

In My Tradition: Ballads and Folk Lyrics

Rosaleen Gregory

Four more ballads (or ballad-like narrative or quasi-narrative songs) from my repertoire over the years. Child ignored all of them, although it is just possible that he was not familiar with either of the two broadsides. “Walsingham” he may have found too literary, and so decided that it was not a “popular” ballad. But why he rejected “The Trees They Do Grow High,” which he was aware Baring-Gould had collected from oral tradition in the west of England, is a mystery, unless he disapproved of it on moral grounds (it includes teenage sex, albeit within the framework of marriage). I usually perform these unaccompanied, except for “The Trees They Do Grow High,” but we’ve included optional guitar chords.

Walsingham

“Walsingham” is a gentle lament for lost love. Fragments of the text are sung by Ophelia in *Hamlet*. From Dave’s book on *Victorian Songhunters* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2006), I refresh my memory of it: William Chappell included text and tune in his massive 1838 *Collection of National English Airs, Consisting of Ancient Song, Ballad and Dance Tunes*. It was featured in Thomas Deloney’s late Elizabethan *Garland of Good Will* and it’s quite possible that Deloney wrote it himself. Chappell found the tune for “Walsingham” in the *Fitzwilliam Virginal Book*, but his comments on the song reinforce the alternative hypothesis that it dates from as early as Henry VIII’s or even Henry VII’s reign, at a time when pilgrimages to holy sites were common.

The Deserter

I didn’t learn this until fairly recently, when I heard someone playing the Fairport Convention CD *Liege and Lief* (Island Masters), a reissue of their seminal 1969 vinyl album of the same name. I remembered it then as a broadside ballad I had heard sung in folk clubs during the 1960s, and decided to take it up at last, mainly for its strong, confident melody.

The Trees They Do Grow High

I’ve learned and performed this fine ballad in several other versions, including those collected by Sabine Baring-Gould, Frank Kidson, and Cecil Sharp, but usually I come back to this simple arrangement with understated guitar accompaniment. It can be found in the *Joan Baez Songbook* (New York: Ryerson Music Publishers Inc., 1964).

Banks of the Nile

This is another broadside ballad that I learned many years ago, from the singing of Sandy Denny while she was part of the folk group Fotheringay. At that time its anti-war sentiments resonated in the context of the Vietnam War. Nowadays, of course, it is Afghanistan. The song was collected on several occasions from oral tradition during the first English folk-song revival, including by Frank Kidson.

Walsingham Anon

www.canfolkmusic.ca/songs/issue43_4/Walsingham.mp3 LISTEN

Am Em Am C Em Am F Em

Voice

As I went to Walsingham, to the shrine with speed, Met I with a jol-ly pal-mer there,

F Em Am

in a pil-grim's weed.

As I went to Walsingham, to the shrine with speed,
Met I with a jolly palmer there, in a pilgrim's weed.

"As you came from the holy-land of Walsingham,
Met you not with my true love by the way as you came?"

"How should I know your true love, that have met many a one,
As I came from the holy-land, that have come, that have gone?"

"She is neither white nor brown, but as the heavens fair;
There is none hath a form so divine, on the earth, in the air."

"Such a one did I meet, good sir, with angel-like face,
Who like a queen did appear in her gait, in her grace."

"She hath left me here all alone, all alone and unknown,
Who sometimes lov'd me as her life, and call'd me her own."

"What's the cause she hath left thee alone, and a new way doth take,
That sometime did love thee as her life, and her joy did thee make?"

"I loved her all my youth, but now am old, as you see;
Love liketh not the fallen fruit, nor the withered tree.

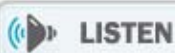
"For love is a careless child, and forgets promise past;
He is blind, he is deaf, when he list, and in faith never fast.

"For love is a great delight, and yet a trustless joy;
He is won with a word of despair, and is lost with a toy.

"Such is the love of womankind, or the word abus'd,
Under which many childish desires and conceits are excus'd.

"But love is a durable fire, in the mind ever burning;
Never sick, never dead, never cold, from itself never turning."

The Deserter



www.canfolkmusic.ca/songs/issue43_4/The_Deserter.mp3

Anon

Voice

When first I de - ser - ted I thought my - self free..., 'Till my cru - el
comrade in - formed a - gainst - me. I was quick - ly followed af - ter and brought back with
speed....., I was hand - cuffed and guard - ed, heavy irons put on me.

The musical score is written in 4/4 time with a key signature of one flat (Bb). It consists of three staves of music. The first staff begins with a rest for the first measure, followed by a series of quarter and eighth notes. The second and third staves continue the melody with similar rhythmic patterns. Chord symbols (C, F, Gm) are placed above the notes to indicate the harmonic accompaniment.

When first I deserted I thought myself free,
Till my cruel comrade informed against me,
I was quickly followed after and brought back with speed,
I was handcuffed and guarded, heavy irons put on me.

As I was a-wandering down Ratcliffe Highway,
The recruiting party came beating that way;
They enlisted me and treated me, till I did not know;
Then to the Queen's barracks they forced me to go.

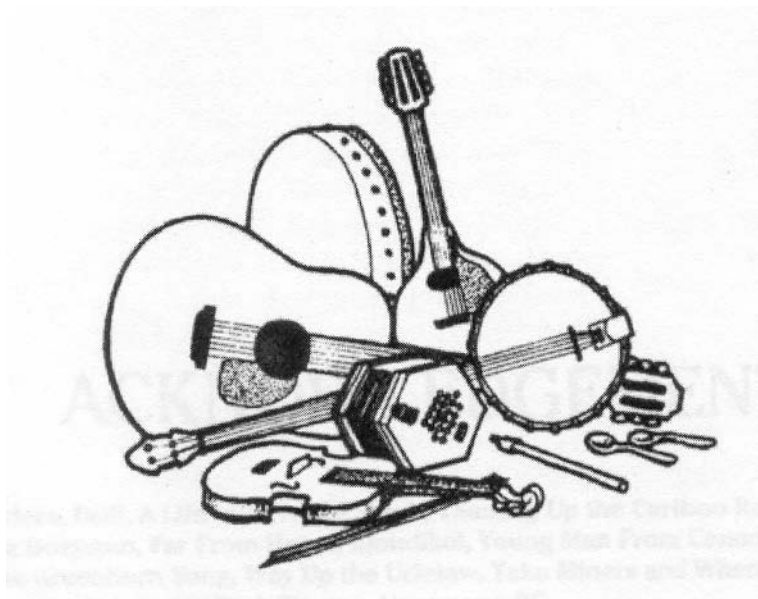
When next I deserted I thought myself free,
When my cruel comrade informed against me;
I was quickly followed after, and brought back with speed,
I was handcuffed and guarded, heavy irons put on me.

Court martial, court martial they held upon me,
And the sentence they passed on me was three hundred and three.
May the Lord have mercy on their souls for their sad cruelty,
For now the Queen's duty lies heavy on me.

Then again I deserted and thought I was free,
When my cruel sweetheart informed against me,
I was quickly followed after and brought back with speed,
I was handcuffed and guarded, heavy irons put on me.

Court martial, court martial was very soon got,
And the sentence they passed on me was that I should be shot.
May the Lord have mercy on their souls for their cruelty,
For now the Queen's duty lies heavy on me.

Then up rode Prince Albert in his coach and six:
"Bring to me that young man whose death it is fixed.
Release him from his irons and let him go free,
For he'll make a good soldier for his Queen and country."



The Trees They Do Grow High

Anon



www.canfolkmusic.ca/songs/issue43_4/The_Trees_They_Grow_High.mp3

Voice

The trees they grow high and the leaves they do grow green,
Ma - ny is the time my true love I've seen, Ma - ny an hour I've
watched him all a - lone, He's young, but he's dai - ly grow - ing

Chords: Em, Am, Em, G, Bm, Em, Em, C, Am, Em, G, Bm, Am, Bm, Em

The trees they grow high and the leaves they do grow green,
Many is the time my true love I've seen,
Many an hour I've watched him all alone,
He's young, but he's daily growing.

“Father, dear father, you've done me great wrong,
You have married me to a boy who is too young,
I'm twice twelve and he is but fourteen,
He's young but he's daily growing.”

“Daughter, dear daughter, I've done you no wrong,
I have married you to a great lord's son,
He'll make a lord for you to wait upon,
He's young but he's daily growing.”

“Father, dear father, if you see fit,
We'll send him to college for one year yet,
I'll tie blue ribbons all around his waist,
To let the maidens know that he's married.”

One day I was lookin' o'er my father's castle wall,
I spied all the boys a-playin' with the ball,
My own true love was the flower of them all,
He's young but he's daily growing.

At the age of fourteen, he was a married man,
At the age of fifteen, the father of a son,
At the age of sixteen, his grave it was green,
And death had put an end to his growing.

The Banks of the Nile



www.canfolkmusic.ca/songs/issue43_4/Banks_of_the_Nile.mp3

Anon

Voice

Am Em Dm Am
O hark the drums do beat, love, no long-er can I stay. The

Am Dm Em Am Em D Am Dm Em
bug - le horns are sound-ing clear, and we must march a - way. We're or - dered down to

Am Em D Am Em D C Em
Ports-mouth, And it's man - y's the wear - y mile, To_ join the Brit - ish a - r-m-y on the

Am Em Am
ba - nk - s of the Nile.

Oh, hark the drums do beat my love, no longer can I stay,
The bugle horns are sounding clear, and we must march away.
We are ordered down to Portsmouth, and it's many's the weary mile,
To join the British army on the banks of the Nile.

“Oh, Willy, dearest Willy, don't leave me here to mourn,
Don't make me curse and rue the day that ever I was born,
For the parting with my love would be like parting with my life,
So stay at home my dearest love, and I will be your wife.”

“Oh, my Nancy, dearest Nancy, sure that will never do,
The government has ordered, and we are bound to go;
The government has ordered, and the Queen she gives command,
And I am bound abroad, my love, to serve in a foreign land.”

“Oh, but I'll cut off my yellow hair and I'll go along with you,
I'll dress myself in uniform and I'll see Egypt too.
I'll march beneath your banner while fortune it do smile,
And we'll comfort one another on the banks of the Nile.”

“But your waist it is too slender and your fingers they are too small,
And the sultry sun of Egypt your rosy cheeks would spoil,
Where the cannons they do rattle and the bullets they do fly,
And the silver trumpets sound so loud to hide the dismal cry.”

Oh, cursed be those cruel wars that ever they began,
For they have robbed our country of many's the handsome man,
They've robbed us of our sweethearts, why their bodies they feed the lions
On the dry and sandy desert shores which are the banks of the Nile.