

“Bring Us In Good Ale” and “The Maid and the Box”: English Social History Through Folk Song

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Back in the early eighties, István Hegyi, lecturer at the music department of the newly-fledged Janus Pannonius University, Pécs, became acquainted with Norman Dannatt, then music adviser for the London Borough of Havering, when the latter, an elderly man whose musical background encompassed accompaniments for the silent movie to military bands and folklore, quite apart from his professional responsibilities in serious music and music education, was on the first of his many stays in Hungary. One evening, in the presence of the author, István asked his guest if he could provide him with an example of a “real folk song, you know, a pentatonic one.” To this request Norman jocularly replied, “Oh, all our songs are pentatonic, but they’re so boring like that that we put other notes in between to make them more interesting.”

The anecdote serves to demonstrate the persistence of a mythical belief in an inevitable relationship between purity and age that has been held for too long among certain romantically-inclined practitioners of folk music, members of the music education profession, and even ballad scholars who should know better, even though it has been more than adequately refuted by such scholars as Bruno Nettl in his 1965 standard volume for ballad researchers *Folk and Traditional Music of the Western Continents*:

A characteristic of folk and tribal music that is frequently stressed is its great age, although often it is not certain whether the age of individual songs or of musical styles is meant. But to assume that each people is, for all time, tied to one kind of music is to assume that no change has ever occurred in its tradition. This view we cannot accept... there is no reason to believe that peoples who learned from each other to use the wheel, to construct instruments, and to smelt iron refrained from exchanging songs... there is an unbroken historical line connecting rural folk music and urban popular music. (10-11)

To this day, there are unfortunately still those who believe that the folk song is a sacred, ancient relic, not so much anonymous as authorless, and that “folk” and “modern” are diametrically opposed terms, even though evidence from such areas as language history or poetry show that this cannot be the case. As language modifies, so does its rhythm. If its rhythm changes, then lyrics must also change and subsequently the music to which they are sung. To state that there is a primordial “folk” corpus is unforgivable romanticism, nostalgia and the cultural snobbery that goes

with the collection of antiques purely because they are old or valuable rather than because they are beautiful examples of the craftsman's skill. This must be shaken off if we are to understand our culture through its past, and apply our understanding to the present.

I was brought up into a folk tradition which believes that somewhere, somebody is creating a folk song, even as I write, and many years of living in Hungary has fostered repeated debates with Hungarians about what constitutes "folk," especially since the word *folkzene* is used in the Hungarian language with a deliberate design to designate something different from *népzene*, the latter of the two being charged with all kinds of superior values.¹ The result was that I have spent far more time since living the life of an "ex-pat" investigating the lyrics of songs than I had before, to try to focus them in time, space, and, most important, human context. Without the coming of an Industrial Revolution, there would be no songs about life and survival among machines. Without human rights movements the same songs would not be sung today, by different performers, to a different audience, but still with a vital message. "A song will acquire new occupational and cultural features as it moves into fresh environments" (Porter 27).

One difference between folk and written literature is that whereas the latter is undeniably the exposition of personal expression, often of thoughts that are radical or at least unusual, the former must by definition express thoughts that are acceptable to an immediate audience. Unpopular topics or points of view could hardly be performed in song to a very real and present audience. Can you imagine somebody singing something to the effect of

Then up and stood our gallant boss
And a fair-minded man was he,
For he paid us a farthing for a full week's work
Quite enough for the likes of we

unless, of course, an underlying sarcasm was fully obvious. Gerald Porter points out how quick the English State censorship machinery was set up "barely fifty years after the introduction of printing" (34), while Buchan in his chapter (62-73) on the Scottish singer Mrs. Brown (b.1747) describes how the same ballad was sung with different text variants in the presence of different audiences at different times in the singer's life. Gerald Winstanley, the leader of the 17th-century Diggers ill-fated communist experiment, produced his own pro-Digger ballads, as did the Luddites later on. Here we may have a partial answer to the question "What is a folk song?" Tackled, neither from the musical nor the literary, but from the political angle, we may say that the folk song in its living form is the product of the communal censorship of the combination of creator(s), performer(s) and audience(s), and that therefore these three categories are interchangeable.

