

Folk Songs And Melodies Of The West.

By Rev. S. Baring-Gould

Some three months ago I wrote to the *Western Morning News* and the *Western Daily Mercury* in hopes of recovering, through some of their readers, the melody to an old Cornish song, "Sweet Nightingale," which Mr. E. Bell, in 1854, heard sung by some Cornish miners working at the lead mines near Zell, on the Moselle. He took down the words and printed them in his "Ballads and Bongs of the English Peasantry," but not the tune. The appeal had its desired effect, and I got the melody. But my letter had another effect. From all sides poured in – literally poured in – copies of "Tom Pierce, Tom Pierce," a favourite – Devonshire song, words only, no music. That, however, I was able to obtain without difficulty.

I soon found that if I wanted the melodies and ballads and songs of our peasantry, I must get them from the peasantry themselves. Accordingly I made inquiries, and began to collect from them. In about two months, I got about ninety with their proper airs; some very fresh and original; some good but not of remarkable character, and some commonplace.

But, that which struck me most was that these were only to be obtained from very old men – that is to say, from men between seventy and eighty-five years old. The more recent generations know nothing of them, despise these old songs and sing only Christy minstrel airs, and music hall songs. Everywhere I hear, "Ah you should have heard M. or N. He was a brave singer, he could sing a hundred songs, but he died – a year or two ago." These songs if collected at all must be collected now. In five more years they will all be gone – gone irretrievably.

Now, the songs and ballads collected, with their melodies belong to various epochs, from before the reign of Henry VII., to the beginning of this century. Some of the ballads are common property all over England, but *not so* the airs. The great bulk of these, I believe, to be of pure West of England origin; and very lovely many of them are. Broadsides circulated through England, and were set where they came to already known traditional tunes; and were sung to these.

For instance, there is a song – "I sowed the seeds of love," which is said to have been composed by a Mrs. Hahergham, of Lancashire, in or about 1690. Now, I have taken down this very song from a labourer, a notable "song-man" on Lew Down; but then, Mrs. Habergham is believed to have written the words to a tune familiar in the north, which has been appropriated by the Scotch as "Blink- o'er the Burn." Here in Devon, the words are sung to another tune, peculiarly sweet, that I cannot trace.

So again with "Joan's ale is new," that quaint old English song is sung – with a verse or two peculiar to the West, and to a tune, quite distinct from that to which it was sung elsewhere in England.

On the other hand, some songs have come with their proper tunes, songs probably sung now nowhere else. There is one "Wherefore go a rushing," the words of which would be best buried in oblivion. This song is found in, a virginal book of MS. music, that belonged to Queen Elizabeth, but was never printed till Chappell extracted it from the MS. music book. Yet, this identical melody I heard sung at South Brent, by a man who breaks stones on the roadside.

Cuper's garden was on the Surrey side of the Thames, and preceded Vauxhall. It was fashionable in Charles II.'s reign. A song was made about it at that time. This song with the melody composed for it, I have recovered from a day labourer.

I have reason to believe that Devon and Cornwall was a nursery of music in the Elizabethan age; but, unfortunately, our West of England music was never collected.

Tom D'Urfey, an Exeter man, at the end of the 17th century, published six volumes of songs and ballads, and set them to such tunes as he could pick up. Unquestionably he laid under contribution the melodies of his native county. By thus popularising the tunes, he made them common property. Not only so, but a number of them crossed the border, were taken up by the Scotch, and many of what they regard now as their National Scottish airs, are demonstrably old English tunes, appropriated by them.

Now, I will give an instance of what I believe to be D'Urfey's appropriation of a West of England tune. "Arscott of Tetcott," – a song that must be of John Arscott of 1652, and not as supposed of the last John Arscott, of 1752 (then only a boy), is sung to a very grand old melody. Now this same tune, that is to say, half of it, D'Urfey used and set to the words "Dear Catholick Brother," a political song, and from D'Urfey the tune passed elsewhere; but the complete melody is only found in Devon associated with "Arscott of Tetcott." I have found "The Outlandish Knight;" "The Shepherd's Daughter and the Knight;" "The Squire of Tamworth, or the Golden Glove;" "The Worcestershire Tragedy," and other old ballads sung by our peasant song-men, and I have collected the airs to which they sung them. In addition to ballads, they have preserved some perfectly exquisite Elizabethan songs, of a delicacy and beauty that is surprising. There are later songs, less easy to fix the date of; but all more or less interesting.

I propose to publish the best of all these arranged for the piano, flute, and for voice, by the Rev. H. Fleetwood Sheppard, an accomplished musician; and to issue them to subscribers in three parts, each to contain some twenty-five songs; at half-a-crown the part, so as just to cover expense of printing. A few of these original songs need altering from their coarseness, and some of the melodies have been taken down in two or more variation's. I propose to put a MS. copy of all the songs and ballads, with their various readings, exactly as taken down from the mouths of the people; one in the Library of the Institution at Exeter, the other in the Plymouth Library, for reference in time to come, as in five years or so, these will be the only records of the songs of the men of the West.

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