

Cross Border Raids

Conflicting interpretations of folk music collected in the borderlands of the Tamar Valley and Dartmoor.

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There is an underlying “received wisdom” and “common sense” about the nature of traditional music and community identity in the British Isles, which continues to be defined by the cultural aspirations and backgrounds of a small group of enthusiasts active in collecting and publishing folk material during the early part of the last century. From the perspective of Cornish identity this is thrown into sharp relief by the contrasting interpretations of material collected in the borderlands of the Tamar Valley and Dartmoor. This paper will consider different perceptions of this border and how this is reflected in the way that traditional material is interpreted.

In the British Isles the genre of music we call “folk” or “traditional” has its roots in the activities of a small group of enthusiasts in the late 19th century. Certainly a leader and arguably the first folk song collector in the modern sense was Rev Sabine Baring-Gould who worked in the Dartmoor / North Cornwall / Tamar Valley area that also provides the geographic backdrop for the subject of today’s conference. It is a delightful, and perhaps informative, irony that Baring-Gould’s work might be seen as pioneering the English Folk Song revival and yet the geographic area of his work is being considered by this conference as a contested border between England and Cornwall.

Baring-Gould

Although he maintained an interest and continued to add material to his collection into the early years of the 20th Century, Baring-Gould’s main period of collection activity was circa 1888 to 1893. His collection provides us with a snap shot of the songs popular at the social events and in the pubs and Inns of the farming and working communities of Dartmoor and North East Cornwall. These songs are a mixture of broadside ballads, music hall songs and material of much earlier origin and taken down from singers who were often celebrities in their locality. It is important to recognise the “pick and mix” nature of the material collected, with lyrics and words frequently interchanged and adapted. Baring-Gould’s



rough copy notebooks illustrate this with a large number of variants being collected for some songs such as “Flowers and Weeds”.

Baring-Gould’s collection in Cornwall is summarised by Martin Greabe: “*Baring-Gould's 'Personal Copy' manuscript contains nearly 100 songs collected from about 35 singers in Cornwall In round terms, though, we are talking about a quarter of the singers that Baring-Gould collected from and about one seventh of the songs. The majority of the songs were collected by Baring-Gould himself, sometimes alone, sometimes with Frederick Bussell who would take down the music while Baring-Gould concentrated on the words.*”

Although there were subsequently a number of folk song collectors active in Cornwall none were so prolific as Baring-Gould in the amount of material they recorded and only a handful of songs were further collected in the North and East.

Early Collectors	
•	<i>Sabine Baring Gould 1888 / 1883 100 items, mostly from North Cornwall</i>
•	<i>George Gardiner 1905 14 items, 10 from North Cornwall</i>
•	<i>Cecil Sharp 1913/1914 26 items mostly from West Cornwall</i>
•	<i>James Madison Carpenter 1929 / 1932 Approx 40 items, mostly in the west</i>

Baring Gould provides an insight into his own view of the nature of the material he collected in his introduction to “Songs and Ballads of the West”:

“But what I find is that songs and ballads sung to their traditional melodies in Somersetshire, in Sussex, in Yorkshire, and Northumberland, are sung to quite independent airs on Dartmoor and in Cornwall. How is this - because the same process went on in the West as in Scotland?”

The Celtic tongue retrograded and finally expired in Cornwall. Then English ballads and songs found their way into Cornwall, as they found their way into Scotland and Ireland, and were set to already familiar melodies thenceforth dissociated from their no longer understood words. Take an instance. There is in Welsh a song on the pleasures of the bottle, “Glân meddwod mwyn.” Now precisely the same melody was sung in Cornwall, almost certainly to words of a like nature. When the Cornish tongue ceased to be spoken, then this melody was applied to a broadside drinking song, Fathom the Bowl.” But “Fathom the Bowl” has, everywhere else, its own traditional air.

Another well-known song is "Tobacco is an Indian weed," another is "Joan's Ale is New," both wedded one would have supposed indissolubly to their traditional airs known everywhere else in England. But not so in Cornwall and on Dartmoor; there these words are set to quite independent melodies—melodies that probably had accompanied words in the old Cornish tongue in former times, to descend later. Broad-side ballads, and songs in "Warblers," and "Apollo's Cabinets," &c., got down into the West, unassociated with music. Then, again, the local composers went to work and set them to tunes of their own creation. Thus, "Sweet Nightingale" was a song by Bickerstaff, to which Dr. Arne wrote music in 1761, and it was sung in an opera in London. The words got into a song-book, "The Syren," which found its way into Cornwall. Some village musician—no bumpkin at the plough tail—set it, and it was sung by the miners in their adits and the labourers in the fields to the locally produced air, not to that by Dr. Arne."

What is interesting here is not just whether or not the difference between melodies found "everywhere else in England" and those found "in Cornwall and on Dartmoor" actually were the result of Celtic influence, but also Baring-Gould's perception of a border between the English of the East, and the Britons / Celts of the West, and identification of that border with Dartmoor.

