

The ‘Lost Voices’ of Maud Karpeles’ ‘Folksongs from Newfoundland’

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In September 1929, Maud Karpeles of the English Folk Dance and Song Society arrived in Newfoundland for the first of two pioneering expeditions. A disciple of Cecil Sharp and friend of Ralph Vaughan Williams, Karpeles was a central figure in the British folk revival and later co-founder of the International Folk Music Council. She had initially planned to visit the island with Sharp as early as 1918, however that trip was cancelled due to funding concerns and Sharp’s untimely death foiled similar plans seven years later. Undaunted, she undertook the challenge alone, notating more than 200 tunes from singers in forty outport communities in one of the earliest Newfoundland folksong expeditions of its kind.

Focusing her efforts on the East and South Coasts of Newfoundland (the former in 1929, the latter in 1930), Karpeles covered a remarkably wide area in a relatively short period. It was an arduous and remarkably courageous journey in many respects. With few paved roads in rural Newfoundland at the time, much of her travel was undertaken by small boat or rail. In some instances she travelled on foot, manuscript paper and pencil in hand, from one community to another. She was supported by Newfoundlanders such as Frederick Emerson, a cultured lawyer with an aptitude for music, yet much of the time she travelled alone in what must have surely been a bold new adventure for the 43-year old Londoner. At various times she found herself lost at sea on a foggy night, stranded in a roadside ditch after narrowly avoiding a wayward cow, seasick on a tumultuous ferry crossing, and all the while dodging the black flies that appeared drawn to her like a magnet at every turn. The unprecedented sight of a lone female song collector wandering door to door gave rise to no shortage of explanations to account for the sudden and unexpected appearance of the mysterious visitor. In some communities she was mistaken for a nurse, in others a German spy, while in the community of Stock Cove, she received a rather unexpected inquiry of a personal nature:

They are all expecting me to find a young man and settle down here, and one young man even got to the length of asking me if I had a boy in King’s Cove. I felt that was the time to give some indication of my age. (Karpeles, 1929)

While not all Newfoundlanders welcomed her with the enthusiasm of the young man from Stock Cove, Karpeles met with an unusually hospitable reception most everywhere she went, prompting her to remark that she had not ever experienced kinder or friendlier people. (Karpeles, 1971) To her credit, she responded in kind, returning to visit socially with several of her 1929 informants the following year and forming lifelong friendships with the Emersons in St. John’s.

Not unlike her predecessors in the British folk revival, Karpeles’ criteria for judging the “authenticity” of folk songs were selective and included, among other things, age, anonymity, style, and oral transmission. Ancient songs with British roots were especially valued, while locally composed songs of recent origin and those previously appearing in print were generally not notated at all. In this sense, flawed expectations of the island’s isolation resulted in continual disappointment as singer after singer regaled her with heartfelt renditions of “When You and I Were Young, Maggie,” “The Letter Edged in Black,” and other popular songs of the era that she rejected on the grounds that they were already in print. (Ibid., p. 18) Initially distraught by what she perceived to be a lack of “authentic” folk songs during the early stages of her collecting, she persevered and, by the end of her 1929 expedition, became increasingly convinced that her efforts had been worthwhile. As she remarked in her diaries, “Mr. Emerson is delighted with

them [my tunes], and I realize more than I did what a very high standard they are.” (Karpeles, 1929) The 1930 expedition, building on the momentum of the previous year’s work, continued to yield fresh discoveries on the island’s South Coast, including the first notated version of the iconic “She’s Like the Swallow” from John Hunt of Dunville, Placentia Bay (of which she would later remark that “my life would have been worthwhile if collecting that was all that I had done.”) (Karpeles, as quoted in *The Times*, London, 2 October 1977)

Karpeles’ findings were disseminated in stages. In October 1929, she lectured on her first expedition at Newfoundland’s Memorial University College, during which Emerson sang several of the songs and accompanied himself on the piano with arrangements he had created for the occasion. Five years later, several of the songs (including “She’s Like the Swallow”) were arranged for voice and piano by Vaughan Williams and published by Oxford University Press.ⁱⁱ It was not until 1971, however, that a more extensive collection of Karpeles’ work in Newfoundland was published by Faber and Faber of London, containing close to one hundred songs and ballads (many of which appear in multiple musical variants).ⁱⁱⁱ

