

# The Reconstruction of a Cultural Identity: Nationalism, Gender, and Censorship in the Late Victorian Folksong Revival in England

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*Abstract: During the Late Victorian period the first folksong revival in England underwent a transformation: the scattered and isolated efforts of individual collectors were consolidated into a cultural movement that had a formal organization, the Folk-Song Society, and a publication, the Journal of the Folk-Song Society. This article contests Harker's and Boyes's claims that the Late Victorian and Edwardian collectors exploited the workers' music, created a mythical "folk" living in imaginary villages, and published "fakesongs" rather than genuine items from oral tradition. Looking back on the period between 1878 and 1903 we can, with the benefit of hindsight, see the achievements, failings, and some of the unique characteristics of the Late Victorian phase of the revival. This article concentrates on five aspects of this early phase: the emergence of a cultural movement, the role of women in the movement, the concepts of folksong employed by the collectors, the idea of national identity as expressed through song, and the two related issues of censorship and authenticity.*

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Although the term "folk music revival" is by no means unambiguous or unproblematic (Rosenberg, 1993), it is both conventional and convenient to discuss the history of folksong in England in terms of two revivals: the second, or post-World War II, revival, associated with A. L. Lloyd, Pat Shaw, Eric Winter, John Hasted, Peter Kennedy and Ewan MacColl, and the first, or pre-World War I, revival, associated with Sabine Baring Gould, Lucy Broadwood, Frank Kidson, Cecil Sharp, Percy Grainger and Ralph Vaughan Williams, which continued into the early 1930s. The second of these revivals, although strongly indebted to such American performers as Woody Guthrie, Pete Seeger, and Joan Baez, and to the radio broadcasts and song collecting of Alan Lomax, drew heavily upon the field-work of the earlier English collec-

tors who were active in the 1890s and 1900s. Its beginnings, moreover, are to be found in the late 1930s (Gregory 1997), so there was little chronological break between the two revivals. Continuity between the two was also evident in the overlap of personnel. Cecil Sharp's disciple, Maud Karpeles, for example, played a significant role in both, while Peter Kennedy, the leading English song collector in the 1950s and sometimes described as the British Alan Lomax, was her nephew (Gregory 2004).

In discussing the history of folksong collecting and performance in England it is therefore important not to overemphasize the break between the two revivals. Nevertheless, there were distinctive differences. One is obvious: the term "revival" is being used in slightly different ways. By the 1950s there already existed in England a wealth of older vernacular songs that had already been rediscovered, collected and published: they lay ready at hand to be taken up and performed in pubs and folk clubs. There was thus a strong emphasis on performance in the post-war revival, although this is not to deny the parallel importance of a renewed momentum in song collection. However, Peter Kennedy and other collectors in the second revival employed a technology, the tape recorder, which was unavailable to Lucy Broadwood and her contemporaries, although several of the latter did experiment with using the phonograph as an aid to notation by ear. There was a focus on political song and industrial song in the work of A. L. Lloyd and Ewan Maccoll that was largely unknown in the first revival. And, perhaps surprisingly, women played a lesser role, at least as song collectors, in the later movement than in the earlier one. Moreover, whatever their gender, the first revival song collectors were "reviving" the musical material they discovered – whether in oral tradition or on old broadsheets – in a different manner: they were making it available for the first time in accessible form to the general public. Editing and publishing was thus more important than performance. There were other differences – and, of course, many interesting similarities – between the two revivals, but a more detailed comparison must be the subject of another article or book. Yet perhaps enough has been said to indicate the importance of the first English revival as a precursor – as well as source – of the better-known post-war revival.

The first English revival is best understood as a gradual historical phenomenon that took place over more than a century. Its roots lie in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, but the revival itself divides naturally into four phases. The first phase was somewhat episodic, from its origins in the 1820s in the song collecting of Romantic nature poet John Clare through the work of the Percy Society and music historian William Chappell to the formation of the Ballad Society and the renewed interest in regional song in the 1870s. The second phase, in the Late Victorian era (ca., 1878-1903), was the time when field-collecting

became more widespread, a new emphasis was placed on the recovery of unpublished vernacular tunes, and the Folk-Song Society was born. Then came the intensely active and productive Edwardian decade (ca., 1903-1914), during which Cecil Sharp was only one of more than a dozen collector-editors who built on the work of their Late Victorian precursors. This third phase was followed by a final period from World War I to the mid-1930s, when the Folk-Song Society was absorbed into the English Folk Dance Society. At this time some of the English collectors broadened their geographical horizons: Sharp did his celebrated work in the Appalachian Mountains with the help of Maud Karpeles, Doreen Senior collaborated with Helen Creighton in Nova Scotia, and Karpeles made her collecting trips to Newfoundland in 1929 and 1930.