Cecil Sharp's Editorship

12 years later, however, Cecil Sharp makes a quite different interpretation in his editorship of the fifth and substantially revised edition of Baring-Gould's "Songs of the West". The Celtic links original espoused by Baring-Gould are toned down considerably both in the introduction and in the notes describing the materials origins. Cecil Sharp's influence could not be better illustrated by the complete reversal of explanation given for the origins he notes provided for the song "Lord Arscott of Tetcott" In "Songs and Ballads of the West" Baring Gould writes:

The author of the song is said to have been one Dogget, who used to run after Arscott's fox hounds on foot. If so, then he probably followed the habit of all rural bards of using for his purpose an earlier ballad, and spoiling and vulgarising it; such poets are incapable of originating anything. I think this because along with much wretched stuff there are traces of something better, and smacking of an earlier period. As Dogget's doggerel has been printed, and I have taken down from ten to twelve versions all widely differing, I have not considered it worth preserving except only where there are pre-Doggetian verses, incorporated by him into his copy; and I have ventured to

recast the conclusion. The tune was obtained through the assistance of Mr. J. Richards, schoolmaster at Tetcott. The same tune is found in Wales to the words "Difyrrwch Gwyr Dyfi" [The Delight of the Men of Dovey] (E. Jones' *Musical Relicks of the Welsh Bards*, 1794-, i., p. 129).

*It-or rather half of the tune-was introduced by D'Urfey into his " Pills to purge Melancholy," to the words " Dear Catholic Brother" (Ed. 1719-20, Vol. VI., p. 277). From D'Urfey it passed into the " Musical Miscellany" (1731, Vol. VI., p. 171), to the words " Come, take up your Burden, ye Dogs, and away." D'Urfey was a Devonshire Man, and he probably picked up the tune when a boy in the West, and used as much of it as he wanted to set to his song. **The air is much older than the age of D'Urfey; it probably belongs to an early stock common to the Celts of Wales and Cornwall.***

Whereas under Sharp's Editorship we find:

"The author of the version of the song as now sung is said to have been one Dogget, who was wont to run after the foxhounds of the last Arscott. He probably followed the habit of all rural bards of adapting an earlier ballad to his purpose, and spoiling it in so doing. I think this, because along with much wretched stuff there occur traces of something better, and smacking of an earlier period. As Dogget's doggerel has been printed, and as I have taken down a dozen variants, I have retained only what I deemed worthy of retention, and have entirely recast the conclusion of the song.

*Half of the tune was employed by D'Urfey, a Devonshire man, in his " Pills to Purge Melancholy," to the words, "Dear Catholic Brother" (vi. p. 277, ed. 1719-20). From D'Urfey it passed into the " Musical Miscellany," 1731, vi. p. 171, to the words, " Come take up your Burden, ye Dogs, and away." **From England the same half-tune was carried into Wales,** and Jones, in his "*Musical Relicks of the Welsh Bards*," 1794, i. p. 129, gives it set to the words of " Difyrrwch Gwyr Dyfi" [The Delight of the men of Dovey]"*

Under Sharp's editorship there seems to be the assumption of an "English" origin for this tune, presumably on the basis that in the first instance D'Urfey's was the earliest printed version and in the second the understandable suspicion that Edward Jones' (1752 – 1824) "*Musical Relicks of the Welsh Bards*" had more recent and prosaic sources than the Druidic origins he claimed! Whether the melody originated on one side of the Severn or the other the interesting point is that the evidence does not seem to have changed between the original

and revised editions just the editorial influence. Baring-Gould's original suggestion of a shared Celtic Heritage seems quite a reasonable so why the change?

Cecil Sharp was once described to me as an English Nationalist and if true then the abrupt change of presumed origin from the " Celts of Wales and Cornwall" to "England" rather makes sense. I would be concerned about ascribing nationalism as we understand in the 21st Century to readily to an Edwardian Folklorist but it is clear that Sharp sought to establish a corpus of English traditional folk dance and did so from a position of discursive power in that he was able to influence its introduction as part of the school curriculum. Sharp actually spent very little time in Cornwall and it is fair to say that any notion of western Celts was simply not compatible with his agenda to promote an English national music, thus making the border invisible. This invisibility of the border was perpetuated through the various folk revivals to become a "common sense" understanding of folk tradition in Cornwall that has been very resistant to change in some quarters.

Reclaiming territory

If "Lord Arscott of Tetcott" could be interpreted as representing a shared Celtic heritage with Wales then "The Mallard" might represent a shared heritage with Brittany. This song was collected by Baring-Gould in Broadstone 1889 and Ralph Dunstan in Perrancoombe 1931, but to different melodies. The words are doggerel –

" Oh, what have I ate, and what have I ate?

I have eaten the toe of a mallard.

Toe and toe, nevins and all,

And I have been to ballery allery,

And so good meat was the mallard."

