

# TRUTH IN FOLKSONG: SOME DEVELOPMENTS AND APPLICATIONS

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Cecil Sharp wrote in 1907 that the elaborate description of minor details in folksong narratives is:

... one of the arts by which the ballad maker imparts to his story a vivid sense of reality. 'Yes sir, and it is true,' is the reply that has often been made to me by a folk-singer at the conclusion of a long ballad which I have praised. Here again, the peasant singer is like the child and loves to think that the story which has moved him is not fictitious but true. To him, there is no tale like the true tale; and to heighten the sense of reality, he will often lay the scene of his story in his own locality.<sup>1</sup>

These few lines were composed seventy years ago and represent Sharp's recognition, albeit brief, of an important if not crucial element in the esthetic, motivation and performance of the Anglo-American folksinger, the idea of truth.

I am afraid that the title of this paper may be somewhat misleading for, in the words of the late Francis Lee Utley, "My purpose is not theory, but the humbler one of classroom relevance."<sup>2</sup> What I wish to do is to discuss some ideas that are largely derived from the work of other scholars but that have, in my view, been sadly overlooked or at least underestimated by most folklorists; ideas that are valuable because they outline potentially fruitful areas of study.

That folksingers are conscious of the element of truth in their material there is no doubt. The existence of singers who consider truthfulness to be an important quality in their songs or at least differentiate between "true" songs and others in their repertoire has been well documented throughout English-speaking tradition.<sup>3</sup> In 1939, Herbert Halpert devoted an article to this aspect of folksong with reference to material that he had collected in New Jersey and the Delaware River area of New York State.<sup>4</sup> His main findings were that singers in that tradition had an intense belief in the factual basis of their songs and that they demonstrated a high degree of emotional participation in their narratives. In performance and conversation, these singers tried to strengthen

My thanks are extended to Martin Laba for his helpful comments and suggestions.

<sup>1</sup>Cecil J. Sharp, *English Folksong: Some Conclusions* (London:1907), p.93.

<sup>2</sup>Francis Lee Utley, "Oral Genres as a Bridge to Written Literature," in *Folklore Genres*, ed. Dan Ben-Amos (Austin: Univ. of Texas Press, 1976), p.6.

<sup>3</sup>In addition to Sharp's work cited above see, for example, Roger D. Abrahams, "Creativity, Individuality and the Traditional Singer," *Studies in the Literary Imagination*, 3 (1970), 5-36; G. J. Casey, N. V. Rosenberg, and W. W. Wareham, "Repertoire Categorisation and Performer-Audience Relationships: Some Newfoundland Examples," *Ethnomusicology*, 16 (1972), 397-403; A. E. Green, "McCaffery: A Study in the Variation and Function of a Ballad," *Lore and Language*, 3 (1970), 4-9; 4 (1970), 3-12; 5 (1971), 5-11; and Robin Morton, *Come Day, Go Day, God Send Sunday* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973).

<sup>4</sup>Herbert Halpert, "Truth in Folksong: Some Observations on the Folk-Singer's Attitude," in J. Harrington Cox, *Traditional Ballads from West Virginia*, ed. George Herzog and Herbert Halpert (New York: National Service Bureau, 1939), ix-xiv.

their listeners' belief by setting the narrative in a locally known place or by presenting the material as personal testimony to an event or series of events. That songs could be widely accepted as valid historical documents seemed, in part, to stem from the rural American's traditional acceptance of hearsay evidence. Respect for the integrity of older members of the community by whom many of these songs had been transmitted to their present bearers was also a contributing factor. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the singers felt that human nature could be relied upon to be consistent and so would sometimes base their evaluation of a song's truthfulness on their own experience of human behaviour and the extent to which this was reflected in the song. The importance of this point lies in the fact that it suggests that the historicity of a song narrative need not necessarily be so crucial a factor in the singer's selection of "true" songs. It also goes some way towards explaining the retention within a community of belief in song material whose subject matter would ordinarily appear to be out of context within that culture.

Here, then, we have a striking example of the vitality of the notion of truth in one section of the North American tradition. Unfortunately, the implications raised have since received little attention.

