

## "God keep our land glorious and free:"

Metaphors for God, death, and "heavenly things" in some English language Canadian folk songs.

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"God keep our land, glorious and free" is the request made each time Canadians sing their national anthem. *The Ode to Newfoundland* offers up the prayer "God guard thee, God guard thee, God guard thee Newfoundland" (Mills and Peacock, 1958, p. 50). These are both blatantly open calls to God for protection within our country of Canada. In my research I have been looking at folk songs to see if our song literature has always been so open about God (and death and heavenly things), and how, if not, these topics have been addressed.

The research took me mostly to songs from Newfoundland, Nova Scotia, Ontario, Alberta, and British Columbia, and I discovered an interesting mixture of blatant and metaphorical references to God, death, and heaven.

By far the greatest number of songs making any type of reference to these topics come from the sea-faring tradition of the Atlantic coast - presumably because death is an ever present danger in the fishing and sailing industries. The next largest group of songs containing these types of references belongs to the cowboy genre. I can only surmise that this is either because of the inherent dangers of rounding up cattle and riding the range, or because of the long hours cowboys spend on their own, with time to contemplate death, God, and the possibility of a life hereafter.

God is represented by a variety of terms in twenty five (25) of the one hundred and four (104) songs in the research sample:

Providence	8
God	7
The (dear) Lord	3
Almighty (one)	3
Christ	2
Saviour (dear)	2
Him on High	1
King of Glory	1

Providence, meaning God or the Deity, was the most commonly used term, with the word God itself being the next most prolific. In the song *The August Gale (B)* we find the following prayer:

So let us pray for those away who on the sea must roam  
And guard them in their tiny craft and send them safe at home;  
And put your trust in **Providence** and trust to Him on high,  
To send these brave ones home again and fill our hearts with joy.  
(Lehr, 1985, pp. 10-11)

The song, *The Banks of Newfoundland* provides some insight into the dangers faced at sea which might lead the fishermen to put their trust in God:

At midnight when the sky is dark  
And heavy clouds do frown,  
It's then we stand great danger  
Of our craft being soon run down  
By some large greyhound of the deep  
That rushes madly by.  
It's then we trust our lives  
To kind **Providence** on high. (Fowke, 1967. pp. 58-59)

Here, the "large greyhound of the deep" refers to the trans-Atlantic steamships, which used to sail through the Newfoundland fishing grounds at night. Often, because the fishing boats were wooden, they could not be seen on the larger ship's radar, and visual sighting, especially in fog, would be unlikely. It was not uncommon for a fishing boat to be mowed down, with all hands lost, without the larger ship even knowing they had hit something. If a bump was felt, it was usually presumed to be a 'burgy bit' - a small piece of an iceberg.

Dangers, while perhaps, not quite so hazardous, also show up in the British Columbia material where we find a gill-net fisherman losing his equipment in *The Song of the Sockeye*:

Now along about dusk when you're starting to doze  
And you think you've got a good night's set,  
An engine will roar and you look out the door  
As some 'farmer' tows into your net. (Thomas, 1979, pp. 155-156)

"Farmer" is a somewhat derogatory term referring to a tugboat, many of which ply the waters of the Inside Passage on the BC coastline. While one can appreciate the annoyance of the fisherman, it is unlikely that the tugboat captain would be able to see the nets, especially at dusk. In this BC song we find no reference to prayer for help, just an insult thrown at the perpetrator of the deed!

On the other hand, in the BC folk song *The Skedaddler*, the down-and-out gold prospector notes that:

Yet tho' cleaned out and fizzled, I do not despair;  
There's a land far from this one - I soon shall be there.  
And if **Providence** leaves me my hands and my health  
The Skedaddler may yet win both honour and wealth.

(Thomas, 1979, pp. 50-51)

This is an interesting verse in that the "land far from this one" may be interpreted literally as leaving the declining gold rush in the Cariboo region and going to another country or province in search of work or gold. Or, it can be interpreted metaphorically to mean that the Skedaddler senses he is about to die and go to heaven. The next line would support this interpretation in that he is suggesting that, were God to grant him his health (and his hands), he might still live to make a name, and some money for himself.

The song sample produced only three metaphors for God: "Pilot Divine" in the *Airman's Prayer* (a poem rather than a song) found in the North Atlantic Aviation Museum in Gander, NF; "Head Boss" in the *Cowboy Prayer*, a poem by Kin Elkins, from the southern States (Thorp and Fife, 1966, p. 70); and "Judge of all judges" in the western Canadian folk song *Where the Great Peace River Flows* (Thomas, 1979, pp. 77-80). The latter, rather than a metaphor is really a literal interpretation of the Bible which notes in 2 Corinthians 5:10 "we must all appear before the judgement seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due him for the things done in the body, whether good or bad."