And so on until the mallard is completely eaten. In his personal copy manuscript Baring-Gould identifies the melody he found with that of "Deprecher Merde" in Chansons "Populaire de la Barsas Breizh", Paris 1840. Baring –Gould did not feel that the lyrics suited the mood of the melody, however, and changed the title to " A Country Dance" adding his own words "When Lambkins Skip....." which was arguably little improvement on the original! Ethel Smyth used the melody as the inspiration for "Mark's Song" in her Opera "The Wreckers" and it was evidently recognised as a Cornish melody by reviewers. More recently the melody has been adopted into the corpus of Cornish music under the title "An Cluyek Hos" .

When asked to provide a song for the Traditional singing contest in the Pan Celtic Festival in Killarney in 1977 Dick Gendal adapted Cornish words to a song collected by Baring Gould in

Devon Called “The Bonny Bird” . Similarly Tony Snell was clearly quite comfortable in trawling the corpus of “South West British” folk songs to find material suitable for adaption to Cornish words for use by Cornish language students in the 1970s. A favourite of mine is one entitled “Young man of Cornwall”, from Sharp’s Somerset collection.

Whether consciously expressed or otherwise there a sense here in which, having retained it’s language and notion of separateness from England, Cornwall is seen as the natural inheritor of “Celtic” traditions in the South West peninsula. From a more empirical point of view there is an area yet to be explored in the extent to which folk culture accompanied the migration of West Cornwall mining communities to East Cornwall and Dartmoor the 19th Century.

Conclusion

The perception of Cornwall within the British folk movement as an English rather than Celtic domain is not reflected in the reality of the substance of collection but in the discourse and power base of the protagonists. Cecil Sharp was the least engaged in Cornwall of all the collectors but has probably had the biggest impact on how folk music in Cornwall is perceived. Had Carpenters collection some 20 years later provided the corpus of “British” folk music, Cornwall would have been presented in a very different light.

Cornish revivalists, however, would seem to have been quite unperturbed by this and carried on regardless. Indeed the fluidity of the border has been used creatively and productively to Cornwall’s advantage in promoting a distinct identity.

Dr Merv Davey March 2007

Notes

1. Broadside ballads were printed sheets of verse without music, intended to be sung to a given popular tune and might be seen as a form of “pop” music during the 18th and 19th centuries. The Royal Institution of Cornwall museum has a collection of Broadside Ballads with topics ranging from Wrecks of the Scilly isles to French Polish drinking at Goonhavern
2. For example “The Owl” collected from James Olver of Launceston is found in Deuteromelia published in 1609
3. The Wren Trust Baring-Gould project 1998 produced Microfiches of all the extant Baring-Gould rough copy notebooks, fair copies and annotated copies of “Songs and Ballads of the West” and “A Garland of Country Songs”
4. Graebe. Martin, “The Folk Next Door – Sabine Baring Gould and Cornwall “ paper presented at the Baring Gould Study Week End October 2001
5. Baring-Gould. Sabine, Songs and Ballads of the West
6. Sharp,C Editor; Folk Songs of Devon and Cornwall, Collected from the mouths of the people By S Baring Gould H Fleetwood Shepherd, F.W Bussel, Under the Musical Editorship of Cecil J Sharp, Principle of the Hampstead Conseratoire, 5th Edition in one Volume, Methuen & Co Ltd 36 Essex Street London 1905

7. Lord Arscott of Tetcott is also known as the Pencarrow Hunt and was supplied to Henry Jenner by Baring-Gould for inclusion in the Celtic Congress's publication National Songs of the Celtic Nations.
8. Baring Gould, S, H Fleetwood Shepherd, Songs and Ballads of the West, Methuen, London, 1892, song no 2.
9. Baring Gould, S, Songs of the West, Methuen, London, 1905 (Ed – C J Sharp), Song no 2.
10. D'Urfey, Thomas, " (Catholick Brother)" , A Song, Pills to Purge Melancholy, 1719 – 1720 Vol 6 p 277
11. See Rimmer, J The Galpin Society Journal, Vol 39 (Sep 1986) p 77 – 96 for discussion of Jones background and "Musical Relicks".
12. Bennet, Jory, Correspondence with the Author Oct 1987: In researching Dame Ethel's work for his dissertation at Keele University he found that several early reviewedas of this Opera had identified Mark's Song as a Cornish Folk Tune Called the Mallard.
13. I have provided a version of "An Culek Hos both in my own "Hengan", Dyllansow Truran, 1983. There is also a version in Racca, Calstock 1997.
14. Baring Gould, Ed Sharp, C, Songs of the West Methuen London 1905 song no 106. Version with Cornish Words by Dick Gendal " Edhen Olow" entered for the Celtic Singing Competition in The Pan Celtic Festival in Killarney 1977.
15. Tony Snell translated a number of songs into Cornish for use by language students in the mid 1970s. As well as his own group "Tremenysy" other contemporary revivalist groups such as "Qyulken Tew" and "Bucca" made good use of his material and several songs were published in "Canow an Weryn Hedhyu", Lodenek Press Padstow 1979