

The Loss of A True Love That Never Can Return: Travels of A Ballad¹

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The broadside ballad “Sweet William” or “The Sailor Boy” is a plaintive story of love and loss which has travelled far over two hundred years. Because “Sweet William” is both a common tale and a tale of common people, its appeal is tested with each retelling or re-singing. Today, one might learn this ballad through a number of media ranging from informal transmission one-to-one to printed and recorded sources to cyberspace. This paper considers the shifting ecology of ballad transmission using a far-flung and living song as a lens.

*A raftsmen's life is a wearisome one
It causes many fair maids to weep and mourn
It causes them to weep and mourn
For the loss of a true love that never can return.
“Pinery Boy” sung by Mrs. M.A. Olin of Eau Claire, Wisconsin
c. 1920, collected by F. Rickaby*



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For the appendix of ballad variants used in this study, please contact the author at kveblen@uwo.ca

This paper follows a ballad in its travels through time and place. The song is not one of the Child ballads,² being neither old nor a rare orchid. It more resembles a dandelion in hardiness and profusion. In its native Siberia, the dandelion evolved quick reflexes and a deep taproot, which ensured survival. Here in the manicured lawns of the western hemisphere, nature and man conspire to provide optimum growing conditions which have caused the term dandelion to become synonymous with weed. Bearing this metaphor of dandelion in mind, this paper considers the shifting ecology of ballad transmission using a prolific and sturdy ballad as a lens.

I first met this song as “The Pinery Boy” (shown in Figure 1) in a compilation of American folksongs (Lomax 1960:112). Northern Wisconsin, once known as “the Pinery,” was a site of logging operations from territorial days, which peaked in the late 1800s and then declined in the early decades of the twentieth century.³ In the early 1920s, Franz Rickaby, a Harvard-trained ballad scholar, documented songs through the upper Midwest. He collected “The Pinery Boy” from Mrs. M.A. Olin, Eau Claire, Wisconsin, who learned it in 1867 from a neighbour.⁴ I learned this song, which describes a logging accident on the Wisconsin River and draws upon local geography with map-like fidelity, under the mistaken assumption that it had originated in that state.

² Ballads are narrative folksongs in stanzas set to a rounded or recurrent melody (Wilgus 1959, 429) to cite one definition. For a more complete description, see David Atkinson’s entry “Ballad” in *The Literary Encyclopedia* [online database] published 21/3/2002; available from: <http://www.litencyc.com/php/stopics.php?rec=true&UID=1214>. The Child ballads are named for their compiler, Harvard scholar Francis James Child (1925-96). Part of a greater European ballad tradition, the ballads collected by Child originated in the British Isles, with an emphasis on Scots ballads between the Elizabethan period and the early nineteenth century. There are references made to other European variants, although they are not included. Over forty years, Child amassed several thousand texts, from which he extrapolated, organized, titled and annotated 305 separate ballads (Child 1965). His harvest, published in *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads* (1882-1898) in five volumes, present a unified body of work, which has inspired other collectors. Criteria for selection, dissemination, variations and codifications have become a field of scholarly discourse and occasional ballad wars. See Leach and Coffin for readings of seminal essays (Leach and Coffin 1961); Bronson for an accessible overview (Bronson 1969); Gregory (2002) for an entertaining take of Child’s views on broadside ballads; and Roly Brown (2001-2005) for a series of articles on broadsides available through the Musical Traditions website <http://www.mustrad.org.uk/articles.hm>.

³ In Wisconsin’s pinery, loggers entered woods in the fall to cut down the pine. Some continued on the river drives, guiding logs down streams to the larger rivers, such as the Wisconsin, where they bound the logs into rafts. In some cases, raftsmen piloted timber to mills as far away as St. Louis. Occupational songs were reportedly sung in camps during slack time. Leary notes that the tunes, text, and singing styles favoured by the loggers that Rickaby collected from were predominately Irish: “the hegemony of song belonged to the Irish” (Leary 1987, 21).

⁴ Mrs. Olin’s neighbor was Thomas Ward, “a great singer.” She thought the song was brought from Canada.

Figure 1: Mrs. M.A. Olin, Eau Claire, Wisconsin : "The Pinery Boy"
 F. Rickaby (1926) *Ballads and Songs of the Shanty Boy*. New York: Harvard University Press, p.85.



Oh, Fa-ther, Fa-ther, build me a boat, That
 down the Wis-con-sin I may float, And ev'-ry raft that
 I pass by There I will en-quire of my sweet Pin-'ry Boy.

Oh, a raftsman's life is a wearisome one,
 It causes many fair maids to weep and mourn.
 It causes them to weep and mourn
 For the loss of a true love that never can return.

"O father, O father, build me a boat,
 That down the Wisconsin I may float,
 And every raft that I pass by
 There I will inquire for my sweet Pinery Boy."

As she was rowing down the stream
 She saw three rafts all in a string.
 She hailed the pilot as they drew nigh,
 And there she did inquire for her sweet Pinery Boy.

"O pilot, O pilot, tell me true,
 Is my sweet Willie among your crew?
 Oh, tell me quick and give me joy,
 For none other will I have but my sweet Pinery Boy."

"Oh, auburn was the color of his hair,
 His eyes were blue and his cheeks were fair.
 His lips were of a ruby fine;
 Ten thousand times they've met with mine."

"O honored lady, he is not hers.
 He's drowned in the dells I fear.
 'Twas at Lone Rock as we passed by,
 Oh, there is where we left your sweet Pinery Boy."

