

Ballad of the Month

Dave writes: You may know an Oyster Band song called "The Oxford Girl", the one that goes "I met a man whose brother said he knew a man who knew the Oxford girl..." It is a great song, but not traditional; yet I suspect that when writing it John Jones and Ian Telfer did have in mind an older narrative song of the same name. Well, I went looking, and, quite a few years ago now, I found this "Oxford Girl" in a broadside collection, although unfortunately I can't remember which one. The words struck me as a trifle grisly, but I thought it rang true psychologically. As printed the ballad didn't have a tune, but I wanted to sing it, so I made up this melody. I now know rather more about the history of folksong than I did then, and I think I can fairly state that I had stumbled on your classic murder ballad. It comes in lots of different variations. It is often called "The Butcher Boy", "The Miller's Apprentice" or "The Berkshire Tragedy", or else the name of the town is changed to Gosport or Wexford or Knoxville (among many others). The great traveller-songstress Phoebe Smith sang a version with words virtually identical

to my broadside, while Harry Cox located it in Ekefield Town, and called it "The Prentice Boy". Sharp collected nine variants of it, mainly in Somerset, and he and Maud Karpeles found it again in Kentucky and Virginia. There are lots of American variants, but, off hand, the only Canadian version I know is one collected by Roy Mackenzie from Daniel Brown of River John, Nova Scotia. Brown's title was "Waterford Town", but other local singers called it "The Wexford Girl" and that is how it appears on pp. 293-294 of *Ballads and Sea Songs from Nova Scotia*. Mackenzie gives no tune, but the rhythm of Daniel Brown's words would fit mine. I still like my English broadside text because it explains why the young man loses his temper. The (unintended) murder is intelligible – although not excusable – rather than an act of gratuitous brutality, which is how it appears in most American versions. So I give the English broadside text first and follow it with the Canadian version noted in the field by Mackenzie.

My father educated me, some learning gave to me,
Then he bound me as a 'prentice boy, a millard for to be.

I fell in love with an Oxford girl with a dark and rolling eye,
I promised that I would marry her, if with me she would lie.

I went along to her sister's house at eight o'clock each night,
How little did that fair maid think I'd show her any spite.

I courted her for six long months, a little now and then,
But I thought it a shame to marry her, my being so young a man.

I asked her if she'd take a walk through the fields and meadows gay,
And there we sat and talked of love, and we fixed the wedding day.

I caught fast hold of her lily-white hands, I kissed both cheek and chin,
I had no thought of hurting her, but yet she wouldn't give in.

I pulled a stick out of the hedge, in a rage I knocked her down,
And the red blood from that innocent girl came trickling on the ground.

I caught fast hold of her curly locks and I dragged her through the green,
Until I came to the deep mill stream and I gently flung her in.

Look how she goes, look how she flows, she's a floating on the tide,
And instead of having a watery grave she ought to have been my bride.

I went on home to my master's house, 'twas twelve o'clock at night,
My master rose and let me in, and he went to strike a light.

I asked him for a candle then, to light me up to bed,
I asked him for a handkerchief to bind my aching head.

He answered me and he questioned me: what stained my hands and clothes?
The answer that I gave to him, 'twas the bleeding of my nose.

No rest, no peace, all that long night I did in torment lie,
For the murdering of my own true love I knew that I must die.

It was some three weeks afterwards when that pretty fair maid were found,
Come floating by her own mother's door in the river near Oxford town.

The judge and all the jurymen on me they did agree,
For the murdering of that Oxford girl it's hanged I shall be.

Oxford Girl

Anon

Broadside ballad

My fath - er ed - u - ca - ted me, some
learn - ing gave to me, Then he bound me as a
'pren - tice boy, a mill - ard for to be.

The image shows three staves of musical notation in G major (one sharp) and 4/4 time. The first staff begins with a whole rest followed by a half note G, then quarter notes A, B, C, D, E, F, G, and a half note G. The second staff starts with quarter notes G, A, B, C, D, E, F, G, followed by quarter notes A, B, C, D, E, F, G, and a half note G. The third staff begins with quarter notes G, A, B, C, D, E, F, G, followed by quarter notes A, B, C, D, E, F, G, and a half note G.

And here is the version collected by Roy Mackenzie from Daniel Brown:

The Wexford Girl (Waterford Town)

It was in the town of Waterford where I was bred and born,
It was in the city of Baltimore that I owned a flowered farm.

I courted manys a Wexford girl with dark and rolling eyes,
I asked her for to marry me, and "Yes" was her reply.

I went up to her father's house about eight o'clock one night;
I asked her for to take a walk, our wedding day to appoint.

We walked along quite easily till I came to level ground,
I broke a stake out of the fence and I beat this fair maid down.

Down on her bended knee she fell; in mercy she did cry,
"O Willie dear, don't murder me, for I'm not prepared to die!"

He heeded not the words she said, but he beat her all the more,
Till all the ground for yards around was in a bloody gore.

I went up to my mother's house about twelve o'clock that night;
My mother she'd been sitting up, she took an awful fright.

"O son, dear son, what have you done? What bled your hands and clothes?"
The answer that I gave to her was, "Bleeding of the nose."

I asked her for a candle to light my way to bed,
Likewise a handkerchief to wrap around my aching head.

I tied it and I twisted it, but no comfort could I find;
The flames of Hell shone around me, and my true love not far behind.

It was about three weeks after, this fair maid she was found
A floating down the river that leads to Wexford town.

And all that saw her said she was a beauteous handsome bride,
That she was fit for any lord, duke, or king, or any squire's bride.

