

# Fakesong in an Imagined Village? A Critique of the Harker-Boyes Thesis

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Analysis of the history and the results of vernacular song-collecting in the United Kingdom during the Victorian era and the Edwardian revival has long been dominated by two books, Dave Harker's *Fakesong: The Manufacture of British 'Folksong,' 1700 to the Present Day*,<sup>1</sup> and Georgina Boyes' *The Imagined Village: Culture, Ideology and the English Folk Revival*.<sup>2</sup> In both tone and substance, these works are highly critical of the methods, opinions and accomplishments of the middle-class male folksong collectors that they study. Together, they put forward a neo-Marxist (Harker) and post-modernist Cultural Studies (Boyes) interpretation of the English folksong revival that essentially writes it off as a Romantic ideological construct and as a bourgeois expropriation of working-class culture. It is now twenty-five years since Harker's book was published and seventeen since Boyes' first appeared, so a fundamental reassessment of their work is overdue. The reissue of *The Imagined Village*—with essentially the same text and thesis, although with some good new photographs—seems a good opportunity to re-evaluate not the details of these books, which are often illuminating and valuable, but their central arguments and the way their subject-matter—the work of the late Victorian and Edwardian song-collectors—has been conceptualized.

## The Harker-Boyes Thesis

Although there are some minor differences of perspective and focus between *Fakesong* and *The Imagined Village*, Boyes and Harker are in fundamental agreement. They are both highly critical of Victorian and Edwardian collectors and scholars, and they both dismiss the fruits of the English folksong revival as an invented tradition, constructed mainly by middle-class males in pursuit of their own reactionary political interests.

Harker argues that the very notion of ballads and folksongs is outdated "conceptual lumber" and that anyone who persists in employing these terms is doomed to produce nothing more than "intellectual rubble." He writes off all folksongs as "fakesongs".<sup>3</sup> In his view all collectors from Thomas D'Urfey in the early eighteenth century to Bert Lloyd in the mid-twentieth century were "bourgeois mediators" who

expropriated the workers' intellectual property. He claims that, taken as a whole, the texts and tunes of songs they ostensibly recovered from ephemeral broadsheets and from oral tradition systematically distort the reality of working-class musical tradition. Even when these "mediators" did not fake individual texts, they collectively constructed a mythical entity called "the folk" and invented a bogus popular culture.

Boyes provides a more detailed examination of the folksong revival in the light of Harker's general perspective. She argues that "the Folk" (she prefers to use a capital letter to emphasize her distaste for the term) were a mythical creation of the academic discipline called "Folk-lore", and that the late Victorian and Edwardian collectors inherited this misconception. They sought and found only old songs reflecting a past that was dead and gone. In consequence they misunderstood and misrepresented the varied music life of the English village.

Harker's version of the thesis is more sweeping than Boyes' and covers a much longer time-period. Boyes' version, on the other hand, is targeted specifically at the first revival collectors, especially Cecil Sharp and his disciples. Although her argument is derivative, borrowed from Harker and Richard Dorson, it is more detailed and hence possibly more persuasive. So let us first evaluate the cogency of her case.

## The 'Imagined Village' Claim

The first problem in considering *The Imagined Village* is deciding what Boyes actually means by her title. Curiously, when we read the book we find no defence or even explanation of the notion of an 'imagined' or imaginary village. One is tempted to speculate that the title was an afterthought, a catchy marketing ploy rather than an integral part of the author's argument. Anyway, it appears that Boyes was jumping on the bandwagon started by Eric Hobsbawm and Terry Ranger ten years earlier when they published their provocative collection of essays titled *The Invention of Tradition*.<sup>4</sup> Hobsbawm was careful to qualify his critique, arguing merely that traditions were *often* less venerable than usually claimed and that *some* were fabrications. Boyes unfortunately was

not so temperate. Whatever she was (and still is) claiming, she appears to be claiming it wholesale, with no modifiers.

Whether captured adequately by its title or not, *The Imagined Village* does have a thesis. There are two parts to Boyes' argument. The first part deals with what Boyes believes to be a *misperception* of English rural society by Victorian and Edwardian intellectuals. This claim is developed through five assertions: (i) that "the Folk" never existed but were a mythical creation of the German Romantic movement; (ii) that the Romantics' assumption that rural communities were survivals of a more primitive past was reinforced by the emergence of a new academic discipline called folklore; (iii) that the Edwardian folksong collectors inherited this same misconception from the Victorian folklorists; (iv) that, in consequence, the inhabitants of rural England were perceived erroneously as "peasants"; and (v) that their villages were misconstrued as isolated remnants of a preindustrial past rather than understood as part of a modern industrial society.

