

The Alouette Is an Old but Distant Bird

[THE IMMIGRANTS' SONGS AND MUSIC ARE WELL PRESERVED IN OTTAWA]

The alouette is a bird which sings while in flight. No alouette has ever flown or sung in Canada. The bird is European and the song of the same name, which is as tightly identified with French Canada as the bagpipe is with Nova Scotia, came with the first French immigrants to land in Québec three hundred years ago. Today some 1400 different French songs of the 15th and 16th centuries which have survived as folk music in Canada are recorded at the Canadian Centre for Folk Culture Studies in Ottawa. Dr. Roxane Carlisle, head of the ethnomusicology section, has compiled the essential facts of Canada's multi-tonal past and archival present for *Canada Today/D'Aujourd'hui*.

[THE FRENCH CONNECTION]

Today's six million-plus French Canadians are descended from some 6,700 immigrants who arrived before 1675 when such immigration ceased. Most came from rural parts in the north or west of France and they brought with them thousands of songs and dance tunes, some already centuries old. The fourteen thousand now on file show that at least two old songs came over for every man, woman and child among the original immigrants. The old songs often refer to places, people or events in France and very often to La Rochelle, the principal port of departure.

The persistence of the songs can be accounted for by not only the isolation and nostalgia of the settlers but by the way they proved strikingly appropriate to the new environment; the strong rhythms were, for example, easily converted into paddling songs for the early voyageurs. The French immigrants also brought a wide variety of dance tunes built around the fiddle which are still being danced to today.

[THE BRITISH INSPIRATION]

The early British settlers were very often discharged soldiers and the early British songs very often had a military tune. The bandsmen (and the songs) might be Scottish, English, Irish or Hessian. Ballads from English broadsheets and the gentler strains of nursery lullabies and children's songs were other major sources. Since British immigration continued and increased (while French diminished), the British songs on record at the Centre are from a much broader time span. Military bands from Britain would remain on garri-

son duty for just a few years and their replacements would bring new tunes from the old sod to play in the town squares of Kingston or York on summer evenings. By 1800 every village in Upper Canada (Ontario) had its fiddler and many had bagpipers as well. The fiddlers played at indoor dances in warm farm kitchens (there were no barn dances in cold Ontario) and the pipers played for outdoor summer dancing. The Welsh brought penillion singing — a singer entered and improvised a set of variations on a melody first stated by a harp (or today, by a piano, a violin or a guitar).

[THE CONTINENTAL TRADITION]

By the middle of the 19th century Canada began receiving immigrants from central and eastern Europe. The Ukrainian Canadians brought a strong tradition of group singing of great variety: kolomyjka couplets, bandura lute music and winter song cycles which combined traditional elements with episodes from the immigrants' travels and the pioneering on the Prairies. The Doukhobor communities in British Columbia and the Prairies gathered together to sing spontaneously in polyphonic style, without instrumental accompaniment. Lithuanians brought sutartines or choral songs, often old and beautiful pre-nuptial and wedding songs. The Bulgars brought old work songs, sung in close harmony that was often a series of parallel seconds. The Poles brought music for the mazanki, a three string fiddle, and the sierszenki bagpipe.

There are many other strains still audible in Canada: Icelandic, Asiatic, Afro-Canadian. It is remarkable how many have survived today, though there are obvious explanations. Canada was and is a vast land with isolated groups. In the 19th century whole villages would move to the New World as a cohesive group.

As Dr. Carlisle says: "Do not believe anyone who tells you that folk music is dying out in Canada. On the contrary, Canada's musical heritage is a fugue of many traditions and precisely because Canadians preserve a flourishing and vital multiple tradition, we can witness its continuing development."

Scholars, musicians and others with an interest may get specific information on the collection from the Canadian Centre for Folk Culture Studies, National Museum of Man, National Museums of Canada, Ottawa K1A 0M8, Canada.