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**“101 Years of Mine Disasters and 101 Years of Song:  
Truth or Myth in Nova Scotia Mining Songs?”**

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*It is generally accepted that the majority of responses to a disaster in social media sources misrepresent what actually occurs in such an event. Over the last century, mine disasters occurring in Nova Scotia have generated numerous responses in the form of folk songs. The purpose of this study is to determine if these folk songs, unlike other forms of popular culture, accurately portray the events and context surrounding these disasters while also examining how they describe human responses to disasters. The findings show that these folk songs in contrast to other media, books and movies do provide a generally factually and contextually accurate view of the disasters, with a focus limited to the events of the disaster itself, the rescue efforts, and the dead and trapped. The possibilities for why this is true are then considered, including looks at the nature and origins of the songs, the response of composers to the disasters, and how the media response to the disasters affected the songs.*

**Keywords:** mine disasters, disaster, disaster myths, folk songs, media, mining, Nova Scotia.

### **Introduction**

In April, 1936, a Canadian broadcaster named J. Frank Willis mesmerized the entire Canadian radio audience with his broadcasts of what was happening when three men were caught by a cave-in and trapped in a gold mine in Moose River, Nova Scotia. The

men were only forty-five meters below the surface but they were faced with steadily rising water and it took six days before the rescuers made contact with them and eight days before they saved the only two who were alive. The story was voted by the Canadian Press the top radio news story of the first half of the twentieth century, ahead of such dramatic stories as the coverage by Canadian radio war correspondent Matthew Halton of the Canadian landings on Juno Beach on D Day or his firsthand account of the Liberation of Paris.

Willis's ninety nine broadcasts from Moose River were picked up and repeated in London by the BBC and carried on US radio stations. He told how the rescuers worked relentlessly "every hour, every minute risking their lives to save the lives of two Toronto men," and he was scathing when he knocked down news reports that the rescue shaft was in danger of caving in on the rescuers. "Don't believe that for one minute," he told his listeners. "It is absolutely untrue" (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation 1936).

One of those listening was a singer from Nova Scotia named Wilf Carter. Carter (whose US records used the name Montana Slim) was in New York but he heard the Canadian Radio Broadcasting Commission (CRBC) coverage—Canada's public broadcasting system was re-named the CBC six months later—and Carter wrote a song called, "The Rescue From Moose River Gold Mine," which became a Canadian classic (Rosenberg 2000:156). It told of the attempts to rescue the three who were trapped:

Long days and nights they had labored  
Turned back when great cave-ins fell,  
While far below patiently waiting  
Three men were in one living Hell (Carter 1936).

It also recounted quite accurately what happened when the rescue team—miners from nearby Stellarton—finally made contact with the trapped men:

Next message filled all hearts with sorrow  
As they heard them say "One pal is gone  
We are trying our best to hold on boys  
Do your best. Don't make it too long. (Rosenberg 2000:156).

Moose River was not really a disaster. It did not threaten or disrupt the social structure of a community and only one of those who died was from the area. But it illustrates the fascination folk singers have for mine incidents, especially when people are trapped and others risk their lives to rescue them. Over 101 years, songs have been written about at least nine fatal mine incidents in Nova Scotia; we will be focusing on the five of these incidents that have twenty or more fatalities and can thus be classified as mass death incidents or disasters. We have chosen to deal only with mass death incidents

for the sake of comparison. It is still a tragedy when two people are killed in a mine but it does not impact the community in the same way as, for example, when one hundred and twenty-five people were killed in a Springhill mine in 1891, leaving approximately fifty-seven widows, one hundred and sixty-five fatherless children and eight childless mothers (McKnight 1891:12). The incidents that will therefore not be included in this study, but about which we are aware of songs are: the explosion at Glace Bay in 1899 that killed eleven; the incident at Glace Bay in 1952 that left seven dead; the fire in a New Waterford mine in 1973 that left two dead, and the incident at Glace Bay in 1979 that left ten dead.

This leaves songs about five incidents to be examined: Springhill, 1891 one hundred and twenty-five dead; New Waterford, 1917, sixty-five dead; Springhill, 1956, thirty-nine dead; Springhill, 1958, seventy-four dead; and Plymouth, 1992 (better known as the Westray mine disaster), twenty-six dead. All together these disasters led to at least thirty-five folk songs with the most—fifteen of them—coming out of the Westray mine disaster in 1992. Regrettably, we were only able to obtain the lyrics for twenty-nine of these songs (and for twelve of the Westray songs). These will thus be the only songs examined within this article.

In a recent monograph, Quarantelli and Davis (2011) discuss disasters and popular culture. They say:

By any criteria that could be used, PCD [Popular Culture and Disaster] has been one of the least studied topics that disaster researchers have addressed. In fact, prior to the late 1990s, very few publications can be found specifically focusing on any aspect of PCD in the literature produced by social scientists, historians, and those interested in the humanities and the arts. For example, as late as 1991, the Center for Popular Culture at Bowling Green University—the major organization in the world focused on popular culture—communicated to us that, in their extensive library and archives, they had only a total of nineteen entries under the label of disaster, and that a review of disaster novels in 1989 “showed very little on disasters and related topics in other popular culture collections in the country” (Joe Perry, personal communication). A recent inquiry about the current holdings of this Center found that few additional PCD items have been collected. (Quarantelli and Davis 2011:35)

Quarantelli and Davis (2011) use the 2010 Haitian Earthquake as a framework with which to discuss the “musical aspects of PCD [Popular Culture of Disaster]” (p. 108). This disaster provoked a particularly large musical response, about which Quarantelli and Davis (2011) ask:

Is there something about Haitian culture or the nature of this particular catastrophe that precluded the emergence of spontaneous local songs? At the very least, and more broadly, we think it suggests content analyses ought to be made of the nature of all songs that are sung in all major disasters and catastrophes, and is something that ought to be specifically examined (p. 111).

