

A Crowd of Jolly Trappers: Labrador Trapping Songs

Tim Borlase

Memorial University of Newfoundland, Labrador Institute
Newfoundland and Labrador, Canada

In the middle decades of the 20th century, Douglas Best of Mud Lake, alone on a trapline and stretched out on a tiny bunk inside a log tilt that measured about two metres by two metres and one metre high, while reminiscing about his friends weeks away by snowshoe, sang these words to himself:

The crowd of jolly trappers, we are leaving one and all,
The first hard work is started on the portage Muskrat Falls,
And getting in our canoes boys, oh it seems so fine,
Going up Grand River with our pole and tracking line. (Best, as cited in Borlase, 1993, p. 126)

What is so remarkable about this song and the many others composed in such isolation is that there was anyone jolly at all. On the great Labrador peninsula, men would leave their wives and families from far flung isolated homesteads along Labrador's coast and major inland waterway Lake Melville to travel hundreds of miles to the height of land to trap and fur. Douglas Best refers in his first verse to the fall trip lasting from September to just before Christmas. The jolliness of the trappers together would last only a few days. They would reach major obstacles like the turbulent and fast Muskrat Falls and help each other line their canoes along the shore, amid the swirling, boiling rapids and pole upstream. Days of paddling rolled into days of walking with all their possessions for three months on their backs.

Now up the river in canoe every man is found,
Feeling very jolly for to reach his trapping ground.
And setting out our traps we work from early until late.
And every man a'wishing that the fur is taking bait. (Best, as cited in Borlase, 1993, p. 126)

Jolly? Perhaps. Exhausted for sure. The trapper's path consisted of 200-300 traps set in a zig zag fashion about a half kilometre apart. It took about three days to snowshoe the length of the path which was 100-150 kilometres long with tilts and tents approximately a half day's walk from each other. It was here at the end of a very long, arduous day which often began at 4am that songs were composed. Many trappers were illiterate. They went over and over the words and tune in their head as they laid in their bunk stoking the fire and trying to keep warm.

Just fresh untrodden snow was there before them,
And snowshoe tracks was all that lay behind,
Alone they tramped the long and lonely traplines
And knew content and ease and peace of mind.

Alone they lay beside their glowing campfires,
Read and reread the writing on a can,
And slept and woke and fed their fires and dreamed,
Of home, comfort and summer in the land. (Pardy, as cited in Borlase, 1993, p. 116)

Established traplines were passed on from generation to generation. Some young men started their own trapline as young as thirteen. Once a trapper reached his trapline, he was on his own unless he made an arrangement to meet a buddy every three weeks or so. Some years the price of fur was so low that it was hardly worthwhile to outfit, buy traps and gear,

to go trapping. The trading posts dealt in exchanges of goods for furs and oftentimes, a trapper would not know how much the post manager would be giving. A gun for example could take as many furs as were piled up on the floor beside it reaching the muzzle.

Henry John Williams, a man who was still winning dogteam races into his seventies, sings about the precarious business of trapping. In *Me Name is Walt Kippenhuck*, after failing at fishing he tries his hand at furring. At first he is optimistic, having heard that the animals are so plentiful that he can catch them in pairs. But at the end of the song reality has set in; the Devil's windmill brings to mind the sorcerer's apprentice.

Oh, we'll give up the fishery and try for the fur,
For everyone says it's a pretty good year,
The foxes is swarming, the same with the cats,
There's hundreds of minks and there's thousands of rats.

Oh, we set out our traps and we teeled our snares,
To load them down quick now we'll teel (bait) them in pairs,
We teeled by the marshes, the brooks and the bogs,
The best spurt we had was seventeen frogs.

All night long we'd pray and we'd fret,
While all the last day we'd swear and we'd sweat,
For the big mountain cat on the hilltop you'd go,
You'd then waddle down with nothing in tow.

Give us the white weasel and the flairy tail squirrels
A dozen apiece, we'll head back for the girls,
I made up my dozen with traps and my gun,
But poor Tommy Burden, he got only one.

Oh, planning life's journey needs courage and skill,
Not floundering around like the mighty big whale,
And all things planned right and it all goes well,
And it's only to work like the Devil's windmill. (Williams, as cited in Borlase, 1993, p. 46-47)

Heading back for the girls was a short respite. Christmas time was usually about two weeks long and then it was back to the trapline in frigid winter temperatures. On the second trip the trappers usually stayed until late April when the rivers broke up and they could return home by canoe.

