

Singing the Child Ballads

Rosaleen Gregory

As part of the ongoing mopping-up operation (these are my final Child ballads—no, these really are the last—no, they really are...), here are four versions that I learned in recent years to illustrate presentations that Dave was giving at various conferences. They are all sung *a cappella*.

Child #214: “The Braes o’ Yarrow”

Here called “The Dowie Dens of Yarrow”, and featuring in a presentation on 19th century Yorkshire collector Frank Kidson’s collaborations with English scholar/singer/facilitator Lucy Broadwood. Originally published in Kidson’s 1891 *Traditional Tunes*, it was actually an example of non-Yorkshire material, having been collected from a Mrs. Calvert of Gilnockie in Dumfriesshire, the grand-daughter of Sir Walter Scott’s informant Tibbie Shiel. The text is similar to that printed by Scott in *Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border*. I like this version so much that it has basically replaced for me the version that I used to sing.

You can find that other version, “The Dowie Houms of Yarrow,” taken from *The Oxford Book of Ballads*, edited by Arthur Quiller-Couch, in *Canadian Folk Music* 41:4 (Winter 2007-08), p. 24. It does have the merit of an interesting final verse and a lovely tune, the one that Carolyn Hester popularised in the sixties as “Yarrow.”

Child #209: “Geordie”

From the same presentation, given at Whitby Folk Week (Yorkshire, England) in August 2008, here is “Banstead Downs”, a southern England version of “Geordie” collected by Lucy Broadwood from Sussex source singer Henry Burstow. As I already have two other versions of this ballad that I sing, I haven’t adopted this one into my regular repertoire, but it’s certainly a fine example of a Child ballad, and moreover a version Child could possibly have included, at least in an Addendum, but didn’t.

So this is actually my third version of Child #209. The other two may be found in the same issue of *Canadian Folk Music* 41:4 (Winter 2007-08), pp. 22-24. One is the vigorous June Tabor version from that great album with Maddy Prior called *Silly Sisters*, and the other is the gentler lament that Joan Baez used to sing.

Child #22: “St. Stephen and Herod” and #55: “The Carnal and the Crane”

Again from the same presentation at Whitby comes this engaging if somewhat corrupt Christmas carol sung to Lucy Broadwood by three gypsies from the Goby family encamped in the border country between Surrey and Sussex, where Lucy’s family home was situated. It seems to have elements of each of Child #22 and #55, which were arguably variants of the same ballad type, notwithstanding Child’s decision to separate them. Broadwood’s traveller informants called the ballad “King Pharim,” which she interpreted as a corruption of “King Pharaoh.” They also sang her another traditional Christmas carol, “The Moon Shines Bright.” You can find the incident described in Dave’s book *The Late Victorian Folksong Revival*, on p. 341.

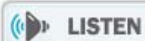
Child #54: “The Cherry Tree Carol”

And while we’re on Christmas carols, and my disbelieving eyes are looking out the window here in Athabasca and seeing snow falling, on April 24—two days ago it was the temperature that was 24, not the date—well, at Whitby in August 2008 Dave and I also did another illustrated presentation, this one on English collector Maud Karpeles’ 1929-30 expeditions to Canada and Newfoundland, so here is a folk-carol collected by Maud from Mrs. Vrooman, aged 85, of Regina, Saskatchewan. For me it’s another duplicate, since I already sing a version taken mainly from William Sandys’ old (1833) collection, *Christmas Carols, Ancient and Modern*, albeit to the tune in the *Joan Baez Songbook*. Anyway, you can find that one in *Canadian Folk Music* 40:1 (Spring 2006), p. 28.

Addendum: Listening to the Ballads

While I think of it, this might be a good opportunity to mention that, as *Canadian Folk Music/Musique folklorique canadienne* is, courtesy of Athabasca University Press, going on-line in the not too distant future, including on-line publication of back copies, I am currently in the process of recording all the items published in the *Singing the Child Ballads* column since it started in Spring 2005, with a view to including them as audio-clips, so that people can hear them as well as see them in print.