This article is a first try at doing just that. It examines the twenty-nine folk songs generated by the mass death mine disasters listed above. Like Scanlon's (1999) earlier study of fictional accounts of the 1917 Halifax explosion, the article does what Quarantelli and Davis (2011) ask for: it compares what the songs say happened to what actually happened as well as what the songs include and leave out. The study admittedly has its limitations for, as discussed below, it seems possible that mining songs are more likely to be accurate than other folk songs as well as other types of popular culture. This article is therefore very much a tentative first step into a neglected field. The authors are already exploring folk songs about maritime incidents in Atlantic Canada and folk songs about *Titanic* and are planning a study of folk songs about major Canadian incidents.

### **Literature Review**

In the face of a disaster, ordinary people respond well. They rarely panic. Even in crowd crushes, they tend to assist others. Victims are not dazed and confused or in shock, waiting to be assisted or rescued by trained emergency personnel. Instead, survivors usually do the initial rescue work and get those who are injured to medical facilities (Quarantelli and Dynes 1972:66-70; Scanlon 1997:583-585).

Despite this, myths persist. One reason is that they are perpetuated by the mass media, especially radio, television and print. They are so persistent that even persons with recent disaster experience believe them though they did not behave that way. They thought people would panic but they did not panic. They thought victims would be dazed, confused and in shock but they acted rationally. They thought looting would occur but they did not loot. Wenger, James and Faupel (1980) suggest the media focus on the most impacted:

Such stories detail the plight of the individual who has been “wiped out” by the disaster, who has lost their family, or suffered great misfortune. Of course, such individuals are covered by the media because they “stand out” from the other victims.... However, these atypical cases are often presented as...typical... (p. 40).

In his study of disaster movies, Quarantelli (1985) found many of the same concerns. They tend to concentrate more on the threat than the disaster itself: “Planes do not crash, ships do not sink, nuclear plants do not melt down, epidemics do not spread, etc.” (Quarantelli 1985:10). He found they often focus on concern about possible panic and indicate there has been looting though they do portray helping behaviour. These findings are supported by Mitchell, Thomas, Hill and Cutter (2000).

Quarantelli (1985) also found movies tend to ignore emergency planning and recovery; the post-impact period is largely ignored and there is no search and rescue either by survivors or organized emergency responders. Movies also portray sexual stereotypes: “Women...are characterized as, if not hysterical, generally deferring to men’s physical strength or coolness in the face of crisis” (Quarantelli 1985:10). Scanlon (1999) found similar gender distortions in novels about the 1917 Halifax explosion (1,963 killed, 9,000 injured when a munitions ship exploded). Though women did most initial search and rescue while the military was preoccupied with its own casualties, the novels ignored or downplayed the role of women and played up the importance of the military (Scanlon 1999).

Archie Green’s 1972 book *Only a Miner: Studies in Recorded Coal-Mining Songs* analyses songs about coal mining that were recorded in the United States between 1925 and 1970. Green (1972) does not assess the accuracy of these songs, but focuses instead on what the songs reveal about coal mines and miners. To do this he draws on three disciplines: ballad scholarship, labour history, and popular-culture studies (Green 1972:xii). Disasters and disaster songs are not discussed within this work in great detail.

In one of the few studies of disaster folk songs, Lyle (1983) reported that songs about American railroad disasters were also factually inaccurate: they often omitted, ignored, or misrepresented the facts in favour of American moral values of the time and the creation of heroes out of the dead engineers. Lyle’s (1983) conclusion was *not* shared by others. When Wachtendorf (1999) compared folk songs to other forms of literature, she found they tended to be accurate. “Most of the songs,” she reported, “concentrated on people coming to help - the disaster myths of panic and disorganization were not prevalent” (Wachtendorf 1999, discussion of slide three). When Rogers (1982) examined a single ballad on the loss of a sealing ship, Southern Cross, he found it was historically accurate.

When Rosenberg (2000) examined songs on two mine disasters in Springhill, Nova Scotia in 1956 and 1958, he found they tended to be expressive, aiming to memorialize the event, allowing composer, performer, and audience to jointly express their feelings of sorrow, shock, and possibly hope but he did not deal with their accuracy. Although that is not unusual, accuracy in folksong has been studied by several scholars. Cecil Sharp (1907) discusses how folksongs impart a sense of actuality on their audience:

Much is left to the imagination of the listener; the story is sketched in a few bold strokes, with, here and there, a minute and elaborate description

of some minor incident. This is one of the arts by which the ballad-maker imparts to his story a vivid sense of reality. “Yes, Sir, and it is true”, is the reply that has often been made to me by a folk-singer at the conclusion of a long ballad which I have praised. Here, again, the peasant singer is like the child, and loves to think that the story which has moved him is not fictitious but true. To him there is no tale like the true tale; and, to heighten the sense of reality, he will often lay the scene of his story in his own locality (p. 93).

Halpert (1964), considered by his successors as a definitive source on the notion of truth in folksongs, expanded on Sharp’s ideas. Halpert (1964) stresses that “the problems of the human relationships to the song, which not only should be of interest to collectors and sociologists but would appeal to people at large, have been generally ignored” (p. xiii). One such problem is the importance placed on truth in folksong and the resulting common belief that songs are true without valid evidence. As one informant told Halpert (1964), “Ain’t true songs better than story songs? The truth’s always better than anything that isn’t true!” (p. xx). Halpert (1964) finds that the singers also believe in the factual basis of their songs, strengthening this sense of actuality primarily through emotional participation and localization of the song (p. xiv-xv). A strong oral tradition is also thought to contribute to the belief that songs are true (Halpert 1964: xvii).

