

In Memoriam: John Hasted, 1921-2002

John Barrett Hasted, physicist and folk musician, was born Woodbridge, Suffolk, on the 17th February, 1921, the son of John (Jock) Hasted and Phyllis Barrett. He was educated at Winchester College, where he won the science prize for a method of measuring velocity and distance by means of reflected sound waves, a principle later used in radar and sonar. A scholarship financed his undergraduate studies in chemistry at New College, Oxford, where he also won a choral scholarship. While singing in the New College Choir Hasted came to know and love the music of Vaughan Williams and other composers drawing inspiration from English folksong, including Alan Bush, whom he met in 1940. Bush was Hasted's first musical mentor. He soon joined Bush's Workers Music Association, and then founded his own Oxford Workers' and Students' Choir to perform spirituals, labour movement anthems, and other material with political and social content.

Hasted's studies and musical activities were interrupted by World War II. He joined the British army in 1941, and was soon recruited by C.P. Snow to join a team of "radio officers" working on the development of radar at Richmond Park. He next helped develop portable radar sets at the Malvern research station, at which time he met Winston Churchill's scientific adviser, Professor Frederick Lindemann (later Lord Cherwell). In 1942 Hasted was transferred to North Africa as a wireless maintenance officer, and was responsible for installing radar in Malta and in Alexandria (Egypt). He later took part in the Italian campaign, serving in the same regiment as Dr. Donald Hughes, a musician-educator who would also play a part in the post-war folksong revival.

Hasted voted Labour in the general election of 1945, which saw the coming to power of the first Labour government with an overall

majority. He returned to Oxford as a doctoral student in Lindemann's Clarendon Laboratory, where he worked on microwave physics.

The next year marked a significant milestone in Hasted's musical life. Hearing an Almanac Singers' disc that a friend had picked up in New York, he recognised instantly the kind of music that he wanted to sing and play. As he wrote in his autobiography, *Alternative Memoirs*,

The Almanac Singers were the outcome of a whole tradition, entirely different from our own: group singing, to the accompaniment of two guitars and a five string banjo. It was just as the Carter Family had done it.... Bob Hinds, a merchant seaman, had brought the Almanacs 78rpm record "Talking Union" for me to hear in 1946. I at once wanted to make music like this.¹

He had little opportunity to do so in Oxford, however, and it was only after finishing his doctorate and moving to London that he found like-minded enthusiasts for the attempt to combine folk music and left-wing politics.

1948 was the year that John Hasted first began to play a significant role in the post-war English folksong revival. It was also a time of change in his personal life. He married his first wife, Elizabeth Gregson, with whom he set up house in Notting Hill Gate and had two daughters. He obtained a job in the Physics Department of University College, London, doing research on ions and on atomic collisions with Sir Harrie Massey and thereby playing his part in the establishment of UCL as a major centre for atomic physics. In his spare time he joined Alan Bush's choir, the Workers' Music Association Singers, and then formed his own Topic Singers. This led to a joint project with the Labour

¹ Hasted, John. *Alternative Memoirs*, pp. 121 & 123. Shipton Green, Sussex: Greengates Press, 1992.

Movement Theatre Group on a political musical review performed at the Unity Theatre.

During the late 1940s Hasted frequented the Leicester Square Jazz Club to hear such pioneers of the English traditional jazz revival as George Webb, Graeme Bell, and the Christie Brothers Stompers. More important still was a meeting with Bert Lloyd, and the start of a lifelong friendship that endured despite some later differences of opinion on the path that the revival should follow. Together the two men planned to form an Almanac-type folk group. Hasted later recalled the incident in these terms:

It was years before I could even get hold of a folk guitar, let alone find other people with similar aspirations. Eventually I found folklorist Bert Lloyd, and asked him if he wanted to start an Almanac group in England. To my astonishment his voice dropped about an octave, and he said very quietly "Passionately".²

Hasted searched London for a suitable guitar, and eventually found an old Martin. He then wrote to Peoples Songs for mimeographed instructional materials compiled by Pete Seeger, and, following the instructions, taught himself to play guitar. He subsequently added five-string banjo to his arsenal.

By 1949, disillusioned with what he considered the moderate nature of the Attlee government's reform program, Hasted had joined the Communist Party. That year he visited Yugoslavia, where he led a brigade of British youth who had volunteered to help reconstruct roads and railways devastated in the war. He learned a number of Serbo-Croat folksongs that he incorporated in his repertoire, including an ode to Tito which went "Druje Tito, oy, Druji Tito / Lyublici byela" ("Comrade Tito, oy, comrade Tito, / Our little white violet"). To this Hasted's Trecu Engleska Brigada responded,

"Harry Pollitt, oi, Harry Pollitt, / Our little red geranium", or, more frivolously, "Mary Gibson, oi, Mary Gibson, / Burnt the stew last Tuesday".