If research is successful when it proves your hypothesis to be right, or to be wrong, then my research has been successful. I was honestly expecting to find much more metaphorical masking of God in our folk song literature. I doubted that our song-makers of old would have so openly used the name of God, Christ, the Lord and the Saviour in their songs, although the prevalence of the word "Providence", which many may take to mean good fortune, rather than God, might have been used to avoid more blatant statements. Be that as it may, it would seem that our song-makers of old were not influenced or hindered by what we know today as 'political correctness'.

Having disproved my own hypothesis in terms of "God metaphors", I move on, undaunted, to death. This is a topic no one likes to talk about openly. Think of all the words you use, and have heard others use to avoid out and out saying "s/he's dead." Terms that come to mind are "passed on", or "perished", or "gone home", or, less reverently, "kicked the bucket", and "snuffed it."

There is no shortage of death accounts in our Canadian folk song literature, especially that of Newfoundland. In some instances, the song writer comes straight to the point: "when three busy workmen were by death stricken down" (*The Grand Falls Tragedy*, Lehr, 1985, pp. 81-82); "But his eldest son got drowned" (*The August Gale*, Lehr, 1985, pp. 9-10); "He was drowned on McClellan's drive" (*Jimmy Whelan*, Fowke and Seeger, 1965, pp. 124-125); "Among those mangled bodies a-floating down the gulf, 'Twas dead and bleeding on the bank was the foreman young Monroe" (*The Jam on Gary's Rock*, Lehr, 1985, pp. 102-103); "Thousands of people fell by fire", "Twenty-two men there did die" (*The Miramichi Fire*, Fowke and Johnson, 1967, pp. 192-194);

“Her heart was broke and her corpse lay cold” (*She’s Like the Swallow*, Fowke and Seeger, 1965, p. 147); “Three men lay frozen at her pumps, Six more in the cabin lay cold” (*The Wreck of the Union*, Lehr, 1985, pp. 190-191). “Poor creature she’s dead, and poor creature she’s gone” (Mills and Peacock, 1958, pp. 8-10) comes from the song *Tickle Cove Pond* and refers to the death of a horse which fell through the ice on a pond while hauling wood in the winter. We sense some kind of a caring attitude from this singer towards his horse, but a different attitude from the singer of the *Truck Driver’s Song* when, with feeling, he notes that “the dizzy bitch will hit the ditch and leave you cold and white” (Thomas, 1979, pp. 111-113). We may safely assume here that he is referring to a logging truck and not a woman. Lukey, of “Lukey’s Boat” fame, on the other hand is referring to a woman:

O, Lukey he looked ‘round and ‘round,  
 Aha, me b’ys!  
 O, Lukey he looked ‘round and ‘round,  
 “My wife is dead for the blinds are down!”  
 Aha! aha, me riddle-I-day!”  
 “Oh now” said Lukey, “I don’t care,  
 Aha, me b’ys!  
 “Oh now” said Lukey, “I don’t care,  
 I’ll get me another in the fall of the year”,  
 Aha! aha, me riddle-I-day.” (Mills and Peacock, 1958, pp. 28-29).

While Lukey seems to be taking death quite lightly, others take it more seriously and try to couch the topic in more gentle terms. Many examples can be found in Lehr’s (1985) book *Come and I Will Sing You*: “sleep ‘neath the clay” (*The Grand Falls Tragedy*, pp. 81-82); “sleeps beneath the deep” (*The August Gale (B)*, PP. 10-11); “met with a watery grave” (*The Excel (A)*, Lehr, pp. 58-59); “sank below in a watery grave” (*The Annie Young*, Lehr, pp. 4-5); “sank to rise no more” (*Aspell and Carter*, pp.7-8); “some brave lads were called away” (*The Blue Wave*, pp. 17-18); “called home by the Lord” (*The Annie Young*, pp. 4-5); “May the Lord have mercy on their souls, we’ll never see them more” (*The Schooner Mary Ann*, pp. 126-127). Not surprisingly, in the Newfoundland songs where drowning at sea is a common theme, meeting, or finding a ‘watery grave’ recurs quite frequently.

Other songwriters employ metaphors to cushion the pain and sadness of the subject of death. Life has been likened to an hourglass through which run the sands of time. Death, then, occurs when all the sand has run through: “I know their glass was run” (*The Wreck of the Union (B)*, Lehr, 1985, pp. 191-193); “His time has come, his glass was run” (*Bold Larkin*, Lehr, 1985, pp. 19-20); “But on the way returning home his glass of life was run” (*Constant Farmer’s Son*, Lehr, 1985, pp. 42-43).

Sleep is another metaphor commonly used for death: “And I’ll sleep the long and lonely sleep called slumber in the tomb” (*Peter Emberly*, Fowke, 1973, pp. 72-73).