Green (1970-71) uses Halpert’s (1964) ideas as a basis for his study on variations of the Irish-Anglo folksong “McCaffery”. Green (1971) finds that truth is an important aesthetic quality in folksong, but that this truth is generally a moral one and not necessarily based on particular or historical truths (pp. 5, 9). He thus explains every variation of “McCaffery” “as an attempt by a particular ethnic, religious, social or occupational group to accommodate a song to their own special view of life – in short, an attempt to prevent the song from ‘lying’” (Green 1971:10). Green (1970a) argues:

For two reasons it is important to ascertain whether, despite its various anomalies the song is in fact a record (accurate or not) or historical events: firstly, because the question is of some interest in itself, and secondly, because, if a source could be established, then the song’s diversions from it might throw light on what a literary critic would call the “meaning” of its various versions, and what I, with anthropologists, prefer to call their “function”, since this latter term, unlike the former, inevitably includes a consideration of the song’s relationship to its cultural and social context. (p. 8).

Ashton (1977) also discerned a difference in regards to what is claimed to be true about a folksong and what is actually true. He agrees with Halpert (1964) and Green (1970-71), stating that ‘truth’ in folksongs has multiple meanings and that a song need

not be factually accurate to be considered ‘true’ by a singer or audience as a song that accurately represents the singer’s and audience’s life experience or culture can seem to be as true as a song that is factually accurate (Ashton 1977:13). Ashton (1977) also highlights that folksongs provide “a striking example of the vitality of the notion of truth in one section of the North American tradition. Unfortunately, the implications raised have since received little attention” (p. 13).

### **Mining and Mine Disasters**

To put the songs in context it is important to have a basic understanding of mining and mine disasters. Mines operate on a shift basis and usually twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. For those underground -- as for those in a submarine -- there are no cues that tell of passing time. Everything is dark except for the light from the lamps on helmets or other installed lighting. Miners work in small groups, often away from others doing similar jobs. In coal mines, which are the vast majority of mines in these songs, work is done hundreds of metres below the surface. Miners check in at the pit head and ride down to work, carrying the food and drink they will need for a full shift.

Coal mines are especially hazardous because they are prone to explosions caused by methane gas, coal dust or a combination of the two. A spark caused by a piece of machinery or even a miner’s tool can be enough to ignite the gas and cause an explosion. Another threat to miners is “bumps” or sudden seismic shifts in the mine, caused by an uneven weight displacement after coal has been removed. “Bumps” result in collapses and the floor and ceiling of the shafts to be suddenly thrust together (Brown 2002:41). Everyone underground feels an explosion or bump and those on the surface soon know as well, either through feeling it, seeing flames and debris coming out of the pithead (Burden 1991:121), or by hearing the mine’s siren—which is sounded when there is an emergency (Brown 1983:66). Often some miners escape quickly but all too often others are trapped. The first rescue attempts are usually made immediately by miners without protective gear, trying to save their fellow workers. As they respond, the call goes out for trained mine rescue workers, known as draegermen, who use specialized equipment (Brown 2002:23). Usually the draegermen recover bodies as well as search for and try to rescue trapped miners.

Once rescue becomes unlikely, the focus is usually shifted to body recovery. That rescue phase may last as little as twelve hours, though miners have been rescued alive after more than a week. The community and rescue workers tend to stick to the mining adage that those missing are considered to be alive until a body is found (Burden 1991:122). Media reports are often not hopeful of survivors. As the bodies are brought up, they are usually interned in a temporary morgue until they can be identified. Identification is usually done by the identification number on their lamp battery, location found, and at times, appearance or unique body or clothing marks, such as scars or

personal repairs to clothing. Once identified the bodies are delivered to the families, who hold funerals as soon as possible.

Mining is dangerous, but even more so is mine rescue. At Springhill in 1956, two trained draegermen lost their lives when gases penetrated their breathing apparatus (*The Toronto Star*, November 2, 1956:1). The mine was then closed for several hours in order to allow fires to burn down and gas to be ventilated, lowering the risk of secondary explosion (Brown 1983:70). Similarly, at New Waterford in 1917, because the responders did not wait for the air to clear before entering the mine, three died from gas poisoning. (Government of Nova Scotia, accessed 2010). Sometimes, rescue is delayed or abandoned. After the 1914 Hillcrest mine explosion, one would-be rescuer said he had seen fifteen or twenty bodies piled in a heap along with cars, horses and rails but could not do anything until gas was removed from the point of the entry (*Lethbridge Herald*, June 19, 1914:9). Five days after an avalanche buried a mining camp at Granduc, British Columbia, in February 1965, the search was called off and company personnel, RCMP and Royal Canadian Engineers from Canadian Forces Base (CFB) Chilliwack were evacuated from the area. There had been three smaller slides since the original avalanche: it was feared there might be another major slide (*The Prince Rupert Daily News*, February 25, 1965:1). Sometimes bodies are left and never recovered; the mine is shut down because retrieval is considered too dangerous. On other occasions mines have been re-opened briefly solely to allow bodies to be recovered. This occurred after in Springhill after the No. 4 mine was sealed in the wake of the 1956 explosion (Brown 1983:77).

### The Songs

We have tried to collect as comprehensive a list of songs as possible. However, due to the nature of this material, compiling a ‘complete’ list would likely be impossible. The songs were drawn from other edited song collections, printed publications such as journals, books and newspapers, personal communication with composers or those who could provide song lyrics, Internet forums such as the Mudcat Café (<http://www.mudcat.org/>) and Internet searches.