If during its Edwardian phase the first revival burned with a brilliant flame like a meteor in the night, the earlier phases were no less important. I have discussed the first phase – that of the revival’s origins and early history during the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, Romantic, and mid-Victorian eras – in my book *Victorian Songhunters* (Gregory 2006). The Edwardian years undoubtedly saw the English movement at its peak: they were a time of intense energy during which a large body of vernacular songs was collected by quite a number of prominent figures in the musical life of the time, including, but certainly not limited to, such big names as Cecil Sharp, Ralph Vaughan Williams, and Percy Grainger. The Late Victorian phase, however, laid the groundwork for these achievements. It lasted a quarter of a century and produced a very impressive body of collected folksongs. It, therefore, requires comparable research and analysis and deserves better and more sympathetic attention than it has so far been accorded. Indeed, in comparison with the Edwardian phase it has been unjustly neglected by scholars, or, when discussed at all, its nature and history have been distorted. Such influential surveys as Dave Harker’s *Fakesong: The Manufacture of British ‘Folksong’ 1700 to the Present Day* (1985) and Georgina Boyes’s *The Imagined Village: Culture, Ideology and the English Folk Revival* (1993) unfortunately present rather misleading perspectives. Hence this article contests Harker’s and Boyes’s claims that the Late Victorian and Edwardian collectors exploited the workers’ music, created a mythical “folk” living in imaginary villages, and published “fakesongs” rather than genuine items from oral tradition.

During its Late Victorian phase the revival underwent a transformation: the scattered and isolated efforts of individual collectors were consolidated into a cultural movement that had a formal organization, the Folk-Song Society, and a publication, the *Journal of the Folk-Song Society*. Looking back on the period between 1878 and 1903 we can, with the benefit of hindsight, see some of this movement’s achievements as well as its failings, and acknowledge that

it exhibited certain unique characteristics. In this article I concentrate on five aspects of the revival in this era: the emergence of a cultural movement, the role of women in this movement, the concepts of folksong employed by the collectors, the idea of national identity as expressed through song, and the two related issues of censorship and authenticity.

## The Emergence of a Cultural Movement

The first thing to recognize is that a fundamental change took place in the nature of the revival during the last two decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The task of recovering English folksong evolved from scattered individual initiatives into an organized movement with an institutional base, the Folk-Song Society. In short, those two decades saw the transformation of localized folksong collecting into a nation-wide cultural movement.

The first half of the late Victorian era, from the mid 1870s through the end of the 1880s, witnessed a number of individual, and largely isolated, pioneering efforts to locate and collect English folksongs in rural locations. The most important pioneers included Charlotte Burne, Sabine Baring-Gould, and Frank Kidson, and the most significant publications reflecting these early collecting efforts included Burne's *Shropshire Folk-Lore*, Baring-Gould's *Songs and Ballads of the West*, and Kidson's *Traditional Tunes*. Yet as late as the 1880s it was still fashionable to decry England as "a land with no music," in comparison with France, Italy, Germany, and Austria. This, of course, was very unfair to such Victorian composers as Frederic Cowen, George Macfarren, Alexander Mackenzie, Arthur Sullivan, Charles Hubert Parry, and Charles Villiers Stanford, but their orchestral works, if not their oratorios and choral pieces, were often seen as derivative from German and Austrian music. It was also unfair to the collectors and editors whose work I discussed in *Victorian Songhunters*, most notably William Chappell and James Henry Dixon. However, rightly or wrongly – and in my view quite wrongly – there was a widespread sentiment that English music was inferior to that of continental Europe and that England lacked the popular music traditions that had proven one of the well-springs of the Romantic movement in Germany and elsewhere.

As regards folksong, the "land with no music" *canard* was dealt a fatal blow in the late 1880s and early 1890s. This was when the revival really gathered momentum in England. The years 1890-92 were pivotal, witnessing the beginning of the transformation and providing a bridge between the early phases of the revival and what was to come. From then on individual collecting efforts were consolidated into a whole that was more than the sum

of the parts, namely a cultural movement aimed at a renaissance of English music founded on the sturdy base of a revival of English folksong. The goal of helping to lay the foundations for an English musical renaissance was not a conscious motive for the pioneer collectors in the 1880s, but from the publication in 1892 of Broadwood and Fuller Maitland's *English County Songs* it became increasingly recognized as not only desirable but also feasible. It found first expression in *Sussex Songs* (1889), Lucy Broadwood's early collaboration with her cousin Herbert Birch Reynardson. Her circle of musical friends and acquaintances grew to include Fuller Maitland, a leading light in the Early Music revival and a champion of Henry Purcell, and such leading art music composers as Somervell, Stanford, Parry, and, significantly, the young Ralph Vaughan Williams. They all quickly embraced the idea of a reinvigorated and distinctive national music rooted in folksong. As a result, folksong collecting became legitimized and even fashionable, and one suspects that this fact, along with the attractive ideal of a renaissance of English music, helped motivate many of the movement's participants.