The second part of Boyes' thesis explores the consequences of this alleged misunderstanding. She contends that Victorian and Edwardian folksong collectors idealized their informants as traditional, primitive, or 'folk-like' when they really were not. Moreover, she claims that the collectors (who came mainly from urban, middle-class backgrounds) knew little, and cared little, about the real economic and social problems of contemporary rural society. Nor were they really interested in the varied musical life of the village as it really was, since they were seeking only certain kinds of songs. The old songs that they did collect were an unrepresentative selection. By publishing them (often in bowdlerized or otherwise amended form) these neo-Romantics created a composite picture of a musical "Merrie England" that had never really existed. Consequently the body of songs and dances conventionally called "folk music" is no more than a misleading ideological construct, and the folksong revival did us a disservice by distorting the reality of working-class popular culture.

### **The Flaws in Boyes' Argument**

There are a number of different claims here, packed together in one rather complicated interpretation. Let us try briefly to sort out the main strands of Boyes' argument. On one level we are dealing not with intellectual or cultural history but with social history and a factual question. Boyes asserts (or rather assumes) that the average English village was much more modern than the portrait of such a village found in, say, the writings of Baring-Gould, Charles Marson,

Alfred Williams, or Flora Thompson. But she makes no attempt to prove the truth of her claim. *The Imagined Village* is not a work of empirical social history. Nor is there any effort made to demonstrate that the writings of these eye-witness reporters of village life were either untypical or error-laden. So just possibly the traditional Shropshire villages known to Charlotte Burne or the many in Devon visited (and hence perceived) by Baring-Gould may not have been so very "imagined" in the first place. Kidson, indeed, may have erred in the opposite direction when he emphasised the extent to which the railway had brought urban culture to rural Yorkshire. Anyway, there is an empirical question to be answered about how far the tentacles of modernization had progressed into the remoter corners of the English countryside by the late Victorian era. The historical evidence seems to suggest that the answer varies considerably from region to region and from locality to locality. Boyes appears to be ignorant of the considerable body of historiography on this issue, and she makes no attempt to deal in a substantive way with these pesky matters of fact. But perhaps that is hardly surprising in a post-modernist work of this kind.

On another level we are dealing with language, with such words as "folk" and "peasantry." Here we are on the post-modernists' favourite ground, and we might expect a degree of sophistication in Boyes' treatment of terminology. Unfortunately this is not the case. Boyes appears to forget that terms such as "peasantry" have resonances, and the resonances may—and frequently do—change over time. As a result, they can be misleading if read literally with a modern meaning. The word "peasant" or the word "folk" may conjure up for Boyes a nostalgic image of an Olde England lost forever except in song. But it does not follow that the Victorian and Edwardian collectors themselves intended those terms to be understood that way. Nor does it entail that they had an idealized picture of the villages and villagers they visited. Before assuming and asserting what she had yet to prove, Boyes needed to research further the nineteenth century meanings of the terms on which she was placing so much weight.

In fact, most early Victorian collectors did routinely employ the word "peasantry," whereas the late Victorian and Edwardian collectors tended to substitute the word "folk." Yet when one analyses what they intended by these terms one has to conclude that they meant to denote nothing more than "the rural lower classes." Chris Bearman has shown in detail that this is true for Cecil Sharp.<sup>5</sup> In other words, the collectors had no intention of evoking peasants in the western European sense of owner-proprietors of smallholdings or in the eastern European sense of

serfs. They included as "peasants" or "folk" all manner of rural artisans, from farm-labourers to blacksmiths and carters, anybody, in short, whose socio-economic status was lower than that of the squire, vicar, and large-scale farmer. Hence "peasant songs" or "folk songs" for Dixon, Broadwood, Sumner, Baring-Gould, Sharp and others meant simply the songs of rural lower class people. Whatever "the folk" might or might not have been in the distant past, they were in the late nineteenth century and in the first decades of the twentieth century almost everyone who lived in villages and small towns, with the exception of an easily identifiable social elite.

Thus although it might seem to Boyes that when Sabine Baring-Gould talked about "the peasantry" he was living in a mythical world created by German Romantics and anthropologists such as E. B. Tylor, in fact he was well aware of the harsh realities of everyday life in Lew Trenchard. That is quite evident when one reads his autobiography, or even the notes to his published song collections. Moreover, the "peasants" from whom he collected songs earned their livelihoods in one or other of all the different trades and occupations to be found in his region of Devon, including mining.

Similarly, although more than half of Sharp's male singers were labourers, his other informants practiced a wide variety of different trades—more than forty in all—nearly all of which reflected one aspect or another of the mainly agrarian economy of rural Somerset. Apart from housewives, the few exceptions were quarrymen, miners, weavers, quay workers and mariners who lived and worked in the small fishing ports of the Bristol Channel. They were not peasants (in the modern sense of the word), but there is no evidence that Sharp thought they were; he used the term to refer in a loose and general way to refer to the lower-class inhabitants of inland villages, but he collected songs just as readily from other members of the lower classes who lived in ports, small towns and, occasionally, even cities. As Bearman concludes, "[O]ne thing is quite certain: however unfashionable a term 'peasantry' might have become since 1905, Sharp's description was reasonable and does not deserve the ridicule which has been heaped upon it".<sup>6</sup> Terminology can be misleading, and in this case it seems to have misled Boyes rather than Baring-Gould and Sharp.