We are aware of three songs about the explosion at Springhill mine in 1891 (two of which are examined in this article as one is in French); three songs about the disaster at a New Waterford mine in 1917; five songs about the explosion at Springhill in 1956 (four of which are examined in this article as we were unable to locate lyrics for one); nine about Springhill 1958 (eight of which are examined in this article as we were unable to locate the lyrics for one); and fifteen songs (twelve of which are examined in this article as we were unable to locate lyrics for three) about the 1992 Westray mine disaster in Plymouth. As previously stated, this adds up to thirty-five songs that we are aware of, and twenty-nine songs that will be included within the scope of this article’s analysis.

### Common Themes

The songs about the Nova Scotia mine disasters tend to focus on similar themes. They depict the disaster itself and the ensuing rescue efforts, describing the struggles involved, and finish once the survivors have been brought up and rescue effort ceased. They place some focus on the dead with a tone of mourning and regret, but place a greater focus upon the survivors. Emotion is evoked from the emphasis on the plight of the trapped men, the bravery and determination of the rescuers, and the fate of the dead. This is illustrated in “The Ballad of Springhill:”

Eight days passes and some were rescued,  
 Leaving the dead to lie alone.  
 Through all their lives they dug their grave  
 Two miles of earth for a marking stone (Seeger, reprinted in O’Donnell  
 1992:146).

As a result of this focus, the songs omit certain information. For instance, although prior events in the mine, such as previous disasters or safety inspections, are mentioned in many songs it is only ever a line or two as exemplified by “Miracle at Colliery Two,” a song about the 1958 Springhill disaster:

Sorrow hit that stricken town as it had two years before  
 When the Springhill mine explosion took place in Colliery Four  
 (Kingston, reprinted in O’Donnell 1992:145).

Similarly, events occurring as a result of the disasters after the main rescue effort, such as inquiries, mine closures, charity disaster funds, or, in the case of the 1958 Springhill mine disaster, a trip to the Ed Sullivan Show for some survivors, (Greene 2003:129-131) are usually not mentioned. In the same way, little mention is made in the songs of the retrieval, identification, or burial of the dead. There is one exception; funerals are mentioned in “New Waterford’s Fatal Day:”

When the time had arrived for those men to be buried,  
 When their bodies were ready to be laid ‘neath the sod,  
 With tears in our eyes and our hearts full of sorrow,  
 We commended their souls to the mercy of God (Timmons, reprinted in  
 O’Donnell 1992:151).

Most songs also make no mention of and social, economic, or political issues surrounding mines. These may include families left without a provider, unemployed

miners, changes in the town's economy, political backlash, and inquires. One exception is "Springhill," which depicts the town fifty years after the mines closed:

These are green hills now  
But I remember those days  
When the big bump came  
And replaced the old ways  
When the mine shut down  
From the danger and the sorrow  
And they built us a prison  
Where I'll go to work tomorrow (Vardigans 2008).

(After the third incident the mine was closed and a prison was built in Springhill to help stimulate the town's economy]. This song also mentions efforts to vitalize local tourism with the help of Springhill native Anne Murray:

It's a drive thru now  
Another roadside attraction  
Where Anne Murray is an icon  
And Snowbird is a legend (Vardigans 2008).

Songs also omit aid that came from outside the community, save the draegermen, such as support from organizations such as the Red Cross and Salvation Army. Only two songs mention aid and only "New Waterford's Fatal Day" specifically mentions outside aid:

Many thanks are now due to all those outsiders  
Who came to our aid in that day of great woe (Timmons, reprinted in O'Donnell 1992:151).

The songs tend to avoid using specific mining terminology, perhaps because few of the composers were miners and, in any case, they compose for a broad audience not for a mining community. Some do use terms such as "draegermen" which was widely used, though always defined in media reports. As can be seen in the song "Miracle at Colliery Two", the term is inserted so that context defines it:

The draegermen kept working hard with hopes more were alive  
(Kingston, reprinted in O'Donnell 1992:145).

Others however simply refer to "rescuers":

Now when the news reached our good nearby,  
Rescue work started, their hopes were still high (Ruddick, reprinted in O'Donnell 1992:143).

Books on mine disasters are detailed in their coverage. They begin before the disaster, follow the incident with the help of inquiry reports, track the rescue efforts, and examine the results of the disaster. Examples of this are *Individual and Group Behavior in a Coal Mine Disaster* by Horace Beach and R.A. Lucas (1960), *Miracle Town: Springhill, Nova Scotia 1790-1982* by James Brown (1983), and *Blood on the Coal, Revised Edition* by Roger Brown (2002). Newspapers usually do the same through their articles, though their coverage of previous events can be less complete, and their coverage of rescue focuses on bravery, struggle, sorrow, and mourning, much like the songs. Examples of this are: "Trapped Men Answer Draegermen's Signals Spurs Hope For Rescue," (*The Toronto Star*, November 2, 1956:1), "N.S. Mine Blast Traps 118 Men," (*The Globe and Mail*, November 2, 1956:1), "Prince Visits Stricken Town," (*The Globe and Mail*, November 1, 1958:2); "Sympathy, Donations Flood into Plymouth," (*The Toronto Star*, May 11, 1992:A13). They provide a view of the disaster that is far more detailed than the songs.

Social, economic, and political aspects of the disaster are all reported by the media, and books also record these parts of the disaster. Mine closures, families left without a provider, unemployed miners, changes in the town's economy, political backlash, inquires, outside assistance, disaster funds, media relations, and the retrieval, identification, and burials are all discussed in these sources. Inquiry reports also have a wider scope, though they tend to lean towards the causes of the incident, the results, possible methods of prevention, and blame, if any. Examples of this are *The Westray Story: A Predictable Path to Disaster* by K. Peter Richard (1997) and the *Report of Commission of Inquiry: Explosion in No.26 Colliery, Glace Bay, Nova Scotia on February 24, 1979* by R.H. Elfrstrom (1980). It is clear then that a great deal is omitted by the songs.