I was taken on suspicion, and placed in Wexford gaol,
Where there was none to pity me, or none to go my bail.

Come all ye royal true lovers, a warning take by me,
And never treat your own true love to any cruelty.

For if you do you'll rue like me until the day you die;
You'll hang like me, a murderer, all on the gallows high.

A Ballad Revisited

Three issues back (36.2, Summer 2002) I reconstructed a ballad collected by Sabine Baring-Gould from informant Joseph Paddon of Holcombe Burnell in Devon. You will recall that in *Songs and Ballads of the West* Baring-Gould printed "Dead Maid's Land" with a modified text and with a different tune to the one he had heard Paddon sing. He used Paddon's melody - a particularly beautiful

one, in my opinion - for a song of his own composition. However, he sent a copy of Paddon's text to Francis Child, who printed it as a variant of "The Gardener" (Child # 219) in *English and Scottish Popular Ballads*. So my reconstruction consisted of putting Paddon's melody back with Paddon's text, and that was what I printed on pp. 22-23 of 36.2.

At the time I commented that it would be interesting to compare this reconstruction with the version of the song in "The Personal Copy", the recently discovered Baring-Gould manuscript book housed at Killerton House, near Exeter. Well, this summer I was over in the UK on a research trip and I tried to arrange to see "The Personal Copy" at Killerton. No such luck. The country house is now used as the National Trust regional headquarters and is open to the public in the summer, but the library is closed to the *hoi poloi*. I tried contacting Martin Graebe, the English expert on Baring-Gould, to see if he could wave a magic wand, but he couldn't or wouldn't. However, he informed me that the Killerton manuscripts had just been put on microfiche, and that there were copies in Exeter, Plymouth, and Cecil Sharp House (London). As I wanted to see the other Baring-Gould fair-copy manuscript (donated, as B-G promised, to the Plymouth Central Library), I chose Plymouth and duly turned up at the special collections room of the local library. The staff there were eager to show me a complete photocopy of the Plymouth manuscript, but my inquiries about the microfiche initially drew blank looks. Then one of them remembered: "yes, maybe they had received some new microfiche a few months previously, and perhaps it was in the bottom drawer of such-and-such a filing cabinet..." To my relief, it was.

So the upshot of all this was that I was able to compare my reconstruction with both the version in "The Personal Copy" and the version in the

Plymouth "fair copy" manuscript. Amazingly, my reconstruction was virtually identical with the ballad as written out in "The Personal Copy". The tune *is* the same. As regards the text, there is one minor difference in wording in the last verse between Child's text and B-G's text: the latter has the word "maid" where Child prints "may". Apart from this one word, what appeared in issue 36.2 faithfully reproduces the ballad as it is found in "The Personal Copy".

However, it is interesting that the Plymouth version and the Killerton version are not identical. Very similar, to be sure, but not identical. I cannot be completely sure, but it looks as though the Plymouth manuscript is based directly on what B-G collected in the field from Paddon, who, incidentally, is identified as Thomas (not Joseph) Paddon in both the Plymouth and the Killerton manuscripts. Why is the Plymouth version the earlier of the two? Because in a note to the Plymouth version B-G states that Paddon omitted a verse required by the logic of the text, and we find that verse reconstructed and inserted in the Killerton copy and consequently also in *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads*, but it is not given in the Plymouth manuscript. The tune, too, while essentially the same melody, is not identical in the two manuscripts. For comparison, here is the Plymouth version of "Dead Maid's Land", as sung in December 1889 by Thomas Paddon, labourer, of Holcombe Burnell. I have included, but placed in square brackets, the verse that he omitted and that Baring-Gould reconstructed.

A garden was planted around with flowers of every kind,
I chose of the best to wear in my breast the flowers best pleased my mind,
The flowers best pleased my mind.

A gardener standing by I asked to choose for me,
He chose the lily, the violet, the pink, but I liked none of the three,
But I liked none of the three.

A violet I don't like, a lily it fades so soon,
But as for the pink I cared not a flink, I said I would stop till June,
I said I would stop till June.

The lily it shall be thy smock, the jonquil shoe thy feet,
Thy gown shall be of the ten-week stock, thy gloves the violet sweet,
Thy gloves the violet sweet.

The gilly shall deck thy head, the way with herbs I'll strew,
The stockings shall be the marigold, thy gloves the violet blue,
Thy gloves the violet blue.

[I like not the gilly-flower, nor herbs my way to strew,
 Nor stockings of the marigold, nor gloves of violet blue,
 Nor gloves of violet blue.]*

I will not have the ten-week stock, nor jonquils to my shoon,
 But I will have the red, red rose that flowereth in June,
 That flowereth in June.

The rose it doth bear a thorn that pricketh to the bone,
 I little heed what thou doest say, I will have that or none,
 I will have that or none.

The rose it doth bear a thorn that pricketh to the heart,
 O, but I will have the red, red rose for I little heed its smart,
 For I little heed its smart.

She stooped to the ground to pluck the rose so red,
 The thorn it pierced her to the heart, and this fair maid was dead,
 And this fair maid was dead.

A gardener stood at the gate, with cypress in his hand,
 And he did say, "Let no fair maid come into Dead Maid's Land,
 Come into Dead Maid's Land".

[* verse reconstructed by B-G and included in both "The Personal Copy" at Killerton and in *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads*]

Dead Maid's Land

Anon
 Thomas Paddon

A garden was plant - ed around, with
 flowers of ev - ery kind, I chose of the best to
 wear in my breast, the flower best pleas - ed my mind....., the
 flower best pleas - ed my mind.