In *Tishialuk Girls*, Charlie Lloyd pines for one of Sam Cove's daughters. Sam Cove ran the store in Tishialuk and was very aware of just how successful or unsuccessful each trapper was. Charlie Lloyd died before he could marry a Tishialuk girl, but the travelling dogteam driver, Jim Pardy, who delivered the mail, absconded with a Tishialuk girl by hiding her under a blanket surrounded by mail on his *komatik*.

Aunt Meg wants me to wed with her daughter,
Takes from me my heart's delight;
Give me a girl from down Tishialuk,
Shines in my eyes like the diamonds bright.

Tishialuk girls are neat and tidy,
Tishialuk girls they won't last long,
Tishialuk girls they will be useful,
When Sam Cove is dead and gone. (Lloyd, as cited in Borlase, 1993, p. 62)

The whirlwind which was the feasting and partying that went on over Christmas, as people travelled from dogteam from one homestead to another, is indicative of the last verse of *Tishialuk Girls* and *A Crowd of Jolly Trappers*. The partying inevitably involved singing and dancing. For example, the entire fourteen families who called Mulligan their home all knew Douglas Best's *A Crowd of Jolly Trappers*.

Made up this song on Monday evening,
Sung this song on Tuesday night (Lloyd, as cited in Borlase, 1993, p. 63)

As these songs were never recorded or written down, Drucilla Riche, of Rigolet, now in her eighties, was the only person alive who could remember *Tishialuk Girls*. But she could not recall the last two lines. In the tradition of the trapping song she ascribed it to her brother and located it on his trapline.

Made up this song to Ochre Brook,
Sung in remembrance of Charlie Lloyd (Riche, as cited in Borlase, 1993, p. 63)

The popularity of the trapping song continues at house parties and in sing-alongs. In another effort to keep this tradition alive, Northern Harmony, Happy Valley-Goose Bay's community choir, had twelve choral arrangements of Labrador folksongs commissioned by well-known Canadian composers Kenneth Bray, Nancy Telfer, Michael Snelgrove and Gary Ewer. Modern Labrador songwriters like Shirley Montague, Harry Martin and Gary Mitchell continue to write material in the tradition of the trapper.

Trapping songs are tied to the country, both in exclaiming its beauty, its loneliness and in ensuring trap line ownership by identifying other trappers and where they hunted in relation to the composer. The hauntingly beautiful *If I Had the Wings of an Eagle* connects the feeling of awe and longing.

If I had the wings of an eagle
I'd fly over mountains wide,
I'd fly to my lover's bosom
Way down in Gillard's Bight.
I'd light on my lover's bosom
And this I tell to you
I'd tell her of the dreary nights
I spent in Kenamu. (Borlase, 1993, p. 190-191)

The trapper's life was an honourable one. There were customary laws that were strictly obeyed. The trapper's life was so perilous and so risky, that if you left a trapline for two years, the trapline was no longer yours. But to protect the owner, traps could not be taken. The tilts continued to also belong to the former trapper who had an option to sell or burn them. If someone came on your grounds, you could hang the trap in a tree. If found a second time, you could "beat up" trap. *Tishialuk Girls*, *A Crowd of Jolly Trappers* and *Me Name is Walt Kippenhuck* all describe fellow trappers and where they are located. By singing these lyrics, trappers were assured of maintaining their control over their own trappers' path. Nowhere is this more obvious than in Judson Blake's *The Trapper's Alphabet*:

M is for Murdock who works day and night,
N is for Nath who hunts Gillard's Bight,
O is for Oswald who hunts down the bay.
P is for Percy who's only half way. (Blake, as cited in Borlase, 1993, p. 118)

So why is the retaining of these songs important? Trapping reached its peak in 1939, when there were 87 trappers around Lake Melville laying over 15,000 traps. Yet over sixty

years later, Labrador people still love these songs. Maybe it is their connection to the land and the feeling of a way of life that exists now only in people's memories. Lesley Pardy, a Cartwright trapper, says it more poetically than I can ever hope to in "Ode to Trappers":

A way of life that now is swiftly passing
And in a world for them grown cool and strange
There slowly fades away a breed of man,
Adrift and lost upon the winds of change. (Pardy, as cited in Borlase, 1993, p. 116)

But I think it is also the intimacy. In what other society are you invited to share the dying embers of a fire, in the closeness of the dark surrounded by miles and miles of drifting snow?

So now my song is ended, the truth to you I'll tell,
A trapper has a lonely life and that you all know well,
I think I'll boil the kettle, cheer the bogie with a junk,
I rhymed this into Apple Lake stretched out upon my bunk.
(Best, as cited in Borlase, 1993, p. 127)

Through all this adversity, Douglas Best, like the others before him, surely was a jolly trapper.

References

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