Recently though, the discussion was taken up by a British folklorist, Tony Green. In his functional study of eight versions of the Anglo-Irish ballad "McCaffery," he concluded that, in the tradition in which he was working,

... when a singer talks of truth, he is referring to morality rather than to historical facts or to facts of such a general nature that their application is more likely to be ethical than documentary ... for the traditional singer, this ballad [McCaffery] potentially functions as "truth" on two levels; the first, that of an historically accurate narrative; the second, that of a moral statement with application to the experience of particular singers and probably of particular descent groups.<sup>5</sup>

The introduction of a bold statement such as this should serve to illustrate that this idea of "truth" in song is a more complex concept and much wider in application than might at first be assumed and hence merits further investigation. I believe that the term "truth" is eminently flexible and that a song need not necessarily be documentary or ethical in its application to be considered true. In fact, a singer may perceive truth throughout his entire repertoire, basing this perception in part upon the fact that some of his songs will simply "ring" true by incorporating elements which symbolize his life experience or typify his culture. The very nature of a song's subject matter may therefore be a crucial consideration, providing in itself the basis of a singer's decision that here he is dealing with a true or untrue song.

When a fieldworker enquires of a singer as to the truth of his material, he is asking that singer to exercise his esthetic by way of making a value judgement in relation to that material.<sup>6</sup> Since esthetic considerations play a dominant role in the process of formation and subsequent regulation of repertoire, it

<sup>5</sup>Green, 5, p.10.

<sup>6</sup>In terms of the fact that in western society honesty and truthfulness are highly valued personal qualities, this is reflected at the folk level with a feeling for verisimilitude in art forms. As one of Halpert's informants pointed out, "Ain't true songs better than story songs? The truth's always better than anything that isn't true." See Halpert's article for further comment.

is reasonable to suppose that the notion of truth will be an important one in this process.<sup>7</sup>

In the winter of 1974-75, I studied the singing tradition of a section of the Irish immigrant community in Leeds, a large industrial city in the north of England. My chief informant was James Murphy, a sixty-five year old native of County Mayo.<sup>8</sup> He had sailed to England in 1930 to look for work and had never since returned home. A singer and step-dancer of some repute back in Ireland, he soon began to entertain the clientele of pubs in the various towns and cities that he visited in search of employment, and performed regularly in Leeds where he finally settled in 1942. As well as traditional and popular songs from Ireland, he would often perform music-hall and other English "pub-type" songs to the accompaniment of the piano. At length though, Jim was introduced to the Royal Oak, a pub which, unlike his usual haunts, possessed a largely Irish clientele. It was also the regular venue for "sessions" of traditional Irish music and songs at weekends and on special occasions like St. Patrick's Day. Jim made the Royal Oak his regular drinking place and soon found himself singing there on occasion.

At this point, his repertoire underwent a rapid and complete transformation. The English songs and much of the Irish material that he had previously performed for predominantly English audiences were now relegated to "inactive status,"<sup>9</sup> and replaced by songs learned from other singers, phonograph records, and the ballad sheets of Irish newspapers sold in the pub every week. However, Jim took great pains to assure me that these songs were part of his own tradition, he had heard them and known them during his youth in Ireland and so could speak about them with some authority.

The material that now became active in Jim's repertoire comprised songs that were linked by a unifying thread that he could clearly conceptualize, but found difficulty in articulating: "Oh, somethin' about Ireland, somethin' o' that sort, a come-all-ye kind of a song, that's the kind of song I sing." This contrasts with some of the material he had formerly incorporated into his repertoire, of which he said, "Well, we know they're old songs, but they're not the real old Irish songs."

Apparently, the songs that he now started to sing were, and he made no distinctions between them on the grounds of their veracity. They all, in some way, functioned as truth. In fact, the songs that I collected from Jim could generally be considered as belonging to one of two categories according to their subject matter. They dealt, by and large, with the themes of Irish nationalism and events associated with it, and of emigration from Ireland to escape the hardships inherent in life there from time immemorial. In this respect, they closely approximated the kinds of songs generally performed at the Royal Oak by other singers. At least 80 per cent of the songs I heard performed there over

<sup>7</sup>For a discussion of esthetics and repertoire, see K. S. Goldstein, "On the Application of the Concepts of Active and Inactive Tradition to the Study of Repertoire," in *Toward New Perspectives in Folklore*, ed. Richard Bauman and Americo Parédes (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1972), pp.62-67.

