

**Holdstock, Dick. *Again With One Voice: British Songs of Political Reform, 1768-1868*. Loomis House Press, 2021. 398 pp. ISBN 978-1-935243-77-9**

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Compilations of political ballads are nothing new. After all, practically from the earliest days of the broadside trade, they were seen as at least in part serving a journalistic role, and what is journalism at its best if not the voice of criticism of all aspects of life, whether of capital punishment, matrimonial infidelity, turncoat allegiances or merely unseemly new fashions. What makes Dick Holdstock's book an especially welcome addition to the bookshelves of the ballad collector and social-political historian alike is the manner of its inception: "This book arose out of my curiosity about why, throughout the English-speaking world, there are so many songs in the repertoires of traditional British folk music performers that admire Britain's historically accepted enemy, Napoleon Bonaparte" (Preface xi.). Setting aside the anomaly of traditional British singers ranging all over the English-speaking world, the phenomenon is after all not so strange. Successive British governments raised taxes to finance military operations both on land and at sea, and while the Royal Navy partly existed on the system of sharing out captured enemy ships, maintaining a large, trained land army was extremely draining on the country. It is not so illogical for the hungry, underpaid native, the family of the press-ganged breadwinner, to cast the blame not on the foreign foe but domestic taxation. Moreover, France was undergoing drastic political changes that certainly appealed to many parts of society.

In method the volume, the result of decades of collection and research, follows the path of the late Roy Palmer, long a lonely pioneer in bringing together historic song and sociocultural history on alternating pages. This collection brings together 120 songs that provide insight into a wide variety of areas of reform and dissatisfaction covering the century in the title, which obviously stretches far beyond the Napoleonic era. Holdstock is more fortunate than earlier writers in this genre, for today historians consider all kinds of materials as bona fide sources for uncovering and understanding the past. As for socio-political song texts, the author of the book's Foreword, Steve Roud, creator of the digital Folk Song and Broadside Indexes housed in the Vaughan Williams Memorial Library of the English Folk Dance and Song Society, gives a lucid explanation as to their value to the professional historian:

Song was not simply a colorless<sup>1</sup> medium by which the reformers got their message across; it had a resonance of its own, a social meaning, and was an integral part of everyday experience of nearly everyone in society . . . But not everyone sang in the same way, or the same songs, and to a certain extent what songs you knew and performed partly defined you . . . For all levels, *song* was one of the glues which kept a community together . . . While radicals were vocalising their “seditious” sentiments, conservatives were using patriotic verses to stiffen their resolve to fight them tooth and nail . . . Increasingly in the period covered by this book, printed materials played a big part in song circulation. Huge numbers of song-books were published each year, tailored for all tastes and budgets. (ix-x)

Indeed, the difference between the massive output of the seventeenth century in cheap one-page publications and that of the succeeding couple of centuries was the incremental percentage of the literate and semiliterate population. And by their very nature, the written broadsides were almost immediately available to those without the ability to read, or at least with any facility, as they very quickly became part of the oral culture, just as the hymns written by the early Methodists (who also taught many a working man to read) were learnt and sung by all of the congregation.

The 120 broadsides in Holdstock’s book are divided chronologically but also thematically in the stages of the struggle for reform: Liberty: 1768-1781; Revolution: 1780-1789; Paine: 1789-1795; Insurrection: 1796-1799; War: 1800-1815; Suppression: 1815-1819; Gagged: 1819-1830; Union: 1830-1836; Charter: 1837-1851 and Reform: 1851-1868, thereby providing an explanation for the seemingly arbitrary 100 years covering these “British Songs of Political Reform” in the subtitle of the book. Reform, after all, certainly began earlier than 1768 and continues to this day with every demonstration, strike, and lobbying of those in authority. The subject matter of the individual songs is wider than one would at first suppose, yet each is deeply relevant to the overall theme, and show how broad a net dissatisfaction and unrest can cast: in the first section alone (Liberty), the stormy political career of the radical John Wilkes; the increasing demand for an abolition to slavery; in Boston, America, undercutting regular local wages with cheap casual off-duty pay for the unloved military personnel. A curious broadside in Chapter 2 – Revolution, “The Rats and the Ferret,” utilises an already familiar reverse anthromorphisation as commentary upon the Gordon Riots of 1780, with Lord Gordon as the ferret. Seditious literature carried severe penalties, so “the names of all parties are concealed to protect the guilty, but it is understood that the rats are members of Parliament and the mice are the working class. The ferret is Lord George Gordon, who used anti-Catholic bigotry for his own aggrandizement” (37). Here Holdstock stands on the brink of anachronism: in the Preface to his seminal work *The Making of the English Working Class*, E. P. Thompson gives 1780 as the beginning of the process when “most English working people came to feel an identity of interests as between themselves, and as against their rulers and employers” (Thompson 11). A half-century later, Thompson’s description still rings