The folk group with Bert Lloyd seems to have come to fruition in the early '50s. It was called The Ramblers and performed at trade union functions and demonstrations, but apparently never made any recordings. In *Alternative Memoirs* Hasted recalled it as follows:

Bert Lloyd and I formed The Ramblers, consisting of Bert himself, guitarist Neste Revald, myself, and Jean Butler, an American girl who had plenty of experience singing with five-string banjo for American Unions, and had often performed with the Almanacs. The name for the group came directly from Woody's song which Jean sang for us.... The Ramblers lasted only a couple of years as a group, but the sound we made was solid, since Bert had a high-up voice and I was bass-baritone. Jean's voice and banjo were authentic Almanac. But we never possessed or sang into a tape-recorder or even a wire-recorder. Only the BBC had those, and we were not exactly their territory, not even in the archive library.... We sang both American and British material, and we often wrote new words.... One day Jean sang for us the entire *Tom Joad* ballad of Woody Guthrie, possibly one of the finest ballads to have come from the New World. This was its first performance outside the USA. It is sung to the tune of *John Hardy*.... Searching through the original Negro Spiritual Songbooks of the Jubilee Singers, who performed all over Europe to finance Fisk University, the first for Negroes, I had found several songs I'd never heard in England. Our London Youth Choir put them into service straight away. "We shall not be moved", "Down by the Riverside (Ain't Goin' Study War no More)", and the one I knew as a Trad Jazz tune, "When the Saints go Marching in". Our performances may well have been the channel through

² *Ibid*, p. 121.

which these songs passed into the European Folk Tradition.³

Hasted formed the London Youth Choir, which he conducted throughout the fifties, in 1951, and immediately took it to the Berlin Youth Festival. Around this time, too, he wrote his first political folksong, "Go Home Yankee". Later agit-prop songs by Hasted included "Talking Rearmament", "When Asia Came to Geneva", "Conscripts Forward!" and "Ballad of the Daily Worker".

A regular participant in Workers Music Association summer schools, usually held at Wortley Hall, near Sheffield, Hasted was now forming friendships with other left-wing folksingers, including Fred Dallas and Eric Winter, whom he first met in 1953. The Hasted/Winter collaboration would result in the first English folksong magazine to be published as a deliberate rival to *English Dance and Song*, the official bulletin of the rather conservative English Folk Dance & Song Society. Deliberately modelled on *Sing Out*, this was titled *Sing* and the first issue appeared in May-June 1954. Hasted was the music editor. He wrote a column about the London folk scene, contributed songs that he had written, and scoured the bushes for new songs from other political folkies. He also reviewed publications by other stalwarts of the folksong revival, such as Ewan MacColl's small book of industrial songs, *The Shuttle and the Cage*.

1954 was also the year when what was probably the first English folk club opened its doors. Called The Good Earth, it was located in the heart of London at 44 Gerrard St., and Hasted was soon to be found there, singing and playing banjo and guitar. His continuing enthusiasm for traditional jazz also kept him in touch with the activities of the Ken Colyer Jazz Band, which had now begun to feature a skiffle group in its club dates. An offshoot of the Colyer group, the Chris Barber Band, did the same, with Tony Donegan on banjo. Hasted loved the mix of Leadbelly and

Woody Guthrie songs they performed, and was soon leading his own John Hasted Skiffle & Folksong Group, the personnel of which included Redd Sullivan, Martin Windsor, Shirley Collins, Marion Amiss, John Cole, Judith Goldbloom, Chaim Morris, and others. By 1955 they had a regular gig at another London folk club, the Forty-Four Club in Soho. These are some excerpts from Hasted's reflections on this seminal folk group and its repertoire:

We had three years of real excitement and inspiration with Skiffle music. And when in due course the craze was superseded, the washboards returned to the cupboard under the sink and the tea-chests to the dump, those of us who had started it at least felt the satisfaction of having changed the face of British popular music, with a public revival of harmony, rhythm, counterpoint, and a celebration of laughter, love, drama, fame and money.... When I heard Colyer playing in Greek Street I decided to reorganise my group as a 'Skiffle and Folksong Group', with Redd Sullivan taking most of the leads. Redd was acclaimed as one of the best singers of blues and worksongs in Britain at that time. My London Youth Choir member Hylda Sims had just formed another group, with Russell Quayle, which they called the City Ramblers. The two groups each had their club, in cellars in Soho. We offered regular club nights, with about three hours of singing and some dancing. Very soon the American songs were supplemented by British folksongs sung in the skiffle style. When the well-known 'Wraggle-Taggle Gypsies' became a hit, Martin Windsor of my group wrote words that were appropriate to Soho life, the 'Wraggle-Taggle Cool Cats'. Our bass-player Chaim Morris came up with topical songs such as 'The Piccadilly Line' and 'Long John at the Forty-Four'. We became the 'Forty-Four Club'.... How strange skiffle must have sounded to American ears, with all the differences of expression, accent,