The folk lyric is a social entity, and must therefore pass through time in flux, both its words and its tune modifying to suit the age. Each was undoubtedly created, by a human being, in a social context, at a point in time. Each—that is each surviving the social test—is immediately subject to change. It is a matter of one's point of view as to whether one substitutes the word *subject* with *vulnerable* or *eligible*. I am reminded of Asimov's famous Foundation trilogy, and the Seldon Plan, which was so important to conceal from all for fear that the inhabitants of the

Empire would cause the law of mathematical probability to fail through knowledge of its fundamental axioms. One of the biggest problems for the researcher into folk material in the present century is precisely that we have begun to isolate, dissect and, worst of all, *preserve*.

Having stated the above, it might seem strange that I continue to maintain that we can learn much of history from the folk lyric, a beast selective in its diet, but in being so, one providing us with valuable and unique knowledge of the history and condition of the people by and for whom it was produced, giving us an angle of insight very different from that of the historian, whose background is intellectual, individualistic and uncontemporary. In contrast, the folk song, while undoubtedly first fashioned by an individual, has gone through an internal process of censorship as a result of its physical and moral proximity to its audience, thereby becoming a communal statement which is continually being reproduced more contemporarily to the events, real or allegorical, that it describes and the views that it expounds. That the song may have undergone a number of changes between its creation and our meeting with it is beside the point: as a general rule, we can say that information is lost rather than created in the process, or that it becomes more clipped and cryptic with the passing of time, as performers either understand the shorthand information, rather in the fashion of an elliptic piece of Cockney rhyming slang, or blithely sing and occasionally edit that which makes no more sense than "it feels right like this." Indeed, while the collector Frank Purslow suggested changing the obsolete "ganged along" in "The Maid and the Box" to "gaily trudged along, or something similar" there seemed no need for him to suggest a change, or even proffer an explanation for the *content* of the same line, which recurs in verse five and is an important punctuation mark in the tale: "*She put her box upon her head and ganged along*" (5, 17 emphasis added).

Like all other art forms, one must of course be careful when sing folk lyrics to glean information about society. As Porter has stated, later generations *have* made free with meaning, especially when the moral sentiment of society has changed. Class-related statements should be closely investigated before we come to any conclusion of the ilk of "two hundred years ago *this* was how they thought about *that*." However, for less controversial information we can play fairly safe. Thus, "She put her box upon her head and ganged along" does at least point us with some certainty to the fact that in England it was common to see women carrying their belongings balanced upon their head, as they still do in other parts of the world to this day. (It makes you wonder whether the English once had a bottle dance!)

The story in a song is either fictitious or a description of fact embellished by artistic license and standard cliché. To give but one very primitive example, the song "Rufford Park Poachers" starts with the words "They say that forty gallant poachers they was in a mess" (1). Without investigating, it can be surmised that the number may just as easily have been thirty-nine or forty-one, but for *artistic* purposes an approximation of forty is more than sufficient. Furthermore, it is quite possible that the actual number of poachers that entered the conflict with the gamekeepers was considerably less or more than forty. The aim of the song is not to document precise figures, but to build up a general picture of the clash between the authorities (the landed gentry) and the poachers (whom the audience will side with), whose numbers have to be socially as well as artistically credible in story-telling terms.

Indeed, the important information to be found in the song comes in the final statement:

A buck or doe, believe it so,
 A pheasant or a hare
 Were placed on earth for everyone
 Quite equal for to share

The statement shows us, not that there were poachers, nor even that there was a struggle between them and the gamekeepers of Rufford Park, but that the social layer that is symbolically the “singer of the song” believed that the poachers were in the right, and that they should never have been denied the right to hunt for smaller game, a right going back to the early Middle Ages, though already curbed to some extent before the medieval period came to an end.