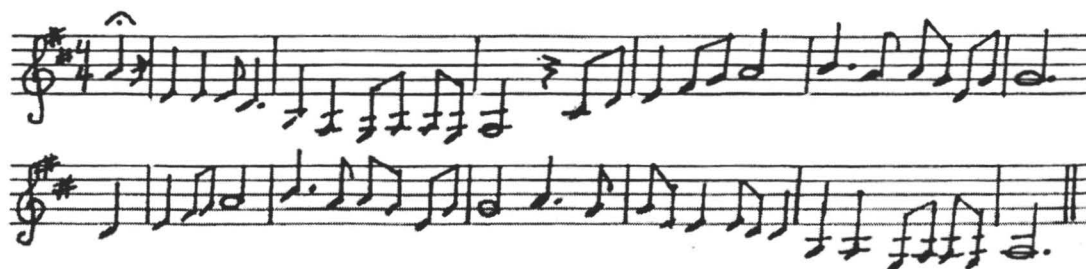
She wrung her hands and tore her hair,
 Just like a lady in great despair.
 She rowed her boat against Lone Rock
 You'd a-thought this fair lady's heart was broke.

"Dig me a grave both long and deep,
 Place a marble slab at my head and feet;
 And on my breast a turtle dove
 To let the world know that I died for love.
 And at my feet a spreading oak
 To let the world know that my heart was broke."

Figure 2: Elizabeth Stewart, Mintlaw, Aberdeenshire, Scotland: "Sailin', Sailin'"

Transcribed from her 1993 commercial recording 'Atween You An' Me, Hightop Imagery HTI 001

by K. Veblen



O sailin', sailin's a weary life
It's ta'en from me my heart's delight
It's left me here for to sigh and to moan
And to wait upon my true love's return

O bring to me paper, pen and ink
That I may write to my heart's content
And every line I may drop a tear
And every line I'll put Billy dear

O father, father build me a boat
For it's on yon ocean that I may float
And every vessel I will pass by
I will make inquiry for my sailor boy

O he hadn't a long sailed upon the deep
When a man-y-war vessel she chanced to meet
O captain, captain come tell me true
If my dear Billy's amongst your crew?

O what kind of clothes does your Billy wear?
What kind of clothes does your Billy wear?
His jacket's blue and his trousers white
And the color of his hair is as black as night

O I doubt, I doubt and I rather fear
That your dear Billy O he is not here
For al last night as the wind blew high
We lost the sailor in yonder bay

O she wrung her hands and she tore her hair
Like any lady in great despair
She dashed her head up unto a rock
O what life can I live since my Billy's gone?
O what life can I live since my Billy's gone?

While doing research in Scotland in 1992, I visited a ballad singer, Elizabeth Stewart of Mintlaw, Aberdeenshire. When I sang "The Pinery Boy" to her, she responded with "Sailin', Sailin'," which she had learned from her Aunt Lucy.⁵ She commented that it had been a broadside, published in the papers. She later sent me a copy of her commercial recording *Atween You An' Me*, with her version, as I've transcribed in Figure 2. The notes to Elizabeth Stewart's cassette describe her as one of the Fetterangus Stewarts,

⁵ Elizabeth Stewart recalls listening to her aunt Lucy Stewart (1901-1982) singing when she was a young as three years old.

travelling people known for their ballads.⁶

Several early discoveries in the library piqued my interest. I have continued to collect versions, noted in the Appendix. My discussion here is based on the examination of 77 whole and 49 partial texts (with and without melodies, 78 tunes in all, 3 without texts), including 57 citations of ballad versions, plus 58 references to field or commercial recordings. These versions have been gathered from archives and libraries throughout North America as well as the Internet.

Although assembling and contemplating ballad variants is fascinating, the intent of this paper is to reflect upon the dissemination of a living song still in transit.⁷ The ballad examined has many names, most commonly "Sweet William," "The Sailor Boy" (Laws K12), "A Sailor's Life," "A Sailor's Trade," and "Father, Build Me a Boat."⁸ These versions have been reported from England, Scotland and Ireland to Canada and the United States. For the purposes of this paper, I shall alternate between "Sweet William" and "The Sailor Boy" when referring to this ballad. The paper begins with a comparison of two early broadside versions, traces migration to North America, speculates about the texts and their meaning, then juxtaposes contemporary recordings to draw conclusions about the song's movement through time, space and various media.

Early Broadside Versions

The earliest extant records of "The Sailor Boy" are nineteenth-century broadsides, so called because they were a single sheet of paper printed on one side.⁹ Broadside ballads were hawked by street singers and sold by the yard. The industry began in Elizabethan times¹⁰ and changed to fit popular taste and growing literacy. In addition to different formats (due to the evolution of the medium), broadsides or broadsheets were not confined to ballads. They included humorous and religious tracts, advertisements, and other popular press items. Broadside served as conveyers of entertainment, news, and as readily available art

⁶ Travellers, also known as gypsies (although thought to be distinct from Roma who are also called gypsies), have cherished traditions of song. See Purser's discussion of the thirteenth-century Scottish poem still sung by travellers (Purser 1992:58-59). MacColl and Seeger collected songs from English and Scottish travellers, including several versions of this ballad (MacColl and Seeger 1977). Porter (1988) and Gower (1983) have document the famed Scots traveller Jeannie Robertson's singing. Music of Irish travellers is traced by Munnely (1975). Kennedy and Lomax describe the vocal delivery of Irish traveller Lal Smith ("Sweet Willie, 1952) as "white-voiced, embellished, glissando style" (Kennedy and Lomax n.d.: 9).

⁷ Rather than as the definitive compilation of ballad versions.

⁸ Other titles for this ballad include "Down by the River Side," "Lost Willie," "Pinery Boy," "Sailor's Sweetheart," "True Sailor," "A Soldier's Life," "My Boy Willie," "Sailing Sailing," "California Boy," "Soldier Lover," "Lost Lover," "Captain, Captain Tell Me True," "The Deep Blue Sea," "Willie Riley," "A new Song Call'd the Young Lady's Lamentation for the Loss of her True Love," "The Sailor Boy and his Faithful Nancy," "Moment's River Side," and "The Lost Lover."