³ *Ibid*, pp. 124-127.

musical habit, even melody, that the young British imposed. Working with me were two strongly contrasted singers, Redd Sullivan, who would have wanted nothing more than to have travelled with Leadbelly; and Shirley Collins, the girl with the pure Sussex bell-like voice. How could these two ever sing together? I can only indicate how each would react to the same material. Consider 'The Gallows Pole'.... When Leadbelly, or indeed, Redd Sullivan sang the song, the choice of life or death would depend on the mood of the singer. But when Shirley sang the song it would be an English ballad in the form "O the Prickle-i-bush That pricks my heart full sore, If I ever get out of the prickle-i-bush I'll never get in it no more." The symbolism would assume such importance that the audience never unravelled the mystery of who killed who, or why.... I had splendid individual singers, but how did they ever combine together in a group? Only the simplest of harmonies, no barber's shop training, or the individuality would be lost. After all, there was no prospect of a professional career for a skiffle group when we started out. So individuality was maintained.⁴

Hasted was not only a pioneer of English skiffle, he was one of its most vocal advocates in his irregular "A Singer's Notebook" column in *Sing*. He applauded skiffle as a do-it-yourself music that appealed to city youth, a modern and urban form of folk music that could give traditional vernacular song a new lease of life and yet also serve the labour movement. The pages of *Sing* reflected this radical vision of the folksong revival that Hasted shared with Eric Winter: they were filled with political songs and practical advice on how to play guitar or construct a washtub bass, yet they also included traditional material, often contributed by Bert Lloyd. Hasted's own repertoire included some traditional songs, and since 1948 he had

occasionally collected in the field. "Byker Hill", "The Methody Parson" and "The Young Sailor Cut Down in His Prime" are just three of the vernacular songs we owe to his efforts to recover the workers' music of past centuries. This is part of what Hasted had to say in *Alternative Memoirs* about song-collecting in the fifties:

SING magazine afforded us the opportunity to print songs that we had collected "in the field" – that is, folksong material from singers in the countryside or the industrial North. Collecting with magnetic tape recorders was only just beginning, the first machines were expensive and heavy, and there was not always electrical power in country cottages.... At first I collected songs by the old method of copying the words and music out on a notepad whilst the singer was singing them. Singers had been more patient with "dictation" to Cecil Sharp than we found them to be fifty years later. I soon devised a shorthand of my own, but even so I couldn't easily keep up with the singers. One session up in Eskdale became inextricably entangled with the annual docking of lambs' tails. "I can dock they tails quicker tha what 'ee can larn they songs" and blood spilt all over the notebook.⁵

Hasted and the other members of his group wrestled with the question of how much emphasis they should put on singing British material. Some favoured concentrating on English songs and performing them in local dialect and traditional style. Others wanted no more than to sing the blues, with only unconscious concessions to the English idiom. Hasted straddled these extremes. He loved the music of Leadbelly and Woody Guthrie but he loved the modal melodies of traditional ballads and the heritage of industrial song. His solution was a cheerful eclecticism.

⁴ *Ibid*, pp. 130-133.

⁵ *Ibid*, p. 128.

Not that Hasted had given up on political song and the London Youth Choir. In 1955 he took the choir to the Warsaw International Youth Festival, and it was not long before it too was featuring a skiffle group as part of its performances. 1956 was the year of the Suez Crisis, and while participating in a demonstration in Whitehall against the Eden government's policies Hasted had his trusty Martin broken by an over zealous policeman. His response was to build his own twelve-string – unobtainable in Britain at the time – from the remnants and another old six-string.

With the chart success of “Rock Island Line” skiffle was now a force in English pop music, and Hasted again championed it as an attempt to “rebuild a living, urban people’s music, and an audience for it”. The next year he took the London Youth Choir to Moscow for another international youth festival and achieved instant notoriety when the *Daily Express* printed a photograph of Nikita Khrushchev shaking hands with the group’s washboard player in Red Square. Surprisingly, given his openness about his political allegiance, Hasted — by this time a respected academic expert on atomic physics — was able to obtain a visa to attend a scientific conference in the USA in 1958. While in New York he met Millard Lampell of the Weavers and folk-guitarist Jerry Silverman, and visited Woody Guthrie in hospital in New Jersey.