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1 This is an American publication. Where spellings diverge, I have kept the orthography of the original, but otherwise used British English.

true in Holdstock's book. In "The File Hewer's Lamentation" (61-62), the file Hewer compares his lot with that of the African slave. Similarly, in contrast with the coeval gung-ho naval songs promoting the indomitable courage unto death of the True British Tar, "The Tenders Hold" laments,

Is this your proof of British rights?  
Is this rewarding bravery?  
Oh shame to boast your tars' exploits,  
Then doom those tars to slavery. (108)

Not all the items in this book are against the ruling class. In 1797, there was an unsuccessful attempt by the French to invade via Pembrokeshire, Wales, repulsed through "the virtue and military acumen of the proud yeomen . . . under the command of the bold Lord Cawdor" (114). The piece, apparently "transcribed from the dictation of an old man, who used to sing it," concludes with a standard beatification of king and country and curse upon the enemy:

God bless our king and country  
With plenty, joy, and peace,  
And may all French and Spanish  
From Britain ever cease.  
Likewise all our noblemen -  
Bless them with counsel wise  
For to be loyal to their king  
And face their enemies. (114)

The heroes, however, are the common Welsh yeomen. More tragic are the main protagonists of the broadside "Edward" relating the attempted rebellion of the Irish rebellions the preceding and following years, who are caught and executed. As with many of the ballads in the volume, today only scholars and devotees would be aware of the events and characters, but in each case Holdstock succinctly (in this piece, just one page) clarifies the events leading to its celebration in song. Importantly, the broadsides in the volume provide an angle to history that we would not possess were we to rely entirely on more conventional historical records.

Anyone familiar with the ephemeral popular verse will know that it was not the task of the collector-author to discover or further disseminate works of art, or even the rare "moderate jewel" among the "veritable dunghills" to be found in the popular canon, as the great American collector F. J. Child described them in an 1872 letter to the Danish scholar Svend Grundtvig (Palmer 157). The jewels, moderate or otherwise, of *Again With One Voice* are in the insight they provide in this intensive period of struggle for the most basic of human rights without which any subsequent (and present) strivings would come to nothing. This is not to say that no literary skills or pithy, witty humour can be found among them: the song is a communal form and for it to survive even briefly depends on an instantaneous magnetic effect. With regard to text, the draw of each piece lay in its topicality, for these broadsides were

in a very real sense journalistic: both their popularity and ephemerality derived from the great speed each had to be composed and printed, and the rate at which one had to succeed another in a matter of days—hence the derogatory name *ephemera* (lasting one day). An excellent example is the song from the period 1789-1795, “Billy is Sick of the War” (95). “Billy” is William Pitt the Younger, who strove to maintain support for the war against revolutionary France when things were going badly—the Duke of Brunswick lost battle after battle, Prussia, and Spain signed peace treaties, France occupied Holland. And other British broadsides, as we have already seen, appeared placing Bonaparte in a positive light.

The piece is an open ridicule of Pitt, not only as regards its text, but also its already popular tune, which parodies “What Can the Matter Be.” The popularity of existing tunes was very important, as there was literally no time to compose a new one for each broadside, or to teach it to the public even if one had been created, or most basic of all, to set up a manuscript that anyway few would be able to read. Just as many a football jingle on the stadium terraces of today exploits an existing popular piece, the broadside ballad from its inception made use of extant, well-known tunes. Although Holdstock does not spend energy on this element, it is worth noting that while employing existing tunes—“Billy is Sick of the War” uses “Oh Dear, What Can the Matter Be”—the hack writers of varying standard did not always, indeed rather frequently paid no heed to the number of syllables required to fit into the designated tune.

All in all, the radical broadsides in *Again With One Voice* are at once edifying, educational and entertaining. Some are even singable, although that is not the main concern of the compilation. The volume is a valuable contribution to any social or political historian and every enthusiast of the century covered and well deserves a place among their bookshelves.

### Works Cited

Palmer, Roy. “Veritable Dunghills: Professor Child and the Ballad.” *Folk Music Journal*, vol. 7, no. 2, 1996, pp. 155–66.

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