### **Factual Inaccuracies**

While there are many omissions, there are few factual inaccuracies in the songs studied. Two songs about the 1958 bump in Springhill, "The Ballad of Springhill" and "The Springhill Disaster of 1958," make reference to the miners being trapped in an area with a height of three feet:

It was three feet high and a hundred long (Seeger, reprinted in O'Donnell 1992:146).

But the last bit of hope like our lamps soon burned dim  
 In the three foot high dungeon we joined in a hymn  
 (Ruddick, reprinted in O'Donnell 1992:143).

This is a distortion rather than a clear error. It is true that a small part of one area where twelve miners were trapped after the 1958 “bump” had a height of three feet. However, most of the areas where miners were trapped were four to six feet from floor to ceiling (Beach and Lucas 1960).

In some cases inaccuracies are really omissions or points that are left vague. For instance, in two songs on the 1956 Springhill explosion, “Rescue from the Springhill Coal Mine,” and “The Springhill Mine Explosion of 1956,” and in one song on the 1958 Springhill disaster, “Miracle at Colliery Two,” draegermen alone are credited with the rescue work, while in reality the first responders and a significant part of the rescue force were volunteer barefaced, normal, miners (Burden 1991:122). Only LeGere’s “Springhill Mine Disaster” gives the volunteers appropriate credit.

Another example of distortion is present in two songs about the 1956 Springhill disaster: “Rescue from the Springhill Coal Mine” and LeGere’s “Spring Hill Mine Disaster,” as well as in two about the 1958 Springhill disaster: “The Ballad of Springhill” and “The Springhill Mine Disaster of 1958.” These songs mention measurements of the mine that are simplifications. For example, in “The Ballad of Springhill” it states:

Rumble of the rock and the walls closed round  
 The living and the dead men two miles down...  
 Twelve men lay two miles from the pitshaft (Seeger, reprinted in  
 O'Donnell 1992:146).

In the “The Springhill Disaster of 1958” the distance is described as follows:

I'll sing you a song of the bravest of men  
 Of those who remained to go digging again  
 To bring the coal up from ten thousand feet deep (Ruddick, reprinted in  
*O'Donnell* 1992:144).

Rather than mentioning the exact distance in feet between the miners and the pithead, they state the distance is two miles or ten thousand feet, about 500 feet different from the actual depth. It is also of note that “The Springhill Disaster of 1958” does not expressly state that its measurement is from the pithead and the trapped miners. This could be interpreted as the miners being trapped considerably deeper than they actually were, as the mine shafts tended to run diagonally, often stretching farther horizontally than vertically. This was the case in the No 2 Springhill mine (Brown 2002:38).

These variations do not, for the most part, give an incorrect impression. Listeners will imagine men trapped in cramped spaces. They will imagine brave rescuers, be they draegermen or volunteers. They will imagine miners trapped well below the surface. In any case, exaggerations are not uncommon in storytelling. For example, in his 1972 study of La Have Islanders in Nova Scotia and use of the general store to meet and talk, Richard Bauman (1972) mentions:

Still, it was commonly recognized that story tellers tend to embellish their yarns.... The core of truth was insisted upon however – “They weren’t really lyin’ about their stories; after a while they just polished it up a bit”.... The few storytellers who went beyond the limits of creative license to complete distortion or fabrication were singled out for gentle ridicule and not taken very seriously. Everyone knew who they were (p. 335-6).

The exaggerations then, such as the mention of miners trapped alive in a three foot high space, are not inaccurate to the point of giving an unrealistic picture of events to listeners. The miners were trapped and the space where they were trapped was not spacious. The songs stay within reasonable bounds in respect to the facts.

### **Westray**

While most songs omit previous and resulting events, as well as the surrounding social, economic, and political issues, this is not the case with the 1992 Westray disaster. This is the most recent disaster and unique in the fact that the explosion was largely attributed to ignored safety regulations and risky practices on the part of Curragh Incorporated, the company that owned and operated the mine (*The Globe and Mail*, May 11, 1992:A04). It seems apparent that due to this, the songs are different.

The first clear difference is that songs about the Westray disaster such as “Westray” and “Their Lights Will Shine” are more poetic, with fewer direct references to the disaster outside the title. Instead they rely on references to events and metaphors to deliver their message. This can be seen in the chorus of “Their Lights Will Shine:”

Their lights will shine  
 Twenty-six all of a kind  
 Their lights will shine  
 Facing those who would be blind.  
 Their lights will shine  
 For the loved ones left behind  
 From the darkness of the mine  
 Their lights will shine (MacDonald, reprinted in O’Donnell 2009:59).

Secondly, the songs mention that the inquiry and criminal trial which resulted from the disaster and did not find Curragh Inc. or any of its officials responsible for the deaths that occurred at Westray (McMullan 2005:27-29). Most songs about Westray are filled with anger and resentment. “Coal Black,” for instance asks:

Will some justice give you peace  
Ease your soul, let you sleep  
In your black tomb buried deep  
Do you hear their lies? (Gallant 1999).

Corporate greed is suggested as an issue in many songs about Westray, often as a reason for the disaster:

Twenty-Six lay dead in Nova Scotia,  
All of them lay buried underground.  
While the man’s on the phone,  
Screamin’ for more coal.  
His soul is darker than the mine (Undertakin’ Daddies 2001).

They pushed them hard and did not care,  
I just don’t understand.  
How could someone care so little for the lives of their fellow men? (Wood 2009).

