

“The songs of the people for me”: The Victorian Rediscovery of Lancashire Vernacular Song

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The folksong revival in England, associated in the Edwardian era with such famous names as Cecil Sharp, Percy Grainger and Ralph Vaughan Williams, among many others, had its roots in an earlier rediscovery of English vernacular song during the Victorian period. The published work of most of the Victorian pioneers has been neglected by historians, folklorists and ethnomusicologists, although Francis James Child’s *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads* is admittedly one notable exception to this generalization. Although many important Victorian song collectors were based in London or the home counties—such figures as William Chappell, James Henry Dixon, Robert Bell and John and Lucy Broadwood come to mind—others lived in towns and villages far from the capital. In the last decades of the nineteenth century such important regional collections as Collingwood Bruce and John Stokoe’s *Northumbrian Minstrelsy*, Frank Kidson’s *Traditional Tunes* and Sabine Baring-Gould’s *Ballads and Songs of the West* demonstrated that English folksong was still flourishing in the counties of Northumberland and Durham, Yorkshire and Devon and Cornwall respectively.

Earlier in the Victorian era, a handful of antiquarians and folklorists, among them James Orchard Halliwell, Llewellyn Jewitt, Davison Ingledew, Charles Foreshaw and John Harland, had begun to explore the songs of Norfolk, Derbyshire, Yorkshire, and Lancashire. Notwithstanding the impact of the music hall, vernacular song was still, to a large degree, regional song, and often dialect song. To comprehend the importance of regional song in nineteenth century England, we must therefore explore the recovery and dissemination of local ballads, lyrics and occupational songs, including those in dialect and those published as poetry, on a region by region, even a county by county, basis. It is a formidable task and, to the best of my knowledge, no one has yet attempted it.

This article, which is based on papers that I delivered at the CSTM conferences at York University (in 2004) and at Douglas College, New Westminster (in 2005), makes a beginning, focusing on one county, that of Lancashire, in northwest England. Extant collections of broadsides printed in



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the region suggest the existence of an oral tradition of popular balladry going back to the seventeenth century or earlier, but it was only in the early 1850s, with the work of James Orchard Halliwell, that Lancashire songs were collected for publication in books aimed at a middle-class market. Halliwell’s pioneering efforts, which are to be found in his *Palatine Anthology* and *Palatine Garland*,¹ were followed by those of John Harland, William E. Axon, and Thomas T. Wilkinson. Harland’s two publications, *Ballads and Songs of Lancashire, chiefly older than the Nineteenth Century* (1865) and *Lancashire Lyrics: Modern Songs and Ballads of the County Palatine* (1866), remain to this day the most comprehensive collection of Lancastrian song-texts, while Axon’s *Folk Song and Folk-Speech of Lancashire* (1871) focused primarily on dialect verse, sketching its history and examining its provenance in the county.



Broadside Ballad Seller in Victorian England

John Harland (1806-1868) worked as a reporter and editor for the *Manchester Guardian* newspaper. He had lived in Manchester since 1830, having moved there from his native Yorkshire to pursue his career in journalism. His most important book, *Ballads and Songs of Lancashire, chiefly older than the Nineteenth Century*, which was published in 1865, marked a breakthrough in regional collecting because of its wide range of song-types, although, unfortunately, only the words (not the tunes) of the songs were provided. The collection included several border ballads, a few other narrative ballads, May Day and wassail songs, drinking songs, old comic

songs, occupational songs by the county's spinners and weavers, and a great deal of regional material reflecting Lancashire life and customs.²

Harland's sources were varied: a mixture of earlier printed publications (especially James Orchard Halliwell's self-published editions), old manuscripts in libraries, broadsides (he made good use of the collection donated to the Chetham library in Manchester by Halliwell), compositions by well-known local poets, and some items collected from local oral tradition, usually, although not always, by others than himself. While he was normally careful to document his printed and manuscript sources, Harland was less punctilious about providing detailed information about his local informants. His preface suggested that he was particularly interested in narrative songs that reflected the Lancashire of the fifteenth, sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and that his book had initially been intended as a collection of old ballads from the Middle Ages through the early Stuart era. Difficulty in finding a publisher had caused him to omit lengthy "rhyming chronicles [with] obsolete words and phrases," with the result that the book actually covered a three hundred year period from the late fifteenth century to the Georgian era.³

