winds." At length an elderly man rises. "I can't sing at all, Maybe if some of these young folks hear somebody who can't sing at all try, maybe they'll try." He comes forward. "You just give me a note now and then on that thing," he says to Milson.

"No, I don't know that song, and I don't think my playing would suit the way you sing." Milson sits down. "You just go on ahead."

Standing quite straight, in a quavering but controlled voice, he sings "Only A Bird in a Gilded Cage." disappointing these visitors who had hoped to hear at last a genuine Miramichi ballad. The audience applauds enthusiastically but falls silent when Milson again asks for volunteers.

During this song Mrs. Mitchell arrives, a short, stout woman in a maroon print dress. She walks across the floor as the song ends and opens the door onto the patio, remarking that it is certainly warm in the auditorium. Remembering that a cold song is in store, Milson calls on volunteers again. The first man rises, walks to the front, and announces that Jack Riley from PEI ("You probably know we don't think

much of PEI around here," he says. "Call 'em pee-eye-ers. But Jack Riley was all right") had taught him the song. He leans on the stage and in a pure but shaky tenor which smooths out and gains power as he proceeds, sings "Young Charlotte." A short man in a gray shirt and white slacks – with red socks glowing beneath the cuffs – he follows the words on two often-creased pieces of white notebook paper. At one point, at the words, "stepped into the sleigh," he loses his place and spends five or ten seconds searching among the four pages of writing. Finding it with visible satisfaction, he looks up and says "they're in the sleigh now" and continues. As the song goes on he leans his hip on a table and his voice becomes even surer. He finishes with the characteristic throwing away of the last few words and receives the applause – quite enthusiastic, especially from the few visitors – with astonishing grace, as one used to applause.

Later, finally, some young people do sing: a trio of girls, ten to thirteen years old, perhaps, manages to gasp out, between giggles, a version of "If I Had A Hammer" – in, incidentally, Peter, Paul and Mary's arrangement, which is as far beyond their capabilities as the sextet from Lucia di Lammermoor – and one girl sings "Where Have All the Flowers Gone?" The best moment of the afternoon occurs when Mrs. Mitchell manages to get the audience to join in on "Alouette."

The afternoon ends with Milson singing three or four Newfoundland folk songs, explaining that "they're big in Ontario this year," and his own song about the moon landing. He concludes with "So Long, It's Been Good To Know You." As we spill out into the rainy Newcastle town square, under the baleful stare of Lord Beaverbrook, it occurs to me that in five or ten years there may well be no Miramichi Folk Song Festival, and that perhaps the most unquestionably beneficial contribution Beaverbrook ever made to the Maritimes was to suggest to Louise Manny that she go out and collect some folk songs. The wood pulp smell is strong in the damp air; the wind has shifted.