All the work of song-collecting, collating, and editing done by the many individuals involved in the early phase of the movement had various cumulative results. One major effect was a refocusing of Victorian songhunting away from the library into the field. Another was a renewed emphasis on tunes, sometimes, unfortunately, at the expense of texts. At its best, however, the Late Victorian movement recognized that traditional songs are organic entities in which words and melody combine to create a whole that is more than the sum of its parts. It also recognized that oral and print sources were – and are – symbiotic, and that the collector-scholar needs to pay careful attention to both and to the complicated relationship between them. Folksong was thus understood to be part of a wider body of vernacular song, which in turn was part of a wider stream of popular music, but it could also provide the basis for that greatly desired renaissance of English art music.

## The Role of Women

One of the most striking features of this Late Victorian cultural movement was the central part played by women in it. This, of course, can be viewed as part of a wider social and political context within which the early English feminist movement emerged and made some progress. However, the initial gains made by the women's movement were small, and one should not assume that the social and intellectual climate of the time was already favourable to women taking on roles that had traditionally been reserved for men. Notwithstanding

the occasional successes achieved by William Gladstone and other moderate reformers within the Liberal party, the Late Victorian era, and in particular the 1890s, was in the main a time when Conservative ideology was dominant. For example, the Conservative party had readily embraced a program of imperialism and colonialism that was increasingly popular in the country at large, and Conservative or Conservative/Unionist governments were usually in office. The Prime Minister, Lord Salisbury, and his ally, Unionist leader Joseph Chamberlain, believed they had been given a mandate to employ force against Irish reformers, militant feminists, strikers, anti-government demonstrators in the streets, and indeed anyone who stood in the way of an expanding British Empire. During this period of Conservative ascendancy and imperialist xenophobia, reformers of all stripes had difficulty in getting a hearing or making any progress with their causes. Nonetheless, they were getting better organized. At the turn of the century the Labour Representation Committee, the forerunner of the Labour Party, was created, and a few years before, in 1897, the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies was founded. The latter was committed to moral suasion and would oppose, often quite bitterly, the tactics of more militant suffragettes in the Women's Social and Political Union who would catch the attention of the press in the Edwardian era. By remaining respectable, the NUWSS was able to gain support among women (including Lucy Broadwood) whose politics were in other respects conservative, and its membership grew rapidly. Its first success was the increasing involvement of women in local government, as voters in elections to district councils, as employees of local school boards, and, occasionally, as elected officials.

Involvement of women with folksong collecting and the emergence of the cultural movement that we call the English folk music revival largely antedated the full-scale emergence of this political wing of English feminism. Feminism already existed as an intellectual current, and there were certain female Victorian role models, including Florence Nightingale and Mary Anne Evans (George Eliot), to whom young women might look up. But the Late Victorian female folksong collectors were pioneers. They broke new ground, and they did so in a social and political climate that was not particularly favourable to their endeavours.

Marianne Harriet Mason, whose charity work with orphaned or neglected children subsequently led to a career as a Local Government Board inspector, must be given credit for starting the ball rolling. The publication of *Nursery Rhymes and Country Songs* (1878) marks the beginning of the second phase of the first folksong revival. Mason demonstrated that old ballads were still extant in oral tradition and that children (and their grandparents and nurses) might be valuable tradition bearers. Yet this fairly slight publication

could easily have remained an isolated phenomenon and soon been forgotten had not others seen its worth and taken up the cause.

Charlotte Burne was the young folklorist who first perceived the importance of music in rural culture. Encouraged in her interest in local customs, ceremonies, dialect speech, plays and music by an older woman, pioneer Shropshire folklorist Georgina F. Jackson, Burne recognized that melody was an integral component of traditional song and that anyone attempting to preserve local musical customs and present them in a scholarly manner to a wider audience needed to capture tunes as well as texts (Burne 1883-86). Doing so was not easy for her but, like Baring-Gould in Devon, she took the trouble to find musician-helpers who could note the melodies more accurately than she felt able to do on her own. Burne was catholic in her approach to song-collecting: she not only preserved the traditional and broadside balladry of her native Shropshire, she noted folk lyrics, carols, wassails, souling-songs, and recently-composed comic songs about local events. As might be expected, she searched for songs among the elderly female residents of villages near her home, but she also saw that the itinerant travelers of the region possessed a wealth of unique folklore, including song. Like Harriet Mason, Burne recognized that children – in this case gypsy children – could prove a fecund source of songs that their parents might be more reluctant to perform to outsiders. All in all, *Shropshire Folk-Lore*, although it contained much more than local music, was a pioneering work for the folksong revival in several ways. It set folksong within the broader social context of village life, it demonstrated that traditional ballad was alive and well in rural England, and it showed how valuable the traveler community was as a carrier of English as well as Romany song traditions.

