

The Ballads of George J. Byers

Peter Fielding

“There [These] are fragments of songs that nobody sings” *John Wilfred Byers*

Old Ballads Sung by George J. Byers, West Annan, N.S. is an unpublished manuscript housed at the Nova Scotia Archives & Records Management (NSARM, formerly PANS) that contains the compiler’s father’s song repertoire.

Following the death of George J. Byers (1857-1917), John Wilfred Byers initiated a project to preserve his father’s song legacy. Soliciting help from his aunt and uncle, over forty songs were preserved; of which over thirty include handwritten music notation. Extant materials indicate that the collection was compiled shortly after his father’s death, assembled into its current form in approximately 1930, and donated to Nova Scotia Archives & Records Management in 1974.

While lacking the scholarly cross-references found in the publications of contemporary collectors (William Roy MacKenzie and Helen Creighton), J. W. Byers’ archival collection is a wonderful source of early Nova Scotian traditional vocal repertoire that

serves to preserve a single family’s song heritage. Since George J. Byers’ father, John Walter Byers (1805-1875), immigrated to Nova Scotia from Scotland in the 1820s, portions of this repertoire may have stemmed from his childhood in Scotland that was and directly transmitted via family in Nova Scotia.

This article identifies the repertoire of this collection and the tonal/modal/pentatonic pitch spaces traversed by those songs, as encoded in music notation. It also presents the lyrics and music notation of three songs: “Tally-Ho,” “Peter Amberly,” and “Jack Robinson.”

The preserved repertoire of George J. Byers includes the lyrics of forty-three songs and music notation for thirty-five. A complete listing of the songs appears below, grouped by the headings found in the collection as follows: oldest songs, earlier songs (1), former popular songs c.1880–c.1900, earlier songs (2), and miscellaneous songs (see figure 1).

Oldest Songs

1. My Bonnie Lass
2. The Mountain Brow
3. The Flying Cloud
4. The Croppy Boy
5. The Hogs in the Cellar
6. Jack Robinson
7. The Iron Door
8. Bonnets of Blue
9. The Plough Boy
10. Tally-Ho

Earlier Songs [1]

11. The Silvery Tide
12. Waterloo
13. Peter Amberley
14. General Wolfe
15. The Little Girl That Played Upon My Knee
16. The Shanty Boys
17. Peggy’s Letter
18. The Farmer’s Boy

Former Popular Songs 1880?—1900?

19. The Old Elm Tree
20. Little Nell of Narraganset Bay
21. The Indian's Lament
22. Twenty Years Ago
23. Take Me Home
24. Marabel
25. Nancy Till
26. The Yellow Rose of Texas
27. The Garden Gate
28. The Dying Californian
29. Dan McGinty
30. When Shall We Three Meet Again
31. Where Did You Get That Hat ?

Earlier Songs [2. Scottish]

32. Scotch
33. Why I Left My Hame [Home]
34. Jennie Sat Doon
35. The Braes O'Glenniffer
36. Lucy's Flittin'
37. Mary's Dream
38. Robin Tamson's Smiddy
39. Cliffy Rocks

Miscellaneous Songs

40. The Plain Golden Band
41. Down in a Coal Mine
42. Mother's Knee
43. The Faded Coat of Blue

Figure 1. *Listing of Songs, grouped by the collection's divisions*

Of the thirty-five melodies encoded into music notation, five are pentatonic (four scales spanning two distinct pitch space collections [523], [535]), ten are hexatonic (again four different scales spanning two distinct collections [632] and [6Z25]), and 18 are septatonic (17 major, one mixolydian, all members of the diatonic set [735]).

The remaining two are interesting in that one is octatonic ("Peter Amberley"), and the other is non-tonic ("Jack Robinson"). Part of the charm of "Peter Amberley" resides with its shifting tonal centers on Bb, F, and C and its ensuing multiplicity of valid solmization interpretations.

Not wishing to venture into any of the seven solmization systems that I've studied or had to teach, suffice it to say that the non-tonic melody has its

charms as it contains two chromatic pitches: one as part of a descending chromatic line spanning G to F (see the sixth complete measure of "Jack Robinson"), and one that serves as a repeated lower chromatic neighbour to F (measures 11 and 12).

The remainder of this article presents the music and lyrics of three songs excerpted from the Byers manuscript. These songs include "Tally-Ho," "Peter Amberly," and "Jack Robinson."

Thanks are extended to the Nova Scotia Archives and Records Management for permissions to include these digital reproductions from the Byers collection.

