



Lightfoot. By Nicholas Jennings. [Toronto]: Viking, 2017. 328 pp. ISBN 9780735232556.

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After Nicholas Jennings wrote the 8,000-word biography for the CD set, *Songbook* (1999), Gordon Lightfoot was apparently so impressed that he permitted Jennings to write a full, authorised biography that would be released after his death. With the Sesquicentennial in 2017 and the fact that Lightfoot has produced so many quintessential Canadian songs, the publisher and Jennings persuaded the singer to allow the biography to appear in that momentous year.

Over the past two decades Jennings compiled numerous writings on Lightfoot and interviewed many persons. He was able to interview the songwriter himself twenty times over a five-year period. Indeed, scattered through the book are italicized sections that are word-for-word excerpts from those interviews. It seems strange, though, that none of Lightfoot's wives or live-in girlfriends were interviewed. After all, this biography does provide details of Lightfoot's marriages, relationships, and children.

The opening chapter initially draws in the reader by underlining how by 1974 Lightfoot was a wealthy superstar. Simultaneously, his album *Sundown* and its title track had topped the charts. The next page launches the reader into the 1975 Rolling Thunder tour and Bob Dylan's inclusion of Lightfoot in the Maple Leaf Gardens' shows. The last concert ended with a "bacchanal" at Lightfoot's Rosedale mansion. On its top floor Dylan and Lightfoot traded songs. As Jennings writes, "Although more workmanlike and straightforward, Lightfoot's songs had an artful structure and poetic resonance that made them accessible in ways that Dylan's weren't" (p. 6). The next chapter launches into tracing how Lightfoot had become that songwriter.



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Orillia was the birthplace of Gordon Lightfoot and where he spent his first two decades, being a boy soprano in the church choir, and then a member of several different vocal groups. He got his early music education there and developed a love for performing. The town's idyllic setting, close to nature, nurtured a love for the outdoors that remained constant throughout his life.

Jennings follows a chronological presentation of Lightfoot's career. After outlining his initial experiences, such as managing to find the occasional singing gig with his partner, Terry Whelan, copying scores for the CBC, and then landing a regular spot on the TV show, *Country Hoedown*, the author provides a fine overview of Toronto's coffeehouse musical scene during the 1960s and 1970s. By participating in its vitality, Lightfoot laid the groundwork for creating his *oeuvre* of more than 300 songs, and cultivating relationships with other performers that would become crucial for his career.

Unlike many of those performers, Lightfoot chose to remain based in Canada and Jennings skilfully writes about the "mechanics" of the music business. After the successes of "For Lovin' Me" and "Early Morning Rain" in 1964, the commencement of almost constant touring for the singer began, including appearances at the most prestigious folk festivals. Annoyed at how his recording contract and other aspects of his management had been handled, in 1969 Lightfoot formed Early Morning Productions.

Although Jennings frequently gives us details about the person, place, or incident that inspired a song, and occasionally a strophe of a song, no thorough analysis of its poetic imagery appears except for a reference to what was happening in Lightfoot's personal life to explain its content. This reader was disappointed that the musical aspects of his songs received even less attention.

What about the guitars Lightfoot uses? Jennings mentions Lightfoot using a four-string guitar when he performed with Whelan during the early days in Toronto. However, the book states on page 273, fewer than 20 pages before the end, that Lightfoot had been using his six-string Martin guitar since 1948. Earlier, Jennings related how the twelve-string instrument was used for "Sundown." Apart from this meagre information about actual instruments used, little is given about his guitar technique and how it was developed. Jennings does assert that Lightfoot uses a limited number of keys for his songs. To this reader it is not surprising that many have G as the basic key, as this is true of much guitar-based literature. In any case, even a superficial examination of the songs reveals usage of many other keys.

Early on, Jennings refers to Irish folksongs being included in the repertoire that Lightfoot sang. Again, no details are given about what these songs were, or how the singer became aware of them apart from repertoire to be found on the recordings of Bob Gibson and The Weavers. Yet, in listening to Lightfoot's own songs, one often hears the strophic forms (ABBA or ABCA) so frequently found in songs from Ireland. Also, in another interview, Lightfoot explains that prior

to writing “The Wreck of the Edmund Fitzgerald,” he had been working with a melody based on an old Irish dirge. That melody became the basis of the new song.¹ How did Lightfoot come across that dirge melody?

Overall, Lightfoot’s output has been noted as being influenced by country music and his melodies usually have a strong tendency to descend. This reader has been curious to know whether the singer was aware that the overall contour of most country music tunes is similar to those of Indigenous melodies to a certain extent in their propensity to descend, perhaps after a quick leap upwards at the beginning.² Also, some of his songs such as “Cherokee Bend” make specific reference to Indigenous persons. This book informs us that the Mohawk artist, Robert Markle, not only painted his portrait but became a close friend. Did Lightfoot hear any traditional Indigenous musical expressions through Markle or possibly on his canoe trips in remote parts of Canada?

With the lack of direct musical insights to be found in the book, this reader was delighted to find that the endpapers are reproductions from the manuscripts of two Lightfoot songs. The front endpaper is from “Early Morning Rain” while the endpaper is “If You Could Read My Mind.” The latter example shows Lightfoot shifting metres in order to better place the accentuation of certain words.

Throughout the book, Jennings emphasizes that it was through persistence and discipline that Lightfoot achieved success in his career. But approximately half of the book deals with the complications caused in his family life and his career by his dependence on alcohol. The singer recognized that he needed to go on annual strenuous canoe trips to get off the bottle and get back in physical shape in order to perform his next tour. Where was his discipline then to not depend on alcohol before performing or trying to compose a song?

In spite of these gaps in covering the legacy of Lightfoot, the book is handsomely presented with 12 pages of black-and-white photos. The end matter includes a full dated discography up to 2016.

1. See http://www.mlive.com/entertainment/grand-rapids/index.ssf/2015/11/why_gordon_lightfoot_wrote_the.html

2. See Elaine Keillor, “Amerindians at the Rodeos and Their Music,” in *Contemporary Indigenous Popular Music in North America*, Karl Neuenfeldt, ed. *The World of Music: Journal of the Department of Ethnomusicology Otto-Friedrich University of Bamberg* 44, no. 1 (2002): 75-94.