Burne eventually moved to London and became the first woman president of the Folk-Lore Society. It was her collecting from Shropshire gypsies that seems to have inspired Laura Smith to do the same in the Scottish border country and in London and the Home Counties. Smith's *Romany Songland* (1889) promised more than it delivered, but together with Francis Hinde Groome's *In Gipsy Tents* (1881), it demonstrated the variety and abundance of song to be found among English and Scottish travelers. Nor was it Laura Smith's only contribution to the Late Victorian folksong revival. Her major work, *The Music of the Waters* (1888), was the only publication that attempted to document a panorama of English sea-song. While her main focus was on the occupational songs of English mariners – she made a brave attempt at sorting out and categorizing various different kinds of shanty – her collection included some broadside ballads and other songs sung by sailors when at leisure. As such it was less specialized than either Davis and Tozer's shanty collection

(1907) or John Ashton's broadside collection (1891), both of which works served to flesh out further Smith's pioneering work in the field.

Important though the published collections by Mason, Burne, and Smith were, they pale in comparison with the work of Lucy Broadwood. Broadwood's initial publication, *Sussex Songs*, was a modest contribution to the revival, although it served the double function of reminding its readers of the Reverend John Broadwood's pioneering work (Dusart 1947) and printing some of the first folksongs ever noted by his niece. *English County Songs*, on the other hand, was a major achievement, and Broadwood certainly played her full part in its creation, as both collector and editor (Broadwood and Fuller Maitland, 1893). The network of folk music enthusiasts that she and Alec Fuller Maitland developed while researching the book helped provide a core membership for the Folk-Song Society when it was formed in 1898, and the book itself certainly stimulated song-collecting in various regions of England. As the first real attempt at a systematic survey of folksong in the length and breadth of the country, it provided a roadmap for the burgeoning movement, and, while it had its imperfections, it was clearly a milestone, one of the most important products of the Late Victorian phase of the revival. Broadwood's subsequent collecting – from Henry Burstow and from the Dunsfold villagers, in particular – found an outlet in the *Journal of the Folk-Song Society* and in her belatedly published *English Traditional Songs and Carols*, a book which, despite its publication date of 1908, really belongs to the Late Victorian phase of the revival. Moreover, Broadwood played a central role in the movement not merely as a collector but as the secretary of the Folk-Song Society and, above all, as its long-serving *Journal* editor. Essentially she was the one who held everything together, keeping in regular communication with not only Fuller Maitland but also Baring-Gould, Burne, Kidson, Somervell, Kate Lee, and, later, Sharp and Vaughan Williams. It is no exaggeration to say that she was the administrative heart of the folksong movement from the early 1890s until the mid-1920s.

Pauline Greenhill and Diane Tye's *Undisciplined Women* (1997), among other works, has raised the question of how and why women were drawn into cultural movements, and what allowed them to play important roles within those circles. All four of the aforementioned pioneering English female song collectors were young women when they did their initial field-work and became involved with the first folk music revival. Brought up in comfortable circumstances, they did not have to earn a living and hence had free time available to pursue their avocation. For both Harriet Mason and Lucy Broadwood the motives that led to their initial involvement with folksong were family-related: Mason wanted to publish the material that she had inherited orally from her beloved grandmother Mitford, and Broadwood collaborated with her cousin,



composer Herbert Birch Reyardson, to republish and expand the collecting work of her uncle, John Broadwood. Laura Smith found herself in the fairly unusual situation of travelling with her family from seaport to seaport, and it was presumably her father who encouraged, or at least facilitated, her interviewing elderly seamen in homes for retired sailors. Charlotte Burne fell under the spell of Georgina Jackson but she was fortunate that her family acquiesced in her enthusiasm for the study of folklore and that, when she began to collect traditional ballads, she had the help of a family friend and local musician, James Smart. Lucy Broadwood's continuing work as a collector-editor, which resulted in the pivotally important *English County Songs*, owed much to her family friend and subsequent collaborator, Alec Fuller Maitland, since it was he who proposed her as his co-editor and who encouraged her to collect additional songs for the book in the counties of Surrey and Sussex. In all four instances, then, we find that the existence of supportive family members and family friends, combined with the leisure time provided by a comfortable middle-class family income, facilitated these women's involvement with folksong. But it was a fascination with and love of the songs that made these four women different from the many hundreds of thousands of other women in similar socio-economic circumstances who remained outside from the folk music movement.