Back in England, Hasted put a lot of time and energy into youth music education, working with Donald Hughes and Pat Shuldham-Shaw. This was the time that Rosaleen (Donald’s daughter) remembers him participating in weekend workshops at Battle of Britain House, near Ruislip, and singing his favourite song at the time, “Strange Fruit”. In the late ’50s, too, he was caught up in the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, marching for four days on the road between the atomic weapons research facility at Aldermaston and Trafalgar Square, where the London Youth Choir performed to hundreds of thousands of demonstrators. When the British peace movement split over strategy,

Hasted sided with Bertrand Russell and the Committee of 100’s willingness to use Ghandian methods of civil disobedience. His own special contribution to the struggle was to house and operate the illegal pirate radio station, *Voice of Nuclear Disarmament*, an activity that could easily have cost him his job at UCL.

Perhaps because of his evident courage and sincerity, certainly because of his incredible energy and enthusiasm and his engaging modesty about his own abilities, Hasted won a large following among left-wing youth, skifflers, and young folksingers. Widely regarded as the best five-string banjo player in Britain (at least before Peggy Seeger arrived on the London scene), he won poll after poll for his prowess on the instrument. Although he had a good voice, he was averse to being recorded as a singer because he felt that his ‘educated’ public-school accent was inappropriate to the folksongs he loved, but he can be heard as an accompanist, for example on early Shirley Collins recordings. In retrospect he sounds a competent but not outstanding instrumentalist.

So it was not as a singer or even as a guitar and banjo player that Hasted most deserves to be remembered but as a pioneer, leader and catalyst. His influence on the younger generation of English folksingers was huge. He had many protégés, most of whom at one time or another were members of either the London Youth Choir or his skiffle group. They included Hylda Sims, Leon Rosselson, and both Dorothy and Shirley Collins.

How Hasted found the time to combine what amounted to full-time participation in folk music, skiffle and left-wing politics with his job as an atomic physicist remains a mystery. His frenzied involvement with both “the Party” and “the movement” clearly took a toll on his family life, and his first marriage was a casualty. In 1959 he remarried. His second wife, ballet dancer Lynn Wynn-Harris, persuaded him that it was time for him to salvage his academic career. In the early sixties Hasted quit his role as one of the

mainstays of *Sing* and also cut back on his active life as a musician. As a result his part in the sixties folk boom was minor. On the other hand, in 1964 he published a major scientific work, *The Physics of Atomic Collisions*, and four years later was rewarded with the position of Professor of Experimental Physics and head of the physics department at Birkbeck College. In addition to papers in scientific journals, Hasted published two other important scientific books, *Aqueous Dielectrics* (1973) and *The Metal-Benders* (1981).

After leaving the academic life in 1984 Hasted retired to St. Ives in Cornwall, where he compiled his reminiscences of the glory days of the skiffle era in *Alternative Memoirs* (1992). Looking back, he remembered the fifties as the best years of his life. As he put it, "I always had happy groups and happy choirs, a stimulating nightlife, and more laughter and tears than in the rest of my life."⁶ He passed away on the 4th May 2002, at Penzance, Cornwall. His work as a pioneer of radar and as an atomic physicist has a place in the history of modern science, but he will also be remembered as a pioneer and mainstay of the post-war English folk music revival, a founder and champion of the skiffle movement, and a passionate advocate for both traditional and political folksong.

David Gregory

Hasted on the Modes

Academic studies of folk music have not always been helpful. I taught the subject at a Technical College and had to decide what, if anything, I should say about modes. Before European harmonic theory developed, melody had developed into the seven-note scale, that is, the white notes of the piano. But it would be arranged in seven different ways, with every note able to be the keynote, or final note of the melody. Each one of these modes was named after a Hellenic state.... I could never remember which mode was which, so I made up a rhyme:

*Remember, remember,
I'll never remember
The name of a Hellenic Mode.
So I picture each one
As a nymph with a guitar
And I dedicate each in an Ode.
Ionia, Ionia,
I'll never disown yer
No matter if you sleep around.
Doria, Doria,
The warrior's euphoria,
You're loving me into the ground.
Phrygia, O Phrygia,
No, she'll never kidjer,
She's never in amorous mood.
Lydia, O Lydia,
The Encyclopydia,
With Marx on her back all tattooed.
Aeolia, Aeolia,
You're holier, much holier
Than Saints that go marching in.
Locria, O Locria,
You're so mediocria,
You'll die of surprise if you win.
Now Moses supposes
That Mixomytosis
Is just Mixolydian Sonheim,
So I shout 'Hypoborean'
In tones so stentorian
I've got every Mode in this rhyme.*

⁶ *Ibid*, p. 130.