What use a gas sensor if it’s not calibrated,  
Not hooked to the Scoop, or its readings ignored?  
When the dust from the Miner lies thick in the deeps,  
What use the stone dust still bagged up and stored?  
What use the inspector if he turns a blind eye  
To the open bare wires, to fuel spilled on the coal?  
What use regulation if it’s all for a buck,  
And there’s scarcely a thought for the men on the coal? (Archbold 1992).

The songs also reference Nova Scotia premier Donald Cameron and how he was not assessed any blame for the disaster in a mine he had heavily supported (Comish 1993:52-53). An example of this is evident in “Westray Remembered:”

Some high politicians, at first they did cry,  
But their greatest concern was to cover their hides,  
And the rot in the system meant that no one would pay.  
Our courts they did fail us so badly that way (McLean 2000).

“Westray Remembered” also references a prior inspection of the mine which did not note dangers within the mine (Comish 1993:33).

Songs about Westray are therefore different from songs about other incidents as they place the disaster in context by discussing details preceding and subsequent to the incident. Songs about Westray are also the only songs to carry a sense of anger and bitterness. While songs about other incidents contain fatalism to make sense of how something so terrible could happen, Westray can be explained in terms of human greed for power and money.

### **Danger and the Inevitability of Mining**

The songs do depict the dangers involved with mining life quite well, which is a key aspect of being a miner. For example “The Ballad of Springhill,” about the 1958 mine disaster, ends with the words:

In the town of Springhill, you don't sleep easy  
Often the earth will tremble and roll.  
When the earth is restless, miners die  
Bone and blood is the price of coal (Seeger, reprinted in *O'Donnell*  
1992:146).

These words illustrate the danger of bumps and reflect mine disasters being a constant part of mining: some of the miners trapped in the Springhill 1958 disaster had been in the mine during the 1956 explosion and also present during other accidents (Brown, 2002:51). The risks involved in mining are something accepted and feared by miners and their families. Yet despite the dangers, men continued to go down into the mines to work. In fact, many songs that depict the dangers of mining and disasters go on to mention the inevitability of working in a mine. Some songs make general references to this:

Move away and you'll lose the strength of your family  
And you'll pay with your pride if you go on the dole.  
Now these two are certain but the next is a chance,  
That you'll pay with your blood if you go on the coal (Archbold 1992).

But morning sun will rise again,  
As sure the rooster crows,  
And man will toil beneath the soil  
Where'er the coal seams grow (Provoe).

Others specifically connect working in the mine to the way to earn a living:

There are other brave men also,  
Of whom you have never read –  
Men who take all kind of chances  
Just to earn their daily bread (Chicanot, reprinted in O'Donnell 1992:132).

To all day long smash through stone,  
When breathing dust and dirt.  
To feed their families, keep their home,  
They've learned they must push on (Wood 2009).

Only two songs serve as reminders that there are alternatives to working in a mine, seemingly responding to the prevalent attitude that there are not:

“My son,” he said, “don't be a miner,  
'Cause it's hard work and too little pay.  
You'll dig in that hole for that company's coal  
And wind up just digging your grave” (Conn).

“No More Pickin' Coal” specifically refutes the idea of mining as the only way to provide sustenance for a family:

Those big city lights keep calling me;  
No more pickin' coal,  
No more pickin' coal.

Mama, Mamma, please stop that cryin';  
There'll soon be lots of bread, and chicken frying (MacDonald).

The songs therefore follow a characteristic typical of country music that is defined by Peterson (1992) as “class-*unconsciousness*, a fatalistic state in which people bemoan their fate, yet accept it” (p. 60). Most songs depict the tragedies as a part of life.

### **Religion**

Religion is often in the songs, a reflection of the importance of religion in small mining towns. Prayer is mentioned as a way of dealing with or responding to the disaster, either from the perspective of witnesses or those trapped below. The religious elements in songs of this type are meant to help comfort grieving families and communities. Religious references are also used to evoke sympathy and hope for the deceased, by

suggesting that they live on in some way (Wilson 1992:127). This can be seen in “The Springhill Mine Explosion of 1956:”

The Lord had heard their prayers—  
The first man walked from the mine (Kingston, reprinted in O’Donnell  
1992:138).

It is also a theme in “Miracle at Springhill:”

The Lord was helping both sides.  
To meet and so he led,  
The rescue crew at three thousand feet, to men they thought were dead  
(Rudolph, reprinted in O’Donnell 1992:140).

There are also religious references in “The Springhill Disaster of 1958:”

Oh be thankful you fellows brought back from the dead  
And pray for your friends who have gone on ahead  
And you boys up in heaven as you look on down  
Don't forget to remember Springhill mining town (Ruddick, reprinted in  
O’Donnell 1992:144).

References such as this are even present in at least one song about the 1992 Westray mine disaster, “Westray Remembered,” in which justice will one day be served by God:

But someday in Heaven before God's great throne  
There'll be no escaping when sins are atoned (McLean 2000).

The songs also depict the sense of religious fatalism often seen in mining communities who have suffered a disaster. Save Westray, the disasters can often not be blamed on human error; inquiries usually find that despite major safety measures, little could have been done to prevent the disasters. Similarly the rescues of those trapped below are seen as miraculous. People turn to religion to explain these events, and see them as fated. This is illustrated in “Springhill Mine Disaster (1891):”

Dark phantoms rise before my eyes,  
News comes, the vision's fled,  
One hundred three and twenty of our  
Springhill miners dead (Creighton and Metcalfe, reprinted in O’Donnell  
1992:134).

The reference to “dark phantoms” followed by the deaths seems to suggest a reaper like presence, or predetermined aspect of the miner’s deaths. The last four lines of “Rescue from the Springhill Coal Mine” also show the fatalist belief in a higher power causing the disaster:

The reason for these tragedies  
We never will know why,  
The answer’s in the power  
Of the Master up on high (Miller, reprinted in O’Donnell 1992:142).