### Late Victorian Concepts of Folksong

During the Late Victorian era there emerged a vision of folksong that was more ecumenical and tolerant than that which later came to be associated with Cecil Sharp, Maud Karpeles, and the English Folk Dance and Song Society. It was, in part, a reaction to the great variety of song types – including national and occupational songs – that had been recovered. It was also the result of the emergence of a new body of popular music scholarship that had been inaugurated by William Chappell in the mid-Victorian era but which was developed further in the 1880s and 1890s. Frank Kidson, in particular, recognized that English folksong was an integral part of, and inextricably connected with, a larger body of British vernacular music that had also found expression through broadside balladry, dance music, ballad opera, and the best of commercial popular song (Kidson 1886-87, 1890-91, and 1894-97).

For Kidson as a historian of popular culture, the crucial question was whether a song possessed a "vital melody" (Kidson 1907-8). If it did, it would become a vernacular song, and quite frequently several different sets of lyrics would become associated with the tune. Conversely, if a certain ballad text

or song lyric had enduring appeal but initially lacked a distinctive melody, it would soon pick up a good and appropriate tune; in fact, different, although usually somewhat related, melodies might be found linked with it in different regions of the British Isles. The name of the tune composer and/or the name of the author of the song-text might be known or the item might be anonymous, but for Kidson this did not matter very much. What really mattered was whether the song had survived and become part of vernacular culture. This was a view that neither Sharp nor, initially, Vaughan Williams would embrace. Sharp, in particular, never understood – or, at least, never accepted – Kidson’s perspective on the role of folksong and folk dance within the broader history of British popular music, and he fought long and hard, if unsuccessfully, to persuade the Folk-Song Society to adopt his own Darwinian interpretation of the genesis and evolution of folksong as a unique species. In fact, a decade after Sharp’s death in 1924 the English Folk Dance and Song Society, and subsequently the International Folk Music Council, would eventually adopt a Sharpean definition of folksong, albeit at a time when developments in North America were again demonstrating that it was too narrow. However, my own studies in the history of folksong and popular music have led me to conclude that Kidson was essentially correct and that Sharp was mistaken.

This said, it has to be acknowledged that not even Kidson, and certainly neither Lucy Broadwood nor Sabine Baring-Gould, systematically conflated the notion of folksong with that of vernacular song. They still sometimes – although not always – made a distinction between songs noted aurally from rural tradition bearers, items they readily labeled folksongs, and other vernacular songs, in which they were still interested but which they tended to call old songs, country songs, county songs, or national songs. While they insisted that the broadsides were a highly important source for ballad and folksong texts they usually argued that the best tunes were to be found in oral tradition, irrespective of their known or unknown origin. Baring-Gould, in particular, made a distinction between “genuine” folksongs and other “old English” popular songs found in oral tradition; the latter, he supposed, were the products of 17<sup>th</sup>- and 18<sup>th</sup>-century commercial songsmiths whereas the former were anonymous creations of the common people. Both, however, were forms of vernacular song (Baring-Gould 1895-98). In making the distinction Baring-Gould anticipated the narrower definition of folksong for which Sharp argued in *English Folk-Song: Some Conclusions*, although he did not share Sharp’s hostility to such excluded items as “The Lass of Richmond Hill” and “The Vicar of Bray” to which Sharp denied the privileged label (Sharp 1907:111-113).

Searching for a broader term to encompass the wider field of vernacular song, Baring-Gould latched on to the word “minstrelsy,” which had the advan-

tage of suggesting a musical tradition that went back to the Middle Ages, but yet could embrace later, even much more recent, exponents of the popular art of song-making (Baring-Gould 1895-98). Kidson followed his example (Kidson 1901). The term had been used earlier by Bruce and Stokoe in *Northumbrian Minstrelsy* (1882), but it was not one that achieved widespread adoption; “folksong,” for all its ambiguity, won the day. However, that should not disguise the fact that the Late Victorian era witnessed not only a fairly systematic attempt to recover vernacular melodies from rural tradition bearers but also a renewed interest in broadside balladry, occupational songs – especially sea songs – and national songs.

## National Song

The concept of “national song” had earlier antecedents on the continent of Europe, but in the English-speaking world the term seemingly first came into currency in 1823 when William Kitchiner published his collection *The Loyal and National Songs of England*. Taken up and publicized by the influential William Chappell in *A Collection of National English Airs* (1838) and *Popular Music of the Olden Time* (1858-59), the term became standard usage in the Victorian era. The last decades of the century saw a resurgence of the genre, and at least a partial breakdown of the rather artificial division between folksongs collected from rural source singers and other vernacular songs that were often sung by the same informants. It found expression in Eaton Fanning’s three-volume edition of John Hatton’s *The Songs of England* (Fanning 1890) and several other song collections, including those edited by such leading folksong collectors as Sabine Baring-Gould and Frank Kidson. Baring-Gould’s eight-volume opus, *English Minstrelsy*, was subtitled *A National Monument of English Song*. Kidson’s later collection, *The Minstrelsy of England: a Collection of 200 English Songs with their Melodies, popular from the 16<sup>th</sup> century to the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century*, was more modest in scope, although he supplemented it with another publication titled *English Songs of the Georgian Era* (Kidson and Moffat 1907).