Harland argued that while the reign of Elizabeth may well have been the "golden age of English ballad and song," in reality few extant ballads were older than the reign of James I, when they had first been assembled in garlands and chapbooks, such as those preserved in the Pepysian Library in Cambridge.⁴ He had therefore attempted for the first time to pull together all such Jacobean broadsides relating to the county of Lancashire. Although he felt obliged to disclaim any poetic merit for his discoveries, Harland nonetheless argued that those Lancastrian ballads that had survived from the early Stuart era were very valuable, since they preserved a unique form of regional literature. Frequently tinged with local dialect, they were rarely written in standard English. Often containing records of local conflicts, regional usages, customs, and superstitions, such old ballads often owed their origin to turmoil or crime. They had survived, he suggested, because they treated love, murder and war, "subjects which most largely hold the popular affection and regard, which in all essentials will ever remain alike, however their outward garb may change with the transitory tastes and fleeting fashions of the age."⁵

Harland's reader could thus expect a mixture of traditional ballads, broadside ballads, and other local songs, arranged in a roughly chronological pattern. There were more than sixty items in the collection. The older narrative songs included two accounts of the battle of Flodden Field, and a "Fragment of an

Ancient Ballad of a Tyrannical Husband,” while such broadsides as “Butler of Bewsey,” “Fair Ellen of Radcliffe,” and “The Liverpool Tragedy” depicted events of local history. Other songs reflecting Lancashire life included “Warrington Ale,” “Warrikin Fair,” “Long Preston Peggy,” “The Burnley Haymakers,” “The Bonny Gray” (about a cockfight), “The Lancashire Miller,” “The Lancashire Witches,” and “The Praise of Lancashire Men.” There were also a few wassails and wakes, for instance the “Droylesden Wakes Song” (a dialogue song), and a “Wassail Cup Song,” which Harland had found in a small chapbook published by a broadside printer in Manchester.

Although he had done well in locating songs linked to local events, Harland had not discovered many ballads in oral tradition. He had, however, come across a few remnants of minstrelsy. One of the lengthiest ballads, “The Famous History of Flodden Field,” was likely the work of a poet with connections to the family of Sir Edward Stanley, whose exploits received special attention in the text. Harland had also found in the Ashmolean Library in Oxford a manuscript of “A Love Song” written by the presumed author of the border ballad “Chevy Chase,” a Lancashire man named Richard Sheale. Sheale, one of the last known professional minstrels, was a retainer of the Earl of Derby in the early Tudor era.

The traditional ballad usually called “The Cruel Sister” (aka “The Two Sisters” or “Binnorie”) also has the hallmark of a minstrel production, and Harland had obtained three versions of it. One, titled “The Miller and the King’s Daughter,” was a broadside version very similar to that printed in the Cavalier drollery titled *Wit Restor’d*, first published in 1658. It had been supplied to Harland by Edward Rimbault from the Anthony Wood collection in the Bodleian Library, Oxford, and is thought to have been written by a friend of dramatist Philip Massinger called Dr James Smith. A second version, taken from oral tradition, had been submitted by an anonymous correspondent to *Notes and Queries*. This was no more than a fragment, but a fuller text had been contributed to the same periodical in 1825 by a correspondent signing himself Seleucus. It was titled “The Three Sisters” despite there being only two sisters involved in the action – the implication being that the ballad was sung by the third sister, who had presumably brought elder sister and miller to justice. Moreover, the entire last segment, in which the drowned body is found by a minstrel and various body parts are employed to make either a harp or a viol, thereby giving the victim a voice to relate the crime, was missing. Noted from oral tradition in

Southern Lancashire, this variant thus differed substantially from the broadside version.⁶

Among the most unusual and interesting material in Harland’s collection was a group of seven May-Day songs reflecting an old custom prevalent in the region. The ceremony was akin to wassailing, but performed in April and intended to celebrate (or perhaps encourage) the advent of Spring. With one exception, these texts appeared to be traditional in origin, although in the form Harland reprinted them they had been purged of any elements of local dialect. They included “The Mayers’ Call,” a “Mayers’ May-Day Song,” a “Steford and Northern May Song,” a “May Eve Song,” and “Old Swinton May Song.”⁷ Harland had collected the latter in April 1861 from local merry-makers, as he recalled in his introduction:

I was surprised by a party of waits who had come into my garden, in the hamlet of Swinton and township of Worsley, and who serenaded the family in song, the words of which I could not make out from their singing. There were four singers, accompanied by a flute and clarionet, and they together discoursed most simple and rustic music. I could not at first understand what was evidently a local custom of ancient date, as it was not Easter, or Whitsuntide, or May-day, or any of the old popular festivals. My inquiries on the subject resulted in my obtaining, from the dictation of an old Mayer, the words of two songs, called by the singers themselves “May Songs,” though the rule is that they must be sung before May comes in. My chief informant, an elderly man named Job Knight, living in Swinton, told me that he himself “went out” May-singing for about fourteen years, though he has discontinued the practice for some years. He says the time the Mayers commence is usually about the middle of April, though some parties start as early as the beginning of that month. But the songs cease with the evening of the 30th April. Job says he can remember the custom for about thirty years...There are usually, he says, five or six men, with a fiddle, and sometimes a flute or clarionet. The songs are printed just as recited by Job Knight...the first song bears marks of some antiquity...There are various lines...in which the sense seems to have been marred, from the songs having been handed down by oral tradition only; but I have not ventured to alter these in any way.⁸

