Folk Music: Property of the Peasantry?

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There is a prevalence among people to look upon folk music as something quaint, pastoral and ancient, as though God when creating the world had equipped each nation with three hundred or so folk songs and commanded its people to care for them as best they could. Folk music is looked upon by one part of the community as inviolable and sacred, by another as irrelevant and out-of-date. Neither attitude does any good to the musical oral tradition.

In a world where we are increasingly surrounded by "new" things—even in the industrial countries, people now aged forty grew up without colour televisions, CD players, microwaves, automatic car windows, redial buttons on telephones, photocopiers, computers . . . —false values are attached to things that are "old": buildings that should be demolished are protected, unrealistic prices are placed on old articles and they are sold as valuable antiques, whatever their standard of workmanship may be. Worse still, things that should be alive, vibrant and an integral part of our present culture are dubbed old in order to place the value of ancientness and inviolability upon them.

This, after all, is part of human nature. Older people demand respect from their juniors not because they are wiser or simply *more knowledgeable* about the world, but because they have seen that through history the wisest—as opposed to cleverest or best educated—people have tended to be old, or at least to have reached an age of reverence. But while all the wisest people may be old, not all the oldest people are wise.

Can we substitute the elements of this truism to say "All old songs are folk songs, but not all folk songs are old?" This will be one of the purposes of the present excursion.

The folk song is one possession of ours that has suffered greatly from twentieth-century humanity's misunderstanding of what it is. This misunderstanding is not only brought on by ignorance of the true nature of folklore; it is a wilful counterfeiture of the past in order to make it an example for the present. When most of us were children the bemoaning of "the good old days" was the province of the elderly—now it is

not unusual to hear the early middle-aged making the same moan. Part of our survival gear includes an amazing ability to forget pain, whether it be the pain of hunger, or of polio, or of stillborn children, or loss of loved ones through war, or purely of living in time of war. People, it would seem, are able to cover up the unpleasant side of their past and remember with fond, fictive nostalgia the superiority of the past:

> members of literate, industrialized societies can easily look back in longing to a past when desire, ambition and social rank were more circumscribed, when children behaved themselves, when politicians and generals were great men, and when our ancestors were more in touch with both themselves and the natural forces that surrounded them and shaped their lives.....
>
> If the past, however recent, is a series of fictions whose appeal is not at all diminished by our awareness of historical probabilities, one of the tales we like to believe is that popular folk or folk customs are survivals from a time when the members of a poor but contented peasantry, whose lives were rooted in the land they worked, celebrated the turning of the seasons and the accompanying vegetative cycle with simple jollity and innocent sexual license. Or, if we are of a darker cast of mind, we may hold that old customs are debased forms of pre-Christian religious ceremonies, originally dedicated to fertility magic, human sacrifice, and the worship of dark gods. (Pegg 8)

One must separate the folk song from folk ritual. It is far more possible for a ritual to come out of a spontaneous communal activity than for the words and music of a song to come into being via the same route. God did *not* donate folk songs to the human race, even if he imbued some of us with the ability to make music and lyrics. There is a recurring theme in the cartoon series *Asterix the Gaul* which involves the very enthusiastic though incompetent village bard, wishing to celebrate Asterix's freshest exploit, being gagged and tied up by the villagers to prevent him from doing so. In any society, whatever its size, talent is going to be appreciated and ineptitude quashed. Bad artisans will not obtain work, the food of bad cooks will not be eaten, and the inept *maker* will not be heard. Indeed, in the area of performance there tends to be far more self-criticism than in other fields, and people are far more likely to admit openly "I can't sing" or "I can't act" than that they cannot cook or drive a car well.