What kinds of songs were included in the category of “national song”? A number of flagrantly patriotic ditties – “British Grenadiers,” “Heart of Oak” and “He Swore He’d Drink Old England Dry” come immediately to mind – but the majority were not chauvinistic. Rather they were popular songs that a varied group of editors from Hatton to Baring-Gould and Kidson regarded as, in some sense, expressing a spirit of Englishness. They were a mixed bag, some anonymous and others by “name” songsmiths from Shakespeare to Charles Dibdin, but all possessed “vital melodies” that had helped them live on from

generation to generation. A few were satirical and quasi-political: “The Vicar of Bray” is a good example. Some, such as “The Oxen Ploughing,” “My Dog and Gun,” “D’Ye Ken John Peel?” and even “The Gallant Poacher,” celebrated rural life, or, as in “The Roast Beef of Old England” and “Adieu to Old England,” expressed regret for the passing of a simpler, pre-industrial mode of existence. Drinking songs like “Down Among the Dead Men” and “The Barley Mow” are to be found among them, and celebrations of the mariner’s vocation are common, as in “You Gentlemen of England” and “The Lass That Loves a Sailor.”

Yet other national songs were simply examples of English song-making at its best. They included many love songs, some rather sentimental (“The Garden Gate” and “Cupid’s Garden”), some mildly suggestive (“The Spotted Cow”), and some sad or wistful (“Early One Morning” and “I Live Not Where I Love”). Even such traditional ballads as “The Three Ravens” and “The Knight and the Shepherd’s Daughter” were also included in this category, as well as some of the most popular broadside ballads such as “Bold Wolfe” and “Turpin Hero.” National song was a mixed bag, to be sure, but the quality was usually high and many of these ditties were destined to become the standard fare of 20<sup>th</sup> century community songbooks. They expressed ideas and sentiments with which their listeners could identify, and they were, above all, catchy and singable. Essentially they were vernacular songs of varied origin that had all become part of popular culture.

## Censorship and Authenticity

The question of the accuracy and authenticity of the ballads and folk lyrics published during the Late Victorian period is a difficult one. The existing scholarly literature, such as it is, vigorously denies the authenticity of many of the songs published by the Late Victorian collectors. When I began my research it was perhaps the most major issue with which I expected to have to come to terms. Was it true that I would be dealing primarily with “fakesongs” created by bourgeois “mediators” who were either unprincipled exploiters of the workers’ music (Harker 1985) or, at best, misguided neo-Romantics with a rose-colored vision of a mythical “folk” living in an “imagined village” (Boyes 1993)? The short answer turned out to be “no.” However the critique, although misdirected, was not totally groundless. It quickly became clear that not everything collected was deemed publishable at the time. There was the problem of the social conventions of middle-class society and, hence, of what was acceptable to publishers.

I have come to the conclusion that there is no single and simple answer

to the question of how much censorship occurred. The degree varied considerably from source singer to source singer and from collector to collector. Some, but not all, source singers practiced self-censorship when performing for audiences they perceived as more genteel than their normal one, which was often a group of friends they met in a local pub. Different songhunters had different ways of dealing with the problem of song lyrics that they deemed unacceptable to polite ears. A few “published and be damned,” but most looked for other, more socially acceptable, solutions. So the situation was not a uniform one. That said, there clearly *was* fairly systematic censorship of bawdy material in most publications intended for a general, as opposed to a specialist, middle-class audience. The simplest solution for an editor, when faced with a text thought too rude for publication, was to leave out the offending verses or even entire songs. Evidence that this was the case can be found in the discrepancies between broadside texts and published versions, in shortened and clearly incomplete texts, and in the candid admissions of certain collectors, including Baring-Gould, Laura Smith, and Lucy Broadwood. And it seems to have been fairly often the case that source singers were too shy to sing the “outway rude” portions of their repertoires to ladies or even clerics. Hence some of the censorship that took place was actually inadvertent on the part of female and clerical editors. And a considerable number of the Late Victorian songhunters were in fact women or clergymen.

So in these late 19<sup>th</sup>-century folksong collections we *are* missing one dimension of English vernacular song, and an important one at that. One place where we can see some of the kind of material that the collectors suppressed is in the third part of Volume 8 of *The Roxburghe Ballads* which was edited by Joseph Ebsworth and published by the Ballad Society in 1897 (Chappell and Ebsworth 1869-99). Thanks to Frederick Furnivall (1869, 1873), the Ballad Society was committed to the principle of scientific editing, which meant printing everything – bawdy songs and all – in a broadside collection such as the Roxburghe. Volume 8 included, among other *risqué* things, a group of comic ballads about the dealings of men, usually merchants, lawyers, or sailors, with “beggar wenches” and prostitutes in London and other ports.