The Dowie Dens of Yarrow



www.canfolkmusic.ca/songs/issue43_2/ChildNo214.mp3

Anon

Voice

There liv'd a lad - y in the west, I ne'er could find her
mar - row, She was court-ed by nine gen - tle - men, And a plough - boy lad in Yar -
row.

There liv'd a lady in the west,
I ne'er could find her marrow;
She was courted by nine gentlemen,
And a ploughboy lad in Yarrow.

These nine sat drinking at the wine,
Sat drinking wine in Yarrow;
They made a vow among themselves,
To fight for her in Yarrow.

She washed his face, she kaimed his hair,
As oft she'd done before, O!
She made him like a knight sae bright,
To fight for her in Yarrow.

As he walked up yon high, high hill,
And down by the homes of Yarrow;
There he saw nine armed men,
Come to fight with him in Yarrow.

"There's nine of you, there's one of me,
It's an unequal marrow;
But I'll fight you all one by one,
On the dowie dens of Yarrow."

There he slew, and there they flew,
And there he wounded sorely;
Till her brother John, he came in beyond,
And pierced his heart most foully.

"Go home, go home, thou false young man,
And tell thy sister, Sarah,

That her true love, John, lies dead and gone
On the dowie dens of Yarrow."

"Oh, father dear, I dreamed a dream,
I'm afraid it will bring sorrow;
I dreamed I was pulling the heather bell,
In the dowie dens of Yarrow."

"Oh, daughter dear, I read your dream,
I doubt it will prove sorrow;
For your true love, John, lies dead and gone
On the dowie dens of Yarrow."

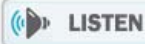
As she walked up yon high, high hill,
And down by the homes of Yarrow,
There she saw her true love, John,
Lying pale and dead on Yarrow.

Her hair it being three quarters long,
The colour it was yellow;
She wrapped it round his middle sma'
And carried him hame to Yarrow.

"Oh father dear, you've seven sons,
You may wed them a' to-morrow;
But a fairer flower I never saw
Than the lad I loved in Yarrow."

This fair maid being great with child,
It filled her heart with sorrow;
She died within her lover's arms,
Between that day and morrow.

Banstead Downs (Georgie)



LISTEN

www.canfolkmusic.ca/songs/issue43_2/ChildNo209.mp3

Anon

Voice

As I rode ov - er Ban - stead Downs, One mid - May morn - ing
ea - r - ly, There I esp - ied a pret - ty fair maid, La - ment - ing for her
Georg - ie. Say ing, "Georgie nev - er stood on the King's high - way, He - nev - er rob - bed
mon - ey, But he stole fif - teen of the King's fat deer, And sent them to Lord
Nav - ey

As I rode over Banstead Downs,
One mid-May morning early,
There I espied a pretty fair maid,
Lamenting for her Georgie.

Saying, "Georgie never stood
on the King's highway,
He never robbèd money,
But he stole fifteen of the King's fat deer,
And sent them to Lord Navey."

"Oh, come and saddle my milk-white steed,
And bridle it all ready,
That I may go to my good Lord Judge
And ask for the life of my Georgie."

And when she came to the good Lord Judge,
She fell down upon her knees already,

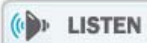
Saying, "My good Lord Judge, come pity me,
Grant me the life of my Georgie."

The judge he looked over his left shoulder,
He seemed as he was very sorry:
"My pretty fair maid, you are come too late,
For he is condemned already.

"He will be hung in a silken cord
Where there has not been many,
For he came of royal blood
And courted a virtuous lady."

"I wish I was on yonder hill,
Where times I have been many!
With a sword and a buckler by my side
I would fight for the life of my Georgie."

King Pharim



www.canfolkmusic.ca/songs/issue43_2/ChildNos22_55.mp3

Anon

Voice

King Pha - rim sat a - mus - ing, a - mus - ing all a - lone,
There came the bless - ed Sav - iour, And all to him un - known.

King Pharim sat a-musing,
A-musing all alone;
There came the blessed Saviour,
And all to him unknown.

“Say, where did you come from, good man.
Oh, where did you then pass?”
“It is out of the land of Egypt,
Between an ox and an ass.”

“Oh, if you come out of Egypt, man,
One thing I fain I know,
Whether a blessed Virgin Mary
Sprung from an Holy Ghost?