The other song whose lyrics I should like to use to demonstrate how the folk song may be used to glean information about our past is “Bring Us In Good Ale,” perhaps somewhat unusual in the present context, as it is a Medieval English Lyric. I have chosen it because the medieval period is the only one in which the lyric, and at that the anonymous lyric of the long-forgotten *trouvère*, is a *bona fide* literary subject. This is also one of the few lyrics in R.T. Davies’ *Medieval English Lyrics* to which the notes at the back are to say the least, scanty, containing no more information than “A drinking song.”

In “The Maid And The Box” we have seen how through incidental description we have gained information about one tiny aspect of society with the aside “she put her box upon her head.” Sceptics might claim that if this is how knowledge of the England contemporaneous with the lyrics is to be gleaned, we could determine that at this time it was common for the female sex to go around like some sharpshooter in a Hollywood western:

The gentleman shot one of them without any more ado
 While this beautiful young damsel she shot the other two (39-40)

Our knowledge, even our common knowledge without recourse to history books, suggests that this is not so. However, the folk lyric should not be dismissed as regards its usefulness in giving us information—it is simply that the information in the song is now at a different level of “truth.” Exceptional or not, the *beautiful young damsel* does exist as a romantic ideal, the *woman as good as a man*, and shows an attitude towards the female sex not described in books dealing with political or social franchise. As a historic figure the *beautiful young damsel* may not exist, but as ideal she most certainly does.²

Far more factual in nature than the possible existence of a society in which the single woman had the option of independence is the information we gather from the apparent cliché *She lived with her master and served him seven long years* (3). We will have to use other sources to prove that seven years was a usual duration for a work contract, rather than a magic number common in folk culture—not that the one in any way excludes the other—but we can be certain that contracts as such existed, and not contracts of the type to be found in the folk tale, where one has to work for one’s freedom and/or beloved, but a period mutually agreed upon by both employer and employee.

Information hinted at in this way is two-directional: it provides one with cultural information, while fairly accurately dating the song. We have, then, a rounded picture of events: a servant free to leave service by pre-agreed contract; independence of the female sex, and, in the creator's eyes at least, a respect for such independence; footpads; the habit of transporting one's worldly belongings balanced upon one's head; the archaic *ganged*; a song in a rural setting. These would all point to a historical eighteenth century, or possibly a nostalgic near-contemporary idealization of it.

"Bring Us In Good Ale," like "The Maid and the Box," appears at first sight to be exactly and no more than what Mr Davies purports it to be: a simple drinking song. But upon closer investigation it reveals a whole insight into the medieval diet and the medieval man's attitude towards it. That it is primarily a song in praise of an alcoholic beverage cannot be denied—but the alcoholic beverage in question was the staple liquid diet of the population, including women and children, right up until the beginning of the present century. Were it considered purely a means of becoming inebriated, the author George Borrow (1803-1881), agent for the British and Foreign Bible Society, would hardly have written "Good ale, the true and proper drink of Englishmen. He is not deserving of the name of Englishman who speaketh against ale, that is good ale (Lavengro, Chapter 48, qtd. in *ODQ* 78)." But the importance lies in the verse-by-verse, blow-by-blow comparison of ale with other sustenance, whether it be the beef from the famished, scraggy cattle killed off for the winter through lack of fodder, or the fatty bacon, or the badly-washed tripe, or the shells that unconcerned cooks dropped in with the eggs, or the hairs left in the butter, or the venison that was prohibited for the majority of society. Cruel punishments were meted out for the killing of the "King's Deer," although, as Holt shows us, this did not prevent people from hunting it:

In 1302 a commission of *oyer and terminer* was issued to try persons who had entered the park, chases and warrens of the earl of Warenne at Wakefield with a multitude of armed men, while the earl was in Scotland fighting in the king's service, and had hunted there, carrying away deer, hares, rabbits and partridges, and had also taken fish from his fishery at Sandal. (78)

While social histories do give us impressive pictures of the past, lyrics can do much to augment the images. Both "The Maid and the Box," apparently a simple adventure, with its vivid portrayal of an independently minded young lady who can look after herself, and the seemingly inconsequent, light-hearted "Bring Us In Good Ale," with its robust comparison of ale with the various foodstuffs of the later fifteenth century, illustrate their respective periods in a way that no other genre could do in quite the same way or with quite the same impact.

Appendix I

Below are two versions of "The Maid and the Box." The first is worded as I found it in the folk song collection "The Foggy Dew" (Purslow 57-58), while the second is the result of my learning it from the book, practicing it, and singing it a number of times in public. To the best of my knowledge I was still singing the "learnt" version, yet when I came to writing down the words as I sang them at the time of writ-

ing this paper I was greatly surprised at precisely the number of unconsciously-made changes that the song had undergone in a period of just a short time.³

"The Maid and the Box" (1)

It's of a fair young damsel near London did dwell
For wit and for beauty there's none could her excel
She lived with her master and served him seven long year
And what followed after you quickly shall hear.

She put her box upon her head and ganged along
And the first one that she met he was a noble gentleman
"Where are you going, my pretty fair maid, where are you going this way
I will show you some nigher road across the counterie."

Then he took her by the hand and he led her down some lane
He said, "My pretty fair maid, I mean to tell you plain
Deliver up your money without any fear or strife,
Or else this very moment I'll take away your life."

The tears from her eyes like two fountains did flow
"Oh, where shall I wander, Oh! where shall I go?"
But while he turned himself around a-searching for his knife
This beautiful young damsel she took away his life.

She put her box upon her head and ganged along
And the next one that she met he was a noble gentleman
"Where are you going, my pretty fair maid, where are you going so late?
And what was that noise, my love, I heard at yonder gate?"

That box you have upon your head to yourself does not belong
To your master or your mistress you have done something wrong
To your master or your mistress you have done something ill
For not a moment from trembling you cannot keep still."

"The box I have upon my head to myself it does belong
To my master nor my mistress I have done nothing wrong
To my master nor my mistress I have done nothing ill,
But I fear in my heart that there's some man that I have killed."

Then she took his horse by the bridle rein and she led him to some place
Where this stout and able man he lay a-bleeding on his face
He had three loaded pistols, some powder and some ball
Besides a large white whistle more robbers for to call.

He put the whistle to his mouth and blew both loud and shrill,
And three more stout and able men came tripping down the hill
This gentleman shot one of them without any more ado
While this beautiful young damsel she shot the other two.

He said, "My pretty fair maid, for what you have done,
I'll make you my bride, my love, and that before too long
I'll make you my bride, my love, and that before too long
For taking of your own part and handling of your gun."

"The Maid and the Box" (2)

It's of a fair young damsel, near London she did dwell
For her wit and her beauty no other could excel
She lived with her master and served him seven long years
And what followed after you quickly shall hear.

She put her box upon her head and ganged along
And the first one that she met he was a stout and able man
"Where are you going my pretty fair maid, where are you going this way
I will show you some nigher road across the counterie."

He took her by the hand⁴ and he led her down some lane
Then he said, "me pretty fair maid, I means to tell you plain
Deliver up your money without any fear or strife
Or else this very moment I'll take away your life."

The tears from her eyes like two fountains did flow
"Oh, where shall I wander, oh where shall I go?"
But as he turned himself around a-searching for his knife
This beautiful young damsel she took away his life.

She put her box upon herb head and ganged along
And the next one that she met he was a noble gentleman
"Where are you going, my pretty fair maid, where are you going so late
And what was that noise, oh and what was that noise that I heard from yonder gate?"

That box you have upon your head to yourself does not belong
To your master or your mistress you have done something wrong
To your master or your mistress you have done something ill
For I see from your trembling that you cannot stand still."