Tally-Ho

TALLY - HO

It was in the month of March, eighteen hundred and three,
We had a recreation in our own country. Our own true
country sportsmen, through hills, dales, and rocks,
And so jovially they hunted in search of a fox.

Cho. Tally-ho! Hark-a-way! tally-ho! hark-a-way! tally-ho!
Tally-ho! hark-a-way! My boys, away, come away!

The image shows a handwritten musical score on aged paper. It features six staves of music in treble clef with a 2/4 time signature. The lyrics are written below the notes. The title 'TALLY - HO' is at the top. The lyrics describe a hunting scene in March 1803. The chorus is a call to action for hunters.

It was in the month of March, eighteen hundred and three,
We had a recreation in our own country.
Our own true country sportsmen, through hills, dales, and rocks,
And so jovially they hunted in search of a fox.

Chorus:

Tallyho! Harkaway! tallyho! harkaway! tallyho!
Tallyho! harkaway! My boys, away, come away!

Peter Amberley

Peter Amberley

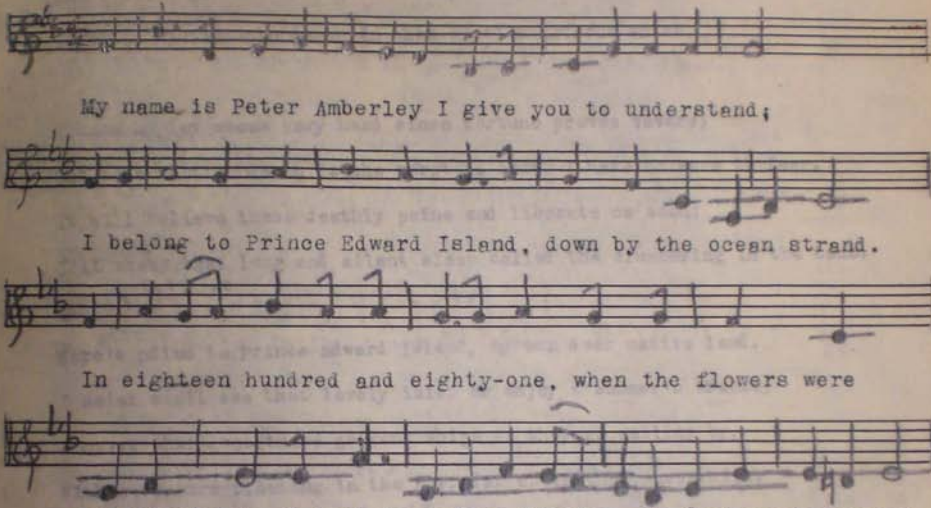
PETER AMBERLEY

My name is Peter Amberley I give you to understand;

I belong to Prince Edward Island, down by the ocean strand.

In eighteen hundred and eighty-one, when the flowers were
brilliant hue, I left my native country my fortune to pursue.

I landed in New Brunswick in a lumbering country there;
I was hired to work in the lumber woods where they cut
the spruce tree down;
It was loading sleds in a lumber yard,
Where I got my deathly wound.



My name is Peter Amberley I give you to understand;
I belong to Prince Edward Island, down by the ocean strand.
In eighteen hundred and eighty-one, when the flowers were brilliant hue,
I left my native country my fortune to pursue.

I landed in New Brunswick in a lumbering country there;
I was hired to work in the lumber woods where they cut the spruce tree down;
It was loading sleds in a lumber yard,
Where I got my deathly wound.

There's danger on the ocean where the waves roll mountains high;
There's danger on the battlefield, where the enemy bullets fly;
There is danger in the lumber woods, though death lurks seldom there;
I fell a victim unto death in that great monstrous snare.

I know my lot seems very hard since fortune proves severe;
But to a victim, death is the worst to come, I have no more to fear.
It will relieve those deathly pains and liberate me soon;
I'll sleep that long and silent sleep called the slumbering in the tomb.

Here's adieu to Prince Edward Island, my own dear native land.
I ne'er shall see that lovely isle, or enjoy a summer's breeze;
I never shall see those gallant ships as they go sailing by,
With streamers floating in the air, far above the canvas high.

Here's adieu unto my father; 'twas him that drove me here.
I thought him far too cruel, his treatment too severe.
It is not right to force a boy, or try to keep him down,
It will repulse him from his home when he is far too young.

Here's adieu unto my dearer friend; I mean my mother dear.
She has raised a son who has fallen as soon as he left her care.
Ah, little did my mother think when she sung sweet lullaby,
What country I would travel in, or what death I should die.