So it is doubtful that English villages in the late Victorian era were modernizing more rapidly than the collectors realised. It is also unlikely that they had a highly romanticized image of the inhabitants of those villages. Yet even if Boyes was correct on both counts, it would not follow that the songs collected in those villages were any the less traditional. On a third

level we are dealing with the songs themselves, no more, no less, and the issue is simply whether or not they are authentic. We know that the collectors did reject other items that they were offered: Victorian drawing room ballads, music hall songs, and well-known 'national' songs. They rarely went collecting in the industrial villages of the Midlands or the north of England, with the result that they failed to collect many occupational songs other than those reflecting the lives of ploughmen, shepherds, blacksmiths, sailors, and soldiers. They certainly neglected the *urban* lower classes, since they usually did not bother to song-hunt in city streets or pubs. As a result their collections show a rural bias and do not mirror faithfully the *entire* musical life of working-class England. This is a pity, but historians deal routinely with imperfect sources. For example, it is no use lamenting that Samuel Pepys' fascinating and invaluable diary, which reveals so much about London in the 1660s, tells us little about the English countryside. We just go to other contemporary sources to supplement Pepys. Similarly, it is no use lamenting what the songhunters did not hunt. The drawing room ballads, music hall ditties, trade-union anthems, and bawdy songs can be found elsewhere.

Collectors of the time were not modern ethnomusicologists, and it is anachronistic to criticise them as if they were. Nor is it reasonable to blame them for what they did not do, when nobody else did it either. The focus should be on what they achieved. They preserved a large body of folksongs and ballads, many of which would otherwise have been lost forever. The important question to be asked is this: *Were the melodies and lyrics that they saved genuine examples of the music of the English countryside?*

Boyes claims that the legacy of the folksong revival was bogus. But her arguments miss the mark. She provides no evidence to suggest the ballads and songs noted in the field by Broadwood, Kidson, Sharp, Vaughan Williams and their fellow collectors were anything but vernacular songs that English rural workers had taken to their hearts. How those workers and their villages were perceived by the clergymen and musicians who noted their songs is ultimately irrelevant. Whether we like to call the songs "folksongs" (as I still do), or not (as Boyes and Harker recommend), matters little. The bottom line is that what the collectors *noted down* was authentic. Many hundreds of genuinely traditional songs were saved for posterity, and I, for one, am very glad to have them. They add beauty to our lives. On the other hand, we must recognise that the *printed versions* of a small but significant number of these songs were inauthentic. Surprisingly, Boyes has little to say about the editorial dilemmas faced by Victorian and

Edwardian collectors who wanted to publish the fruits of their collecting. The issue of authenticity, however, lies at the heart of *Fakesong*.

### Giving Harker his Due

Let us begin by giving Dave Harker his due. *Fakesong* was—and still is, since it has not been entirely superseded<sup>7</sup>—an important and innovative book that provides useful insights into the history and business of music publishing. Harker correctly pointed out that folksong and ballad collecting was a task undertaken mainly by middle-class intellectuals. His claim that vernacular song collecting has usually involved a relationship between different classes of society is unassailable. Moreover, some song collectors were avaricious, others were fraudulent, and I would by no means attempt to defend every single one of them from his charges.

For example, we should recognise that Tom D'Urfey's motive in assembling *Pills to Purge Melancholy* was primarily financial, and he seems to have readily "borrowed" songs from any source he could. Much the same could be said about *A Collection of Old Ballads* and its anonymous author. Thomas Percy undoubtedly created quite a few fakesongs when in the first edition of his *Reliques* he published his own rewrites of ballads as if they were the texts to be found in the famous folio manuscript. Frederick Sheldon seems to have shared Percy's perspective on the legitimacy of "polishing" texts and then still claiming them to be authentic "originals." Several of the Scottish Romantics (including, at least initially, Sir Walter Scott) did the same, with Pinkerton the worst offender. As a result, a small number of ballads that were wholly or largely the creations of enthusiastic imitators were passed off as authentic creations of the "folk", although these were usually exposed sooner or later. "The Child of Elle", "Hardyknute" and "The Laidley Worm of Spindleton Heughs", to name just three, were indeed fakes.

A much more widespread problem than literary fraud was the question of editorial licence. Many Georgian and Victorian ballad editors showed insufficient respect for the texts that they so freely edited. This was not uniformly the case: Ritson and Child are clearly exceptions, and they had their disciples, even in the Society that bore Percy's name. Allingham may stand as a typical example of a Victorian editor who allowed himself considerable licence. A highly intelligent and articulate poet, he was quite open and explicit about his editorial methods, and provided a cogent defence of them. His fundamental argument was that it was his job as an editor to provide his reader with the best version possible of any given

ballad, and that doing so often entailed collating texts and eradicating blemishes. Editing was therefore, in his view, a creative act, not merely a matter of antiquarian scholarship. In Allingham's opinion, the texts that he produced were the nearest thing possible to a recreation of the original old ballad. He was not distorting tradition but *restoring* it. Even if one rejects Allingham's approach, one has to recognise his honesty and his right to his viewpoint. There was nothing fraudulent about what he was doing, but his texts are indeed composites. They are not fakes, but there *is* a sense in which they are not genuine.

