

Singers' Workshop

This time I want to share with you a song that I originally found in *The Ballad Book of John Jacob Niles* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1961). Niles' version (which is in B-flat) starts on F above middle C, which makes the top part of the tune too high for me, so I have transposed it to a lower key. On transcribing what I actually sing and then comparing it with Niles' version, I find that I have modified the tune just a little, and that I have also altered slightly some of the words ("with" instead of "his" in line 2 of the second verse, "nobody" instead of "no man" in line 3 of the third verse, "lie awake" instead of "will wake" in line 3 of the fourth verse).

Lovers' Farewell

Anon

My lover did come ere evensong... And he
gave me a farewell, But the wars that took him to the
Low Country, He never a word did tell, But the
wars that took him to the Low Country, He never a word did
tell.

My lover did come ere evensong
And he give me a farewell,
But the wars that took him to the Low Country
He never a word did tell. (repeat last 2 lines of each verse)

Oh, he did go to the bloody wars,
With lance and shield a-glisten,
While his lady did weep in her bowing-room,
And none was there to listen.

Down fell he there, and there to die,
In the wet of the Low Country,
And nobody knows that he lies there
But his horse and his hound and his lady Mary.

Oh, he may sleep in an open grave,
Where raven fly and flutter,
But I lie awake on my pallet of grief,
And many a cry will utter.

Niles calls the song “a traditionary form of ‘The Three Ravens’” and he collected it from a quiet, dignified schoolteacher, Miss Alice Wetmore, who was visiting friends or relatives in the Line Fork community of Kingdom Come Valley, Kentucky, and had stopped in at the home of Aunt Beth Holcolm in Whitesburg on her way. Aunt Beth, much the more garrulous of the two ladies, was trying to persuade Miss Wetmore to spend the night with her, the roads into Kingdom Come being “middlin’ poor” after a torrential Appalachian downpour – which she went on to describe as “a pure trash-mover. Hit was even a gully-washer and a toad-floater”. Aunt Beth and Miss Wetmore both sang for Niles, but the “singing bee” he proposed for later never took place and he left without discovering where or how Miss Wetmore had learned the song she called “Lovers’ Farewell”.

After reading Niles’ account my own imagination began to run riot. As I see it, Miss Wetmore may have composed this song herself, weaving it around her own (secret) love affair with a young man who suddenly left to fight in World War I in the damp, muddy trenches of Belgium and France, an area unfamiliar enough to an Appalachian schoolteacher for her to describe it, vaguely, as “the Low Country”. After he left, she did what women are accustomed to doing in wartime – she waited. But he did not return. In composing this song she drew on her own oral knowledge of “The Three Ravens”, romanticizing her lost love by transforming him into a medieval knight with lance and shield, and concealing her own identity as his “lady Mary”. For me, the gentle, almost impersonal tone of the song suddenly changes in the final verse to the naked grief of the first person singular in the last two lines – “I lie awake on my pallet of grief...”

All speculation, of course – but although I am reasonably familiar with the classic variants of “the Three Ravens” and the “Twa Corbies” I have never previously come across this variant or anything resembling it. Niles says (it) “is in fact the corrupted remains of an original ballad”, but this doesn’t seem good enough: the words “evensong”, “a-glisten” and even “pallet” all seem to me to suggest a modern “re-working” rather than earlier “remains”. Anyway, however this song came into being, it has a beautiful tune and poignant lyrics, and I think it should be more widely known and sung. So the puzzle for this

issue of Singers’ Workshop is: can anyone out there throw any further light on “Lovers’ Farewell”, or are my fanciful ruminations to be the last word?

Rosaleen Gregory

Treasures from Our Archives

Fifteen Years Ago

Bulletin 22.2-4 was published in December 1988; a description will appear next issue.

Ten Years Ago

Bulletin 27.3 (September 1993). This was the last (we hope!) of the “newsletter-style” issues. It featured Robert Rodriguez’s article “The Devil at the Dance” (with French version by André Gareau), and a directory of Yukon folk contacts. For the Ethnofolk Letters column, we treated the world to Judith Cohen’s actual handwriting; radio column Over the Waves and magazine column The Centrefold both showed up as well. Just one review, of CD *Six Mile Bridge*, by the group of that name. Songs “The King William’s Town Brides” by Jim Dauncey and “Oran Bhancùbhar (Song of Vancouver)” and some “housekeeping” features completed the issue.

Five Years Ago

Bulletin 32.3 (September 1998). This issue had a radio focus; it included David Gregory’s memoir about the CKUA radio series *Ragtime to Rolling Stones*, and a triple-headed editorial on the CBC’s attitude to folk music, with George Linsey, David Spalding and George Lyon expressing views. In non-radio-related matters, two reminiscences of the late Joe Adams were accompanied by his song (with Rona Altrows) “The Last of the Wild Ones”; three blues songs by Canadian women, “Women’s Liberation Blues” (Vera Johnson), “November Blues” (Penny Lang) and “Two and Twenty Blues” (Linda Morrison) followed up the Canadian blues theme of two issues earlier. An Ethnofolk Letters column, and lots of news, reviews, letters and regular compilations, rounded things off.

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