By the standards of the time Ebsworth, although a man of the cloth, was quite broadminded. He had come to realize that it was difficult to draw the line between what was in his eyes reprehensible and what was bawdy but humorous and perhaps harmless. He enjoyed some of the comic ballads dealing with extramarital sex, and was not afraid to say so, even though Queen Victoria was numbered among the Ballad Society’s subscribers. After reprinting a ballad called “The Lusty Miller’s Recreation,” in which three daughters and finally their mother in turn sampled a miller’s services to their evident satisfaction,

he commented, “We pity the poor nondescripts who cannot ‘snatch a fearful joy’ from [this song],” adding that although it was admittedly “somewhat broad in treatment,” there were “worse things in the puritanic sermons of the day” (Chappell and Ebsworth 1869-99, 8:3, x, 621). Yet although lusty millers and their exploits were acceptable in Ebsworth’s eyes, ballads about thoroughly lascivious and immoral women were still distasteful. In earlier volumes he had already reproduced quite a few of the less explicit broadsides about prostitutes, female thieves, and other free-living women, but there were many more such items that he had deferred until the last. Now, with the final volume, it was time to bite the bullet. If one wanted anything like a complete edition of Roxburghe, one had to accept that it included many dozens of broadsides depicting, and often celebrating, female behavior that was – at least in the eyes of conventional middle-class opinion – at best unseemly and at worst downright vicious, wanton, or lewd. Ebsworth collected these “iffy” ballads together into a section that he called “Group of Female Ramblers,” and he warned his readers explicitly about the nature of its contents. Such songs, he explained, illuminated a recurrent phenomenon found in every country and every period of history: “unchanging in vice although diverse in costume and language.” They were hardly titillating; rather they could and should function as a warning to any “silly moths” who might be dazzled by their “baleful light” (Ebsworth, *Roxburghe Ballads* 8:3, x). The most dangerous group comprised some three dozen items about female beggars, bandits, smugglers, and highway robbers, as well as the usual randy milkmaids and street-women, whose conduct or philosophy of life contravened the moral standards supposedly upheld by polite society. It was a rather diverse category, but certain themes predominated.

One favorite subject was that of prostitutes who cheated and stole from their clients, as in “The Miser Mump’d of his Gold; or, The Merry Frolic of a Lady of Pleasure at Bartholomew Fair.” Urban fairs were obviously dangerous places, at least for the respectable. They were locales at which sexual license was viewed as a normal occurrence, where husbands were expected to condone their wives having a fling with other men, confident that they in turn would find new sexual partners among the drunken party-goers. The Charlton Horn Fair had been a time of carnival, when normal proprieties and restrictions were, by common agreement, in abeyance, and life’s troubles could be temporarily forgotten in a whirlwind of saturnalia. One ballad it had inspired, which Ebsworth printed, was “Hey for Horn-Fair” (Chappell and Ebsworth 1869-99, 8:3, 665-666). Here is a verse from it:

Close under the hedges they lye, and there they sweet Furmety eat;  
And if their old Husbands stand by, the Wives will put on them the cheat:

When Roger had found out fair Nell, he takes her a little aside,  
 But what he did there I sha'nt tell, with playing at Whoope-all-hide!  
 'Tis then the sweet pleasure begins, the Lover enjoys with the Lass;  
 One Billing oft makes the Maid willing to dally upon the grass.

Other broadsides portrayed women as delighting in the variety of their sexual partners and rejoicing in the fact that they obtained a good income from an activity that they enjoyed. "The High-Prized Pin-Box," for example, devoted fourteen stanzas to describing the more than twenty different occupations – from peer and parson to weaver and wool-comber – of men pleased by a certain "damsel" before concluding with the observation that there was no man alive that would not "some coyn bestow" for the use of her "pin-box" (Ebsworth, *Roxburghe Ballads* 8:3, 713-714). Another common theme was a woman's alleged weakness in the face of her sexual urge. "The Wanton Wenches of Wiltshire," which was apparently written to the tune of "The Fair Flower of Northumberland" (Child no. 9), is a typical example. The overt discussion of feminine sexual needs found in this ballad is hardly shocking nowadays, but at the time the sentiments expressed were too brazen for polite ears. The ballad-monger employed the usual code words ("brisk", "kiss", "run", "laughter") but it was easy to infer that this was a tale of masturbation, lesbian sex, and voyeurism that ended in an orgy. Here are five stanzas from the broadside (Chappell and Ebsworth 1869-99, 8:3, 651-652):

Now, young Batchelors, all draw near, and you a pleasant Discourse  
 shall hear,  
 Of four young Damsels all meeting and greeting each other together  
 in fair Wiltshire.  
 All complain'd at a sorrowful rate, because they could not enjoy a  
 mate:  
 Whilst they made their sad pitiful moan, they thought they were pri-  
 vate and all alone.