Harland’s book also included various occupational songs reflecting the life of Lancashire spinners and weavers, some humorous and others bitterly political: examples are “Jone o’ Grinfilt’s Ramble,” “Jone o’ Grinfilt’s Return,” “Gorton Town,” “Grimshaw’s Factory Fire,” “Hand-loom versus Power-loom,” and “The Hand-loom Weavers’ Lament.” It is not entirely

death).¹² The broadside version that Harland included was essentially that printed earlier by James Dixon in *Ancient Poems, Ballads and Songs*,¹³ but he also included a fragment of a “traditional” (Harland’s term) variant that he had obtained from T. Whittaker and that he regarded as superior to the broadside.¹⁴

Another folk lyric was “The Sprig of Thyme” (aka “Let No Man Steal Your Thyme”), which Harland had obtained from a broadside collection made by John Greaves of Irlam, a village between Warrington and Manchester. This is Greaves’ version of the song:

You virgins far and near, that are just in your prime,
I’d have you keep your gardens clear, let no one
steal your thyme.

Once I had a sprig of thyme, and it flourish’d night
and day,
Until there came a false young man, and he stole
my thyme away.

But now my thyme’s all gone, no more I can it see;
The man who stole my thyme away, he did prove
false to me.

Since now my thyme’s all gone, and I can plant no
new,
In the very place where grew my thyme, it’s overrun
with rue.

Rue, rue, runs over all; but so it shall not seem,
For I’ll plant again in the same place, and call it the
willow green.

Willow, willow, I must wear, willow, willow is my
doom,
Since my false love’s forsaken me, and left me here
to moan.

A gardener standing by, three flowers he offer’d me,
The lily, pink, and red rose-bud, but I refused all
three.

The pink it is a flower that’s sweet, so is the rose in
June;
The lily is the virgin flower, alas! oft cropp’d too
soon.¹⁵

More than one hundred songs in *Lancashire Lyrics* were recently composed verses by local authors, some evidently well-educated but many others working-class in origin. Indeed, the book was in part designed to showcase a number of popular Lancashire poets, many of whom wrote in regional dialect. They included (among others) Samuel Bamford, Thomas and Benjamin Brierley, Samuel Laycock, John Critchley Prince, Charles Swain, and Edwin Waugh. Harland was particularly fond (and proud) of a non-dialect item titled “The Songs of the

People” that Prince had written as a flag-waver for the collection:

Oh! the songs of the people are voices of power,
That echo in many a land;
They lighten the heart in the sorrowful hour,
And quicken the labour of hand;
They gladden the shepherd on mountain and plain,
And the sailor who travels the sea;
The poets have chanted us many a strain,
But the songs of the people for me.

The artisan, wandering forth early to toil,
Sings a snatch of old song by the way;
The ploughman, who sturdily furrows the soil,
Meets the breeze with the words of his lay:
The man at the stithy, the maid at her wheel,
The mother with babe at her knee,
Oft utter some simple old rhymes, which they
feel—

Oh! the songs of the people for me.

An anthem of triumph, a ditty of love,
A carol ’gainst sorrow and care,
A hymn of the household, soft, rising above
The music of hope or despair;
A song patriotic, how grand is the sound
To all who desire to be free!
A song of the heart, how it makes others bound!
Oh! the songs of the people for me.¹⁶

There was also a fair amount of dialect poetry in *Lancashire Lyrics*. Examples are the anonymous “Moi Owd Mon,” Joseph Ramsbottom’s “The Pleasures o’ Whoam,” Edwin Waugh’s “Come Whoam to thi Childer an’ Me,” Sam Laycock’s “Mi Gronfeyther,” John Scholes’ “Aw Cunnut Dry my Heen, Robin,” Thomas Brierley’s “Heaw Quare is this Loife,” and Richard Bealey’s “My Piece is o bu’ Woven Eawt.” The latter was a handloom weaver’s song, and Harland sensed a strong sense of community and brotherhood in this and other songs created by the working-class poets of southern Lancashire. He praised the “kindly sympathy” combined with “dry yet racy humour” that he found in their verses, and provided several examples in the section titled “Songs of Life and Brotherhood.” This included, among other items, Laycock’s “Bowton Yard,” James Dawson’s “Good Neet,” Ben Brierley’s “The Weaver of Wellbrook,” Charles Swain’s “Be Kind to Each Other!,” and another anthem by Prince called “Human Brotherhood.”