If we look upon the folk music tradition of two countries, Hungary and England, we find a number of differences. Whereas Hungary long remained for the vast majority of the population an essentially agricultural country whose history comprised the coming and going of external military forces which necessitated, in between, "rebuilding" programmes whose main object was to bring the country back to pre-occupation sta-

tus, England had a much more forward-moving history, primarily because it was itself expanding and being greatly affected by events in every part of the world. If we take at least one of the functions of the folk song as being a comment upon the environment in which people live, then it logically follows that significant changes in the environment are going to result in significant changes in the statements to be found in folk song.

The prevalence of direct warning in folk songs cannot be denied. Like Aesop's fables, many conclude with a moral, whether a stereotype as can be found in the last verse of many a song dealing with the submission of a girl to the amorous advances of a young man

> So come all you young maidens, take warning from me,
> When you're out on the town don't be easy and free,
> Dress yourself up and set out for a place,
> For there you might meet with young Ramble Away. ("Ramble Away" 17-20)

or the hidden or false moral of the merchant sailor who swears that he will not return to sea...until his money is all spent.

The songs of the sea are a very good place to start when investigating the English folk song. The sea became an intrinsic part of English life in the sixteenth century, when the Tudors, having in the person of Henry VII put an end to internal strife with the defeat of Richard III at Bosworth, could afford to look out upon the world and desire their share of its pickings. The earliest nautical songs must have been created at this time, commemorating feats performed "upon the main". Songs like *All Things Are Quite Silent* evidently come from the time of the Napoleonic Wars, when the loathsome custom of impressing sailors was at its height:

> The fleet had to be maintained by the haphazard and ubiquitous compulsion of the press-gang, because voluntary recruiting was inadequate owing to the notorious conditions on board the royal ships. The life of the fisherman and the merchant sailor was hard enough, but it was better than life on a man-of-war, where the food was foul and scanty, the pay inadequate and irregular, the attention to health nil, and the discipline of iron. (Trevelyan 363)

Trevelyan looks at the evils of press-ganging from the sailors' point of view. The folk song paints an equally vivid picture, but from an angle often, if not generally, left out of the picture by the historian—the girl left behind.

> All things are quite silent, each mortal at rest
> When me and my true love lay snug in one nest
> When a bold set of ruffians they entered our cave

> And they forced my dear jewel to plough the salt wave.
>
> I begged hard for my true love as though I begged for life
> They'd not listen to me although a fond wife
> Saying, "The King he needs sailors, to the sea he must go"
> And they left me lamenting in sorrow and woe. ("All Things are Quite Silent" 1-8)

This is more than a poignant complaint by a wife forcibly separated from her husband. She and many other thousands of wives and sweethearts found themselves suddenly without the most important and possibly the only wage-earner in the family, with little hope of seeing their partner again in the foreseeable future, if at all [**1**]. This inevitably generated a social imbalance, a predilection to hasty marriage or sex without marriage, an increase in the number of exploited, low-paid working women, and prostitution.

Even before the Industrial Revolution, England had evolved into something very different from a largely unchanging agricultural community. By the sixteenth century the merchant class was already well entrenched in active politics, in which activity it was being joined by the wealthier artisans. Even at the very beginning of the eighteenth century the "working man" was often a miner, a seaman or a soldier; many members of or entire families had emigrated to different parts of the world to seek everything from religious freedom, to their fortunes, to evasion of English law. But with the explosion of the Industrial Revolution there was a mass migration from the countryside to the town, complemented by the creation of new mining and mill villages adjacent to the raw materials that were to be worked. Those living out their lives in these new settlements were without any kind of pastoral care, whether that care be the traditional largesse of a country squire toward his tenant, the dubious benefits of the poor house, or care of the soul.