Several lines in “Miracle at Colliery Two,” which its title itself underlines, show a belief in fated results in a more positive light:

Twelve more alive, the good news came -- hard to believe but true.  
God had cared and prayers had spared and hope became renewed  
(Kingston, reprinted in O’Donnell 1992:145).

### **Bravery**

The fact that miners risk their lives in their jobs is one that miners face at all times. Bravery, whether referring to the rescuers, the trapped miners, or both, is mentioned in many songs as exemplified by “The Miracle at Springhill”:

Two Draeger men died heroes, as the poison gas did roll  
A tense and breath-held nation, knew that the help though brave  
May not in time reach the miners, the ending it looked grave.

Below the surface, miners had made their bid for life  
They breathed life-giving oxygen, through a hose dug with a knife  
Some miners bravely started, to crawl in painful flight  
But breathed their last along the way, while seeking for daylight  
(Rudolph, reprinted in O’Donnell 1992:139).

The general bravery of miners, a necessary trait for those in their line of work, is also evident in several lines from the New Waterford mine disaster song, “The Omen:”

Ah! But brave men will always dare to risk their lives at work.  
They laugh at danger, scorn to fear, will not be called ‘a shirk’  
(MacMillan and O’Donnell, reprinted in O’Donnell 1992:180).

The bravery of the rescuers is depended on by the men trapped underground, who hope to be rescued:

Listen thru the rubble for a rescue team,  
Six hundred feet of coal and slag;  
Hope imprisoned in a three-foot seam (Seeger, reprinted in O'Donnell 1992:146).

These lines not only show the bravery of the rescuers in describing them as barefaced, meaning they have no protection against gases, but they show the determination of the rescuers, who venture into possibly unstable underground tunnels, which could harbour pockets of deadly gases, to save those trapped. Furthermore, these lines, in being sung from the perspective of those trapped and listening for signs of help, illustrate the understanding of those trapped that the rescuers will stop at nothing to save them. They can depend upon a rescue team coming, and expect it (Beach and Lucas 1960:14, 23). This is also seen in the previous quotation from "The Omen," as the desire of miners not to be a "shirk" extends to rescue work as well. This is a key part of the miner's mentality, the same part that drives the belief that until the body is found, a missing man is assumed to be alive. This gives a clear picture of the trust miners share, an important part of that community.

### **Realism**

The songs portray disasters as they are often with brutal reality:

It was in sixteen for my bread I did labour,  
That day the dreadful news went 'round,  
But little I thought would so many lay lifeless  
All torn and mangled under the ground (Timmons, reprinted in O'Donnell 1992:150).

In addition to describing the tragedy the songs accurately describe the immediate response of miners to seek to rescue their comrades still within the mine. This appears in two lines from "Rescue from the Springhill Coal Mine:"

Rescue parties at once started working  
To find the men trapped below. (Miller, reprinted in O'Donnell 1992:141).

In short, they do not portray shocked miners unable to react. There is never a suggestion of confusion or hesitation on the part of the rescuers in any of the songs.

There is no attempt in any of the songs to ignore the tragic loss of life or the difficulties in dealing with that; but most songs tend to avoid mention of retrieving and identifying bodies. However, in two songs, LeGere's "Spring Hill Mine Disaster" (which is about the 1956 incident) and "Westray Remembered" those bodies which could not be retrieved before the mine was sealed are noted:

Eighty-eight were rescued  
With twenty-six left behind (LeGere, reprinted in Rosenberg 2000:176).

15 bodies were all they recovered that time.  
11 are buried still down in that mine (McLean 2000).

This is significant as mining communities see the retrieval of bodies as essential and leaving bodies in the mine as taboo (McMullan 2005:25).

### **Why Mining Songs are Accurate: Summary and Conclusions**

As has been shown, though the songs have a few minor factual errors and most leave out what happened before and after the incidents they deal with, they are for the most part reasonably accurate in the way they describe what happens in a mine disaster. On the whole they show determined men going about the grim business—and sometimes losing their own lives—as they try to rescue trapped colleagues. Since this trend towards accuracy seems in contrast to what happens with movies and novels, it is important to try to explain why.

One possibility is that most of these songs were written within days of the events being described in fact in some cases the writing began while rescue efforts were still going on. That meant that the writers still had a very fresh impression of what was happening and had happened. Since much of the news coverage was about two main themes—the efforts to rescue trapped miners and the necessity for families to wait for news, it is not surprising that these themes emerge and that the songs cover them adequately and accurately.

A second possibility is that folk singers regularly perform their material in front of audiences some of whom are knowledgeable. An artist who suggested that miners panicked when they were trapped and that others did not risk their lives to rescue those trapped would find his audience -- to put it mildly -- less than impressed. A movie maker creates fiction and a novelist rarely has to confront the historical figures he writes about; but a folk singer is continually in contact with his or her audience. Even Peggy Seeger who wrote "Ballad of Springhill" in France eventually ended up performing in Nova Scotia and visiting Springhill (Nunn 2002:4).

A third reason for the relative accuracy may be -- and this will have to be examined when songs about other types of incidents are researched -- is that some of those who write songs about mine disasters are familiar with the culture of a mining community. They know the concern every time someone goes underground. They know the daily relief when their miners return safely. Certainly a few of the songs about Springhill reflect a direct knowledge of mining and of Springhill itself. Eddie LeGere was in Hamilton, Ontario when he wrote “The Spring Hill Mine Disaster” in 1966, ten years after the 1956 disaster. But LeGere grew up in Joggins, Nova Scotia, not far from Springhill and one of those who died was his brother-in-law. In his opening verse, he identifies with the miners:

Listen friends to my story,  
It’s sad but true,  
Some hundred men went down the mine,  
Who were just like me and you (LeGere, reprinted in Rosenberg 2000:175).