Even more interesting was a group of contemporary songs about a recent period of severe recession in the textile industry (1862-64). Collectively titled by Harland “Lays of the Cotton Famine” and allocated a section of their own, these were current vernacular songs that expressed the sentiments of workers made unemployed by the

effects of the American Civil War. A good example is Laycock's "Th' Shurat Weyvur's Song," which captured the despair and abandonment evidently felt by certain Lancashire working-class communities at this time.¹⁷ Other industrial songs included, among others, Ramsbottom's "The Factory Lass," Mrs Bellasis' "The Smokeless Chimney," Laycock's "Cheer Up a Bit Longer," "The Mill-Hands' Petition" by an anonymous writer with the initials 'W.C.,' and two items whose very titles summed up the desperate situation that they reflected in dialect verse, James Bowker's "Hard Times" and Ramsbottom's "Eawt o' Wark."

It is perhaps significant that Harland did not use the term "folksong" as a general descriptor for his Lancashire material, although his friend and collaborator William Axon would do so only half a decade later. Evidently the term was not yet in widespread use in the 1860s. Yet if it is possible to have a concept without a term to designate it, Harland had a notion of "folksong." He used the phrase "songs of the people" to describe many of his texts, and, like A. L. Lloyd a century later, he deliberately included industrial and occupational songs in his collection.

In 1867 Harland and Thomas T. Wilkinson jointly published an account of local customs titled *Lancashire Folk-lore*.¹⁸ In 1882, after Harland's death, Wilkinson edited a new (third) edition of *Ballads and Songs of Lancashire*, truncating its title but expanding its contents significantly.¹⁹ In doing so, he drew heavily upon Harland's other collection, *Lancashire Lyrics*. He followed Harland's mode of organization, but added a final miscellaneous section of extra songs that he had assembled himself. The new edition substantially increased the percentage of imitation ballads and other recently composed songs, including many dialect songs, whose authors were usually well-known local poets.

Yet despite its presentation of much interesting regional material – in particular, the industrial songs reflecting the hardships of workers in the Lancashire textile industry – there were two main drawbacks with the new edition. Although Harland had aimed to create a collection of "songs of the people," in fact at least half of the contents of the 1882 edition was literary rather than vernacular in character. Oral tradition was not ignored, but printed sources were privileged. And there were still no tunes, which was especially disappointing because the book did include a large number of very singable lyrics. For Wilkinson, as for Harland, the emphasis lay squarely on the recovery of texts rather than melodies. Even the revised edition, therefore, was essentially a work of mid-Victorian scholarship rather than a

contribution to the new wave of folksong collecting that would gather momentum in the 1880s.



Broadside Ballad Seller in Late Victorian England

If Thomas Wilkinson may reasonably be classified as a disciple of Harland and an enthusiastic champion of his work, so too may William E. Axon. Axon is virtually unknown today, even among folk music enthusiasts and ethnomusicologists. But that is unfortunate, since he played an important role in publicizing Lancashire vernacular song to a middle class audience in the 1870s and 1880s. The story of the rediscovery of the regional song of northwest England is not complete without an examination of the contribution made by this librarian and journalist.

Axon was born in Yorkshire in 1846, seems to have lost both parents in early childhood, and was apparently brought up by a relative who made sure that he obtained rather more than a basic education. He was a bright student and initially chose librarianship as a career, eventually obtaining employment in the Manchester Reference Library. There he met, and struck up friendships with, Harland and Wilkinson. Axon shared their enthusiasm for the region's vernacular literature, and he assisted Harland with the collection of material for *Ballads and Songs* and *Lancashire Lyrics*. Axon's own publication, *Folk Song and Folk-Speech of Lancashire*, was dedicated to Wilkinson, while Harland's two books were advertised in the preface.²⁰ Axon, incidentally, went on to a second career in journalism, joining the staff of the *Manchester Guardian* in 1874. He published a number of other books and pamphlets, some literary and others about social and economic issues, but nothing else on folk music.

Folk Song and Folk-Speech of Lancashire was a slim volume of 96 pages that sketched the history of Lancashire dialect verse. The book was not intended as a song collection, although it did include a considerable number of songs by way of illustration.