The third major problem that gave Harker grist for his mill was the issue of bowdlerization. Most late Victorian editors felt the need to censor certain song-texts to make them suitable for "polite ears." From the vantage point of a different age we may regret their actions, but it seems only fair to recognise that they honestly believed they had no choice in the matter. Moreover, only in a few cases were their bowdlerized texts out-and-out fakes.

Baring-Gould, for example, felt the need to re-write various "rude" songs that he had collected, but he seems usually (perhaps always) to have indicated in his notes when he had done so. He was not trying to pull the wool over anyone's eyes. That said, the fact remains that a considerable number of the songs that he published were inauthentic. His version of "The Gardener", for example, appeared with the wrong tune, apparently because he wanted to reserve that melody for one of his own compositions, "Shower and Sunshine." His rewrite of "Strawberry Fair" was so extensive that it changed the story and theme of the ballad. My rough calculation is that perhaps as many as one third of the song-texts that he published were tampered with in a significant way, while another third were subjected to more minor polishing. But one should also recognize that Baring-Gould made the original texts of the items in *Songs and Ballads of the West* publicly available in Plymouth Library and his entire collection is available to posterity on microfiche as "The Personal Copy." He wanted the songs *as collected* to survive and he did his best to make that happen. However, many of them remained unpublished, which means that most people know the modified versions rather than the originals.

Much the same is true of the songs that Frank Kidson and other late Victorian editors collected but withheld in part from "polite ears" by printing only the "decent" verses. One has to acknowledge a fairly widespread suppression of folksongs that described (even metaphorically) sexual encounters and their consequences. This was not exactly a systematic distortion of an entire working-class culture, but it *was* an effective repression of one element in that culture.

I am reluctant to call bowdlerized folksongs "fakes" when there was no element of fraud in the editing process. But this is a matter of opinion, and others clearly feel differently. Nonetheless, if we count all bowdlerized songs as "fakes" and add them to the spurious ballads created by Percy and his disciples, we are still left with a large majority of authentic ballads and folk-lyrics. In short, "fakesongs" did exist, but they were a minority of the total number of vernacular songs recovered in the Georgian and Victorian eras. Depending on what you count as a "fakesong", the total number could range anywhere from one percent to about ten percent. So while Harker is not completely wrong, his conclusions are greatly exaggerated. He made a mountain out of a molehill. A rather large molehill, admittedly, but still a molehill.

### Problems with Harker's Arguments

Harker's book—notwithstanding the valuable information contained within its pages—is fundamentally misleading. The essential problem is that his thesis is so extreme. He goes far beyond merely asserting a class relationship between collectors and informants, and he is not content with denouncing questionable editorial practices on the part of certain individuals. He defines all folksong collectors and editors as mediators, and he claims that mediation involved both cultural expropriation and financial exploitation. To put it bluntly, he is claiming that the collectors—all of them, not just a few nasty individuals—took the workers' songs, changed them to suit bourgeois taste, and made money from publishing them in this denatured form. In the process they created an utterly false impression of lower-class musical culture.

This interpretation has a certain plausibility, but is it actually true? In my view, when one recognises what the thesis entails, and then examines the evidence in detail, it quickly becomes obvious that it is counter-factual. Not surprisingly we do find some collectors guilty as charged, but the majority simply do not fit the bill.

It is important to recognise that, according to Harker, even when a given collector apparently tried honestly to print texts accurately and spent much of his meagre income on publishing his discoveries, he was still an entrepreneur engaged in "faking a culture" for the entertainment of his chosen market. For example, in Harker's opinion, Joseph Ritson had a "love-hate relationship towards workers' culture" and his scholarship still "effectively acted, albeit in marginal and vastly superior ways to Percy, in the cultural interests of [his own] class-based culture".<sup>8</sup> Similarly, Harker believes that two centuries later such a

well-meaning mediator as Frank Kidson exhibited a "patronizing" and "culturally reactionary attitude" in his dealings with working people, which was compounded by his "innocence of country workers' culture".<sup>9</sup> More generally, he believes that the late Victorian collectors were no better than the Romantics, because their activities reflected the same class interests. Even the ones who strove hardest to be scientific in their endeavours—Ritson, Chappell, Child, and Lucy Broadwood, for example—necessarily distorted and expropriated the workers' music.