This was no environment for folk songs lauding green fields and meadows, husbandmen and shepherdesses, yet the people still required the oral tradition of music. It was through the medium of the folk song that they were able to express themselves, for the old folk tales appear to have been too ancient to be modified, or had entered the domain of the middle and upper classes and been distorted into a tweeness unrecognizable by the common folk, a process that accelerated throughout the Victorian period, when even Shakespearean texts were mutilated in the name of "good taste," and which continues in the "disneyfication" of folk tales in the present century [**2**]. The ancient agricultural myth which personified barley as John Barleycorn had no relevance to people who rarely saw the light of day, members of a new and expanding class who were experiencing what Bob Pegg refers to as the law of the urban European jungle:

> Urban Europeans .... see their lives in terms of an evolutionary progression. If things are going badly, we should fight

> against them, battle them out, in order to try and alter our circumstances by effort. The strongest and the most able go to the top of the dung hill, while the weaker members of society have to put up with what is almost certainly a less congenial situation. (Pegg 19)

Perhaps the industrial serfs could not alter their situation, but this did not mean that they were unable to comment upon it. Indeed, they were far from passive regarding their lot, and there was more than a little concern that the political activities of the Cooperative Societies and the Methodists [**3**] would bring about a revolution in Britain similar to the one that had just occurred in France.

In their folk song, as elsewhere, the lot of the worker can be found simply, yet poetically, graphically and vibrantly described. *The Four Loom Weaver* depicts the sheer hardship of the factory weaver:

> I'm a four-loom weaver as many a one knows
> I've nowt to eat and I've worn out my clothes
> My clogs are both broken and stockings I've none
> You'd ne'er give me tuppence for owt I've gotten on
>
> Old Billy O't Bent he kept telling me long
> We might have better times if I'd nobbut hold my tongue
> Well I've holden my tongue till I've near lost my breath
> And I feel in my own heart I'll soon clem to death
> . . . . . .
>
> We held on for six weeks, thought each day were the last
> We've tarried and shifted till now we're quite fast
> We lived upon nettles while nettles were good
> And Waterloo porridge was the best of our food.
>
> I'm a four-loom weaver as many a one knows
> I've nowt to eat and I've worn out my clothes
> My clogs are both broken, no looms to weave on
> And I've woven myself to far end. ("Four Loom Weaver" 13-20)

The loyalties of the workers are portrayed in *Doffin' Mistress*, where the quality of the doffers' [**4**] work relates to the respect they hold for Elsie Thompson, who appears as a kind of early foreman [**5**]. If the weaver in the previous song did not benefit from the advice of Old Billy O't Bent, it would appear that the group of workers under Elsie could be thankful for a dynamic, intelligent middle-(wo)man:

> O do you know her, or do you not
> This new doffin' mistress we have got?
> Elsie Thompson it is her name

And she helps her doffers at every frame
Ladli-right fol dol,
Ladli-right fol day.

On Moday morning when she comes in
She hangs her coat on the highest pin
Turns around for to view her frames
Shouting, Damn you, doffers, tie up your ends...

And when the boss he looks round the door
Tie your ends up, doffers, he will roar
Tie our ends up we surely do
For Elsie Thompson but not for you...

Yes, tie our ends up we surely do
For Elsie Thompson but not for you
We'll tie our ends and we'll leave our frames
And wait for Elsie to return again. . . ("Doffin Mistress")

The subject matter of this song is something new; its vibrant anger is everpresent, its vocabulary modern. But the simplicity and the directness of approach to the theme is familiar, too, as are some of the formal elements—the refrain and the stress of important information in the song through repetition interpolated with subtle advance in the song. (At other times the story line of songs will leap, or remain cryptic and unsaid, showing that the repetition of the song is by no means laboured for want of ability of expression, but deliberately employed for effect.)

Returning briefly to Hungary, the purists of musical folklore will deplore the *nóta* of the nineteenth century. An essential difference can be seen between the synthetic creation of nostalgic quasi-folk pastoral songs, and the dynamic creation of new material deliberately describing the new conditions of a large proportion of the population. Even with the *nóta* we must be slow to criticize out of hand, for there are musical and linguistic elements present in new songs that strengthen, rather than denigrate, the tradition, and perhaps more importantly evolution, of a nation. We have already seen that English folk song transmogrified itself from the countryside to the new factory towns along with the population.