<sup>8</sup>. All the names in this paper have been changed. Field recordings of the songs and conversations referred to are housed in the archives of the Institute of Dialect and Folklife Studies at the University of Leeds.

<sup>9</sup>This term is borrowed from Goldstein's article cited above.

a period of several months could be thought of as belonging to one of these two categories. This is not surprising since almost all of the regular audience, being first generation Irish, had experienced emigration themselves, and the Irish Republican movement continues to be an ever-present element in all areas of Irish society and culture.

The songs thus described were of a type designed to fulfill what I considered to be and what some informants readily recognised to be the dual function of singing within the context of these "sessions," dominated as they were by the performance of dance music; the provision firstly of a socially sanctioned opportunity for the release of emotion in the form of reminiscence of a homeland which many had been forced to leave unwillingly, and secondly of a verbalisation of communal identity. The fulfilment of such functions was largely dependent upon the singer's ability to convey, through his material, an air of authenticity with respect to those elements of his song texts that spoke of Irish culture as it had been in the native context and now was for the emigrant. "True songs," in this situation, became an important functional type.

In Jim's compilation of a new repertoire for performance in this new context, the notion of truth was an important though by no means exclusive factor in the formation of a whole complex of requirements which a song should meet, including standards of musicality and performance. I asked him, for example, if there was a real story behind all of his songs and his reply was: "Oh there is, yes, there is, but the story that's behind it doesn't go with the air to a lot of songs," hence . . . "Now 'Kevin Barry', you don't hear many singing that one. We know it's an old rebel song, but it never caught on much in Ireland didn't that one, there wasn't the right air to it, not like 'Bold Robert Emmet.'"

Of the act of singing itself, he said, "If you don't put that dorn into it, there's nothin' Irish to it at all." (The term "dorn" refers to the high degree of melodic decoration typical of the traditional singing style of the West of Ireland.)

That songs fulfilling such requirements as these could all be regarded as "true" arises from the flexibility of the term which in my view can serve as a lexemic representation for different categories of songs. The designation "true song" can, for example, be applied to a formal category whereby the songs are grouped together on the grounds that they possess intrinsic characteristics shared by all such songs. (They contain documentary truth and can thus be validated by reference to history.) On the other hand, the same label may be placed upon a different category of songs which invoke a common affective response derived from past experience. They correspond, for example, to the singer's sense of morality, or, as Halpert has suggested, describe essentially the way in which the singer would react were he placed in the situation outlined in his narrative. Finally, songs may be described as "true" because they belong to a category of songs which fulfill the same function, and the group esthetic of those involved in the folksinging event demands that the requirement of "truth" be met before such a function can be fulfilled. Thus, in our case, Jim could perceive truth in songs that were more lyrical than narrative and that did not involve the formation of an ethical or other affective response. Such songs might simply make a passing reference to St. Patrick's Day celebrations or provide some other point of association for the largely Irish audience. As a result, they could be deemed to have an Irish "flavour" and to be suitable for perfor-

mance in the context of those gatherings at the Royal Oak. They would likely fulfill the expectations of those present with respect to the acknowledged functions of singing in that context. Our singer, then, could select material which he believed appropriate for such performances and include it in his "active" repertoire, once this selection had been consensually validated by receiving a favourable audience response. At the same time, his attribution of "truth" to the song would also be validated since it had been seen to function successfully in a performance situation governed by an esthetic in which a notion of truth was a highly important element.<sup>10</sup>

I have also detected a broadly based concept of "truth" in song from the comments of informants in the Conception Bay Head region of Newfoundland's Avalon Peninsula. I discussed with one singer the incorporation into song texts of traditional elements of Newfoundland culture, with specific reference to the Newfoundland fishing ballad, "The Flemings of Torbay," which he had just performed for me.