Thus in Harker's world the bourgeois collector cannot change his spots, however pure he believes his motives to be. In his opinion we are not dealing with changing intellectual fashions or a gradual development of scholarly practice. I have mentioned Ritson and Kidson as two of the defendants in Harker's "case for the prosecution" (his metaphor)<sup>10</sup> simply to show that Harker is not merely attacking (say) Percy, Pinkerton, Bruce, and Baring-Gould for particular misdemeanors. They would have been easier targets, and in such cases we would have to concede that many of Harker's criticisms are valid. But he is not satisfied with identifying the black sheep in the family. On the contrary, his accusation is a general one that applies (in his view) to *all* Georgian, Victorian, Edwardian and even postwar collectors. He believes that to a greater or lesser degree they all show class bias in their dealings with folksong, and that together they have systematically corrupted and repressed working-class culture. Whether they realised it or not, they were engaged in ideological class-warfare, and were part and parcel of the governing elite's ongoing attempt to develop a 'national' bourgeois culture.<sup>11</sup> In short, everyone from D'Urfey and Phillips to Vaughan Williams and Lloyd is guilty of cultural genocide. Putting it that way may sound harsh, but that *is* what Harker is arguing.

Let us examine a few of the specific ways in which *Fakesong* is unfair to its subjects, the bourgeois "mediators." Harker begins his book with the early eighteenth century, and attacks D'Urfey and Philips as pioneers of the commercialization of vernacular song editing. It is true that both *Pills to Purge Melancholy* and *A Collection of Old Ballads* were attempts to exploit a growing market for song-collections, and that neither editor paid any attention to copyright issues. But song-publishing had been a commercial affair since the early Tudor period, so attempting to make a living this way was hardly new, and in any case Harker admits that both men had other sources of income. What matters is whether they corrupted their material in the process of editing and publishing it, and Harker offers no evidence that they did. Indeed, he recognises that D'Urfey simply picked

up songs he liked from anywhere he found them and cheerfully plunked them into his voluminous printed collection. And he certainly did not censor them. The scope of Philips' work was narrower, but he exhibited a similar cavalier eclecticism, which meant that his material, mainly garnered from broadsides, was reprinted much as he found it. Editorial tampering thus does not seem to have been a factor in early eighteenth century English (as opposed to Scottish) song-publishing.

Harker's critique of Percy is surprisingly mild, although Percy provides an excellent exemplar of his thesis: the would-be bishop's motives were at best mixed, and he certainly transformed many of his texts. The *Reliques*, whatever its virtues and its historical significance, was not a reliable collection of old songs and ballads. It did distort the culture that it pretended to exhibit. So Percy stands convicted of exploiting traditional song for personal gain and of corrupting his sources in the process. He was also guilty of censorship. What is unreasonable is Harker's attempt to convict Ritson of the same sins. Ritson was a human being and he made some mistakes in his dating of sources and in his editorial notes, but these were honest errors. In his case there was no exploitation of his material from financial or careerist motives. Moreover, Ritson was the first editor of ballads and songs who was sincerely committed to accuracy and authenticity. With a few minor exceptions, his printed texts appear to be reliable. Harker nonetheless maintains that Ritson distorted working-class culture by the very action of selecting certain songs and ballads and arranging them in certain categories in his publications. Yet he fails to show how this in any way harmed either the songs or their creators. The case for the prosecution is feeble and non-proven, and we can legitimately write it off as ideological rhetoric. Ritson is thus another early but important counter-example to the Harker thesis.

Harker's discussion of the late Georgian period focuses almost entirely on the Scottish Romantics. His strictures against the editing practices of Scott and some of his disciples are often justified, but he provides no evidence to convict such English collectors as John Bell, Gilbert Davies, and William Sandys of the same intellectual crimes. John Bell, whom Harker praises in another publication,<sup>12</sup> in no way fits Harker's "mediator" model, which explains why he passes over *Rhymes of Northern Bards* so quickly, but even so he comes close to admitting that it was an unbiased expression of regional working-class culture.<sup>13</sup> Gilbert Davies is ignored completely, while William Sandys receives only a handful of passing references. The first decades of the nineteenth century were not the most prolific time for vernacular

song-collecting and publishing, but Harker has little to say against those songhunters who were at work then. It seems legitimate to conclude that the early nineteenth century was therefore not a period in which the creation of "fakesong" was rampant.

Harker's strictures against the early to mid-Victorian collectors also lack substance. He chooses to critique the work of Wright, Halliwell, Dixon, Bell, Chappell, Broadwood, and Harland, but he ignores the other collectors of the period. The first five of these men were members of the Percy Society, which published many of their collections. The Society was essentially an academic club of independent scholars, and its publications were subsidized by its members and by other well-wishers. There was no commercial exploitation of traditional music here, and even Harker is constrained to admit that "song-mediating ... had been all but removed from the constraints of capitalist production and of the marketplace [and] no longer represented a serious intervention in the politics of culture".<sup>14</sup> He resorts instead to accusing these men of cultural nationalism—a charge that was undeniably correct in the case of Chappell, at least—but he is unable to show why patriotism as a motive for song collecting and editing was problematic. He attacks Chappell for allegedly systematically downgrading workers' music and wishing to "insert bourgeois values in the form of song into the working-class culture of mid-Victorian Britain and its Empire," but he provides no examples of Chappell actually doing this. Nor does he explain why Chappell's great work, *Popular Music of the Olden Time*, constituted an attack on the lower classes, except to suggest that it provided "cultural ammunition" for proponents of national unity in the face of "working-class restiveness."<sup>15</sup> That feeble argument is the best he has to offer. Once again, Harker's case remains unproven.