Rather it provided an overview of the historical development of Lancastrian dialect in verse and prose, a genre that Axon clearly loved and believed should be better known outside the county. His principal interest lay in dialect poetry, but in Lancashire there was no sharp dividing line between vernacular poetry and vernacular song, especially among the lower classes. The book was therefore *de facto* a history of Lancastrian working-class song. Internal evidence suggests that it was written in 1871 or thereabouts, but the date of publication was not given and it is possible that it was not issued commercially until 1887, having been circulated only privately before that date.

Axon shared Harland's rediscovery of a regional and vernacular lower-class song tradition, but he was prepared to go one step further. His book was, as far as I can tell, the first Victorian publication to employ the term *folk song* in its title.²¹ For that reason alone it is important, but the work of Harland, Wilkinson and Axon also has a wider significance. As we have seen, they saw their publications as vehicles for championing "the songs of the people" (Harland's phrase, taken from the lyric by John Critchley Prince). Axon meant by "folk songs" the same as Harland meant by "songs of the people," that is, any vernacular songs created and sung by local people, whether or not the composers' names were known and whether or not they were in Lancashire dialect.

This was a broad concept, extending to contemporary political and occupational song as well as to broadside balladry and shorter folk lyrics. Moreover, because parts of Lancashire were industrializing rapidly, regional song in this county included the songs of textile mill workers, as well as those of handloom weavers and other artisans. In short, a century before A. L. Lloyd argued for a broader definition of folksong than Cecil Sharp's, namely, one that would include urban and industrial song, this trio of Lancastrian collectors had implicitly done the same. Of the three, Axon was the most vociferous and articulate in his enthusiasm for the rhymes of local bards. He must therefore be recognized as one of the leading champions of working-class verse and song in Victorian England. For that he deserves our attention.

Although he was a wage-earner and was certainly not rich, Axon was a gentleman with a secondary school education and a love for art and literature. His social and economic status was therefore middle class, which might make him – at least according to Dave Harker's way of looking at things – a 'mediator' who sought to expropriate the Lancashire workers' culture and dabbled in 'fakesong'. Axon may have functioned as an intermediary in the wider circulation of certain

dialect verses, but there was nothing fake about the songs he printed, nor did he in any way exploit the Lancastrian lower classes. If he exhibited a class bias in *Folk Song and Folk-Speech in Lancashire*, it was not to be found in what he included, or in his comments on that material, but in what he chose to omit. For example, he passed over in silence the cycle of ballads about Jone o' Grinfelt. Nor did he discuss any of the songs in the section of Harland's second book called "Lays of the Cotton Famine." Industrial Lancashire at its grimmest, in times of recession or strike, when the factory chimneys uncharacteristically failed to belch forth columns of black smoke, was often portrayed in song by the Lancashire worker-poets. But you would not know that from Axon's little book. He privileged comic songs and love songs over protest songs.

Nonetheless, to characterize Axon as a 'mediator', a word with pejorative connotations in folklore circles, seems to me a very misleading way of describing his attitude towards Lancashire songs, singers, and songwriters. Why? Because his work exudes a sense of solidarity with the ordinary people of Lancashire, from whom he clearly felt no separation by class lines. He regarded Lancashire song as a direct expression of working-class life, and he admired it as much for the values it expressed as for the creativity of its artisan-poets. Indeed, he was fiercely proud of this regional song tradition, commenting that "so numerous are the singers becoming that they bid fair to make their quaint, strong dialect as rich in literature as the Scottish Doric of Robert Burns."²² The following quotation captures something of the flavor of his enthusiastic advocacy on behalf of the local workers and their culture:

[The] Lancashire singer...is no grand minstrel, setting forth, in words sublime, the bloody triumphs of the battle-fields, nor does he indite a "woeful ballad to his mistress' eyebrows;" his songs are not of blossoming hawthorn and the golden sun of June, nor of the war and strife of human passions at their highest intensity; and yet his strains are truest poetry, and instinct with human interest. The short and simple annals of the poor, their virtues, loves, and failings, – these are the subjects of his rhymes, and fitter subjects for poets of this class could not be found than the working men of Lancashire. The genuine Lancashire lad is a being worthy of study; his deep sense of humour, his patient endurance of adversity, his life-long struggle with want, his indomitable perseverance, his love of home – all point him out as one of a remarkable race...And well have these characteristics been reproduced by men like Edwin Waugh, Benjamin Brierley, Sam Bamford, Samuel Laycock, and others.

These men have been, to a great extent, self educated, themselves a portion of the people whom they describe...and running through their writings is a vein of tenderest humanity, of brotherly love for their fellow men, however degraded by sin and misery.²³

One could write this off as high-flown boosterism, but there is no doubt that Axon was sincere, and he had no intention of patronizing the songwriters he cited or their audience. Like Friedrich Engels, who was also living in Lancashire at the time, he evidently liked the textile workers and artisans that he had met in Manchester and neighboring towns, and he greatly admired the productions of their poet/songwriters.