⁹ The term broadside is also applied to street songs and come-all-ye's; chapbooks, which were small printed pamphlets; garlands or small collections of ballads songs or verses; and songsters, nineteenth-century song collections in North America, usually pocket-sized, containing texts of music-hall, patriotic, religious, and sometimes traditional songs (Wilgus 1959:430-437).

¹⁰ "The first collection, a sequence of Robin Hood ballads, was printed by Wynkyn de Worde (c1495), only two decades after the introduction of printing to England" (Myers 1993:130). Simpson asserts that the most influential period of the broadside ballad was from the beginning of Elizabeth I's reign to about 1700, although not the most prolific period. For an exhaustive treatment of broadside melodies, see Simpson 1966.

for the general populace.¹¹

This section examines two broadside versions printed by Dublin publisher P. Brereton (with no date given) and London publisher Preston (Harkness J.), probably sometime between 1840 and 1866. These are texts alone with no indication of melody, a common feature of broadsides. The P. Brereton broadside titled "A New Song Call'd the Young Lady's Lamentation for the Loss of her True Love," may be accessed at: http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collid=amss&fileName=as1/as107370/amsspage.db&recNum=0&itemLink=D?amss:6:~temp/~ammem_UW30::¹² The English Preston (Harkness J.) broadside titled "The Sailor Boy and his Faithful Mary" may be accessed at [http://bodley24.bodley.ox.ac.uk/cgi-bin/acwwweng/ballads/image.pl?ref=Firth+c.12\(227\)&id=17639.gif&seq=1&size=0](http://bodley24.bodley.ox.ac.uk/cgi-bin/acwwweng/ballads/image.pl?ref=Firth+c.12(227)&id=17639.gif&seq=1&size=0)¹³. "The Sailor Boy and his Faithful Mary" is paired with an earlier version "Sailor Boy" printed sometime between 1819 and 1844 by the London publisher Pitts.

Both broadside ballads were illustrated with woodcuts, although these woodcuts would likely have graced other offerings. The eye-catching prints served to take up space where appropriate. Likewise, they were often used as domestic art in taverns and homes. Illustrations from the Brereton version seem less pertinent to the tale of the song, portraying two people (eating?) in an interior scene at the top and a bird sitting on a tree limb at the bottom. In contrast, a ship in full sail on the ocean illustrates the Preston broadside.

Both Brereton and Preston versions are eight stanzas long. Although only half of the verses are similar, these verses carry the plot. Corresponding verses follow the same sequence of events and are clearly related in rhyming schemes, set phrases and meter. Supervenient verses serve a framing function; they set the scene, describe the hero and finish the ballad. Although framing verses are distinct, they seem transposable. When first, second, or last verses are interchanged, they seem to rest easily in their new placement. The two other verses, which detail the heroine writing a song and describing Willy's appearance, might be added or dropped from the text with little detriment to the action.

Action is voiced in the first person present tense, as the heroine declares her love for William: "If I don't have him, I'll have none at all," and "The night is long and I can find no rest/ The thoughts of my willy run in my breast." She orders a boat that she may "inquire for my sailor boy," either a Queen's ship or a French vessel. When she learns that he is drowned and buried on "yon green island," she despairs and tears her hair. The final outcome is decisive in the Preston broadside (she flings her body in the deep to die), but more muted and ambiguous in the Brereton version: "From the cabin boy to the mainmast high / You must mourn in black for my sailor boy."

There are also references to other broadside versions of this song. Six London publishers

¹¹ "The ballads were for the most part not written to give instruction or to incite to action but rather to provide a moment in which listeners could enjoy verse, wit and song" (Holloway and Black 1975:2). For a fascinating discussion of social class, production, dissemination, and reception of literary texts, see Fisher 2003.

¹² The J. Brereton broadside may be viewed electronically from the "America Singing: Nineteenth-Century Song Sheets" collection of the American Library of Congress. According to the current director, James H. Billington: "The Library of Congress is the nation's oldest federal cultural institution and serves as the research arm of Congress. It is also the largest library in the world, with more than 130 million items on approximately 530 miles of bookshelves. The collections include more than 29 million books and other printed materials, 2.7 million recordings, 12 million photographs, 4.8 million maps, and 58 million manuscripts." See <http://www.loc.gov/about/>.

¹³ These two broadsides are accessed through the Bodleian Library in Oxford. The Bodleian makes its huge collection of over 30,000 broadsides complete with extensive information available through the Allegro Catalogue of Ballads: <http://www.bodley.ox.ac.uk/ballads/ballads.htm>.

(Catnach, T. Evans, Davenport, Pitts, Preston and Such) and one Dublin publisher (Brereton) are cited;¹⁵ but there may have been others, given the popularity of this medium and, indeed, of this song.¹⁶ Furthermore, well-received songs such as this one might have been reprinted and sold over a period of time.

Itinerant ballad singers were a familiar feature of nineteenth-century streets. Crowds gathered to hear the new songs they sang, perhaps composed that very day. Many ballads of this time begin "Come all you (fair maids, young men, good folk, sailors etc.) / and listen to me." These songs conveyed action in familiar stanzas, adapted to the sensational crime or hanging of the moment. Like the text, the tunes might be borrowed or newly constructed on standard models with enough repetition to stay in a listener's ear after one hearing. Hindley describes the practice of one broadside publisher of his time:

It is said that he [Catnach] at one time kept a fiddler on the premises and that he used to sit receiving ballad-writers and singers, and judging of the merits of any production which was brought to him, by having it sung then and there to some popular air played by his own fiddlers, and so that the ballad-singer should be enabled to start at once, not only with the new song, but also the tune, to which it was adapted (1869: 8-9).