### **Editorial Practices: the Good and the Bad**

If Harker's accusation of cultural imperialism is a red herring, what about his attack on Victorian editorial practices? He has to admit that John Broadwood insisted on the faithful reproduction of tunes and that Chappell "prefigured the tendency towards the scientific collection of both texts and tunes which was to emerge towards the end of the nineteenth century."<sup>16</sup> He recognises that Dixon was no mere armchair scholar but did some of his own collecting, developed a fairly extensive network of regional collaborators who also noted songs in the field, and generally preferred to print texts taken from oral tradition or older broadsides. All this, however, suggests that *Ancient Poems, Ballads and Songs of the Peasantry of Eng-*

land was, if not totally reliable, at least no repository of large numbers of "fakesongs." The same is surely true for most other early to mid-Victorian song collections, with the possible exception of Sheldon's *Minstrelsy of the English Border*. Curiously, Harker entirely ignores Sheldon, his best target in this group of collectors. His account of the work of Wright and Halliwell ignores several of their more important publications, and he has little or nothing to say about such other Percy Society members as Collier, Croker, Mackay and Rimbault. Edward Rimbault, in particular, was an important figure, and it is strange that Harker fails to do more than mention him in passing.

John Harland is the only one of the regional collectors that Harker discusses in any depth. Could that be because the eclectic nature of the various song-collections from Cornwall, Cheshire, Derbyshire, Shropshire, Yorkshire, and Northumberland hardly supports Harker's claim that these mid-Victorian "mediators" were highly selective in what they chose to print? Of course, it is very probable that the proportion of industrial songs in their books is less than existed "on the ground", yet one can hardly claim that songs of social protest were totally suppressed. And there is certainly no shortage of dialect songs reflecting local places, people and culture. To be sure, the mid-Victorian collectors didn't find everything that they might have done, quite a few of them failed to bother with tunes, and some censorship probably occurred. But the charge that they systematically distorted the material that they did uncover seems totally unjustified. Harker simply fails to provide any substantial evidence to bolster his case.

Harker's manifest hostility to Francis Child and his disciples also requires some comment. He writes off Child as an unoriginal disciple of Grundtvig who was never able to theorize his own practice, and he maintains that Child's own ideas "shifted hardly at all" between the 1850s and 1880s.<sup>17</sup> In accordance with this claim, Harker persistently refers to *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads* as a "third edition" of Child's earlier *English and Scottish Ballads*. This is thoroughly misleading, since Child's *magnum opus* was in fact a new collection with different contents and a different (albeit similar) title. Moreover, this sleight-of-hand disguises the revolution in ballad editing that occurred between the two collections, a revolution that was primarily the work of Child himself, however much he may have valued Grundtvig's advice. Child was not the only Victorian ballad editor to adopt a positivist methodology; Frederick Furnivall and J. W. Ebsworth did the same for their respective editions of *Bishop Percy's Folio Manuscript* and *The Roxburghe Ballads*. Nor did Child ever free himself entirely from his earlier, neo-romantic, outlook,

since he retained the idea that traditional ballads had been created communally by "the folk." Yet, notwithstanding these nuances, the fact remains that Child was the pioneer of a radically new approach to ballad editing and the creator of the largest, most systematic, and best-documented collection of English-language narrative song-texts. Harker's account provides no indication of the magnitude of Child's achievement nor of the decades of scholarly labour that went into making his *magnum opus*.

Harker's equally jaundiced perspective on the late Victorian folksong revival is set out in his chapter on "The Strong Men and Women before Agamemnon" (Agamemnon is, of course, Cecil Sharp). He discusses, in a uniformly scathing way, a selection of the most important song-collections of the 1880s and 1890s: Bruce & Stokoe's *Northumbrian Minstrelsy*, Baring-Gould & Sheppard's *Songs and Ballads of the West*, Barrett's *English Folk-Songs*, Kidson's *Traditional Tunes*, and Broadwood & Maitland's *English County Songs*. He ignores the work of other late Victorian collectors (Husk, Logan, Mason, Burne, Laura Smith, Crawhall, Sumner, *et al.*), but they would no doubt have received the same treatment. He claims that the collectors screened out all material that did not fit their idea of traditional song and treats the collecting process as one in which "moveable property" called "folk song" was purchased by judicious expenditures of tobacco and beer, or expropriated by the exercise of social power.<sup>18</sup> For example, he depicts Baring-Gould as a callous treasure-hunter who cared nothing for his informants once he had extracted their "cultural property", Kidson as an entrepreneur who bought songs at "market value" from his informants, and Lucy Broadwood as a manipulative personality who was highly selective in what she collected and published.<sup>19</sup>