Remarkably, more than fifty of the tunes that Karpeles notated in Newfoundland remain unpublished and virtually unknown. Through that process of selective omission, more than a dozen Newfoundland singers and at least two communities were excluded from the published collection altogether (in effect, “written out” of the recorded history of Newfoundland folk song).^{iv} This paper, a first step toward a new scholarly edition of Karpeles’ unpublished song material, seeks to rediscover these “lost voices” by examining selected songs from her manuscript transcriptions.^v By exploring factors that informed her selective process and considering aspects of text, music, performance practice and historical context, I hope to demonstrate that the unpublished songs are in fact, vital to achieving a comprehensive assessment of Karpeles’ work. Both historically and geographically, Newfoundland was situated at the epicenter of the Anglo-Celtic folk revival and consideration of the totality of Karpeles’ field work affords us a wider window into the trans-Atlantic flow of culture and ideas linking musical traditions on both continents. The comparative study of both published and unpublished variants likewise offers the potential of shedding new light on the processes of oral transmission that shaped the cultural practices of rural Newfoundland communities in the early twentieth century.

The unpublished song manuscripts may be grouped into three broad categories. In the first are a small number of songs that were published in edited or slightly abridged form. In most cases, the manuscript versions contain alternate endings not included in the published collection (including multiple endings of the Child ballads “Lord Bateman” and “Willie O Winsbury,” among others), while the manuscript versions of the dances “Kitty’s Rambles” and “The Self” are notated with detailed dance instructions not found anywhere else. The omitted material, although perhaps viewed by Karpeles as unwieldy for publication purposes, offers revealing clues into the performance practices of the folk singers and dancers of the period and has much to offer for performers and scholars of today. Subtle modifications and deletions notwithstanding, all of the songs in this category appear in the published collection with tune and text intact.

A second, much larger, category comprises more than twenty unpublished variants of songs that were recorded in the published collection from alternate informants. In some cases the omissions appear driven by a practical desire to avoid redundancy in instances where multiple versions of the same tune (or closely comparable tunes) were recorded with identical or near identical texts. This is especially evident in instances where similar versions of a given song

were collected in the same community (or nearby communities), often with family ties linking the various informants. In many cases, however, the situation is far more complex than that. A significant number of unpublished variants contain alternate melodies and texts to the published versions and at this stage Karpeles appears to have made some crucial editorial decisions. The evaluative criteria she considered in making such decisions extended well beyond subjective assessments of musical and textual merit (although such considerations undoubtedly played a role) and included practical aspects such as the level of difficulty she experienced in notating songs from certain informants, as well as her own aesthetic preferences and ideological biases. A compelling argument can be made, however, that contrasting variants form a web of interrelated texts that lose valuable context and meaning when treated in isolation from one another. In such cases, the study of musical and textual comparisons between variants can tell us much about how folk songs evolve through conscious and unconscious processes of oral tradition, as well as how local cultural practices can shape a shared body of repertoire. Only through careful comparison of both published and unpublished variants can these processes be fully explored.

A prime example of this type of variant may be observed in the multiple versions of a song known variously as "The Press Gang," "The Merchant's Daughter," and "The Shepherd." All begin with virtually identical verse in which the daughter of a London merchant rejects the advances of wealthy suitors in favour of her true love, a young man of modest means. Karpeles published just one of four versions she collected in Newfoundland, a rendition sung by William Malloy at St. Shotts, St. Mary's Bay, during her second expedition in August 1930. In Malloy's version, the girl's father rejects her true love William, a sailor, however his plans are foiled when the daughter (disguised as a sailor), boards the vessel and slips undetected into her lover's quarters. Only later is her identity revealed, at which time the happy couple gets married on board and sails off to England in matrimonial bliss. The melody captures well the light-hearted sentiments of the text – simple, lively, and emphatically triadic. An unpublished variant collected from Bennett Barnes of West Champneys, Trinity Bay the previous year, tells essentially the same story with a similarly lively and unambiguously tonal melody.