Here's adieu unto my dearest friend; to the island girl so true.
Long may she live to bless the isle where first my breath I drew.
But the time will roll on just the same as before I passed away;
What signifies a mortal man, whose frame is generous clay.

There's one more request I wish to ask; and that I'll have to crave,
That same great Holy Father will bless my silent grave.
It is in the city of Boistown my mouldering bones will lay,
Awaiting the Savior's calling on that great Judgement Day.

Alternative Atlantic Canadian versions:

William Roy MacKenzie recorded a version of "Peter Ambelay," as sung by Paul Brown of River John, Pictou County, Nova Scotia in summer 1926 as #116 in his *Ballads and Sea Songs From Nova Scotia* (pp. 295-296, lyrics only).

There is a version sung by a Richard Hartlan of SouthEast Passage (Nova Scotia) that was transcribed by Helen Creighton and published as "Peter Rambelay," #138 in *Songs and Ballads From Nova Scotia* (pp. 301-303).

There is a version sung by Mr. J.W. Collier of Elgin, N.B., collected by Helen Creighton (CR 131 B2), transcribed by Kenneth Peacock, published as "Peter Emberley," #118 in Helen Creighton's *Folksongs From Southern New Brunswick* (pp. 231-235).

Jack Robinson

JACK ROBINSON

Now the perils and the dangers of the voyage are past;
The ship into Portsmouth arrived at last; The sails
are all furled and the anchor is cast, And the happiest
of the crew is Jack Robinson.

The image shows a page from a music book with the title 'JACK ROBINSON' at the top. Below the title are four staves of musical notation. The lyrics are printed below each staff. The paper is aged and yellowed. On the left edge, there is a vertical column of text from the reverse side of the page, which is partially visible and reads: 'So at', 'To fl', 'He at', 'She c', 'When', 'Then', 'Or w', 'A",', 'Sinc', 'Fore', 'The'.

Now the perils and the dangers of the voyage are past;
The ship into Portsmouth arrived at last;
The sails are all furled and the anchor is cast.
And the happiest of the crew is Jack Robinson.

For his Poll he had trinkets of gold galore,
Besides of prize money quite a store;
'Mong the rest of the crew, he went on shore
As coxswain of the boat, Jack Robinson.

He met a man and said. "I say
Perhaps you know of one Polly Gray
Who lives somewhere here about?"
The man said, "Nay, I do not indeed, Jack Robinson."

"And now as I have left my ship,
And all my messmates have given me the slip,
Perhaps you'll partake of a good can of flip,
As you're a civil fellow," said Jack Robinson.

In a public house, they both sat down,
And talked of admirals of high renown,
And drank as much grog as came to half-a-crown,
This here same man and Jack Robinson.

When Jack called out the reckoning to pay,
The landlady stepped in, in fine array;
“My eyes and limbs, but here’s Polly Gray,
Who thought to meet you here,” said Jack Robinson.

The landlady staggered up against the wall;
She said that first she didn’t know him at all.
“Shiver me,” said Jack, “But here’s a pretty squall,
Why Polly, don’t you know me, I’m Jack Robinson.”

Said she to him, “I’ve changed my state.”
“Why you don’t mean to say that you’ve got a mate,
For you know you promised me?” But said she, “I couldn’t wait,
For no tidings could I gain of you, Jack Robinson”.

“For one day someone came to me and said,
That somebody else had somewhere read
In some newspaper as how you were dead.”
“I’ve not been dead at all,” said Jack Robinson.

“Don’t you remember this handkerchief you gave to me,
Just three years ago before I went to sea,
Every time I looked on it, I thought of thee;
Upon my soul I did,” said Jack Robinson.

He turned his cud and finished his glass;
He hitched up his trousers, “Alas, alas,
That ever I should live to be made such an ass,
And be balked by a woman,” said Jack Robinson.

“But to fret and stew is all in vain,
I’ll take a ship and go to Holland, France, or Spain,
No matter where, I’ll ne’er come back again.”
He was off before you could say, “Jack Robinson”.

A version of this song was sung by a Mr. Ben Henneberry of Devil’s Island (Nova Scotia) and transcribed by Helen Creighton. It was published as #40 in her *Songs and Ballads From Nova Scotia* (pp. 79-80).

References

Birth/death records obtained from <https://novascotiagenealogy.com> [accessed 07 Oct 09].

Byers, J.W. *Old Ballads Sung by George J Byers West Annan, N.S.* PANS MG1 #1195e, 1930 (1974).