Naturally, new songs were—and are—always being produced. We should be slow to deny them a place in the folk tradition until we have examined them as honestly (though not by the same criteria) as we would a piece of written literature. Much of what was written by the quasi-balladmongers of the sixties—the Beatles, Cohen, Dylan—will for one reason or other disappear, whether through lack of artistic quality, spuriousness, or a discontinuance of social or commercial need, in the same way as *A KING or a CONSUL? A NEW SONG to the Tune of Derry Down* [**6**], a deliberate piece of anti-French propaganda composed to stir up na-

tionalistic feeling against Napoleon Buonapart, has disappeared from the folk repertoire. (See full lyrics of song in the Appendix.)

The folk song, then, is to be taken as an important source of information that runs parallel with the written documentation of historians. If the worthy songs of the past have managed to survive, it is because they contain some degree of honesty not lesser than the documentation of contemporary politicians, for indeed they *are* a documentation of how the largest percentage of the population regarded the historical period in which they existed.

They are certainly not the exclusive property of a non-existent peasant class romanticized by the urban bourgeoisie; a romantic, unrequited and utterly hopeless love affair entered into, both sadly and luckily, by the very folk song collectors who sought to preserve precisely those songs for absolutely the wrong reasons. The pastoral song is but one type, and a type increasingly irrelevant to an ever-growing urban section of the community. Every war, every social change, has been monitored by the "folk", whether it be a Catholic Irish mother threatening her child with "Go to sleep, or Cromwell will come in the night and steal you away" or the modifying of characters in mummers' plays, or the creation of a new song, as in the above-mentioned case of the broadside ballad "A King or a Consul". The attitude of many "Hungarian" Hungarians towards the picturesque but slightly archaic Transylvanian dialect is one unfair to the population of Transylvania, for it insinuates a requirement upon them not to change in order to gratify the nostalgic notions of the urban folk devotee that the Transylvanian peasant may be poor, downtrodden by the Romanian government, denied essential consumer commodities, but that at least he is happy enough to burst into song at the drop of a hat. As Béla Halmos, the Hungarian folk song collector and researcher related to me a few years ago after a field trip, when he asked the elderly Transylvanian man to sing him a song, the answer came out [my free translation] "Why, laddie? I've no money, no pálinka [**7**], it's nobody's wedding—why should I sing?" Well, certainly not a song about the beauties of life.

The eminent folk song scholar A. L. Lloyd, whose standard volume *Folk Song In England* does not contain a chapter headed "pastoral songs", describes the folk song as a living organism:

> Too often we think of folk traditions as being like 'constant marble stone', changing very slowly, if at all, under the snail-bite of erosion rather than through any sharply-defined action of history. If that is the view from the library, experience in the field shows otherwise. The recent arrival of Indian elephant-drivers in some African logging districts is already transforming the local melody. In the inter-War years, the opening of the bus service and the introduction of artificial fertilizer helped to broaden the life and alter the singing style of a group of Transylvanian villages, bringing an ornate lyricism to what was formerly dour and bitter. A living tradition

> is not a stone column but a plant, hardy but sensitive to climate change. (Lloyd 159)

Elsewhere in the same book he states that

> In a flourishing folk tradition, work on an already-created song never ceases. There is nothing private or exclusive about a folk song; it is the most public and communal form of music and poetry imaginable. In their inception the words and tunes are socially determined and throughout their life they are subject to endless collective elaboration. (Lloyd 65)

The plant from the first quotation was considered to be drooping and dying at the turn of the century, when the first wave of this century's collectors, anxious to save and preserve the past, set out to collect as many songs as possible. They approached the oldest people of the rural areas, because they believed that the countryside was where "it was all at" and that the oldest people would be able to remember the most antique (i.e., *authentic*) material. Unfortunately, these same people had often forgotten parts of the lyrics and even tunes of songs.