In addition, one of the many songs about the 1958 Springhill disaster—“Springhill Disaster”—also had a link to the town. Although it was written by Virginia Bluegrass singer Bill Clifton, it was based on a poem supplied to Clifton by one of the survivors, Maurice Ruddick. Clifton contacted Ruddick while he was still recuperating in hospital and Ruddick sent him the poem which formed the basis for the song recorded by Clifton and the Dixie Mountain Boys. Ruddick himself was a singer and he was known to have been keeping up the spirits of other miners while they were trapped for nine days. Ruddick’s daughter who was also a performer and she later sang the song on television (Rosenberg 2000:162-163).

Jack Kingston, who wrote another of the songs about the 1956 disaster, did get his material from radio but he, too, could identify with those involved. Although Kingston like LeGere performed mainly on radio in Hamilton, Ontario, he had performed in Springhill the summer before the 1956 disaster and he recalled going from home to home, being made welcome and singing a few songs (Rosenberg 2000:157-158). When he heard what was happening he collected radio news reports and read them carefully and composed his songs days after the last trapped miner was rescued. His song reflects accurately the fears of those waiting for news and the fact that some two rescuers died trying to help trapped colleagues:

Well over a hundred miners were trapped in Colliery four...  
For hours and hours they worked away, to reach them it was slow,  
Brave Draeger men were lost in vain to reach the ones below  
(Kingston, reprinted in O’Donnell:138).

A fourth reason is that even where the source is media it appears that the medium used as a source is usually radio and after a mine disaster radio reports focus on attempts to rescue trapped miners. There are updates every newscast about the search and there is in depth and dramatic coverage when trapped miners are rescued. Anyone using the media as a source would inevitably focus on that aspect of what happened. It would also be obvious that those on the surface would be anxiously waiting for news. The story of a mine disaster is therefore in a sense a simple one: there is a problem; there is a search for survivors; those of the surface wait for the news; eventually some trapped miners are rescued.

Thus even two song writers who depended entirely on media sources for their material got it right. Roy Rudolph was driving listening to his car radio about the 1956 disaster. He stopped, jotted down a few notes then composed his song, “The Miracle at Springhill,” as soon as he reached his home in Dartmouth, Nova Scotia. He too mentioned that two rescuers had died:

The second day, on Friday, death took its first great toll,  
Two Draeger men died heroes, as the poison gas did roll  
(Rudolph, reprinted in O’Donnell 1992:139).

TV was the source for the most popular of all the songs written about Springhill—Peggy Seeger’s “Ballad of Springhill,” about the 1958 disaster. This song was written two people who did not even know where Springhill was. Seeger and her boyfriend, Ewan McColl, saw coverage of the incident on French television. Since Seeger knew nothing about mining, she got McColl—who had been in a mine—to write a verse describing what it was like in a mine:

Down at the coal face the miners working  
Rattle of the belt and the cutters blade  
Rumble of rock and the walls close round  
The living and the dead men two miles down (Seeger, reprinted in  
O’Donnell 1992:146).

Seeger made her first visit to Springhill when she happened to notice a highway sign for “Springhill,” as she was heading to a folk song concert in Canso, Nova Scotia. While there she met Caleb Rushton, one of the surviving miners, who is actually mentioned by name in her song:

Three days passed and the lamps gave out  
And Caleb Rushton he up and says  
“There’s no more water or light or bread,

So we'll live on songs and hope instead,  
We'll live on songs and hope instead” (Seeger, reprinted in O’Donnell  
1992:146).

Her song has been so well received that it has been recorded by groups as well known as the Travellers and the Canadian coal miners’ chorus known as Men of the Deeps (Rosenberg 2000:165). Given the perceived accuracy of her version of what happened, it is necessary to accept that when the media cover mine disasters they tend to get it right. One reason why that may be true is that reporters covering such events are inevitably stuck day after day after day waiting along with everyone else for news. It would not be surprising that this would make them very much aware of the culture of mining and the daily risk of going down in a mine. We expect to explore these possibilities when we examine folk songs about other types of incidents to see if they, too, tend to report reality rather than myth.

In their study of media coverage of disasters, Wenger and Quarantelli found that the media tend to ignore non-traditional activities such as search and rescue, which are conducted mainly by volunteers working in emergent groups (1989:61). They found that only 8.6 per cent of newspaper articles and 8.4 per cent of electronic media reports on disaster mention search and rescue and when it was mentioned, those stories inevitably relied to some extent on non-traditional sources (1989:61). However, as such sources were often missed, an important activity was given light attention (Wenger and Quarantelli 1989:62).

This is not the case however for reports about mine disasters. A search of radio and television reports of mine disasters in the CBC archives showed that media reports do cover such normally ignored aspects of a disaster such as search and rescue. In several electronic media sources surveyed on the 1956 and 1958 Springhill disasters, the attention was almost entirely on search and rescue, with reports on progress, chances of rescue, obstacles, and time frames the primary focus. They devoted some time to the hope, worry, and grief of the family members waiting to hear of their miner’s rescue. Rarely did they give time to note funeral services, outside aid, and the social, political and economic impact of the disaster, if at all. All this mirrors the focus found in these songs. The ability of these sources to interview miners also allowed for a greater understanding of the miner’s life and the context in which these disasters stand. This may be why composers who knew little of the mining life and were receiving information through media alone were about to convey the proper context in their songs. This may suggest that folk songs about mine disasters are accurate because of the nature of media coverage of such incidents, coverage that is different than coverage of other mass death incidents. That idea will be tested in studies of folk songs about other disasters when – it seems possible – the focus of the coverage will be very different.

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