Baring-Gould certainly deserves criticism for the way he edited his major publications. Yet I do not find Harker's characterization of the man persuasive. There is abundant evidence in *Old Country Life* and in *Further Reminiscences* (as well as in the notes to *Songs and Ballads of the West* and *A Garland of Country Song*) that Baring-Gould was sensitive to the hardships endured by his parishioners and by other informants whom he came to know well, and that he tried to help them financially. He loved traditional songs, and one cannot blame him for rejoicing when he obtained good ones in the nick of time from aged or frail informants. To portray Kidson as money-oriented seems to me equally misleading. He may have been a prude, but his desire to save traditional melodies before they were lost was absolutely genuine, and publication of *Traditional Tunes* at his own expense was an example not of entrepreneurship

but of altruism. Lucy Broadwood similarly poured a considerable amount of her own income into the expensive business of song-collecting, and the same was probably true for most of the other late Victorian collectors. Harker's metaphor for song collecting as the sale of "cultural property" at market rates reflects his own way of looking at things, not Kidson's, Baring-Gould's or Lucy Broadwood's. He is projecting his own values onto these late Victorian collectors. They were not in it for the money, nor did they see folk music in proprietarian or monetary terms.

I do not deny that Harker has some good grounds for criticising certain of the late Victorians' editorial practices. Most of them aimed at providing their readers with a full set of words to go along with the tune, and it was this goal that caused them to "complete" song-texts from broadsides when what they had obtained in the field was fragmentary or obviously corrupted. One can argue about whether this was a good idea or not, but it hardly constitutes "faking a culture." Moreover, one must be careful not to over-generalize. It is necessary to look at the theory and practice of each of these collectors on a case by case basis. They differed considerably, and each of them deserves to be judged by what he or she actually did in the field and by how their publications were edited. Not all were guilty of bowdlerization. As early as the 1870s we find texts and tunes printed together with complete fidelity in M. H. Mason's *Nursery Rhymes and Country Songs*. In Charlotte Burne's *Shropshire Folk-Lore* the tunes are hived off to an appendix, but there is no reason to doubt the accuracy of either texts or melodies. Again, it is clear that Laura Smith conscientiously published in *Music of the Waters* exactly what she heard her informants sing, even when her melodies or words differed somewhat from previously published versions. One could give more examples, but the point is made: not all collectors were guilty of the sins of which they stand accused.

It is Harker's systematic hostility to all ballad and song collectors merely because of their social status that I find unacceptable. He tars everyone with the same brush, and, to mix a metaphor, in doing so throws the baby out with the bath water. The truth of the matter is that there were major differences in the way the Georgian and Victorian collectors handled the material that they found and published. Some treated it with respect, others did not. Some were looking for material gain or career advancement from their publications, others financed their books themselves or contributed their labour purely from love of the songs. Some believed that tunes and/or texts should be reprinted exactly as sung (or as found in a manuscript), while others wanted to collate variants

and to compile the best version of a ballad or song. In short, the collectors were all over the map on a variety of issues, and Harker's monochromatic vision transforms a rainbow into a grey mist. It obfuscates rather than enlightens.

### **Musical Ecologists**

If one needs a metaphor, a more appropriate image for the late Victorian collectors is to see them as musical ecologists. They were radicals and purists, fighting to save a world of traditional music before the forces of commercialism polluted and destroyed it. Baring-Gould, Kidson and Lucy Broadwood threw themselves wholeheartedly into a cause that not many people—then as now—took seriously. To be effective they believed that they had to make some compromises, of which the most controversial was their decision to clean up song-texts that they judged would offend polite society. Another was to promote the songs in a format geared for performances in middle-class drawing rooms. The critical question is whether, in making these compromises, they denatured the body of traditional song that they intended to save from oblivion. As suggested earlier, my rough guess is that they seriously distorted at most ten percent of the material that they collected. That is a significant amount, to be sure, but not enough to warrant writing off the remaining ninety percent as "fake-song."

Few would deny that Harker presents some valid critical insights into the motives and failings of certain collectors, but his conclusions in *Fakesong* go way beyond what is supported by his evidence. His fundamental thesis is simply wrong-headed, and it derives from his own political ideology and value-system, not from the realities of Georgian and Victorian vernacular ballad and folksong collecting. His mode of attack is carpet-bombing, but those eighteenth and nineteenth century collectors were a scattered and diverse bunch. There were a few black sheep, but not enough to warrant giving the entire flock a bad name.