Life has also been represented as a journey or a voyage, and death by the journey’s

end: "My boy your father's long voyage is o'er, you'll never see him no more" (*Why Don't Father's Ship Come In?*, Lehr, 1985, pp. 203-204). Similarly in the American cowboy song *Ridin'* the writer sings of "when my earthly trail is ended" (Thorp and Fife, 1966, p. 70).

Some of the cowboy songs use activities of their trade to represent death. For example, the 'great, or grand round up':

I hear there's to be a grand round up  
Where cowboys with others must stand  
To be cut out by the riders of judgement  
Who are posted, and know all the brands. (*The Grand Round Up*, Thorp and Fife, 1966, p. 71).

Similarly the 'last great drive' is also used as a metaphor for death:

So when we start on the last great drive,  
Grant that there shall not be any cutbacks,  
As we appear before the Head Boss  
In the green Pastures of Eternal Reward.  
(*Cowboy Prayer*, Thorp and Fife, 1966, p. 70)

Other references in cowboy songs are more directed towards the life hereafter: "Ere I ride the range above" and "up in the home corral" (*The Cowboy's Prayer*, Ohrlin, 1973, p. 190). Badger Clark in *Ridin'* combines metaphors for both death and heaven in this verse:

When my earthly trail is ended,  
And my final bacon's curled,  
And the last great round-up's finished  
At the home ranch of the world. (Thorp and Fife, 1966, p. 70)

In the B.C. cowboy song *Sunset* impending death is symbolized in several different ways: "the lone wolf's last song", "my last campfire's blazing", "I rode my last bronco, I rode my last ride", "the gate is before me and soon I'll pass through", and "When the gate swings behind me, may Christ's mercy find me" (Thomas, 1979, pp. 164-165). Here the metaphor for death is passing through a ranch gate. Even the title of this song, *Sunset*, serves as a metaphor for death. One song surfaced from the Newfoundland selections in which a metaphor of the sea was applied to death. Otto P. Kelland in his song *Let Me Fish Off Cape St. Mary's* requests that:

When I reach that last big shoal  
Where the ground swells break asunder,  
Where the wild sands roll to the surges toll.  
Let me be a man and take it

Where my dory fails to make it. (Mills and Peacock, 1958, pp. 36-37).

Here the last big shoal on the fishing grounds has replaced the final round-up of the cowboys. Continuing on with symbolism from the natural world, death, from a heart broken in love in *She's Like the Swallow* is represented by the fading of flowers:

She took her roses and made a bed,  
A stony pillow for her head.  
She lay her down, no more did say,  
But let her roses fade away. (Fowke, 1973, pp. 146-147)

The rosiness went from her cheeks, the fragrance or breath went from her lips and, like the flowers, she died.

Death, as noted in the song *Jack Hinks* is "the fate of both hero and slave" (Doyle, 1978, p. 28). It can not be avoided. All must go through it. However, in the opinion of the writer of *Hard, Hard Times* death seems not to be so different from life:

The best thing to do is to work with a will;  
For when it's all finished you're hauled on the hill;  
You're hauled on the hill and put down in the cold,  
And when 'tis all finished you're still in the hole,  
And it's Hard, Hard Times. (Doyle, 1978, pp. 24-25)

Here we find a delightful play on the word 'hole', which is used to symbolize both being in dept, and being in the grave.

For many of the people sung about in folk songs, times were hard and life was difficult. Was there anything to look forward to after death? As previously alluded to, the cowboys seemed to think so, ("that range above", "up in the home corral" and "the home ranch of the world"), and so did many of the other folk song makers. The writer of the *Excel* expresses it this way:

This dreadful night is passed and gone, its marks are left behind.  
It is a warning for you all, to prepare while it is time.  
To meet your friends and loved ones, the ones whom you adore,  
On the blissful shores of Canaan, where partings are no more.  
(Lehr, 1985, pp. 59-60)

Meanwhile, the writer of *Peter Emberley* notes that:

There's a world beyond the tomb, to it I'm nearing on,  
Where man is more than mortal and death can never come.  
The mist of death it glares my eyes and I'm no longer here,  
My spirit takes its final flight into another sphere. (Fowke, 1973, pp. 72-73)

Many of the sea-faring songwriters appear to have a deep trust in a life hereafter. In *Annie Young*, when referring to the boys (men) lost at sea, the writer states that “we trust that they’re in heaven, safe with the angels dwell”, while the brothers and sisters “who also for them weep”, “trust that God has guided them to a home of rest and sleep” (Lehr, 1985 pp. 4-5). In similar vane, the writer of *The August Gale (B)* hopes that those lost at sea will “see a better land from sorrow and from care, in the bright land above us all, its splendour for to share” (Lehr, 1985, pp. 10-11). Likewise in the song *Jimmy Judge*, the writer has hopes of a better life in heaven: “But now he is in Paradise, and happy he may be, for I hope in heaven his soul will shine for all eternity” (Fowke and Johnson, 1967, pp. 80-81). The author of *The Blue Wave* advises: “Don’t fret nor mourn for those brave lads that have been called away, I know you’ll meet in heaven above upon that judgement day” (Lehr, 1985, pp. 17-18). Judgement Day itself is referred to on several occasions in the song sample: “Many who had seen the fire thought it was Judgement Day” (*The Miramichi Fire*, Fowke and Johnson, 1967, pp. 192-194):