Fundamentally different in storyline are two unpublished variants from informants on the island's South Coast. In a version collected from Joseph Jackman in the remote community of Grole, Hermitage Bay, the plot unfolds with ominous intent as the father swears his unequivocal vengeance in Verse Two: "Willie's your true love, he'll no more cross the sea; for tomorrow before him his butcher I'll be." (Karpeles, Manuscript Text Transcription, No. 4853, "The Merchant's Daughter") As with the Malloy and Barnes versions, the daughter dresses as a sailor to attempt to board her lover's vessel, however in Jackman's rendition the plot turns to one of tragic irony. The father pulls out a dagger and stabs the person he believes to be Willie, only to belatedly discover (in a manner vaguely reminiscent of Verdi's *Rigoletto*) that the deceased is actually his own daughter in disguise.

A similarly tragic version of events unfolds in a version collected from one of Karpeles' most prolific informants, Mary Mitchell of Marystown, Placentia Bay. As recorded in her diaries, "She [Mrs. Mitchell] knows any amount of songs, but mostly not traditional. She literally poured them out."^{vi} (Karpeles, 1930) Five of these appear in the published collection, suggesting that she held Mitchell's repertoire in particular esteem. In Mitchell's unpublished rendition of "The Shepherd," the daughter's true love is a shepherd (not a sailor) and, unlike the bitter irony of Jackman's version of events, it is the young shepherd (not the daughter) who dies at the hand of the girl's father. In comparison to the other versions, Mitchell's song text is remarkably concise as the father exacts his revenge unhesitatingly in Verse Two: "Her father came to hear it, his

passion grew hot, With a loaded pistol the young shepherd he shot. ”^{vii} (Karpeles, Manuscript Text Transcription No. 4825, “The Shepherd”)

Why then did Karpeles neglect to publish Mitchell’s tragic rendition of “The Shepherd”? It is possible that perceived imperfections in the text played a role (indeed Karpeles was acutely aware of textual matters and, in her 1934 collection, freely modified the texts of her informants to correct what she viewed as incongruities in the verses). In that sense, she may have been somewhat flummoxed by the unorthodox wording of Verse Two. It is also conceivable that, given the proportionally large number of songs by this informant in the published collection, she may have felt that the inclusion further material by Mitchell was unwarranted. A further (and perhaps more plausible) explanation has to do with certain ambiguities of notation in recording Mitchell’s performance. As noted in her manuscript transcription, certain pitches were occasionally (though not always) sung sharp and two other measures (labeled (a) and (b) in the manuscript) were sung with subtle variations in some verses. These ambiguities offer revealing clues into Mitchell’s singing style, yet they may have been enough to persuade Karpeles that she had not notated the tune with sufficient precision to merit publication. Musically, the plaintive melody is arguably the most memorable of the four versions and the modal treatment heightens the tragic irony with an intensity conspicuously absent in Jackman’s version. Considered collectively with the other variants, it presents a remarkably rich and varied picture of the oral history of the song in Newfoundland that contrasts sharply to the one-dimensional view expressed in the lone published rendition. While singers in Trinity Bay and the Avalon Peninsula emphasized the song’s comic elements in lively, tonal settings, Mitchell’s version lends an introspective quality perfectly suited to the tragic version of events transmitted among singers on the South Coast of the island.

Songs omitted from the published collection entirely form our final category for consideration. These range from popular broadside ballads to exceedingly rare songs scarcely notated anywhere else in the world. Given Karpeles’ stated preference for “authentic” folk songs that had not yet appeared in print, the omission of previously published broadside ballads is hardly surprising, yet in this respect one finds glaring inconsistencies. Songs previously printed in popular songsters and the like were generally excluded from consideration, yet broadside ballads recorded from oral tradition by other collectors were considered acceptable while the ballads enumerated in Child’s nineteenth-century publications were revered. Karpeles was not alone in adopting these selective criteria, yet while her judgments no doubt seemed logical and coherent to her, they resulted in the omission of a number of Newfoundland songs of historical significance. Her unpublished transcription of “Sailor in the North Countree,” collected from George Dover of Beaubois, Placentia Bay, is one of only a handful of notated versions in existence and the only recorded instance outside of England. In the case of songs such as the “Banks of Brandy Wine,” Karpeles’ Newfoundland manuscript appears to be the first version with text and music found anywhere in the world (pre-dating by more than three decades a rendition later collected by Helen Creighton in Nova Scotia).^{viii}