One said: 'I must depart a space, for here I am in a woful case:  
 I find I'm ready to scatter my [laugh]ter, therefore I must find a con-  
 venient place,  
 Where no younge man may see what I do: and then I'le streightways  
 return to you.  
 But unto this they would no ways agree, they'd all go together for  
 Company.'

Said the Third: 'I am pure, [my hair's] cole-black; and that you know  
 has a dainty smack:  
 Besides, I know I am witty and pretty: then why should I not have  
 those joys I lack?  
 Being youthful, and just in my prime, and loth to lose my teeming-  
 time:  
 Yet brisk young Gallants no kindness will show! What reason have I to  
 be served so?'

Then the Fourth did begin to prate, and that was bonny brisk bouncing  
 Kate,  
 Who did with fury behold 'em, and told that she was stark mad for a  
 man-like mate:  
 'Tho' I am shorter than others may be, yet wherefore should this  
 hinder me?  
 Behold, I am of a delicate Brown; no colour is better in all the Town!'

Nay, the worst of us all might serve! For surely Batchellors don't  
 deserve  
 To have our favour, who spight us, and slight us, and suffer poor Dam-  
 sels to pine and starve.  
 But we'l tattle no longer of this [foul wrong]! So ev'ry sister sat down  
 to [a song]:  
 And yet, before they had perfectly done, the young men they laught,  
 and the wenches [did run].

Items such as these are not to be found in any Late Victorian folksong collection, yet it is likely that versions of them did exist in oral tradition. However, to judge from the proportion of bawdy material extant in the big broadside collections, censorship in the field of folksong did not amount to more than, at the very most, ten per cent of the total, and likely considerably less. My educated guess, made on the basis of *Roxburghe* and what we know Kidson and Baring-Gould altered or omitted, is more in the region of five per cent. Moreover, it is a distortion that we can easily recognize and for which we can compensate, given the fairly substantial number of songs of this type that were printed before the Victorian age and also collected from oral tradition after it.



## Conclusion

The issue of censorship aside, in other respects there is little reason to suspect either incompetence or a desire to mislead on the part of the Late Victorian collectors. Baring-Gould, the collector-editor who has come most under attack, was in fact open and informative about his collecting methods and editorial decisions. One may not always agree with these, but I have come to respect his honesty and candor. Kidson, although not a cleric, had similar views on what could and could not be printed, but since he was keen to identify the broadsides with which he believed his singers were familiar it is usually possible to supplement the partial texts he published. Broadwood, like Joseph Ebsworth, proclaimed her commitment to printing songs exactly as noted, and, although she believed that some editorial discretion was required in songbooks, her contributions to the *Journal of the Folk-Song Society* are almost certainly reliable. As regards the tunes, all the collectors believed that it was highly important to record them accurately. They did their level best to do so. A few of them – Sabine Baring-Gould, Charlotte Burne and Laura Smith – had some difficulty noting tunes themselves, so they may have made some inadvertent mistakes, but in any case they usually sought from more experienced musicians help with capturing melodies. Occasionally one suspects a given note, rhythm or time-signature may not be quite right, but in the vast majority of cases there seems no reason to doubt the accuracy of the tunes.

The Late Victorian folksong revival demonstrated beyond a shadow of doubt that a wealth of English popular music had survived in unwritten form, mainly, although not exclusively, in the countryside. The collectors, many of them women, proved that English vernacular song – balladry as well as non-narrative lyrics of all kinds – was not only alive and healthy but also very varied in character. Some of it took the form of “national song.” Some of it was bawdy. Not all of it fitted neatly into the category of folksong. And oral traditions were inextricably mixed with a semi-underground print tradition, that of the broadsheet and garland. The collectors were not immune from faults and idiosyncrasies, but together they created a cultural movement that located, preserved, and published much of the extraordinary variety of vernacular song that existed in the small towns and counties of England. Earlier Victorian songhunters had suggested that this was the case, but it was the work of the Late Victorians that proved it beyond a doubt. They built upon the efforts of their predecessors, but they supplanted them in one crucial regard: their focus on recovering tunes from oral tradition. In a word, Baring-Gould, Barrett, Broadwood, Burne, Kidson, Stokoe, and the others demonstrated the persistence of melody in the English countryside. The image of musical Eng-

land that they projected was rather more rural and respectable than the reality, but they had achieved a great deal. They created a new cultural movement, they recovered many hundreds of excellent tunes for the entire nation to sing and enjoy, they established an institutional home for those Edwardian collectors, most notably Sharp, Grainger, and Vaughan Williams, who followed in their footsteps, they contributed to the revival of “national song,” and they also helped make possible the revival of English art music that would demonstrate, once and for all, that England was not a land without music. 🍀

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