Ballad singers plied their trade by carrying individual songs folded in sheets over an arm or selling penny songbooks that were popular in the city.¹⁷ They travelled from urban areas through the countryside,¹⁸ adapting place names to suite their local clientele.¹⁹ In addition to individual sales, sheets from London and

¹⁵ See Appendix for details. London was the headquarters of this urban medium. During the early nineteenth century, over 50 publishers printed broadsides in London. Bachelor of Moorfields, James Catnach and rival Pitts family of Seven Dials, and Henry Such of the Borough were among the best known (Myers 1933:130). See the National Library of Scotlands website: <http://www.nls.uk/broadsides/index.html> for a discussion of Scottish publishers.

¹⁶ As early as the late sixteenth century, broadsides were a profitable business, for printers as well as writers. The broadside genre is a complex and multiple genre, spanning centuries and countries. The unifying feature of such ballads is that they are metrical printed sheets sold for money (Andersen 1982:42-43). Hindley estimates that perhaps there may have been 20,000 to 30,000 copies of broadsides sold "in these degenerate days (1860s)" (Hindley 1869:11). Sir Frederic Madden (1802-1873), as head of the Manuscript Department of the British Museum, amassed a collection of over 25,000 printed songs and ballads now housed at the University Library, Cambridge (Hindley 1869:1). These figures should not be regarded as firm statistics, but rather as an indication of the wealth and diversity of this mobile and ephemeral medium. See the wonderful National Library of Scotland's "Word on the Street" online collection of nearly 1,800 broadsides from Scotland at <http://www.nls.uk/broadsides/index.html>. This wonderful digital collection of ballads dated between 1650 and 1910 offers documentation and historical commentary.

¹⁷ Penny song-books were popular in London, not as popular in the country (Hindley 1869:11).

¹⁸ Nineteenth-century chronicler Hindley comments that "The chief circulation of the broadsheet is in the country, where the Conservative instinct is strong in this as in all other matters (Holloway and Black 1976:11).

¹⁹ Holloway and Black cite 'The Wandering Bard' as an example of song adaptation. The opening lines of this ballad being: "I'm the wandering bard of Manchester / From scribbling can't refrain . . ." Other printings of this broadside replace 'Manchester' with 'Liverpool' and 'Exeter,' presumably providing the balladsinger with wider geographic appeal (Holloway and Black 1975:2).

other major centres were distributed to vendors in smaller towns, often reprinted locally.²⁰ Songs might be copied from another broadside or from oral tradition, with conscious and unconscious changes. Likewise, locally composed and traditional verses were also disseminated in rural areas. Thus, commercial distribution might take place through the individual services of a wandering ballad singer, bulk sales from an urban area through local vendors, and limited productions by local enterprises.

While the broadside ballad is part of a written literary tradition, it borrows, mimics, influences, and sometimes merges with the parallel oral tradition of the time. Some scholars contend that broadsides solidified a particular set of verses in what was a fluid and improvised singing tradition and tended to supersede other oral versions of the ballad. Others suggest that temporarily freezing in textual form refreshed and reconstituted the song between submersion in orality. Andersen comments:

The printed ballad and the oral ballad borrowed from each other. Many broadsides travelled from print into oral transmission in the rural districts and perhaps back to the printed page in town, and many ballad versions were gleaned directly from oral circulation and then registered as broadsides in the Stationers' Company. Most ballads have been in and out of tradition (1982:44).

Migration

The records indicate that this particular ballad has flowed between printed and oral media. The origins and paths of migration are less clear. The number of London broadsides and documented British versions suggest that "Sweet William" originated in England. While that is likely, early records do not reflect who sang what and where very accurately. Early nineteenth-century ballad aficionados were enamoured of the Scottish highlands and all associated folksong, folklore, and fakedore.²¹ Easily obtainable popular street songs were usually considered too commonplace to dignify by collection. Thus, number of texts alone may indicate peculiarities of collectors, patterns of documentation, the presence of a conserving family or avid collector, undiscovered sources, or other priorities in collection.

Nearly half of the English variants assembled in the Appendix were collected by Sharp and Karpeles over a five-year span. The remaining English versions are a scattering of broadsides, partial or disembodied texts and melodies, and a few recent offerings. Collected Scottish versions are mostly contemporary ones sung by travellers, such as the Stewart family. Until recently, most travellers had no fixed home but journeyed along various routes in the United Kingdom. These versions are dissimilar from each other. Irish variants are either associated with Northern Ireland or not assigned a place of origin. This body of ballads seems much like the Breton broadside, varying by only a verse or two. The collector Robin Morton described his experience with "My Boy Willie":

I'm sure this song is an English one, which the Irish and particularly those in Ulster, have made their own . . . I think perhaps this song was available on a ballad sheet at one time. I have heard it sung traditionally on numerous occasions and each singer had it in this version with perhaps a verse or two less. Where a song has been passed on orally the versions tend to differ much more basically (1970:12).

Transmission of the song seems to have bypassed Wales, and gone to Northern Ireland, then to North America via two routes.²² Prior to 1914, Bleakney collected a variant from her aunts in Ottawa who

²⁰ Joy (n.d.:26) describes how broadside sellers hawked their wares in the countryside through the descriptions of a rustic English poet John Clare <http://www.jrc.sophia.ac.jp/kiyou/ki22/mjoy.pdf>.

²¹ See Trevor-Roper's article on the Scottish Highlands, part of an entertaining treatment of invented traditions (Trevor-Roper 1983).

²² It is also possible that since transmission may go both ways, the song may have passed back across the water.

had learned it from ballad singers in the streets of Belfast. These singers were often old sailors or soldiers. She noted: "The expression 'There is a hole in the ballad' meaning that one has partly forgotten a song, perhaps originated from this custom, and the fact that such sheets were sometimes torn" (1918:162). Creighton recorded a version from Nova Scotia learned as a chantey from sailors.

It seems likely that the song moved down from Canada to the Midwest, possibly by the Great Lakes schooner routes and then travelled through the logging camps in Wisconsin and Minnesota.²³ Collectors Franz Rickaby and Helene Stratman-Thomas recorded songs of the lumberjacks, which were predominantly Irish in origin. James P. Leary observed that these Irish singers "were generally of the second generation—born in northern New England, the maritime provinces of Canada, or Ontario—and were veteran loggers by the time they came to Wisconsin" (1987:21). This seems to collaborate Mrs. M.A. Olin's notion that her "Pinery Boy" variant had come from Canada.

"Sweet William" likely travelled in a second and separate route across the Atlantic to Appalachia, given the dates of collection and text variations. Several collectors such as Brown and Kittredge mention that their informant learned or heard the song during the American Civil War (1860-1864). North American printed broadsides of "The Sailor Boy" have not surfaced, suggesting that the song was carried and taught orally by many of the settlers. In America, "The Sailor Boy" spread widely enough to claim a place in Laws' compilation of native and imported broadsides. Likewise, a constellation of names and particulars have been propagated.

Because the tunes of broadsides are not fixed by print, there is considerable variation in range, key, mode, melodic contour and rhythm. While melodies of a particular time and region may share some common features, even belong to the same tune family, changing fashions and the cross pollination of versions cause too much variation to speculate on a given tune's journey. While an early melody by the Irish collector Bunting bears a resemblance to the tune given by O'Lochlainn (also collected in Ireland), it is harder to trace a similar sounding melody across the Atlantic.

But the narrative of "The Sailor Boy" remains consistent throughout its geographic dispersion, with a few exceptions detailed in this section. A brief synopsis (of what must now be a familiar plot) holds few surprises. A young woman requests her father to build her a boat. She sails out to find her sailor and encounters a ship. When she describes her sweetheart to the ship's captain, he tells her that her lover was drowned, usually noting the spot (Rocky Isle, Green Isle etc.). Overcome with emotion, the woman kills herself by dashing her boat against the rocks. The ballad usually ends with her final instructions for her burial. Additional actions may include the detailing of William's appearance, weeping while writing a letter or song and admonitions to the sailors to mourn. In landlocked areas, the ocean often changes to a battlefield, sailor to a soldier. Likewise, the lover's death may vary from drowning to being wounded in action.

Several stock openings are attached to "Sweet William." The most common (as illustrated in Figures 1, 2, 4, and Brereton) describes the sailor's life or trade. In the United States, a merry life often becomes the dreary or weary life of a soldier:

A sailor's trade's a weary life
 It robs fair maidens of their delight
 It causes them for to weep and to mourn,
 Awaiting for the sailor boy to return
 "Sailor's Trade is a Weary Life," Rosina Reber, Santa Clara, UT, 1947, Hubbard, 1961, 90-91.

"Father, father, build me a boat," or "Go fetch to me a little boat" sometimes appears as the opening verse: This stanza is one of the most tenacious. "Where a fragment only remains, it is likely to contain this

²³ Ives (1977) comments: "Maritimes tradition and Maine woods tradition are basically the same, and, as Norman Cazden has ably demonstrated, that the same songs are found in the repertoires of lumber-camp singers in New York, Ontario, Pennsylvania, Michigan, Wisconsin and Minnesota."

particular stanza" (MacColl and Seeger 1977:112). Another tenacious verse which occasionally serves as an opening, is "Captain, captain, tell me true."

Another opening stanza found in Ireland, England and Newfoundland is "Early, early in the spring." (See Brereton and Figure 4). This verse is also associated with broadside ballad, Laws M1.

It's early, early all in the Spring
 My love roved out for to serve the King,
 With the raging seas and the winds blowing high,
 Which parted me from my sailor boy.
 "Sweet William," Mrs. Curran, Conception Harbour, Newfoundland, 1929, Karpeles, 1970,
 159-160.

"Sweet William" has intertwined with "The Butcher Boy" and Love Has Brought Me to Despair" with this verse:

O dig my grave both wide and deep
 Put a marble stone at my head and my feet
 An' on my breast a sweet little dove
 To let the world know I died for love.
 "The Sailor's Sweetheart," Kathleen Denoon, Springfield, MO, 1938, Randolph, 1946, I:
 296-301.

"The Butcher Boy" also shares the following verse:

She called for a stool to sit upon,
 Pen and ink to write it down.
 At the end of every line she dropped a tear,
 At the end of every verse she cried out 'Oh, my dear!'
 "Oh, Father, Go Build Me a Boat," Mary Smith, Sugar Grove, NC, 1915, Brown, 1952, II:
 322-329.

Various ballads such as "Prentice Boy," and "The Lass of Roch Royal," have cross-pollinated with "The Sailor Boy." Songs that have contributed stanzas are "Black is the Colour," "Little Sparrow," "There is a Tavern in the Town"²⁴ and others. Floater verses such as "Black is the Colour" are couplets or stanzas which surface in several songs, illustrating one possible path of disintegration from ballad into song.²⁵ "Black is the Colour" serves as the answer to "What does your Willie Look like?" Similar phrases appear in a popular American folk song, as Mary King's version of "Soldier Boy" illustrates:

Black is the colour of my true love's hair
 Her lips are like some rosy fair
 The purest eyes and the neatest hands,
 I love the ground whereon she stands
 Popular American folk song, Blood-Patterson 1988, 145.

Dark was the colour of my true love's hair;
 His cheeks were like a lily fair;
 If he ever returns, it will give me joy;

²⁴ According to Louise Pound, "There is a Tavern in the Town" is related to the Old World folk-song "Died of Love" (Pound 1 42[126]).

²⁵ It seems that some songs (like "Wagoner's Lad," "Fair and Tender Ladies," or "On Top of Old Smoky") may have started with more of a story line but dissolved into a situation, drawing upon a pool of stock images.

For I'll never love any but my soldier boy
 "Soldier Lover," Mary King, Gatlinburg, TN, 1929, Henry 1938, 188-190.

Other verses make occasional appearances, such as the following examples:

I wish, I wish, but it's all in vain
 I wish I was a sweet maid again
 But a maid, a maid I shall never be
 Til apples grow on an orange tree
 "Sweet William," Mrs. Harley, Worcestershire, n.d., Broadwood & Maitland 1893, 74-75.

I wish, I wish, and I wish in vain,
 I wish I was a child again
 My wish, my wish shall never be
 Till green grass grows over me
 "The Sailor Boy," Mabel Tuggle, Concord Depot, VA, 1916, Gardner & Chickering 1939, 94.

This verse surfaces in English variants:

Four and twenty sailors all in one row
 And my Sweet William is the finest of all.
 He's proper, tall and gentle withal,
 And if I don't have him I'll have none at all
 "Sweet William," Tom Sprachlan, Hambridge, Somerset, 1903, Sharp and Karpeles 1974,
 320-323, 624.

Only a few variants of "The Sailor Boy" depart significantly from the main story line. "The Pinery Boy" from Wisconsin, shown in Figure 1, demonstrates regional adaptation both in occupation and geography. A version from Missouri²⁶ summons up the westward expansion and Gold Rush days in "California Boy" through the simple substitution of "California" for "sailor." Cox records a version from Virginia whose tone evokes the American Civil War. Although the heroine arrives at the hospital too late to see her lover alive, she witnesses his burial with phrases reminiscent of popular Civil War songs:

I followed my soldier to the grave,
 We laid him down with the true and the brave;
 His battle o'er, he has gone to rest,
 He calmly sleeps on his Savior's breast
 "A Soldier's Life" Jessie McCue, Hookersville, VA, 1925, Cox 1977, 29-30.

A variant recorded by the Carter Family in 1928 bears the persistent "Oh, Captain" stanza. However, the narrative is in process of dissolving into a song mourning the loss of her "darling" who is "drowned in the deep blue sea." The action softens and condenses into two verses where the captain tells her that the sailor is drowned, and she announces that she will "end my troubles / By drowning in the deep blue sea." Three other verses set the scene but are not found in other variants. Woody Guthrie adapted the Carter Family version for his popular "What Did the Deep Sea Say?"²⁷ Both Carter Family and Guthrie versions are played today in North American bluegrass and folk circles.

Themes of Death and Enduring Love

While this ballad has travelled far over two hundred years, the narrative has consistently endured. Because "Sweet William" is both a common tale and a tale of common people, it likely has not been preserved for its antiquarian merit or for historical value. Its appeal is tested with each retelling or "re-singing." Each singer

²⁶ 1913. Celestine McDonald, Vernon Co., Missouri, "California Boy," Belden 1940.

²⁷ See the Ballad Index for a discussion of the "Deep Blue Sea" by Paul Stamler and Robert B. Waltz.

who has encountered this song meets what for him or her is a definitive version,²⁸ regardless of the song's condition, whole or fragmented. It may or may not be significant that singers of both genders cherish this song. I counted 100 female and 76 male informants as well as several individuals whose orientation was not possible to determine. Because so many people have cherished this song, there must be an underlying text that satisfies its audience. How may we read the narrative of "The Sailor Boy"?

Part of the appeal of this small story must arise from the immigrant experiences. The 1800s saw an unprecedented movement of people.²⁹ Those who remained at home faced loss. Those who left faced danger and loss. This ballad reassured singers that love endures beyond the grave. If the actions are extravagant, they nonetheless may reflect a real inner world of emotions and desires. Laws describes his category K "Ballads of Sailors and the Sea" as probably more authentic than other groups of ballads.³⁰ "Ranging from accounts of disasters in which hundreds lost their lives to the tragedies of individuals, they bring home to the reader or listener both the peril of the sailor and the anguish of his loved ones at home" (Laws 1957:9). According to Laws, while these nautical songs portray a spectrum of hardship, a favoured theme is love. "The Sailor Boy" is one of a number in this genre. Like the heroine of "The Sailor Boy," the bereft female protagonist of "Down by the Sea Shore" drowns herself in sorrow. In "A Gay Spanish Maid," the maid dies believing her sailor is lost, while in a twist from *Romeo and Juliet*, he is the only survivor of a shipwreck. Nancy of "Farewell, Charming Nancy" perishes of grief after witnessing her lover swept overboard in a storm. Nancy's fate was reworked into other broadsides.³¹ Laws comments further that "These romantic and sentimental ballads fail to reflect the proverbial stoicism of seafaring men's loves ones" (1957:9).

This theme of love intertwines with shadows of sudden death. "A Sailor's Life" tells of "the loss of a true love that never can return." The first stanza anticipates tragedy: "A sailor's life is a wearisome life/ It robs young girls of their heart's delight." Images of military life, signalled by sailors in neat rows, nautical attire, man-o-war vessels, or similar themes of the soldiers' life, further reinforces the sense of kismet. As the heroine sails out alone, the water image evokes passage, both materially and temporally. This water voyage suggests a dream state, with formulaic drama and truncated plot starkly juxtaposed against a sea of longing and oblivion. Love and death are paired in a kind of reverse wedding:³² the ill-starred couple unite in the watery deep.

Conventions and assumptions of the nineteenth century are embedded in the ballad's portrayal of romantic love and of men and women's roles. While the tone of the narrative might have rested comfortably with Victorian ears, it jars modern sensibilities. Representation of the heroine is particularly revealing. While the ballad action is driven by her quest, the focus is on the departed sweetheart. The heroine is unnamed and undescribed, in contrast to William. Male images dominate, notably paternal figures. No other women appear. It is clear that much of the dynamic tension of the narrative is derived from the heroine's bold but unaccustomed voyage. Her action (sexuality?) is rendered passive by the tale's end, perhaps through the ultimate containment of self-destruction. Several critiques of this genre detail how dominant gender coding like

²⁸ Or versions. A singer might encounter several versions and make choices about selection, amalgamation or recreation, depending on personal meticulousness, memory and creative impulses. The role of the singer in shaping and re-shaping traditional material has long been contested.

²⁹ Immigrants and those who stayed home knew a time when "thousands were sailing for Americay," as the Irish song puts it. A steady stream of Europeans poured into North America. Ireland, for example, gave up over half of her population from the 1840s to 1900 (McCaffrey 1992; Miller 1985).

³⁰ Lawes pre-dates much of the controversy surrounding the term authenticity. I speculate that what he meant to say was that this group of songs conveyed a more realistic feel of lived experiences than other ballad categories might.

³¹ These broadsides are "Thomas and Nancy," "Susan Strayed the Briney Beach," and "Scarboro Sand."

³² Christine Cartwright spins an elegant exposition of love and death themes in the ubiquitous ballad "Barbara Allen" (Cartwright 1985). Bertrand Bronson (1969), Eleanor Long (1979) and Patricia Williamson (1991) comment on aspects of "Barbara Allen."

the interactions presented in “Sweet William” define the woman’s role, thus maintaining social norms.³³

Contemporary Recordings

“Sweet William” drew another deep breath of air when two folk-rock groups recorded their versions during the traditional music revival begun in the 1960s. One popular release from the early 1970s featured the Irish Bothy Band’s Triona Ní Dhomhnaill singing “The Sailor Boy,” as shown in Figure 3. This contrasts with Figure 4, “A Sailor’s Life,” as sung by Sandy Denny of the English group Fairport Convention, recorded in 1969. The Bothy Band’s version from their *Out of the Wind, Into the Sun* recording features bright-edged vocals against a deliberate, almost militaristic tempo. In contrast, the Fairport Convention recording favours a meditative pace, superimposing a broadly textured vocal line against an ebbing and swelling accompaniment of electric guitar and synthesized violin.³⁴ This recording is especially notable since it is thought to be the first instance of an English folk group “going electric.”³⁵ The 1969 LP *Unhalfbricking* had limited release in North America but was reissued in CD format circa 1994.³⁶ Since these groups recorded their versions, a number of traditional musicians have also covered the song.

If these modern recorded versions are juxtaposed against the British Preston (Harkness J.) and the Irish Brereton broadsides, the fit is almost too good. The opening lines in the two Irish and two British versions match up, as do the rest of the pieces. Each of the broadsides feature an extraneous verse—the Brereton “The night is long and I can find no rest” and the Preston song writing and doubled final verse.

³³ Such focus is in agreement with Polly Stewart’s 1993 study of women in the Child ballads. Stewart finds that “while a large number of ballads have no women at all in them, the ballads that do depict women also depict men. More bluntly, women are absent from Child ballads unless in some kind of social or filial relationship with men” (Stewart 1993:54-55). Diane Dugaw draws upon her catalogued collection of over 100 separate female warrior ballads from the past three and a half centuries to see how gender roles were played out in broadside ballads from 1650-1850 (Dugaw 1989). See Susan Cook’s study of “Fuller and Warren” (Cook 1994), and Anne Cohen’s treatment of “Pearl Bryan” (Cohen 1973) for two critiques of gender and American broadsides.

³⁴ Malcolm Douglas posted this notice on www.folkinfo.org/forum/topic on March 30, 2003: “In the 1960s, Fairport Convention recorded an arrangement of “A Sailor’s Life” on their seminal folk-rock album *Liege an Leaf*; this was the version noted by W. Percy Merrick from Henry Hills of Lodsworth, in 1899, first published in the *Journal of the Folk Song Society*, vol. 1 issue 3, 1901, pp. 99-100.”

³⁵ Violinist David Swarbrick guests on this album, using improvisational and timbral techniques current then in rock music genres. This recording apparently causes some controversy. Jennifer Cutter, personal communication, Fall 1993.

³⁶ Reinhard Zierke’s (Mostly) English Folk Music Website details discographies and interrelationships of important English singers such as Sandy Denny, A.L. Lloyd and June Tabor plus groups such as Fairport Convention and the Watersons. See his site at www.informatik.uni-hamburg.de/~zierke/watersons/songs/sweetwilliam.html for details.