Axon, incidentally, drew no distinction between vernacular poetry and folksong. He argued that the local dialect writers' most successful verses were those written with popular airs in mind. Precisely because they were singable they had found a home in the hearts of all manner of Lancashire working families, from the smallest villages to the industrial cities. "The strains," he commented, "have become household words; the songs that are sung to the accompaniment of the flying shuttle, that go echoing through the noisy mill, and fill the workman's cottage with pleasant music; the melodies that may be heard alike in the streets of smoky Manchester, and in the green country fields on pleasant summer evenings."²⁴

In seeking a wider audience for Lancastrian song Axon faced certain practical difficulties. One severe problem was that the most representative material is in dialect, which makes it rather tricky to understand, and, moreover, it is more difficult to read than to grasp aurally. Another difficulty was that Harland and Axon collected only song texts, so that Axon's Victorian readers had no tunes for most of the material. The following fairly short, mildly humorous ballad will nonetheless serve to provide some idea of the kind of dialect songs and poetry that he was championing. "Tim Bobbin's Grave" was written by Samuel Bamford and it is about a corpse that comes to life at the prospect of getting a pint of local brew.

I stode beside Tim Bobbin's grave,
'At looks o'er Ratchda teawn;
An' th' owd lad woke within his yerth,
An' sed, "Wheer arto beawn?"

"Aw'm gooin' into th' Packer Street,
As fur as th' 'Gowden Bell,
To taste a Daniel's Kesmus ale."
TIM.—"Aw cud like a saup mysel."

"An' by this hont o' my reet arm,
If fro' that hole theaw'll reawk,
Theaswst have a saup o' the bets breawn ale
'At ever lips did seak."

The greawnd it sturr'd benaeth my feet,
An' then aw yerd a groan;
He shook the dust fro' off his skull,
An' rowlt away the stone.

Aw browt him up a deep breawn jug,
'At a gallon did contain;
An' he took it at one blessed draught,
An' lad him deawn again.²⁵

"Lancashire Witch," composed by John Scholes, was in Axon's opinion the best love song in Lancashire dialect. It will serve as a second example of the kind of material that Axon saw as his mission to publicize beyond the confines of his local region.

An owd maid aw shall be, for aw'm aighteen to-
morn,

An aw myen to keep single an' free;
But the dule's i' the lads, for a plague thi were
born,

An' thi never can let one a-be, a be,
They never can let one a-be.

Folk seyn aw'm to pratty to dee an owd maid,
An' at love sits an laughs i' my ee;
By leddy aw'm capt at folk wantin' to wed,
Thi mey o' tarry single for me, for me,
Thi mey o' tarry single for me.

There's Robin a' mill – he's so fond of his brass,
Thinks to bargain like shoddy for me;
He may see a foo's face if he looks in his glass,
An' aw'd thank him to let me a-be, a-be,
Aw'd thank him to let me a-be.

Cousin Dick says aw've heawses, an' land, an'
some gowd,
An' he's planned it so weel, done yo see;
When we're wed he'll ha' the' heawses new
fettled an' sould,
But aw think he may let um a-be, a-be,
Sly Dicky may let um a-be.

Ned's just volunteered into th' roifles recruits,
An' a dashing young sodiur is he,
If his gun's like his een it'll kill where it shoots,
But aw'll mind as they dunnot shoot me, shoot me,
Aw'll mind as they dunnot shoot me.

He's tall, en' he's straight, an' his curls are like
gowd,
And there's summat so sweet in his ee,
At aw think i' my heart, if he'd nobbut be bowt,
He needna quite let me a-be, a-be,
He needna quite let me a-be.²⁶

In *Folk Song and Folk-Speech in Lancashire* Axon spent only a few pages examining the older dialect songs of the county, but he did provide one complete example of an early instance of the tradition, dating it to the mid-sixteenth century. It is a comic ballad

called “Warriken Fair” and describes how a farmer sells a horse to a gentleman but fails to get paid for the beast. His wife is not amused, and takes the matter into her own hands, creating such a disturbance that the would-be thief is shamed into paying up. Because of the length of the original, here is a slimmed down version, with about half of the verses. As before, the word “hoo,” which occurs quite often, means “she.”

Now, au yo good gentlefoak, an yo won tarry,
I’ll tell yo how Gilbert Scott soud his mare Barry;
He soud his mare Barry at Warriken fair,
But when he’ll be paid, he knows no, I’ll swear.