"This box I have upon my head to myself it does belong
To me master nor me mistress I have done nothing wrong
To me master nor me mistress I have done nothing ill
But I fear in me heart that there's some man that I have killed."

She led him by the bridle rein and she took him to the place
Where this stout and able man he lay a-bleeding on his face
He had three loaded pistols and some powder and some ball
Besides a large white whistle more robbers for to call.

He put the whistle to his lips and blew both loud and shrill
 And three more stout and able men came tripping down the hill
 This gentleman shot one of them without any more ado
 While this beautiful young damsel she shot the other two.

He said, "Me pretty fair maid, for what you have done
 I will make you me bride, me love and that before too long
 I will make you me bride me love and that before too long
 For the taking of your own part and the handling of your gun."

Appendix 2

"Bring Us In Good Ale"

Bring us in good ale, and bring us in good ale,
 Fore our blessed Lady sak, bring us in good ale.

Bring us in no browne bred, fore that is mad of brane;
 Nor bring us in no whit bred, fore therin is no game:
 But bring us in good ale.

Bring us in no befe, for ther is many bones;
 But bring us in good ale, for that goth downe at ones,
 And bring us in good ale.

Bring us in no bacon, for that is passing fat;
 But bring us in good ale, and give us inought of that,
 And bring us in good ale.

Bring us in no mutton, for that is ofte lene;
 Nor bring us in no tripes, for they be seldom clene:
 But bring us in good ale.

Bring us in no egges, for ther are many shelles;
 But bring us in good ale, and give us nothing elles,
 And bring us in good ale.

Bring us in no butter, for therin ar many heres;
 Nor bring us in no pigges flesh, for that will mak us bores:
 But bring us in good ale.

Bring us in no podinges, for therin is all gotes blod;
 Nor bring us in no venison, for that is not for our good:
 But bring us in good ale.

Bring us in no capon's flesh, for that is ofte der;
 Nor bring us in no dokes flesh for they slobber in the mer:
 But bring us in good ale.

Appendix 3

"Rufford Park Poachers"

They say that forty gallant poachers
 They was in a mess
 They'd often been attacked
 When their number it was less
 Oh, poacher bold as I unfold
 Keep up you gallant heart
 And think about those poachers bold
 That night in Rufford Park

The keepers they began to fight
 With stones and with their flails
 But when those poachers started
 Why they quickly turned their tails
 Oh, poacher bold as I unfold
 Keep up you gallant heart
 And think about those poachers bold
 That night in Rufford Park

A buck or doe, believe it so,
 A pheasant or a hare
 Were placed on earth for everyone
 Quite equal for to share
 Oh, poacher bold as I unfold
 Keep up you gallant heart
 And think about those poachers bold
 That night in Rufford Park

Notes

¹ The contrastive use of *népi-* and *folk-* is such that, upon the occasion of the first *Nemzetközi Pécsi Folknap* Sándor Csizmadia felt obliged to write a four-page essay in defence of the latter, which was then handed out at the door (Csizmadia, Sándor. *Folk-találkozó*. Pécs: unpublished essay, 1986). For details of the essay see my article "A Calendar of Days—The Pécs International Folk Festival," Winnipeg University, pending publication.

² From the purely artistic aspect, it is worth mentioning that when the storyteller/singer relates the tale in the neutral third person, the "maid" is a "beautiful fair damsel," whereas when addressed by both the "stout and able man" and the "noble gentleman" she transmogrifies into a "pretty fair maid." The ideal of an independent-minded woman is not shared by the two male protagonists!

³ This, incidentally, is always my method: learn the song—as I live so far from home my sources are possibly more often written or recorded, rather than live—and then only return to my source if I really *can't remember* (as opposed to *unconsciously alter*) the words.

⁴ There was a terrible unconscious pressure to sing the cliché “lily-white hand” here, which I strongly—and, I am happy to say, successfully—resisted!

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