For purposes of illustration, we turn to Karpeles’ unpublished transcription of “The Sheffield Apprentice,” a popular broadside ballad that she collected from Jane Hall of North River near the end of her first Newfoundland expedition on October 19, 1929. The tiny Conception Bay town of North River yielded the richest harvest of folk songs of any of the Newfoundland communities she visited, an imposing tally of more than thirty tunes comprising nearly 20% of her entire published collection. If one accepts Karpeles self-description as a “prospector” in search of undiscovered folk song treasures, in North River she had struck a gold mine. Much of this

mammoth haul stemmed from the contributions of members of the Hall, McCabe, and Snow families, many of whom were accomplished singers with large repertoires of songs. Following in the wake of earlier disappointments, Karpeles was ecstatic about the prospects for her North River collecting, describing the community as "a real hot-bed of singers."^{xix} (Karpeles, 1929)

The "Sheffield Apprentice" had long existed in multiple published collections ranging from textual versions in nineteenth-century songsters to a variety of late nineteenth and early twentieth century musical transcriptions from the British Isles and North America (included among them multiple versions collected by Sharp in England and Appalachia and an English version collected by Vaughan Williams in 1903).^x Three decades after Karpeles, Kenneth Peacock and MacEdward Leach recorded contrasting versions of their own from informants in Western Newfoundland and Coastal Labrador, respectively.^{xi} With subtle textual differences, the basic plot has remained essentially unchanged. A young man from Sheffield (variably of low or middle class background, depending on the informant), leaves his employer in London to work for a lady in Holland (or, in some renditions, Ireland). The lady proposes marriage, but the young man (in love with her chamber maid instead), rejects her, after which she surreptitiously plants a gold ring in his pocket and has him arrested as a thief.

Why then, would Karpeles discard a recognized song text notated from a musical family of informants in a culturally rich community? The fact that multiple broadside versions existed may have been a consideration, yet this alone seems an unlikely reason for exclusion given that it had been collected from oral tradition by Vaughan Williams, Sharp and others (and, in that sense, legitimized from her perspective as "authentic" folk song material). Once again, a possible reason stems from certain ambiguities of notation that arose from subtle variations to the tune that Hall sang upon repeating each stanza. In the second measure, for example, she observed that the pitch "C" was "sometimes sung sharp as in the last phrase, but more often natural;" (Karpeles, Manuscript Tune Transcription No. 5217, "Sheffield Apprentice") in measures 6 and 10, she detected subtle variance in both rhythm and pitch, while at measures 7 and 11, she noted that the pitch was "sung between B-natural and B-flat." (Ibid.) The song's omission is unfortunate in that Hall's spirited rendition contrasts sharply to the plaintive versions collected by Peacock and Leach decades later. As the earliest recorded instance of the song in Newfoundland, Hall's version is historically significant and, at the same time, a revealing window into the performance practices of the North River singers.^{xii}

Perhaps one of the most compelling specimens of song collecting from Karpeles' Newfoundland expeditions is an unpublished transcription of the Irish love song "Loch Erin's Sweet Riverside," as sung by John Davis of Riverhead, St. Mary's Bay, on July 28, 1930. According to the Roud Index of English language folksongs, there is but one recorded instance of the song in existence, an audio recording made by Edith Fowke from a Quebec informant in 1967.^{xiii} This would make the Newfoundland version the first (and possibly only) notated instance of the song with text and music. The singer, John Davis, is the quintessential example of a "lost voice" in the Newfoundland folk song literature. This is from all accounts, the only song he performed for Karpeles and his name is therefore entirely absent from the published collection. Even her field diaries, typically awash with descriptive commentary on her informants, contain no reference to him other than cursory mention of that fact that on the night of July 27 she stayed overnight in the Davis home.^{xiv} (Karpeles, 1930) The omission, while somewhat surprising, was by no means unprecedented as John Hunt, the celebrated informant who gave her "She's Like the Swallow," receives no mention in the diaries either.