“For if this is true, is true, good man,
That you’ve been telling to me,
That the roasted cock do crow three times
In the place where they did stand.”

Oh, it’s straight away the cock did fetch,
And feathered to your own hand,

Three times a roasted cock did crow,
On the place where they did stand.

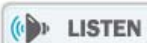
Joseph, Jesus and Mary
Were travelling for the west,
When Mary grew a-tired
She might sit down and rest.

They travelled further and further,
The weather being so warm,
Till they came unto some husbandman
A-sowing of his corn.

“Come husbandman!” cried Jesus,
“From over speed and pride,
And carry home your ripened corn
That you’ve been sowing this day.

“For to keep your wife and family
From sorrow, grief and pain,
And keep Christ in your remembrance
Till the time comes round again.”

The Cherry Tree Carol



www.canfolkmusic.ca/songs/issue43_2/ChildNo54.mp3

Anon

Voice

Jo-seph was an old man, An old man was he, When he and his wife
Ma - ry Came to the land of Gal - i - lee.

Joseph was an old man,
An old man was he,
When he and his wife Mary
Came to the land of Galilee.

And as they were going
Along by the wood,
They saw a red cherry-tree,
As red as any blood.

Out bespoke Mary
With words that was kind,
Saying "Give me cherries, Joseph,
For I am with child."

Then out bespoke Joseph
With words that was unkind:
"I won't give you cherries
If you are with child."

Then out bespoke our Saviour
Out of his mother's womb,
Saying: "Bow down, gentle cherry-tree,
Till my mother get some."

The tree it bowed down,
Down low to the ground,
And Mary picked up cherries
What her apron would hold.

Then as they were going
Along by the road,
They heard an angel saying:
"Our Saviour's to be born.

"Not in a kitchen,
Not in a hall,
Oh no, nor in a parlour,
But in an ox's stall."

This babe was not dressed
In silk nor in twine,
But a piece of fine linen
Was his mother's design.

This babe was not christened
With milk nor with wine,
But a drop of clear water,
And his name was divine.

Treasures from Our Archives

Twenty Years Ago

Bulletin 23.2 (June 1989). This issue featured two articles, slightly allied: Edith Fowke's "Filk-songs as Modern Folksongs" and James Prescott's "Music of the SCA". (Filk songs are songs from science fiction fandom, while the "SCA" is the medieval re-creating Society for Creative Anachronism.) A song written by James, "Lady Hartley's Lament", accompanied the latter article, as did "The Brave and Bonny Host" by Roger Shell. Two traditional songs, "Départ pour les îles", from the singing of Allan and Léontine Kelly of New Brunswick, and "I'll be the Good Boy", collected in Newfoundland by Jim Payne, completed the issue.

Fifteen Years Ago

Bulletin 28.2 (June 1994). This issue consisted mostly of the Festival Directory, but there was still room for some other material, including "The Jealous Lover" (a traditional song from Edith Fowke's collection), Bill Sarjeant's photo montage of the 1993 Annual General Meeting, an EthnoFolk Letters column, written by George W. Lyon this time, and reviews of a Cal Caven-dish concert in Calgary, the 1993 Winnipeg Folk Festival, Richard Chapman's book *The Complete Guitarist*, and recordings *Chansons judéo-*

espagnoles vols. I-III (Gerineldo), *Worth All the Telling* (Larry Kaplan), *Bluesology* (The White-ley Brothers) and five "Celtic" recordings.

Ten Years Ago

Bulletin 33.2 (June 1999). The showpiece of this issue was an interview with Paddy Tutty, accompanied by "Burr Oak" (an instrumental written by her) and her recorded version of the traditional song "The Cuckoo". Several columns appeared: an EthnoFolk Letter from Paddy Tutty, a radio column, "Islands in the Sand" by Steve Fruitman, and a short Centrefold (magazine column). Lots of letters and other housekeeping were included, as well as many reviews and the Folk Festival Directory.