"Well," he said, "I can identify with that, 'cause as you say, it's Newfoundland tradition and it's sort of ingrained in us, 'cause, even, er, say for myself, I haven't been around boats that much, but still, there's a certain fascination concerned with them, y'know, especially when you hear about something like that." At the same time, the achievement of this identification, which my informant seeks from all folksongs as a singer and listener, depends not only upon the song itself, but also upon successful performance, as he noted with reference to the same piece: "Well, I can identify with the story, but after a while, I find it a bit monotonous, er, it depends on who's singing it, y'know, really, 'cause, like, I couldn't do a good job with it, but some people probably could. Probably some fellas could sing that and have you sittin' on the edge of your seat, probably, somethin' like that."

The truth of a song must be carried from the text into performance and, as Tony Green hinted, might well be created in performance, since singers "... speak of 'getting into' the song, of 'being the person,' in short, like an actor on stage, they project themselves imaginatively into a situation in which they have never in reality participated and their audience seemingly accepts this projection as truth."<sup>11</sup>

I have found that such is the concern of the traditional singer with successfully projecting the truth to his listener that he is frequently not content with relying upon his performance of a song as sufficient proof of his own veracity, but will use every means at his disposal to reinforce the factual basis of his text in further discussion.

The introduction of local place names and personages to provide mute and vocal witness to the events narrated in a folksong has already been noted. Another "convincing device" used by the singer in conversation is the introduction of a time referent, a period or epoch, to which, he will tell you, the events in a song pertain. This he will do usually with no apparent justification and often quite erroneously. Finally, as irrefutable evidence in support of his story, he will provide you with information beyond that contained in the song text itself by way of elaboration designed to demonstrate to the listener that a

<sup>10</sup>For a discussion of these equivalence categories see J. S. Bruner, J. S. Goodnow, and G. A. Austin, "Categories and Cognition," in *Culture and Cognition: Rules, Maps and Plans*, ed. J. P. Spradley (San Francisco: Chandler, 1972), pp.168-190.

<sup>11</sup>Green, 5, p.7.

narrative based upon such extensive knowledge on the part of the performer must represent a factual account of past events.

My remarks have, by now, I hope, served to illustrate the fact that not only is the notion of truth in folksong one that is both complex and far-reaching in its implications, but also that the singer recognises it to be so in as much as he articulates a concern for questions alluded to here. These facts constitute in themselves sufficient reason why we should be devoting ourselves to systematic investigation of truth and belief in folksong to the same extent that these problems are currently receiving attention from students of prose narrative. The idea of truth is a lively one in the mind of the folksinger and one that is in some cases clearly articulated by him. Such ideas merit further examination.

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**Résumé.** *John Ashton: "La vérité dans la chanson folklorique: quelques développements et applications."*

*Cecil Sharp a remarqué par écrit en 1907 que les chanteurs traditionnels anglais avec qui il travaillait l'assuraient fréquemment au cours de la conversation de la veracité des faits à la base de leurs chansons narratives. Depuis cette époque, la tendance des chanteurs à chanter ce qu'ils considèrent être de "vraies" chansons ou, tout au moins à s'intéresser aux éléments tenus pour vrais dans les chansons, a été très bien documentée dans le domaine de la chanson de langue anglaise.*

*Le but de cette communication est de montrer la valeur de l'enquête systématique dans les aspects de la "vérité" contenue dans la chanson folklorique, en se rapportant plus particulièrement aux questions de formation et de modification du répertoire de chansons vis-à-vis l'esthétique de groupe d'une communauté de chanteurs folkloriques.*

## **LUMBERCAMP SINGING AND THE TWO TRADITIONS <sup>1</sup>**

**EDWARD D. IVES**

What I will do in this short paper is to describe singing as it occurred in the lumbercamps of Maine during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. What was its function, when, where, and (in broad terms only) how was it done; who were the singers, and what was the basic repertoire? I will then take my own early assumption that there were two traditions in the Northeast: something called "lumbercamp" or "woods" tradition and something called "local" tradition. I will wind up by redefining these two traditions and showing what part the lumbercamps had in one of them.

We can begin with the very obvious fact that in the woods singing was simply one form of entertainment or pastime. It was not something used to time the blows of the axes or to keep men moving together while they were rolling or lifting logs on the drive or on the yards or landings. In this way the lumberman's life contrasts rather sharply with what we read about the sailor's

<sup>1</sup>This paper is a brief summary of what will be a full chapter in my forthcoming book, *Joc Scott: The Woodsman Songmaker* (University of Illinois Press, 1978).