

***Joe Scott: The Woodsman-Songmaker.* By Edward D. Ives
(Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1978. Pp. 475. \$22.50 cloth.)**

I. Sheldon Posen

Volume 2, Number 1-2, 1980

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1081038ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1081038ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Association Canadienne d'Ethnologie et de Folklore

ISSN

1481-5974 (print)

1708-0401 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Posen, I. (1980). Review of [*Joe Scott: The Woodsman-Songmaker.* By Edward D. Ives (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1978. Pp. 475. \$22.50 cloth.)]. *Ethnologies*, 2(1-2), 75-77. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1081038ar>

did he indicate where, in what ways or to what extent, these modifications were undertaken. In similar fashion, Kenneth Peacock's musical transcriptions cannot be entirely trusted for their accuracy. While the songs in this book obviously represent a unified body of material because of their interconnectedness in both regional and linguistic terms, *Gaelic Songs in Nova Scotia* provides the reader with very little insight into the Gaelic singing tradition in that part of the world. The editors reveal practically nothing (the introduction is barely three pages long) about the region itself, the currency of the Gaelic language and the Gaelic song tradition, the repertory of the Gaelic community in Nova Scotia and of individuals within that community. One is left to seek for oneself the contextual and stylistic details that are sparsely scattered through the notes to individual songs, although it should be mentioned that the National Museum did publish a recording of some of the material in 1964.

There can be little doubt that this is an important folksong collection. It deals with the folk tradition of one of the most significant cultural groups in Eastern Canada and is also one of the few studies of Gaelic folklore in this country that involved a scholar who was, first and foremost, a folklorist.² It is, however, a collection from start to finish. It would appear that the editors were concerned not so much with understanding and explaining this body of tradition as they were with the more restricted ambitions of preserving and perpetuating it. While one cannot deny the laudability of these aims, one is left with the impression that the editors of *Gaelic Songs in Nova Scotia* were unduly constrained by them, to the detriment of a more detailed consideration of Gaelic singing in Nova Scotia.

John Ashton
Memorial University of Newfoundland
St. John's, Newfoundland

²In addition to the section on Gaelic folklore in Carpenter's work cited above, (pp. 346-52), see

Joe Scott: The Woodsman-Songmaker

By Edward D. Ives

(Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1978.

Pp. 475. \$22.50 cloth.)

In a shift in focus during the past quarter century or so away from "text" and towards "context," "process," and "performance," folklorists are concentrating more and more on individual performers of folklore genres, so-called "tradition bearers," and their "relation to tradition." The cry seems to be not only to "put the folk (back) into folklore," but to do it one person at a time. The models for these studies are the psychosocial novel and the biography. The result is a sort of folklore-and-personality approach to the definition, analysis, and presentation of data. A noteworthy example of a study with this individual focus is Edward D. Ives's *Joe Scott: The Woodsman-Songmaker*.

Joe Scott was a New Brunswickman who lived most of his itinerant life in turn-of-the-century New England. He worked in the lumbercamps and was something of a local character, with a reputation as a magician, jokester, and hypnotist. Most important for Ives, Scott was a songmaker. He composed ballads based on locally or personally significant events, which he printed on broadsheets and peddled from camp to camp, demonstrating them himself. Scott died penniless and insane in 1917. He left in print and in people's memories all over the northeastern U.S. and Canada (except Newfoundland) some 13 ballads he had written. These ballads, and Scott's biography, form the core of Ives's study.

Joe Scott is Ives's third book that focuses on a long-dead northeastern songmaker. It is Ives's best developed effort. In method it is similar to his other books: Ives talked to everyone he could find who knew the song maker; collected in print or

also Edith Fowke and Carole Henderson, *A Bibliography of Canadian Folklore in English* (Downsview: York University, 1976), for a survey of published works related to Gaelic folklore.

from singers every version he could of the composer's songs; checked or ratified the information in each ballad with newspaper accounts, pored over court, church and government documents for records of the events in the life of the poet or depicted in his ballads; collected photographs of all the main characters and, when he could find them, he visited their tombstones. He then martialled all the information to present a picture of the artist's life and a detailed analysis of his work.

The book is divided into three sections: "The Man," a biography of Scott running about 20 per cent of the book's length; "The Songs," an examination of each ballad, usually in a chapter devoted to it alone (about 75 per cent of the book); and "The Tradition," an overview of the lumbercamp singing tradition and the place of Scott's ballads within it. Ives's stated goal for *Joe Scott* is to examine his work within three contexts: Scott's life, lumbercamp singing, and Ives's own life. He has varied success in doing so.