We must never devalue the sterling work of these enthusiastic collectors, not only from this but from earlier centuries: Child, Laws, Dr Gardiner, the Hammonds, Cecil Sharp, the composer Ralph Vaughan Williams. They left us a rich heritage to build upon. But more recently it has been realized that there are other modes of life described and documented in song, perhaps the largest group of these being the songs related to work, and the sphere of collection has broadened considerably.

If anything, Lloyd's plant seems more likely destined to be killed by kindness. The second of the two Lloyd quotations may be hinting that in fact where the tradition flourishes it has no need to be assisted by artificial fertilizers. And if it is not flourishing? Are we to artificially resuscitate that which has outlived its generation, like a leftover dinosaur? Bob Stewart takes a stance both harsh yet hopeful in his *Where Is Saint George?*

> People begin to turn instinctively to their racial roots for both entertainment and inspiration when they realise that the fruits of accepted society are surely rotten. This reversion is at first an intellectual process, because the true folk tradition is dead...
>
> Our present 'folk revival' is not very creative... It has developed a commercial style and flavour of its own, quite far removed from the tradition that inspired it. . . Do we have a tradition of any sort left? Do we have anything to hand on to the future other than a large collection of dull books and commercial recordings? More disturbing is the question—is there no future at all for folk-music, is it being erased from the mass mind by generations of television, anti-education,

> commercial music and advertising psychology. . . if the tradition is deliberately denied, as at the present time, our energies have no broad stream in which to flow, and are channelled into the useless backwaters of consumer orientation. (116-17)

In the following lines from the same passage, the author blames not only popular cults but also intellectual art for threatening the survival of his national culture:

> The redundant state of serious music, and the blatant corruption of popular music, are typical of forms of creation that have become isolated from their native tradition. Intellectual arrogance begins the process of isolation, which is completed by intentional commercialism. It is vitally necessary to shatter the idol-images of self-devouring art and soul-destroying pop cults. (117)

As the title of the book suggests, Stewart is hunting for an English identity. His style is not one of gloom throughout the book: a ray of sunshine comes through the clouds of doom as he objectively—though with some subjective sorrow—states that there will *always* be some kind of group identity, but that parameters change. Whatever "folk" may be in the future, at least history has shown that dross "is easily forgotten, and the pseudo-songs that have appeared in the past few years will disappear just as easily, leaving no mark upon whatever folk tradition does survive."

Folk culture will always survive just as long as there are folk around. Heartless it may seem, but we must always leave the individual items, the physical and metaphysical manifestations of culture, to change with the tides. This is not to say that we should no longer collect (and preferably sing) folk songs of the past, as they have as much cultural significance as other materials enlightening us on the ways and beliefs of our ancestors. But we must bear in mind that as new winds blow, we must modify according to them.

"A tradition leads where it will, recreating itself along the way" (Stewart 117).

When England was a land of meadows and pasture, and the people worked upon it, then their folk songs echoed their way of life. As the population became urban and industrial, so did the folk songs. One of the most consistent features of the folk song lyric is its political awareness: songs have appeared describing everything from the suffering of the people in the wake of the enclosure acts, to mining disasters, through to the aftermath of the demolition of the Berlin Wall. The folk song is the common property of the people, but not even the people have any particular rights in terms of what form it should take in any given time. It is, in fact, quite possible that the folk song as a genre will cease to exist. But as a vehicle for "folk" expression, which is what it essentially is, the

folk lyric will always be part of a continuum of communal statement of the given community at the given time under given conditions.

Appendix

A KING or a CONSUL?

A NEW SONG to the Tune of *Derry Down.*

Come all you brave Englishmen, list to my story,
You who love peace and freedom, and honour and glory!
No foreign usurper they hither shall bring,
We'll be rul'd by a *native*, our Father and King.
Derry down, down, down, derry down!

