

Life and Times - Ireland

Notes on the meeting arranged jointly by the Vaughan Williams Memorial Library and the Traditional Song Forum, held at Cecil Sharp House, London on 2nd September 2006

This meeting, following the pattern of previous 'Life and Times' sessions, gave practitioners of folk song research or collecting an opportunity to talk at some length about their work and to tell us something of their own lives. This time we had an opportunity to hear four people who work in Ireland - John Moulden, Pat Mackenzie, Jim Carroll and Tom Munnelly.

John Moulden

John started with some personal history, beginning with his birth in Belfast to English parents in 1941 - which placed him inside but also outside of Irish 'Society'. His interest in songs to sing developed into interest in the songs themselves and thus to why people sing and why they make the choices they do about what to sing. He was initially influenced by the songs that he heard sung at home and on the radio, and first heard 'folk song' in 1963. He listened to Children's Hour and sang along with 'Davy Crockett' and company. As an adolescent his singing was more frequently of the like of 'Roll Me Over in the Clover' though the songs sung at the church and Sunday school were food for parodies. In the Scouts he discovered a repertory suitable for group singing which continued in mountaineering circles - group exclusive and increasingly bawdy, increasingly Irish. He believes that the process of singing in communities produces folk song, though many of the contexts in which that was done have disappeared.

In 1969 Mr Kelly, the Librarian at Belfast Music Library, showed John a scrapbook of broadside ballads, mainly by Nicholson. This led him to find out more about Nicholson and to start listing the ballads of Northern Ireland. Increasingly the pursuit of ballads informed his own repertoire and led him to find singers such as Geordie Hannah.

NUI Galway offered him a chance to study ballads and their transfer between Britain and Ireland. This led him to try to understand what influenced people at the bottom of the social hierarchy and to investigate the mechanisms of ballad production and use and this has led to many interesting discoveries. In the C18th Irish people meant, by ballad, a small book of songs. It came to mean the piece of paper and later the song itself.

John described how song books were produced by a 'Work and Turn' method that enabled the simultaneous production of two copies of two separate song books, a great economy of effort for the printer. Many of the printers were able, by such economies, to keep books in the metal for long periods - in one case for over 40 years. The ballad wholesaler would sell a sheaf of ten ballads for a penny and the hawker would then sell them on the streets for a ½d each. The ballad seller, on this basis, would earn about £1 a week.

John's work has helped him to understand that the ballad trade was not as completely urban as had been thought. There certainly are songs that were written for the ballad trade but others were certainly picked up by the trade from the tradition - though there is, in reality, insufficient data to demonstrate this conclusively. He estimates that 16% of songs that appear on ballad sheets can also be found in the tradition

Jim Carroll and Pat Mackenzie

Pat discovered folk music through the Ballad and Blues Club where she heard Bert Lloyd and Ewan McColl singing songs about ordinary people and which struck a chord with her. She came to regard the classic ballads as a high point of the folk repertoire. The Club became the 'Singers Club' where there were guests like Jeannie Robertson, Joe Heaney and Harry Cox among others. Ewan McColl was a great influence on her and asked her to join the Critics Group. She spent 21 years in singing workshops. Jim joined in 1969. Soon afterwards he offered to rewire her flat - he never left.

Jim's story started with the Irish rebel songs that his father sang, as well as songs that he had learnt in a Spanish prison during the Spanish Civil War. In his late teens he turned to Country and Western. Around this time he visited the Cavern Club, then a jazz club. In his early 20s he visited the Spinners club, discovered ballads and was smitten. He went to the Keele Festival and heard Jeannie Robertson. He also met Ewan and Peggy who invited him to set up a singers help group on Merseyside. Later they asked him to re-wire their place and to join the Critics Group.

In July 1973 Jim and Pat started to record songs from travellers together. Around this time they also visited West Clare for the first time (and returned every year until they moved there in 1998). In 1975 they went to

Norfolk and recorded there, most notably from Walter Pardon. They revisited Walter every year until his death in 1996. They also recorded Duncan Williams, who only wanted to sing songs rather than tell stories.

