

**Commentary and Review of  
Edward D. Ives'  
"Larry Gorman, the Man Who Made the Songs"**

**By Dave Olson**

Folk Songs are often described as coming from a sort of nebulous origin. Most can't be traced back to a definitive author with any accuracy. Usually a rough region or groups of people suffice as an explanation for the song. This element produces a hazy line between what is a "folk" song and what isn't. In this book, Edward Ives attempts to define this line a little better by tracing back many songs learned, passed on and collected through oral tradition back to a man named Larry Gorman. Ives explains, "... here was a man who was well-known among his peers and contemporaries as a maker of songs, and the songs he made went into oral tradition. Would not a study of these songs in the context of his life shed some light on the creation of folksongs in general and the relation of the individual song maker to his tradition?"(1) With this hypothesis, Ives goes on to carefully chronicle Gorman's life and the subsequent legends and stories that still surround him.

Ives interest in Gorman formed after a night of singing songs with a group that included a man who said had known Larry Gorman, "the man who made the songs." He began to dredge up material from books and newspapers and finally became interested enough to put an ad in the

paper asking for information concerning Gorman. This led to replies and subsequent visits primarily to the Canadian maritime Provinces where Gorman was born and raised, and northern Maine where he spent much of his life.

After collecting songs, verses, stories and anecdotes, he began sorting out the truths from the misconceptions, this however, left a pile of "maybes" and "could-bes" that needed dealt with. By analyzing stylistic attributes of the songs, chronological data from stories, personality traits of Gorman and the same of other woodsman poets/songwriters of the same era, Ives was able to be quite accurate.

When Ives wasn't sure of his information, he flat out said so. This, if anything, lends more credibility to his research. This ambivalence is to be expected, after all they are still folksongs and although not as diverse as older ballads, they are still subject to variations in content and whom the informant claims to have wrote it.

Gorman's songs usually had something to do with some person in the community; a neighbor, an employer, a politician, a co-worker etc. He would find any quirk about a person and turn into humorous verse. This understandably, was both the reason for his popularity as well as his unpopularity. Since the people he sang the songs to were aware of or knew the subject and usually shared the same views, they loved the songs and learned and sang them. On the other hand, when the person who had been "songed" caught wind of it, they weren't too pleased for the most part. Most learned their lesson not to complain because Gorman would often make up a song more scathing and clever than before. Stories tell of him being run out of

town for a few particularly brutal tunes. Most of these tunes seem trite and adolescent in context today, but when Ives explains the songs' popularity, you can see how the victim could over-react in such a way. This probably also caused his family members undue stress.

The songs were not malicious for sake of hurting someone but rather Gorman was up for a good laugh and down on bullies and users and people he felt weren't as decent as they should be. His songs were his way of usurping undue or misused authority and doing his part for the downtrodden and underdog. Still they were not "protest" songs exactly, yet they had more social relevance than other workingman or satirists' songs of the day. Ives tries to shed some light, "(he) was not unique by virtue of the fact that he was a satirist. The making of satirical songs was a widespread traditional practice . . . .In any community there was apt to be a satirist, well known locally, who was responsible for many such songs and from whom they were, with some apprehension, expected. Larry was doing nothing unexpected or unusual when he scandalized a neighbor in song; others in his culture would do the same sort of thing. Then why all the shouting, if there was nothing special about him? There is ample reason; there was something special about him. But while we are trying to distinguish Larry from the lump, we should also try to see him as part of it."(180)

Ives both asks the questions and answers them without easily excusing himself with comfortable abstractions. He addresses all aspects of folklore research and follows up on them but takes them all with two grains of salt explaining that all terms are generalities and none are the rule.

He approaches Gorman as a folk-poet and as a member of the grassroots culture where folklore flourishes. He recognizes the world's need for heroes, however faulty and contrived they may be, and how "Gorman, the songwriter" was shaped by people to fit that often absurd role and how it was different from the regular-guy, misunderstood, working man who happened to be able to and enjoyed making up songs off the top of his head. It was to the point that other people claimed to be Larry or in one case a novel was written about him portraying him as a superman of sorts. This wasn't him and the people who knew him knew that but his songs traveled further than he did.

The local bard was usually the man people wanted to have around for entertainment but in talking to people who knew Gorman, Ives found that he was not particularly popular and the novelty of his antics wore off quickly for many people. He allegedly had a temper, became easily annoyed and threw away social manners in favor of a kick or some sort of benefit, ". . . the simple fact that a man was a poet would not win him acceptance . . . (He) never won real acceptance, not only in spite of his skill in song making but partly because of his great devotion to that craft. No one was really safe from his wit, if he found something funny about a person, He would make a song up about it, whether that person was friend or foe."(183-4)

He was more the type to let people think as they may and smile, kick his feet up on the table and recite a verse like, "And when they see me coming, / Their eyes Stick out like prongs, / Saying, "Beware of Larry Gorman! / He's the man who makes the songs."(145)

In looking at his lyrics, Ives shows how Gorman became a legitimate poet. His rhyme and

stanza structures were challenging and worked-out with thought and not thrown together to fill the temporary purpose of passing time like many songs were. Although they're all "workingman's" songs, there is still a difference stemming from the spirit, purpose and attitude behind them. He avoided the stilted language often found in traditional ballads and wrote in the language of his day and position. He didn't generally write ballads in the traditional storytelling fashion but told a story using events rather than linear narrative structure. Gorman was not a musician; he usually just stuck a tune to the song and rarely had printed music on the broadsides to go along with the aforementioned words. Although Ives, using both conventional notation as well as his own "code", did take the pains to transcribe the common tunes, sung by his informants, in the book. He justifies by saying, "In fact, it is possible that we have already learned as much about the kinds of tunes Gorman had in mind from our study of the words as we will from studying the extant tunes."(159) It's not the technical aspects or faultless data that's completely important, it's the people and the memories and the impact on others as its passed down through the years that is.

In writing Gorman's biography, Ives treats him as an artist as well as he treats himself as a folklorist, they both do what they do because they like it, they are curious about it and if others are enhanced by it, all the better. Ives says about Gorman's skill and craft, "(He) was an artist. However we may feel about the quality or value of his art, there is no other satisfactory way to describe him."(187)

He also makes sure that you know Larry Gorman worked as a farmer, shipbuilder,

factory worker, fisherman, river-driver, mill-hand and primarily as a woodsman. He was “real folk” just like the people Ives talked to about Gorman and his contemporaries. He was a product of his environment and region and he stayed true to that as was reflected in his work. He stayed at his craft and folk tradition is what has kept his name around as none of the original broadsides ever surfaced during Ives research.

Ives says about his own work in researching Gorman, "I have sung Larry's songs and told stories about him, and heard them sung and told, in kitchens and front parlors from Miminegash, P.E.I., to Rumford, Maine. And everyone laughed and shook their heads and said how that sounded just like him and he certainly was a rascal and did I know anymore. There have been many such pleasant evenings for me, and Larry Gorman was the founder of the feast in each case, the man who drew us together as he had often drawn others together before."

In his book, Ives treats his subject as well as his work and research with intelligence, open-mindedness, integrity, and lets the true personality of everything show through.