For as they lay on their virgin beds, the Trumpeter did sound,  
 Calling them to the seat of justice where every stain was found.  
 (*The Spanish Captain*, Lehr, 1985, pp. 176-177)

But two more bodies still are lying beneath the ocean waves  
 Waiting for the Saviour’s call on the last great Judgement Day;  
 When the sea it will give up its dead we’re told by scripture true  
 May the Lord have mercy on the souls of the Ella M. Randolph’s crew.  
 (*The Ella M. Randolph*, Lehr, 1985, pp. 55-56)

The scripture passage referred to here is 1 Corinthians 15:52 where it states “For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed.” Similarly in the song describing the accidental death of three workers in Grand Falls, the writer tells us:

My story is ended, I have no more to say.  
 Those three stricken workmen now sleep ‘neath the clay;  
 There God will keep them until we all meet,  
 In the great Resurrection in heaven so sweet.  
 (*The Grand Falls Tragedy*, Lehr, 1985, pp. 81-82)

This deep-seated belief in the judgement and resurrection is also expressed in *Peter Emberley* where the dying man makes one final request:

And now before I pass away there is one more thing I crave,  
 That some good holy father will bless my mouldering grave,  
 Near the city of Boiestown where my mouldering bones do lay,  
 A-waiting for my Saviour’s call on that great Judgement Day.  
 (Fowke, 1973, pp. 72-73)

The songs noted above have come from the Newfoundland and Prince Edward Island song literature. To avoid being left with the notion that this is an Atlantic coast phenomenon, we will turn to the song *The Schooner Persian's Crew*, which tells of the fate of this ship and her crew on Lake Huron. Verse eight notes that:

The mystery of their fate is sealed. "Did they collide?" some say,  
But this will never be revealed until the judgement day,  
When the angels they shall take their stand upon these waters blue  
And summon forth by heaven's command the old schooner Persian's crew.  
(Fowke and Seeger, 1965, pp. 138-139)

Many of these songs contain a simply stated belief in the day of Judgement, and an afterlife in Heaven or Paradise. Many are quite Biblically based which would suggest a songwriter with a Christian belief system, or, a Christian-based community since, often-times, the songwriter represented community sentiment.

The research song sample, while not being too strong in the area of 'God metaphors', is quite strong in its representation of Judgement Day and Heaven, and very strong in its use of metaphor to represent death.

The results of this survey might suggest a stronger reliance on God, or a stronger Christian belief on the East Coast of our country than on the west. However, I'm not sure that it would be fair to draw this conclusion at this point since, as the researcher, I have found, and have had more access to, published folk song materials from the eastern part of our country.

The material at hand seems to suggest that the song-makers of old felt quite comfortable using God's name openly in their songs; they felt free to make reference to their Christian beliefs regarding Judgement Day, bodily resurrection, and an afterlife in Heaven, although sometimes couching them in metaphors; and they seem to have felt the need to soften the blow of death through the use of metaphor and analogy.

While this seems to be what the songs are suggesting, further research based on a broader song selection would more accurately address these issues. Other questions however arise from the research done to date:

- Did song-makers of old avoid the use of metaphor for God's name out of respect for Him?
- Were metaphors representing Judgement Day, the bodily resurrection, and an afterlife in Heaven seen as clever, literary techniques, or a means by which the true meaning may be hidden?
- Why would the song-makers wish, or feel the need to conceal their Christian beliefs?
- Were metaphors and analogies for death really used to soften the blow, or was this also seen as a clever and creative literary technique?
- Do musicians in today's culture feel the same uneasiness in speaking about death as did the songwriters of old?

- How do singer/song-writers of today deal with these issues?
- Has 'political correctness' affected the topics dealt with or the way in which they are handled?
- Has 'specialization' within the music industry affected the way in which these topics are portrayed?

We can make educated guesses and assumptions in response to some of these questions, and we can answer some by conducting research within our modern-day music culture. Other questions however, will remain unanswered because:

The song-makers are dead,  
 The song-makers are gone,  
 They're no longer here  
 To get answers from!  
 Or, more metaphorically:  
 The singers and songwriters  
 Have gone to join a choir,  
 Led by that Great Director  
 Who takes them so much higher.  
 'Though we may have some questions,  
 They'll give us no reply.  
 They're too busy singing anthems  
 With that choir up in the sky!

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