

9-28-1965

Cod Liver Oil

Omer McKenna

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.library.umaine.edu/songstorysamplercollection>



Part of the [Ethnomusicology Commons](#), [Folklore Commons](#), and the [Oral History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

McKenna, Omer. 1965. "Cod Liver Oil." NA65.19, CD95.9. Northeast Archives of Folklore and Oral History, Raymond H. Fogler Special Collections Department, University of Maine..

This Song is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@UMaine. It has been accepted for inclusion in Maine Song and Story Sampler by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@UMaine. For more information, please contact um.library.technical.services@maine.edu.

Recommended citation: McKenna, Omer. 1965. "Cod Liver Oil." NA65.19, CD95.9. Maine Folklife Center, University of Maine.

Song: "Cod Liver Oil"
Singer: Omer McKenna
Town: Rumford, ME
NA 65.19 CD 95 Track 9
Collector: Sandy Ives
Date: September 28, 1965
Roud: 4221

"**Cod Liver Oil**" was a popular song from Newfoundland, so popular in fact that many have claimed it as a Newfoundland song. Its origins, however, are not so clearly traced. Part of this stems from the fact there seem to be multiple versions of the song, which, along with variations in song titles, are not uncommon among folksongs. Kenneth Peacock is one of several scholars who have suggested the song is an Irish song from at least the nineteenth century. But other folklorists and interested parties from Newfoundland claim the song was written by Johnny Burke (1851-1930), a balladeer from St. John's, Newfoundland. The major problem in attributing the song to one or the other conclusively is that the versions attributed to one source or another are identical or nearly so. The best explanation available posits Burke's version as a parody of the popular nineteenth century Irish song, but it is difficult to say exactly which version Omer McKenna sang for Sandy Ives in 1965.

Regardless of the exact origins, the song continues its popularity in Newfoundland, appearing through the years in several recordings by folk singers and popular musicians alike. It is hardly surprising that the song is popular in Newfoundland, as cod represented a critical portion of the province's economy until a moratorium ended all cod fishing in 1993. Cod liver oil is an aptly named medicinal drink. It has several health benefits as it has high levels of omega-3 fatty acids and vitamins A and D. Finally, one last point deserves note here: despite considerable cultural exchange between Maine and the Maritimes, Newfoundland has largely been isolated from this relationship. Yet "Cod Liver Oil" somehow found its way from Newfoundland to the woods of Maine, where Omer McKenna learned it.

1.

I'm a young married man who is tired of life,
Ten years I've been wed to a sickly wife;
She'll do nothing all day, only sit down and cry
Wishing to God, oh that she would die.
And a friend of my own came to see me one day,
He noticed my wife was a-pining away;
He afterwards told me that she would get strong,
If I get her a bottle of dear Dr. John.

CHORUS:

Oh doctor, oh doctor, oh dear Dr. John,
Your cod liver oil is so pure and so strong;
I'm afraid of my life, I'll go down in the soil,
If my wife don't stop drinking that cod liver oil.

2.

Oh, I bought her a bottle, oh, just for to try,
The way that she drank it you'd think she was dry;
I got her another, it vanished the same
And I thought she had cod liver oil on the brain.
She liked it so good now that there was no doubt,
I know that my wife she got terrible stout;
And as she got stout, of course she got strong,
And then I got jealous of Dr. dear John.

CHORUS

3.
My house it resembles a big doctor's shop,
It's covered with bottles from bottom to top;
And then in the morning when the kettle do boil,
You would think it was singing of cod liver oil.

Sources: Peacock, Kenneth. *Songs of the Newfoundland Outports*. Volume 1. Ottawa: National Museum of Man, 1965, 48-49; Paul Matthew St. Pierre, "De-Bunking Johnny Burke, an Excluded Canadian Troubadour." *Canadian Poetry* 4 (1995); O'Lochlainn, Colm. *More Irish Street Ballads*. London: Pan books, 1978, 60-61; Greenleaf, Elisabeth, and Grace Mansfield. *Ballads and Sea Songs of Newfoundland*. Hatboro, PA: Folklore Associates, 1968, 316; and Kirwin, William J., ed. *John White's Collection of the Songs of Johnny Burke*. St. John's, Nfld: H. Cuff Publications, 1982, 97-100.