Five Years Ago

CFM 38.2 (Spring 2004). This was a special issue on pioneering collector Helen Creighton (former Honorary President of CFMS, as it then was). Co-editor David Gregory contributed two articles, "Helen Creighton and the Traditional Songs of Nova Scotia" and "The Creighton-Senior Collaboration, 1932-51", the latter outlining Creighton's collaboration with Doreen Senior, a little-documented chapter in her collecting history. Clary Croft penned "Looking Back on

Helen” and “The Helen Creighton Fonds at the Public Archives of Nova Scotia”. Seven songs collected by Creighton accompanied the article, as well as reviews of *Songs of the Sea*, a CD of songs and stories collected by her, Clary Croft’s biography *Helen Creighton: Canada’s First Lady of Folklore*, the National Film Board video *A Sigh and a Wish: Helen Creighton’s Maritimes* and Clary Croft’s CD *Still the Song Lives On*.

Back Issues:

These issues (and all back issues, either in original form or as photocopies) are available from CSTM Back Issues, 224 20th Ave. NW, Calgary, Alta. T2M 1C2. For pricing, see the Mail Order Service catalogue or website (www.yorku.ca/cstm and follow the links), or contact john.leeder@nucleus.com. Cumulative Tables of Contents of all issues since 1982 are available on the website as well. [JL]

Reviews

Books

Stephen Calt. *Barrelhouse Words: A Blues Dialect Dictionary*. 2009. 308pp. ISBN: 978-0-252-03347-6 (hard cover), 978-0-252-07660-2 (soft cover). Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1325 South Oak Street, Champaign, IL 61820 – 6903, USA.; uipress@uillinois.edu; www.press.uillinois.edu

I had great hopes for this book and, at first glance, Calt’s contribution to dictionaries in general and to blues books in particular is an invaluable work. Even with its faults, no doubt some blues singers will want to include it in their libraries. But the reader should be wary of a number of errors that the author has made, particularly in his transcriptions, errors that have led him to some mistaken conclusions and false assumptions.

As might have been expected, this reviewer first looked at some problem words that had surfaced during his own researches into the songs in his repertoire, many of which have been cited in *Barrelhouse Words*. It is often exceedingly difficult to understand some of the words in early blues, a problem commonly caused either by one not being familiar with the idioms or by not understanding the singer’s enunciation. One can therefore appreciate that major transcription reference sources for blues words are invaluable.

Two of the best of these are Bob Macleod’s thirteen volumes of blues transcriptions (PAT Publications, Edinburgh, 1988–2004), and Michael Taft’s *Talkin’ to Myself* (Routledge, 1983 & 2005). Both Macleod’s and Taft’s transcriptions include some errors, as might be expected, and should be used only as guidelines, but they give complete songs with their essential structure, and the conscientious singer, listening carefully to the

original recordings, can correct words here and there. Neither Macleod nor Taft, whom I consider to form the backbone of research into blues words, is cited in Calt’s bibliography.

The book’s title “barrelhouse” is cited in a number of places throughout the book, one of them in the song “Mr. Crump Don’t Like It,” which can be found under “Crump, Mister”. The entry gives the first verse condensed into three lines, which is fine, but the transcription is incorrect in a couple of places: the first word Frank Stokes sings at the beginning of each of the first three lines is “A” (“A-Mister Crump...”), not “Now,” and the word “God” should be “cards”: “No barrelhouse women, cards n’ drinkin’ no beer.” The song is about Crump’s election promise to clean up the illegal activities in Memphis, and, quite apart from anything else, “God” makes no sense here. A further indignity to the song occurs under the entry “Creeper,” where the author is ostensibly quoting verse four: “I saw the creepers and sisters turn around an’ begin to grin.” He very carefully explains what creeper refers to, but the words being sung are, “I told the Presb’terian sisters, turned round an’ begin to grin.”

For the expression “dead cat on the line” Calt refers the reader to the Blind Boy Fuller song “I’m a Good Stem Winder” from 1935, but it would have been far more appropriate, and Calt could have saved himself quite a bit of explaining, if he had cited Tampa Red’s 1932 recording of his own song, “Dead Cat On the Line,” where each of the seven verses gives an example of what the term means.

Calt’s explanation for “bamalong,” found in the title and first line of Andrew and Jim Baxter’s “Bamalong Blues,” reads: