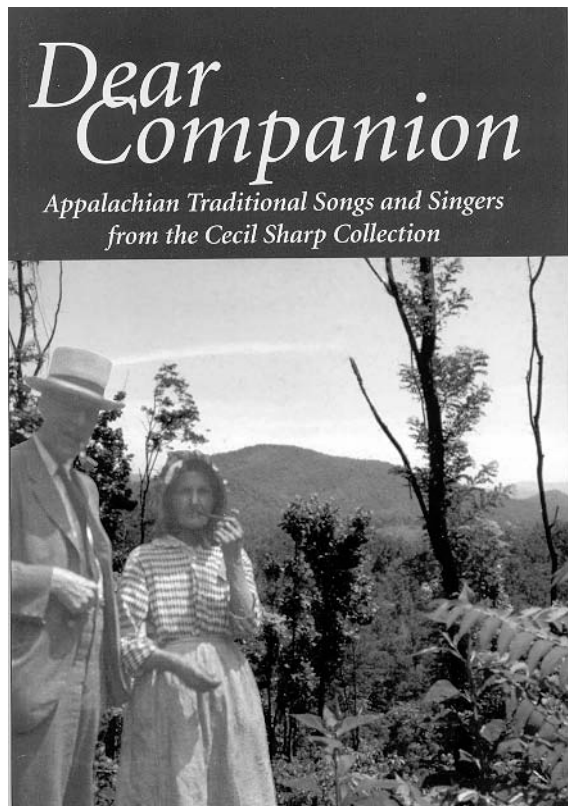


Reviews – Books

Dear Companion: Appalachian Traditional Songs and Singers from the Cecil Sharp Collection. London: English Folk Dance & Song Society, 2004.



Between 1916 and 1918 English folk song collectors Cecil Sharp and his secretary Maud Karpeles traveled through the Appalachian states of North America – North Carolina, Tennessee, Virginia, West Virginia and Kentucky – visiting mountain families and collecting well over a thousand tunes and songs, many of which had their roots in traditional English songs and ballads. Although their visits spanned the months from early April to mid-October, much of their work was done during the hottest part of the year, involving lengthy treks over terrain that was nearly always rough and sometimes almost impenetrable. Sharp's health was frequently a source of worry – he suffered attacks of asthma and of a malarial-type fever. At the time of these trips he was in his late fifties, Maud Karpeles in her early thirties.

Dear Companion is a collection of 53 songs selected from Sharp's and Karpeles' Appalachian collecting trips by Mike Yates, Elaine Bradtke and Malcolm

Taylor, with editorial assistance by David Atkinson. All the above are eminently knowledgeable in their various, but overlapping, fields. Mike Yates, himself a song and ballad collector in both Britain and the Appalachians, runs Kyloe Records which issues CDs (www.kyloerecords.co.uk) of traditional songs, music and stories from northern England and Scotland; Elaine Bradtke is an American-born ethnomusicologist and librarian, currently working part-time at the Vaughan Williams Memorial Library at Cecil Sharp House in Regent's Park, London, where much of Sharp's and Karpeles' archival material is housed; Malcolm Taylor has been librarian in charge of the Vaughan Williams Memorial Library for over twenty years and received an Order of the British Empire in 2002 for his services to musical heritage; David Atkinson is a ballad scholar whose erudition has most recently seen expression in his 2002 book, *The English Traditional Ballad*.

It is a real pleasure to see Cecil Sharp and Maud Karpeles on the receiving end of bouquets rather than the brickbats that seem to have more often come their way in recent years. In fact, Mike Yates almost overdoes the "special pleading" in his excellent 23-page Introduction, while indicating most of the criticisms of Sharp's and Karpeles' work with which we have become familiar – that, for example, they valued songs with British (and especially English) roots to the exclusion of "home-grown" music in the areas in which they traveled, that they paid too little attention to the lives and characters of their informants and, more specifically in the Appalachian context, that they imposed their own, partly imaginary, concept of a transplanted English yeomanry onto the Appalachian mountain people without valuing or even, sometimes, noticing the other possible influences on Appalachian song-texts and tunes of black African or European sources.

Without embarking on a long polemic, it is fair to say that some of the criticism leveled over the years at Sharp has been found to be factually erroneous – the admirable and innovative work of independent scholar Chris Bearman in establishing the true origins of some of Sharp's English informants comes to mind – while some, though factually accurate, can be seen as relating to actions and attitudes which were legitimate in the context in which Sharp and Karpeles lived and worked, even if frowned upon by present-day fashions in scholarship. It has always seemed to me ungracious to criticize any collector for focusing on a certain genre or type of material to the exclusion of all else; in the case in point it is quite possible that if Sharp and Karpeles had tried to collect indiscriminately everything their informants offered, the task,

difficult as it already was, might have proved insuperable, and they might have given up, leaving us without even what we have. At the very least they could with reason be commended on tactical grounds for making their task more manageable by restricting the items collected to song-texts and tunes which they considered were rooted in English tradition. Why, I wonder, should people be criticized simply for making choices? As for their attitude towards their informants, this book will go a long way towards setting that record straight.

While adopting the contemporary practice of placing informants first – the main portion of the book is headed “The Singers and their Songs” (although I doubt we would be as interested in the singers if they had not produced songs) – Mike Yates and his collaborators make excellent use throughout the book of Sharp’s and Karpeles’ diaries, field notes and photographs, revealing beyond further doubt the bonds of affection and interest that developed between the collectors and their informants, persisting in some cases over the years, so that when Maud Karpeles went back in 1950, long after Sharp’s death, to visit some of the same areas, more than one former singer still had fond recollections of the 1916-18 visits. As Mike Yates concludes: “Instead of finding fault with [Sharp], why don’t we give praise instead?” (Introduction, p.25). We need not relinquish our critical abilities, but we need not be small-minded either, as some of Sharp’s critics have been. Sharp and Karpeles need to be understood within their historical context; then some at least of our disagreements with them can be viewed in a more balanced way. And, in the final analysis, they need to be given credit for having the guts and the vision to do what they did in recovering and publicizing forgotten songs.

Buyers/readers of *Dear Companion* will get much more than the 53 songs selected from Sharp’s much larger collection. As far as the selection itself goes, well, nobody can please everyone, and there are bound to be songs left out which some would have wished included and others included which some would have preferred left out. My own chief criticism is the deliberate omission of any of Mrs. Jane Gentry’s songs, on the pretext that these are currently available elsewhere – we are directed to Betty N. Smith’s *Jane Hicks Gentry: A Singer among Singers* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1998), but, good though this may be, I can’t help thinking its existence a lame excuse for excluding one of Sharp’s and Karpeles’ finest singers and her songs from this compilation. Otherwise, we have a well-balanced selection of narrative and lyrical songs, with love songs of one kind or another predominating, and

one or two hymns and play-party songs thrown in for good measure. Every song comes complete with melody line, photograph (usually one of Sharp’s) and name of the informant, and a brief description of the circumstances under which the song was collected, often incorporating excerpts from Sharp’s and/or Karpeles’ diaries. Both Sharp and Karpeles had a vivid descriptive style, and the book does a great job of placing these encounters in context and bringing the singers of the songs and their surroundings back to life on the page. Manuscript references from the Vaughan Williams Memorial Library are scrupulously acknowledged, making this an excellent resource book for those who can make the journey to that institution with ease, but it is perhaps a little disingenuous of Malcolm Taylor to assume all readers of the book will be able to do this, much as they might like to; from Scotland and the north of England to London is still a fair stretch, let alone visiting from, say, North America!

A great deal of scholarship lies lovingly, but not heavily, on this book. In addition to the songs there is a short ‘Preface’ by English folk singer Shirley Collins describing her discovery and purchase, in the mid-1950s, of Sharp’s *English Folksongs from the Southern Appalachians* – for 63 shillings, then worth about two weeks’ wages, but “the best money I ever spent”. This, of course, contained many more songs than *Dear Companion*, and it is true too that Shirley Collins went back to her own roots in the Sussex countryside and concentrated more on the songs of southern England in the early LPs that I, among others, bought to add to my collection alongside Anne Briggs, Martin Carthy, Pentangle and early Fairport Convention. Shirley’s Preface whets the appetite for Mike Yates’ extended Introduction telling the story of Sharp’s and Karpeles’ Appalachian trips with copious quotation from their diaries, a balanced, not uncritical, appraisal of their theories and methodology, and extensive footnotes expanding on the text and pinpointing references.

The Introduction is followed by David Atkinson’s admirably succinct two-page account of Maud Karpeles’ life (she died in 1976, in her 91st year, having spent much of her adult life after Sharp’s death in 1924 working for the International Folk Music Council. And, of course, she followed her introduction to folk song collecting in the Appalachians with Cecil Sharp with her own solo trips to Newfoundland in 1929 and 1930 in further search of examples of folk songs of British origin, a venture which eventually bore fruit in her 1971 publication of *Folk Songs from Newfoundland*. Université Laval in Quebec gave

Maud an honorary degree in 1961 and MUNFLA followed suit in 1970. But I digress).

Before reaching the songs themselves we still have four further information-packed pages. Mike Yates comments on the book's photographs, which are usually, but not exclusively, Sharp's own (he often sent former informants photographs he had taken on visits to their homes, another example of his thoughtfulness vis-à-vis those informants), and which are liberally sprinkled throughout the book. (Incidentally, the photographs of a man and a woman superimposed on the lush Appalachian mountainside pictured on the book's front cover feature Cecil Sharp, but not Maud Karpeles, but rather an informant that the book, rather oddly, fails to identify – unless I missed it somewhere, and the book's title, *Dear Companion*, refers to one of the songs collected, even although it would be hardly amiss to think of it also as referring to Sharp's and Karpeles' own relationship, which, despite – or perhaps because of – their disparity in age, involved a very real affection. David Atkinson reminds us that Sharp would often introduce Maud to North Americans as his adopted daughter, and although this may have been merely a useful way of quashing inquisitiveness it seems to me to reflect quite accurately the probable degree of closeness between the two. This said, the “dear companion” of the song does relate to a closer relationship than the father/daughter one!).

Mike Yates follows his ‘Note on the Photographs’ with one on the singers, pointing out that there are still descendants of these who occasionally turn up at the Vaughan Williams Memorial Library at Cecil Sharp House or contact the Library in connection with Sharp's Appalachian collecting trips. Elaine Bradtke provides an interesting Note on the tunes of the songs, indicating, amongst other things, the incidence of modal and gapped scales in black African music as well as in the Celtic and English sources favoured by Sharp, and suggesting, therefore, a wider provenance of songs exhibiting these characteristics, a more complex cross-fertilization than Sharp may have been aware of. Malcolm Taylor rounds off the introductory sections with Notes on the Song Texts and on the Sharp and Karpeles *fonds* in the Vaughan Williams Memorial Library. It is worth remembering that these manuscript sources include Maud Karpeles' 284-page draft autobiography, which has never been published and which provides Mike Yates with a number of the quotations in his introductory account of the 1916-18 trips.

It is Mike Yates, too, who provides the twelve pages of notes on the songs themselves, each entry giving a

wealth of information, although more could, of course, be said in almost all cases, but you have to draw a line somewhere. All songs are given their Roud Index and Vaughan Williams Memorial Library references. My only (minor) squabble with this section is that in the text songs are arranged in alphabetical order according to the last name of the singer – thus the first song is provided by Julie Boone, the second by Mollie Broughton, the third by Lucy Canady, etc., while in the Notes they are arranged alphabetically by their titles, i.e., “Awake! Awake!” is the first, “The Battle of Shiloh” the second, etc. This doesn't aid cross-referencing between the two parts. A select bibliography of Appalachian music and a select discography of Appalachian singers concludes this impressive introduction to Appalachian traditional songs and singers.

Finally, a few thoughts arising from Mike Yates' Notes on the Songs. I found one or two comments surprising; for example, his (unsubstantiated) assertion that the “foggy dew” referred to in the song of that name (not the Irish song about the 1st World War, but the apprentice-seducing-master's-daughter one) is really “bugaboo”, being from a northern English song where the apprentice seduces the girl with the help of a friend disguised as a ghost (bugaboo). Yates refers to the “original seventeenth-century form” of this song without telling us its source, and to my literal mind the interpretation he provides is sufficiently far-fetched for me to be interested in checking it out – it seems quite adequate to me to imagine the girl wanting to get into a warm bed out of the damp, foggy dew without dragging the supernatural into the equation! I'm willing to be enlightened, but in this case Mike didn't. “The Holly Twig”, a jolly wife-beating song, reminds me in text and tune of the Scottish-derived “Wee Cooper of Fife”, but Mike Yates doesn't mention this in his note on the song or refer to any possible Scottish variants.

In his note on the ballad “Lamkin” Yates mentions a paper presented by Sheila Douglas at the 2002 International Ballad Conference (“Blood Everywhere: The Ballad of Lamkin”). I would add to this by drawing attention to another very intriguing and powerful interpretation of this ballad in a paper authored by Jon Bartlett and Rika Ruebsaat and presented, as it happens, at the 2003 International Ballad Conference held in Austin, Texas. Readers wishing to familiarize themselves with it are referred to “Lamkin: A Ballad Reinterpreted”, in *Canadian Folk Music*, 36.3 (Fall 2002), p.13.

I was surprised to find “Little Musgrave and Lady Barnard” referred to as “almost extinct within British

oral tradition” given its popularity amongst English revival singers, at least during the 1960s and early 1970s, when you could scarcely visit a folk club without hearing a rendition of it in one of its British or North American variants. 1969 was the year I left England for Canada, and I note that Joan Baez included a “Matty Groves” on her LP *Joan Baez in Concert*, issued by Vanguard VSD-2122 in the early 1960s, when I was still an undergraduate at Keele University in the English Midlands. It was around the same time that I came across the singing of Hedy West, the young American revival singer from North Georgia described by A.L. Lloyd as “by far the best of” the women singers of the American folk song revival. Hedy West’s Topic Records LP *Old Times and Hard Times: Ballads and Songs from the Appalachians* ends with a lovely version of “The Wife of Usher’s Well”, one of the songs included in *Dear Companion*, and it would have been nice to see Hedy recognised among the recordings featuring this ballad noted by Mike Yates in his Notes on the songs or in the Discography.

This book contains a wealth of information and entertainment without ever being dry or pedantic. You can learn new things about the songs, travel with Cecil Sharp and Maud Karpeles to meet their informants in the wild Appalachian woods and mountains, check out some of the scholarly literature and recordings and read/listen to/learn the songs themselves. As Elaine Bradtke quotes Martin Carthy as saying: “The only way to kill a folk song is to not sing it”. Whatever theoretical or methodological disagreements we may continue to have with the way Sharp and Karpeles approached the collection of folk songs, the bottom line for me is that they did this with enthusiasm and a love of the songs they found. So they loved some more than others, and some they didn’t love much at all and left to be collected by other people, but insofar as they collected what they did and saw to its publication we are all the richer for their efforts. Let’s hope the compilers of *Dear Companion*, who demonstrate a similar passion and love for the songs, will see fit to bring out a second volume with another 53 of them – and another volume – and another.

Rosaleen Gregory, Athabasca, Alberta

Denis Donnelly (compiler/editor). *Ramblin’ Woman: The Songs and Tunes of Becky Bernson*. Denis Donnelly, 4007 Bow Rd., Victoria, B.C. V8N 3B2; <denis@denisdonnelly.ca>; <www.denisdonnelly.ca>

Various. *Ramblin’ Woman: The Songs and Tunes of Becky Bernson, performed by members of the Victoria Folk Music Community*. Burren Music BMCD01. Denis Donnelly (addresses above)

When Becky Bernson, musician, environmentalist and lover of the outdoors, died in February 2000, she left behind a legacy of songs and tunes that charted her life’s path. Her music includes odes to rivers, pleas for environmental protection and celebrations of the people and places who shaped her world. After her death, Denis Donnelly, her husband and partner in the thriving Victoria folk music scene, decided to honour Becky’s memory by publishing this collection so that her musical contributions would not be lost.

Arranged roughly in chronological order, the songs are clearly notated, and include lyrics and notes from the editor to explain each one’s background or significant details. For instance, “Munchkie’s Rag” is dedicated to a much-loved pet who accompanied Becky on her first hitch-hiked journey from her home in Utah to the West Coast. The song “Ramblin’ Woman” was written to fill the need for a “hiking shanty”. The notes are useful and enlightening, and anyone learning to perform this music will find them helpful in understanding the germ of each piece.

Becky Bernson had a gift for melody and an equally strong ear for a good lyric, and she was fond of throwing a musical surprise into her melodies. She was also able to create great opportunities for singing along. On March 4, 2001, a concert of Becky’s music was performed in Victoria by members of the Victoria Folk Music Society. The resulting CD, *Ramblin’ Woman*, is a live recording of most of the songs and tunes included in the book. The concert recording and this book will, Denis Donnelly hopes, ensure that “these songs and tunes will live on as Becky’s most enduring gift to the world”. These are songs and tunes worth learning and performing.

Jean Mills, Guelph, Ontario

Gavin James Campbell, *Music and the Making of a New South*. Chappell Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2004.