So when he coom whom, an toud his woife
Grace,
Hoo stud up o’ th’ kippo, and swat him o’er th’
face,
Hoo pick’d him o’ th’ hillock, an he fawd wi a
whack,
That he thout would welly ha brocken his back.

Then Grace hoo prompted her neatly and fine,
And to Warriken went o’ We’nsday betime;
An theer too hoo staid for foive market days,
‘Till th’mon wi’ th’ mare were cum t’Rondle
Shay’s.

To Rondle’s hoo hied, and hoo hov up the latch,
Afore th’ mon had tied th’ mare gradely to th’
cratch!
“My good mon,” quo hoo, “Gilbert greets you right
merry,
And begs that you’ll send him th’ money for
Berry.”

“Oh money,” quo he, “that connot I spare;”
“Be lakin,” quo hoo, “Then I’ll ha’ th’ mare.”
Hoo poo’d an hoo thrumper’d him sham’ to be
seen,
“Thou hangman,” quo hoo, “I’ll poo out thy
e’een.”

“I’ll mak thee a sompan, I’ll houd thee a groat,
I’ll auther ha’ th’ money, or poo’ out thi throat;”
So between ‘em they made such a wearisom’ din,
That to mak ‘em at peace Rondle Shay did come in.

“Come, fye, naunty Grace, come, fye, an be dun;
Yo’st ha th’ mare, or th’ money, whether yo
wun.”
So Grace geet th’ money, and whomwards hoo’s
gone,
But hoo keeps it hursell, an gies Gilbert Scott
none.²⁷

Most of the other early ballads mentioned by Axon were to be found in Harland’s first anthology, including “Bewsley Tragedy,” “Trafford and Bron Feud,” “Liverpool Tragedy” and “Fair Ellen of

Radcliffe.” He singled out “The Tyrannical Husband” as a fine example of an early comic ditty, and “Preston Prisoners to the Ladies about Court and Town” as the best of the small corpus of local Jacobite songs. But he soon hurried on to the late eighteenth century, the time-period in which he discovered the beginnings of modern Lancastrian dialect song.

Axon admitted that the authors of the most popular early dialect songs, such as “Owd Ned’s a Rare Strung Chap” and “A Mon o’ Measter Grundy’s,” were anonymous. But the names of some of the founding fathers were known, including John Byrom (who composed the popular carol “Christians Awake”), John Collier (the creator of the fictional dialect storyteller Tim Bobbin), and Robert Walker (aka Tim Bobbin the Second), the author of *Plebeian Politics*. Axon dated the famous “Droylsden Wakes Song” to the first decades of the nineteenth century, the time when Lancashire vernacular song really came into its own. He praised, in particular, the work of Alexander Wilson (“Johnny Green’s Weddin”), Elijah Ridings (“Ale and Physic”), and the piece quoted earlier, Sam Bamford’s “Tim Bobbin’s Grave.”

So by the middle of the nineteenth century the genre was well established, and all that remained was to explore its scope as a vehicle for humour, pathos, and the loving, if satirical, portrayal of ordinary Lancastrian men and women. According to Axon, the Victorian poet-songwriters who best achieved these goals were Edwin Waugh, J. W. Mellor, Benjamin Brierley, Samuel Laycock, R. R. Bealey, and John Scholes. He preferred the work of these men, who usually dealt with personal relationships in a genial, if mildly mocking manner, to the rougher, harder-hitting ballads about poverty and unemployment that Harland had included in his collections.

Waugh, a journeyman printer from Rochdale, counted among his most popular verses “Sweetheart Gate,” “Willie’s Grave” and “Young Chirrup.” Mellor, writing under the pseudonym of Uncle Owdam, was responsible for “Love Thowts,” while novelist Brierley was best known for such pretty lyrics as the “Weaver of Wellbrook.” Most popular of all was Sam Laycock, the author of “Thee an’ Me,” “Bowton’s Yard,” “Th’ Coortin Neet,” “The Village Pedlar” and “Welcome Bonny Brid.”

More religious in tone was the work of Bealey, who composed such sentimental songs as “My Johnny” and “Eawr Bessy,” the latter a tear jerker about the death of a child who would rather stay with her parents than go and live with the angels. Here is the first verse of his “My Piece is O’ but Woven Eawt,” an allegorical song which captures the weariness of a handloom weaver no longer able to

compete with mechanized looms and, at the same time, his pride in his work when furnished with good quality materials:

My piece is o' but woven eawt,
 My wark is welly done;
 Aw' ve treddled at it day by day,
 Sin th' time ut aw begun.
 Aw' ve sat I' th loom-heawse long enoof,
 An' made th' owd shuttle fly,
 An' neaw aw' m fain to stop it off,
 An' lay my weyvin' by.²⁸

This piece too is “o’ but woven eawt,” but to conclude this brief look at Lancastrian vernacular song and its most enthusiastic Victorian champions I should like to emphasize two points. One is that for Harland and Axon Lancashire dialect song was a longstanding, vibrant cultural tradition of high quality: something to be proud of that was still very much alive. The ‘songs of the people’ that they admired had their roots in the past, to be sure, but the Lancastrian folksong that they championed was a living tradition in an industrial age.