Their interest was, initially, in the songs but this evolved into finding out more about the singers and about the origin of the songs. They discovered that, though the singers might refer to the songs as 'me daddy's songs' they mostly learned them from other singers. Walter Pardon was a well-read man and gave the people in his songs some of the characteristics of the times. The more modern the song he sang, the faster it got and the shorter the song became. In the list of Walter's songs the top twelve were all traditional. He maintained concentration better when singing to a microphone. The focus of the microphone helped shut the audience out since, when singing a song it was, to him, like reading a book, with a picture formed in his mind. When he sang about the 'Pretty Plough Boy' it was as if he was seeing him in the field just over the way. He kept his eyes open when singing so, if there was no microphone, he would look down his nose. He gave up singing at the age of 75 since he could no longer reach the high standard that he had set himself. Walter didn't sing in public until he was about 60. He had written some songs but most of his repertoire came from his father or his uncle Billy.

Pat and Jim talked about the changes taking place in the traveling community and particularly the influence of television in the caravans, which has largely replaced the singing as a social activity. Worse, the old people are dying of loneliness because the young people ones don't want to join in the chat.

They talked about recording Mary Delaney and Mikeen McCarthy and other travellers around London. Mikeen had been involved in the ballad trade until the 1950s. He would have these printed on coloured paper, one song to a sheet. The printer would keep a stock for him.

They had been struck by the generosity and hospitality of the people they had met. They were never refused a song, though sometimes the singers seemed uncertain about the value of what they had to the world at large, though it was clear that they valued their own songs - Duncan Williams, for example, preferred singing to story-telling. Walter Pardon was amused when he heard that two 'name' singers had been arguing about who would sing one of his songs - 'they're not mine, they're everybody's' he said. Both Walter and Mikeen related strongly to their songs, to the people and places - this links to Ewan's views and to the Stanislavski method.

In the 60s and 70s Folk Clubs were the only place to perform, McColl believed that performers needed to be professional and therefore gave guidance to help them achieve a higher standard. He saw it as heading a self-help group. Nearly all the sessions were recorded and are now digitised in the Birmingham Library.

Pat and Jim concluded by talking about their concern for the future. The changes in the social patterns of the travellers were mentioned earlier. They believe that they have seen a significant reduction of singing in the last 18 months to a point where there is virtually no social singing to be found. There are some hopeful signs, since the young people are taking up playing instruments - but they have not yet taken up the song.

Tom Munnally

Tom believes that he was initiated into folk music before he was even aware that it existed. Like John, songs around the camp fire were an important part of his singing experience. Oral transmission was the norm - 'we were all traditional singers!' He grew up in Crumlin, a huge estate where people from the city centre were re-housed. Hooleys were a regular event and pubs were the men's domain. When he joined the Rambling Association singing was an important part of hostel evenings. As the interest in traditional song grew in Ireland the emphasis shifted from the community singing aspect to the appearance of 'acts' on a stage. Up until the late 60s Irish landlords were very hostile to traditional music - now, of course, there are 'Irish Pubs' all over the Planet. The Irish Revival, with the Clancy's, Dubliners and all, did have the merit of bringing people to the point where they could discover the 'real thing'. Clubs started to spring up and more people found the older established clubs.

Tom's own voyage of discovery took him to books - Percy, The Pelican Book of English Ballads etc and he started to go to traveller singing events where he first started recording with a mains powered recorder. (He noted that the official Irish collectors were using Ediphone cylinder recorders up until 1956). He met up with Seamus Ennis who gave him advice based on his experience of collecting in Britain and Ireland. He also corresponded with Hamish Henderson.

He eventually met DK Wilgus (through Bert Lloyd) and, in 1971, left his job in a knitware factory to work as research assistant at the Irish Folklore Commission. Since that time he has been a major force in recording Irish song with over 1500 separate items to his credit. Tom has worked with a number of different organisations in the field as well as organizing events and lecturing on folk song, particularly at University

College of Dublin where he works in the Archive and is the last of 21 collectors. (to get a picture of the broad sweep of his activity have a look at his CV on www.ucd.ie/folklore/text/tmunnelly.pdf.)

Discussion

There was an opportunity after the presentations for questions and discussion. Some of the points raised were:

- Very few people really know about songs - but very few people actually want to know about songs
- Sam Lerner used to sing the better part of his repertoire when he was at sea or when he was at home. In the pub on a Saturday night he, like the other singers, would only do a couple of songs and they would be from a fixed repertoire.

The notes above were made by me during the presentations and I am conscious that I must have left a lot of things out - my apologies to the speakers if, in doing so, I have misrepresented them

Martin Graebe

6th January 2007