Figure 3: Ireland: Triona Ní Dhomhnaill of The Bothy Band: "The Sailor Boy"



It was early, early all in the spring
 When my love Willie went to serve the king
 The night being dark and the wind blew high
 Which parted me from my sailor boy

O father, father build me a boat
 For on the ocean I mean to float
 To watch the ships as they pass by
 For I might inquire for my sailor boy

She had not sailed it was a week or two
 When she spied a captain and all his crew
 O captain, captain, come tell me true
 Does my love Willie sail on board with you

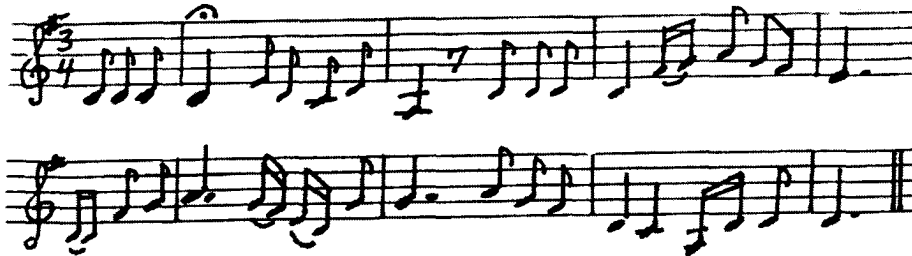
What was the color of your Willie's hair
 what was the color does your Willie wear
 A round blue jacket and his trousers white
 And his tarry head was my heart's delight

O fair maid, fair maid, he is not here
 For he was surely drowned, I am afraid
 For yon green island as we passed by
 Was there we lost a fine sailor boy

She wrung her hands and she tore her hair
 Just like a lady in deep despair
 She called for paper both pen and ink
 And every line she did drop a tear
 And every word she calls Willie dear

So father, father, go dig my grave
 Go dig it long and go dig it wide
 Place a marble stone at my head and feet
 That the world may know that I died in grief

Figure 4: England: Sandy Denny of Fairport Convention: "A Sailor's Life"



A sailor's life it is a merry life
 He robs young girls of their heart's delight
 Leaving them behind to weep and mourn
 They never know when they will return

Here's four-and-twenty all in a row
 My true love he makes the finest show
 He's proper, tall, genteel withal
 And if I don't have him, I'll have none at all

O father, build for me a bonny boat
 That on the wide ocean I may float
 And every Queen's ship that we pass by
 There I'll inquire for my sailor boy

We had not sailed long upon the deep
 When a Queen's ship they chanced to meet
 You sailors all, pray tell me true
 Does my Sweet William sail among your crew?

Oh no, fair maiden, he is not here
 For he's been drowned, we greatly fear
 On yon green island as we passed it by
 There we lost sight of your sailor boy

Well she wrung her hands and she tore her hair
 She was like a young girl in great despair
 And her little boat against a rock did run
 How can I live now my Sweet William is gone?

These and other recent recordings invite comparison as the contemporary counterpart to the nineteenth-century broadside ballad sheets in their function as disseminator, stabilizer, and change agent. It seems significant that Bertrand Bronson commented on recordings around 1969:

The live recording stands in very much the same relation to the music of the folk-song as formerly the old broadsides stood to the text. The broadside, when it took up a traditional song, affected it in important ways . . . it made it audience-conscious, . . . it tended to divorce the words from the tunes . . . It began to cultivate the clichés of written speech . . . and introduced urban attitudes and values. It smoothed out the irregularities of rhythm and statement . . . and made the transitions explicit . . . It provided a static text, that could be accurately memorized and repeated verbatim, and stultified the old re-creative habit of oral transmission. All this phonograph record now does, too, but in a more compelling, more insinuating way.³⁷

³⁷ Bronson's essay on folk-song, revival, and live recordings makes fascinating reading, particularly from the perspective of nearly four decades later. He also points out benefits of media, although "in one fell swoop

Conclusion

We are living in a pivotal time like the Renaissance, where technological developments expand our understanding of traditions, the people who carry them, and the way they work. Transmission theories have come far from the seventeenth-century antiquarian view of ballads as residue of a golden age, preserved in fragmentary form by peasants. These assumptions softened as scholars began to appreciate the resilience and diversity of collective memory. Nonetheless, the emphasis was still on the product of ballads, not the process, even given examples like the famous Mrs. Brown (Nygard 1978:68-87).³⁸ Another notion, based on the work of scholars such as Parry, Lord, Gower, Porter and McCarthy,³⁹ negotiates the role of the ballad singer as both shaper and agent for stability. Tape recorders and videos express a new literacy beyond print literacy. Furthermore, websites, blogs, and open-access journals such as this one express a new kind of interactive literacy that extends a larger scope of information beyond a few privileged academics. As singers have access to these media and control over their representation, they present or withhold their songs at will – thus opening up and often inverting power relationships between singer and scholar. Today the singer may also be the scholar, the scholar a singer.

“Sweet William” or “The Sailor Boy” illustrates much about the process of transmission. Today one might learn this ballad through a number of media: informal transmission in a family or community, live performance, print and musical notation, radio broadcast, possibly television or videotaped performances, cyberspace, and recordings either on wax disc, tape, LP, or CD formats. Circumstances and individual choices favoured this far-flung and living song, whose transmission seems as easy and diverse as dandelion seeds in the wind.

[recordings] obliterated the usefulness of studying local traditions and habits of melodic transmission” (Bronson 1969:206). I wonder if this is true.

³⁸ The first ballad singer to be extensively documented over time was the famous Mrs. Brown, known to Sir Walter Scott, Child and others. Anna Brown was a lettered minister's daughter who had learned ballads in her youth. She is the first singer whose repertoire was studied over a period of time. Comparison of early and later ballad versions demonstrated that Anna Brown conceptualized her songs in a fluid form. While singing, she drew upon a stock of generic images, while remaining true to narrative and meter. See Nygard (1978), Fowler (1968: 294-331) and Bronson (1969:64-78) for further exploration of Anna Brown's generative process.

³⁹ Oral-formulaic re-creation or improvisation became a major theme of ballad scholars such as Milman Parry and Albert Lord who studied epic song performance in the former Yugoslavia as a basis for understanding the creative process in historic epic traditions (e.g., Homer). (Bynum n.d.). McCarthy (1990) provides a contemporary analysis of a ballad singer. Others such as Porter (1988) and Gower (1983) study present day tradition bearers.



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