### **Conclusion**

The fundamental problem with the work of each of the two authors under discussion was that they knew what they wanted to prove before they actually went and looked at the evidence. Harker was convinced in advance that the bourgeois "mediators" (as he insists on calling them) were intent on pirating and distorting the workers' songs. They had to be—if you are a Trotskyist, that's what the bourgeoisie always does. The reality, unfortunately for Harker, was rather

more complicated. Few of the bourgeois collectors were avaricious villains, and few deliberately distorted the songs they had collected. They did face the problem that some folksongs were unpublishable, given the *mores* of the time, and they adopted different strategies, some better than others, to circumvent the difficulty. That's why we need, as far as possible, to probe beyond the Victorian and Edwardian folksong publications to the manuscript sources on which they were based. But it does not mean the songs themselves are "fake" or that an entire song-culture was "manufactured." Harker protests too much.

Boyes, similarly, was convinced in advance that the dreaded 'survivalists' had a Romantic notion of "the Folk" derived from Herder. She conveniently ignored the fact that the English term "folksong" was *not* borrowed from the German but appears to have been coined *circa* 1875 by John Harland's friend and disciple William Axon in his *Folk Song and Folk-Speech of Lancashire*.<sup>20</sup> And Harland and Axon's perception of the folk included textile workers, miners, knife-grinders, and a variety of artisans as well as agricultural workers: in short, the working classes of Lancashire.

So what Boyes needed to do—but manifestly failed to do—was to research precisely what relationships such key figures as John Harland, Sabine Baring-Gould, Lucy Broadwood, Frank Kidson, the Hammond brothers, Percy Merrick, Cecil Sharp and others actually had with rural labourers and artisans. If she had read the relevant sections of Baring-Gould's voluminous writings, if she had read Broadwood's diaries, if she had looked at T. T. Wilkinson's omnibus edition of John Harland's two collections of Lancashire songs, she would have sensed the wide spectrum of rural (and urban) occupations in which song-carriers among the lower classes were engaged. Then she would have known that these collectors did not view the 'folk' from a distance or through rose-coloured spectacles. But neither Harland nor Wilkinson nor Broadwood can be found in either Boyes' index or text, and Baring-Gould receives two cursory mentions but no commentary. She simply ignored the contrary evidence that was already available to her in 1993.

Of course, when she first wrote *The Imagined Village* Boyes did not have the benefit of Chris Bearman's brilliant research and statistical analysis of Cecil Sharp's informants. That seminal article, "Who Were the Folk? The Demography of Sharp's Somerset Folk Singers," appeared in *The Historical Journal* in 2000. Since then Bearman has continued his research on the social history of the Edwardian revival and has produced (with Yvette Staelens) the *Somerset Folk Map* and its successor for Hampshire.

Just one glance at the photographs and mini-biographies of Sharp's informants and the map of their locations should have been enough to convince Boyes that neither they nor their villages were "imagined." They were real, so were their songs, and, moreover, Sharp's collecting manuscripts exist. So we can judge for ourselves the degree to which his printed publications in the 1900s give a misleading impression of what he found in the field. As far as I can tell, it is very small—just the occasional bowdlerization, for obvious reasons.

It is tough when someone else's research undermines the central thesis of your book. But the least you can do, when bringing out a second edition, is to address the issues head-on. That Boyes has failed to do in the 2010 edition. Some nice photographs do not make up for the fundamental omission.

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## Notes:

<sup>1</sup> Harker, Dave. *Fakesong: The Manufacture of British 'Folksong' 1700 to the Present Day*. Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1985.

<sup>2</sup> Boyes, Georgina. *The Imagined Village: Culture, Ideology and the English Folk Revival*. Manchester: Manchester U.P., 1993. Second edition, Leeds, U.K.: No Masters Co-operative, 2010.

<sup>3</sup> For these terms, see Harker, *Fakesong*, pp. xii-xiii.

<sup>4</sup> Hobsbawm, Eric & Terence Ranger, eds. *The Invention of Tradition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983.

<sup>5</sup> Bearman, Christopher J. "Who Were the Folk? The Demography of Sharp's Somerset Folk Singers", *The Historical Journal*, Vol 43, No. 3 (2000), pp. 751-775.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 761.

<sup>7</sup> But see Gregory, E. David. *Victorian Songhunters: The Recovery and Editing of English Vernacular Ballads and Folk Lyrics, 1820-1883*. Lanham, MD & Oxford, U.K.: Scarecrow Press, 2006; and *The Late Victorian Folksong Revival: The Persistence of English Melody, 1878-1903*. Lanham, MD & Plymouth, U.K.: Scarecrow Press, 2010.

<sup>8</sup> Harker, *Fakesong*, p. 35.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 154-155.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xii.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xi.

<sup>12</sup> Harker, Dave. "John Bell, the 'Great Collector'", in John Bell, *Rhymes of Northern Bards*. Newcastle: Frank Graham, 1971.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 52.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 96.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 81-82 & 87-88.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 94-95.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 116-120.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 160 & 164-165.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 165.

<sup>20</sup> Axon, William E. A. *Folk Song and Folk-Speech of Lancashire*. Manchester, U.K.: Tubbs & Brook, n.d. [1871], reissued 1887.