The term “New South” is somewhat ambiguous, but historians often employ it to refer to the southern USA during the post-bellum era – a time of economic reconstruction and of the replacement of slavery with a modified social structure based on racial segregation (the notorious ‘Jim Crow’). The 1880s and 1890s are a particularly interesting period in the history of American popular music, a time that witnessed,

among other things, the gestation of ragtime and blues. So when I picked up *Music and the Making of the New South* I was expecting to find the latest research on the evolution of black folk music into blues and perhaps a new slant on the genesis of ragtime. Maybe, too, there might be information on the provenance of Anglo-Celtic folksong – traditional ballads, broadside ballads and shorter lyrics – throughout the South. My hopes were soon dashed. The book's title is misleading. For one thing, the time period under review is the early twentieth century. For another, it deals only with the city of Atlanta, Georgia. It is essentially a re-worked doctoral dissertation on certain music festivals held in Atlanta between 1909 and 1914. Three recurrent events are discussed: Atlanta opera week (which featured an annual visit from the New York Metropolitan Opera Company), the Colored Music Festival (begun in 1910), and the Georgia Old-Time Fiddlers' Convention, a fiddling contest that was first held in 1913.

Campbell tells us very little about the music played in these festivals, or about the people that played it. I was curious to know which operas were produced in Atlanta, who sang in them, and why they were chosen. A striking photograph reveals that Verdi's *Otello*, with Leo Slezak in the title role, was one of them, but the text of the book has virtually nothing to say about the Met's repertoire or the actual performances staged in the Atlanta Auditorium-Armory. What we do learn is that opera was championed primarily by the local women's music club, and indeed that classical music in Atlanta was largely a preserve of the female gender. The Atlanta business elite (white males only, of course) apparently regarded art music as effeminate, and went to the opera only because their wives demanded that they use the occasion as an opportunity to display their wealth and social status.

The rival Colored Music Festival was broader in musical content, although heavily oriented to art music (solo violinists and pianists playing the standard European classical repertoire were the most frequent performers). Spirituals were permitted (although not all members of the organizing committee approved), provided they were dressed up in choral arrangements, but folksongs and blues were nowhere to be seen. Campbell's take is that the underlying aim of the festival was an attempt by the black middle class of Atlanta to show that they were educated, cultured, prosperous and politically moderate – neither deserving of racist discrimination nor posing a threat to the white power elite. Some whites attended and were duly impressed by the quality of black music-making, but as a political statement the festival was singularly ineffective. Segregation continued as before.

Campbell argues that, notwithstanding the docility of most blacks, the Atlanta power elite felt threatened by the size of the black minority in the city and the state. It also allegedly felt threatened by the mild feminism of a handful of Atlanta ladies, often those uppity devotees of classical music. Fortunately – or so the male elite believed – ideological support could be found for segregationism and for the traditional family in the rural lifestyle of the Appalachian “mountaineers” who once a year turned up to compete for prizes at the Atlanta Old-Time Fiddling Convention. Racial purity and family values were implicitly celebrated in the jigs, reels and lyrics of “hillbilly” music, even if the speech and manners of some of the performers were a little rough. In Southern Appalachia, it appeared, wives knew their place in kitchen, bedroom and nursery. Moreover, there was no danger of miscegenation – and therefore no need for salutary lynchings – because there were few blacks to allegedly pose a danger to one's daughter's virtue. This being the case, the wealthy male members of Atlanta 'society' were happy to indulge in a little slumming and to patronize the fiddle convention. Well, at least the music was lively and enjoyable, and the songs were in English. It is less evident, though, that the white elite's participation was an effective “means of enforcing white supremacy” (p. 135) or even intended to be so.

I see no reason to doubt Campbell's basic claim that sexual politics and racism were bound up with music-making in Atlanta during the decade before World War I. On the other hand, he sometimes seems to go beyond what the evidence warrants. For example, I found his suggestion that Cecil Sharp was a racist in ideological cahoots with the Atlanta business elite to be rather far-fetched. It is always worrying when one comes upon a strange misinterpretation of a topic one knows well. It does make one wonder about the reliability of the rest of the work. Nonetheless, the book is worth reading, despite its comparatively narrow compass. Campbell gives us some interesting social history, written from a Cultural Studies perspective. What I missed was much in the way of *music* history. Surprisingly, *Music and the Making of the New South* contributes little to our knowledge of the development of American opera, of Afro-American art music, of the tradition of spiritual singing, or of early “hillbilly” music. Worse still, a great opportunity was lost. Atlanta in the 1900s was one of the birthplaces of the blues. You wouldn't know it from this book.

David Gregory, Athabasca, Alberta