No Corsican Despot in England shall rule,
No Disciple avow'd of the Mussulman school;
A Papist at Rome, and at Cairo a Turk,
Now this thing, now that thing, as best helps his work,
Derry down,

Shall Atheists rule Britons? O never, no never,
Forbid it Religion for ever and ever;
Their heathenish Consuls then let them not bring,
Our Country is Christian, and Christian our King!
Derry down,

In England when wounds are the sailor's bad lot,
Their wounds and their sufferings are never forgot;
To a Palace far nobler our Vet'rans we bring,
Than is kept for himself by our merciful King.
Derry down,

Let any compare, if my saying he blames,
The splendors of Greenwich with those of St. James.
-Once *Buoni* trepann'd his poor troops to the East,
O'er deserts too sultry for man or for beast;
Derry down,

When the battle was over, and hundreds were found,
By the fortune of was gash'd with many a wound;
Diseas'd and afflicted—now what do you think
This tender Commander obliged them to think?
Derry down,

You fancy 'twas grog, or good flip, or good ale;
No 'twas *poison,* alas! was the soldiers' regale;
See *Jaffa*—see *Haslar*—the diff'rence to prove,
There poison, *here* kindness, *there* murder, *here* love.
Derry down,

And lest we should publish his horrible tricks,
With our freedom of printing a quarrel he picks;
But *we* keep no secrets, each newspaper shews it,
And while we act fairly we care not who knows it.
Derry down,

To Frenchmen, O Britons, we never will trust;
Who murder their Monarch can never be just;
That freedom we boast of, the French never saw,
'Tis guarded by order and bounded by law.
Derry down,

That *Buoni's* invincible, Frenchmen may cry,
Let Sidney the brave give each boaster the lie;
Tho' the arrows of Europe against us are hurl'd,
Be true to yourselves and you'll conquer the world.
Derry down,

Tho' some struggles we make, let us never repine,
While we fit underneath our own Fig-tree and Vine;
Our Fig-tree is Freedom, our Vine is Content,
Two blessings, by nature for Frenchmen not meant.
Derry down,

French liberty Englishmen never will suit,
They have planted the tree, but *we* feed on the fruit;
Then rail not at taxes, altho' they cut deep,
'Tis a heavy Insurance to save the brave Ship.
Derry down,

Let narrow-soul'd *party* be banish'd the land,
And let Englishmen join with one heart and one hand;
Let each fight for his Wife, for *we* marry but *one,*
The French wed so many, they oft care for none,
Derry down,

One King did not suit them, three Tyrants they chose,
And their God they renounce while their King they depose;
Then we ne'er will submit to the Corsican's rod,
Britons want but one Wife, and one King, and one GOD.
Derry down, down, down, derry down!

Notes

1 The navy was not alone in impressing men. The army had its own methods, the most popular being to trick simple folk into believing that there was nothing better or nobler than to fight for one's king and country, and then persuading them to "take the King's shilling". For a humorous treatment of this inhumane practice, read George Farquhar's *The Recruiting Officer.*

2 The process, moreover, shows no signs of coming to an end, though while cartoons of traditional tales become increasingly anaemic, the need for the "blood and guts" struggle between good and evil appears to be satisfied in the form of cyber cartoons.

3 According to Halévy, it was Methodism which, at least in part, *prevented* an English Revolution, but early Methodism was a two-edged sword, and its "contributions... to the working-class movement came in spite of and not because of the Wesleyan Conference" with many of the lay methodist preachers opposing the Wesleyan concepts.

4 "Doffer: A worker who removes the full bobbins or spindles." (SOED)

5 For a deep analysis of the cooperative societies see Thompson.

6 "Derry Down" was a very popular tune, used by many balladeers as the music to their lyrics. I am grateful to Dianne Dugaw for bringing my attention to Thomson's disseartation on the "Development of the Broadside Ballad Trade and Its Influence upon the Transmission of English Folksongs," according to which Samual Hazard was publishing in Batch c. 1790-1806.

7 The national Hungarian spirit, made from one (or more) of a variety of fruits; a relative of schnapps.

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