Ironically, the book is weakest in giving the reader a real sense of its title subject, Joe Scott. This is partly due to the nature of the subject, and partly to the nature of the approach. Scott, as he appears in this book, is less a person than the sum of the information Ives was able to gather about him. For all Ives's effort, what this turned out to be (75 years after Scott's death) was contradictory, sparse, dry, fragmentary, and thin. Could those bones, one might ask, be made to live? Not really. The life of Joe Scott, like that of most people, was most interesting while it was being lived and to those directly involved in it. To us strangers, not even his artistic legacy makes Scott's life story worth that much attention, unless like Ives, we get caught up in the chase. It does not help when Ives tries to enter the mind of his subject (as is often attempted in folklore-and-individual studies) to sort out the subject's emotions and motives for writing songs. Psychology is difficult when one is dealing with biographies of living persons; it is nigh to impossible with long-deceased ones. And

the fact that the subject is dead also demands that the writer speculate, surmise, guess, and conjecture continuously, in order to fill in the inevitable gaps. The process makes for fascinating scholarship, but frustrating reading.

Ives is more solid when he deals with the tradition of which Scott's songs were a part. He successfully undertakes, by particular attention to Scott's work, to place some firm ground under orthodox folklore theory having to do with change and stability within a genre, and with the tension in tradition between conservatism and innovation. In classic *explications de texte* and comparisons of versions, Ives shows where the songs have changed and where they have stayed the same since Scott wrote them, and accounts for why they did one or the other. He proposes that "communal re-creation" be reconceptualized as "communal editing." He makes a good case for Scott as an innovative, *bona fide* artist, showing how skillfully he refashioned and remoulded the traditional ways of dealing with standard themes and developed his own style. Tradition accepted most of these personal contributions. Most important for the notion of the folk artist, Ives demonstrates through Joe Scott that every creator — "folk" or "elite" — is an artist, and that every artist working within a tradition — again, "folk" or "elite" — creates something which was not there before.

Ives's best work in *Joe Scott* has to do with the lumbercamp singing tradition of the northeast, and with his own search for Joe Scott. Ives's passion for finding out how things were, which leads him down the path of Scott's personality, is his glory when it comes to learning about the old ways of the woods and rivers. No one knows this stuff better than Ives, and we are treated in *Joe Scott* to a distillation of his vast knowledge. He covers points you would expect to find in other woods song collections (e.g., singing style, repertoire) but with a comprehensiveness you could never get elsewhere. He also covers many points you simply never get — like a consideration of obscene songs in the camps,

an account of how songs were learned, whether songs got written down and where, and so on. The contradictions in information which Ives gives in this section enhance rather than hinder their readability and verisimilitude. It is important and interesting to know, for instance, that in some camps there was singing every Saturday, in others, none at all, ever — depending on who was there that winter. Or that for most men, singing was only entertainment, and only one of many forms of it; only for a few was it a passion and obsession. No one has said these kinds of things as well or as authoritatively as Ives does here. He also proposes the notion of a double singing tradition: a “public performance” or men’s tradition, and a “private” or women’s tradition. It is a notion which I think bears further investigation.

Each chapter of *Joe Scott* that examines a ballad in detail begins with a vignette of how Ives collected one version of that song. There might be several of these vignettes per chapter, interspersed with text and tune analysis, dealing with how the songs “live.” The vignettes sparkle. First, they show how fieldwork gets done. Ives gives, for instance, a perfect picture of the awkwardness of a collector/informant first meeting and interview, and shows how coaxing (by friends of the informant) works in that situation (pp. 282–84). Second, they capture a sense of Ives’s informants for the reader, and the meaning of their singing to their lives:

Billy Bell died in 1967. During his last months in the hospital he recognized no one, not even his wife or sister; but as the end came on, he sang the old songs once more, going over and over his favorites, among them “The Cumberland Crew” and “Benjamin Deane.” No friends traveled further into that night with him than they. (p. 232)

Third, they show that underlying and beyond Ives’s own persona in his work, and his careful reportage and pursuit of the facts, are his warm affection for the people he works with, and a magic, mystical,

social communion he sometimes feels in the presence of their artistry. Ives’s description, in the final pages of *Joe Scott*, of the transport of the spirit that can happen during singings, is the best statement I have read of what can take place during a session.

Joe Scott is a vital book, for the information it contains, and for the questions it raises. It is weakest when it dwells on *Joe Scott* the individual, for his own sake. It is strongest when *Scott*, again the individual, is used as a point of departure, a vehicle, a window on his culture, a means of talking about and looking at a society, an era, a way of life, the lives of people.

I. Sheldon Posen

University of Pennsylvania
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

Lunenburg County Folklore and Oral History: Project '77

Edited by Laurie Lacey

(Ottawa: National Museum of Man, 1979.
CCFCS Mercury Series 30. 142 pp.)

The abstract sets forth the purpose of this publication:

Laurie Lacey’s edited research report, based on a field collection in the summer of 1977 by a group of high school and university students, offers a presentation of a wide array of genre materials from the county. Selected examples of materials are chosen which convey aspects of the traditional work patterns, educational processes, values and beliefs and song traditions of the residents of Lunenburg County.”

Variouly described as a companion or an extension of Helen Creighton’s *Folklore of Lunenburg County* first published in 1950, it covers some of the same types of material but emphasizes oral history and recorded interviews. It contains much interesting information on oxen lore, rum-running, lumbering and milling, local