While notated versions of the song are exceedingly rare and this musical version likely unique, a localized adaptation of the text of was widely transmitted through oral tradition, where newly added local references resonated with singers across Newfoundland and Labrador. This adaptation became known as the “Blooming Bright Star of Belle Isle,” an iconic Newfoundland song notated by Greenleaf, Peacock, and Leach (albeit with different tunes in each instance).^{xv} The popular version collected by Peacock spawned an array of musical settings, including a well-known choral arrangement by Godfrey Ridout, while the text was later fitted with a new tune and recorded by folk/rock legend Bob Dylan on his 1970 “Self Portrait” album.^{xvi} From its obscure roots, the song had made the seemingly unlikely journey from outport anthem to the mainstream of North American popular culture. This previously unknown version of “Loch Erin’s Sweet Riverside” is the final piece of the puzzle, confirming beyond doubt that the “Blooming Bright Star of Belle Isle” did in fact originate as a Newfoundland traditional song of Irish heritage.^{xvii} Arguably one of the most lyrical songs that Karpeles collected in Newfoundland, the haunting modal melody that Davis sang for her is heightened by persistent fermatas and varied repetition with each stanza.

Karpeles’s Newfoundland song quest was, by any objective measure, a resounding success. It is true that she was narrowly selective in the repertoire she notated from her informants and, with the hindsight of historical perspective, it is all too easy to lament her neglect of locally composed popular songs and easier still to dismiss her efforts as colonialist and ethno-centric. Yet collecting locally composed material of recent origin was never her stated intent and, in that sense, judging her accomplishments on that basis alone is rather like criticizing a Beethoven scholar for neglecting the works of Brahms. When she left Newfoundland in 1930, her goal of documenting a living tradition of Anglo-Celtic folk songs and ballads on the island had been realized, leaving behind an imposing legacy that would lay the foundation for future generations of collectors, singers, scholars, and composers. Through careful consideration of the more than forty unpublished song manuscripts, we are able to achieve a fuller appreciation of the breadth and impact of the repertoire she collected, the rich and varied singing traditions of the communities she visited, and the creative voices of the Newfoundlanders who brought those traditions to life.

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ⁱⁱ Additional piano arrangements were created by Clive Carey, Hubert J. Foss, and Michael Mullinar, and published (with those of Vaughan Williams) in Karpeles, coll. and ed. , *Folk Songs from Newfoundland* (London: Oxford University Press, 1934).

ⁱⁱⁱ Karpeles, coll. and ed. , *Folksongs from Newfoundland* (London: Faber and Faber, 1971).

^{iv} According to Karpeles's archival manuscripts, she collected (but did not publish) songs from the following Newfoundland informants: Minnie Penny (Burin), Thomas Leo Ghaney (Colliers), Bridget Lewis (Conception Harbour), Garret Barry (Marystown), Jane Hall (North River), Rose Snow (North River), John Davis (Riverhead), Larry Ryan (Riverhead), Sarah Lundrigan (Salmonier), Maggie Sutton (Trepassey), Bennett Barnes (West Champneys), and Nellie Barnes (West Champneys). No renditions from informants in Salmonier or West Champneys appear in the published collection.

^v The transcriptions are part of an exhaustive compendium of manuscripts, diaries, and correspondence housed in the Memorial University Folklore and Language Archive Maud Karpeles Collection.

^{vi} Karpeles, Field Diary entry, 12 July 1930.

^{vii} Karpeles, Manuscript Text Transcription No. 4825, "The Shepherd. "

^{viii} Roud Folk Song Index, Vaughan Williams Memorial Library, English Folk Dance and Song Society. (<http://library.efdss.org>)

^{ix} Karpeles, Field Diaries, 16 October 1929.

^x Roud Folk Song Index.

^{xi} See Peacock, *Songs of the Newfoundland Outports*, Vol. 3, p. 709; and Leach, *Songs and Folk Ballads & Songs of the Lower Labrador Coast*, p. 316.

^{xii} Details of performance practice are conspicuously absent in the published songs rendered by North River informants.

^{xiii} Roud Folk Song Index.

^{xiv} Karpeles, Field Diaries, 27 July 1930.

^{xv} The tune collected and published by Peacock (as sung by Michael Aylward of King's Cove in July 1952), was later reprinted in Edith Fowke's *Penguin Book of Canadian Folk Songs* (1973).

^{xvi} <http://www.bobdylan.com>

^{xvii} Peacock (1965) once remarked that the flowery prose style exhibited all the hallmarks of a centuries-old song of Old World origin, however in the absence of conclusive proof his remarks remained speculative.