The other point is that whether or not you classify Harland and Axon as middle class ‘mediators’, they saw themselves as—and were in fact—committed and passionate advocates on behalf of working-class men and women and working-class culture. Their politics were Liberal—they both worked for the *Manchester Guardian*—but Axon in particular sometimes sounds surprisingly like Friedrich Engels in his insistence on the dignity and integrity of the Lancashire working man.

Above all, Harland and Axon, together with their colleague and collaborator Thomas T. Wilkinson, loved and championed their county’s songs, whether those songs were to be found on old broadsides, in oral tradition, or in the publications of working-class poets using local dialect. They deserve to be remembered for the critical role they played in preserving and publicizing a rich regional culture, a culture about which most of their contemporaries were completely unaware.

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Notes

- ¹ James Orchard Halliwell, ed., *Palatine Anthology: A Collection of Ancient Poems and Ballads Relating to Lancashire and Cheshire* (London: Halliwell, 1850). *Palatine Garland, being a Selection of Ballads and Fragments Supplementary to the Palatine Anthology* (London: Halliwell, 1850).
- ² John Harland, ed., *Ballads and Songs of Lancashire, chiefly older than the 19th Century* (London: Whittaker & Co., 1865. Second edition: London: 1875). According to W. E. Axon, an earlier version of the collection dates from as early as 1850, but I have been unable to trace this. If it existed as other than a manuscript, it may have been printed for private circulation.
- ³ *Ballads and Songs of Lancashire* (1865 edition), x-xiii.
- ⁴ *Ballads and Songs of Lancashire* (1865 edition), xiii-xiv.
- ⁵ *Ballads and Songs of Lancashire* (1865 edition), xiv.
- ⁶ *Ballads and Songs of Lancashire* (1865 edition), 106-110.
- ⁷ *Ballads and Songs of Lancashire* (1865 edition), 118-119.
- ⁸ *Ballads and Songs of Lancashire* (1865 edition), 116-118.
- ⁹ *Ballads and Songs of Lancashire* (1865 edition), 223-227.
- ¹⁰ John Harland, ed. *Lancashire Lyrics: Modern Songs and Ballads of the County Palatine* (London: Whittaker, 1866).
- ¹¹ *Lancashire Lyrics*, 58-61.
- ¹² William Chappell, *Popular Music of the Olden Time*, Vol. 2 (London: Chappell, 1859), 520-521.
- ¹³ James Henry Dixon, *Ancient Poems, Ballads and Songs of the Peasantry of England* (London: Percy Society, 1846), 222-223.
- ¹⁴ Harland, *Lancashire Lyrics*, 65.
- ¹⁵ *Lancashire Lyrics*, 66-67.
- ¹⁶ *Lancashire Lyrics*, 212.
- ¹⁷ *Lancashire Lyrics*, 298-300.
- ¹⁸ John Harland & Thomas Turner Wilkinson, *Lancashire Folk-lore* (London: F. Warne, 1867).
- ¹⁹ John Harland & Thomas T. Wilkinson, eds. *Ballads and Songs of Lancashire*. London & Manchester: Heywood, 1882. Billed as a revised edition of Harland’s 1865 publication.
- ²⁰ William E. A. Axon, *Folk Song and Folk-Speech of Lancashire: On the Ballads and Songs of the County Palatine, With Notes on the Dialect in which Many of them are Written, and an Appendix on Lancashire Folk-Lore* (Manchester: Tubbs & Brook, [1871?], reissued 1887).
- ²¹ The next was Heywood Sumner’s *The Besom-Maker and Other Country Folk Songs* (London: Longmans, Green & Co, 1888).
- ²² Axon, *Folk Song and Folk-Speech*, 10.
- ²³ Axon, *Folk Song and Folk-Speech*, 87-88.
- ²⁴ Axon, *Folk Song and Folk-Speech*, 14.
- ²⁵ Axon, *Folk Song and Folk-Speech*, 39.
- ²⁶ Axon, *Folk Song and Folk-Speech*, 51-52.
- ²⁷ Axon, *Folk Song and Folk-Speech*, 15-16.
- ²⁸ Axon, *Folk Song and Folk-Speech*, 59.