

Appalachia, Alba and Albion



Buna and Roby Hicks of Beech Mountain, Watauga County, North Carolina, 1939 - Photo courtesy of the Warner family

Brian Peters looks at the English influences on Appalachian song and music.



“So you’re from England?” said the cab driver who picked me up at Asheville airport, in his warm North Carolina drawl; “that’s where my folks came from, back in the day.” I was on my way to the Swannanoa Gathering, a summer school in the heart of the Southern Appalachian Mountains, to teach classes on English folk songs and ballads. There’s a ready audience for that kind of presentation in North American folk institutions, especially in the Appalachians, where local singers are intrigued to hear versions from the old country of ballads that are very much part of their own tradition: “Hey, we have a version of that, but in ours he kills the other fella with a Colt 45 instead of a sword!”

I was thinking of my cabbie as I watched the series of three BBC Ulster TV programmes entitled *Wayfaring Stranger*, in which Phil Cunningham described the migration of songs and music from the British Isles to Appalachia, with a supporting cast of some of the best singers and musicians around. The likes of Rhiannon Giddens, Tim O’Brien, Archie Fisher, Jerry Douglas, Paul Brady, Len Graham, Karine Polwart and Sheila Kay Adams sang and played, while academics and archivists fleshed out the history. As well as ballads and fiddle music, we learned about the evolution of psalm singing into shape note, of the development of the banjo from African gourd instruments, of the earliest country music recordings and radio broadcasts, and along the way heard classic archive recordings of Fiddlin’ John Carson, The Skillet Lickers, and many others. Sadly the programmes weren’t shown in England, but I was able to access them via the BBC iPlayer, and very good they were, too. Fine performances, fascinating historical detail, excellent filming, all accompanied by Mr Cunningham’s easy presence and readiness to jam along with the best. What was not to like?

It seems a bit churlish to rain on the parade, but there was something missing, amidst the wealth of music, scholarship and anecdote... and that was ‘England’. We heard all about the mass migration from Scotland to Ulster following the Plantation of 1609, and plenty more about the voyages 100 years or more later by these ‘Scots-Irish’ people to the Eastern seaboard of North America, and thence by way of the Cumberland Gap to the Appalachian mountains. But where were the English? They never got a mention. All those English migrants who headed for the Appalachians in huge numbers that, according to historian David Hackett Fischer, may have been as great as those from Ulster. Fischer, whose *Albion’s Seed* is the definitive work on British Isles migration to what was to become the USA, makes a compelling case that what characterised those early settlers in the mountain country was not their nationality but a culture shared on both sides of the Scottish border - a culture of independence, belligerence, strong family ties, and fierce Protestantism. Not only did the transatlantic migrants from Ulster include a significant proportion of Anglo-Irish, but many tens and possibly hundreds of thousands crossed the ocean directly from Northern England itself. Not for nothing is the Cumberland Gap named for an English border county, or the capital of North Carolina called ‘Durham’.

Many American academics and musicians seem unaware of this – or perhaps they agree with the notorious statement of Oscar Schmidt in 1904 that England was ‘Das Land ohne Musik’ - that “the English are distinguished from all other cultures by having no music of their own”. There’s a tendency to credit every element of the white folk music of Appalachia exclusively to the Scots-Irish, never mind that many of those cultural elements would have been shared by the lower-class

“...There’s a tendency to credit every element of the white folk music of Appalachia exclusively to the Scots-Irish, never mind that many of those cultural elements would have been shared by the lower-class English migrants as well. They too sang ballads, purchased broadsides, played fiddles, and used Old Testament psalms for their worship...”

English migrants as well. They too sang ballads, purchased broadsides, played fiddles, and used Old Testament psalms for their worship. And it’s actually very easy to see English footprints all over the music of the Southern mountains. The first example the *Wayfaring Stranger* programmes used to demonstrate the Scots-Irish musical link was the title song itself, sung passionately by Rhiannon Giddens. We were told that the melody is “thought to flow from a 17th century Scottish ballad”, *The Dowie Dens Of Yarrow*, which Rhiannon also sang beautifully. But *Wayfaring Stranger* sounds to my ears a lot less similar to *Dowie Dens* (a very rare ballad in the USA) than it does to the tune of a song collected in Dorset over 100 years ago called *The Captain’s Apprentice*, which you can find online in the Vaughan Williams Library archives. That doesn’t mean it came from there directly, but they surely share the same common melodic stock.

Between 1916 and 1918, Cecil Sharp and his colleague Maud Karpeles spent 46 weeks in the Appalachian backcountry, trudging many a hot and weary

mile over rough tracks to befriend mountaineers in their basic log cabins and persuade them to share their old ballads. Their haul of over 1600 songs is widely acknowledged as one of the greatest folksong collections ever made, but there have been grumbles about Sharp’s title for the published volume, *English Folk Songs From The Southern Appalachians*. Surely he must have been blinkered or downright mendacious not to have acknowledged that the material he found was Scots-Irish in origin?

The truth is that many of the pieces Sharp committed to his notebooks were indeed versions of the very same songs he’d become accustomed to hearing over several years’ collecting in the English countryside. He was aware that many were to be found in Scottish collections as well, but believed that, as far as folksong culture was concerned, there was a big overlap between Lowland Scotland and Northern England – and for those readers North of the Border now raising a sceptical eyebrow, it’s worth mentioning that the great Scots collector Gavin Greig said much the same thing.

Sharp was particularly thrilled to find many ballads from F J Child's great collection still flourishing in the Appalachians, including several almost extinct back in Britain, even in his day. Now, it's important to remember that the Child ballads are heavily biased towards Scotland, simply because no-one in England had carried out the kind of field collecting that Robert Burns, Walter Scott, William Motherwell and many others had followed with a passion in the early 19th century, providing the professor with his main source of material. Child died a few years before Sharp and his colleagues led the wave of song collecting in England – which turned up a great many ballads he would surely have relished – and there is a huge, Albion-shaped hole in his great work. Yet the belief persists in some quarters that those Child ballads found in the Southern mountains must all have come originally from Scotland.

We know much more these days about the history of the ballads than either Child or Sharp did. Most scholars in the field now accept that many began life as printed broadsides, penned for money in the backstreets of London and other cities, and churned out in their hundreds of thousands during the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries. Child's volumes did include a number of texts from print, but he regarded them with disdain. What they provide for the modern ballad scholar, however, is an insight into popular balladry at just the time the migrants were setting out for America, and we can compare that with the repertoire that Sharp and others found in the mountains. I carried out some research recently on the most frequently collected ballads in the Appalachians. The top six include such titles as *Lord Thomas And Fair Ellinor*, *The House Carpenter* (aka *The Demon Lover*), *Barbara Allen* and *Little Matthy Groves*. All four were printed, and most probably originated, in London during the late 17th century; the ancestral *Demon Lover* broadside is credited to a known author, Laurence Price, in 1657. Yet the *Wayfaring Stranger* programmes used two of those to demonstrate "a Scots-Irish tradition", even as a London broadside of *Barbara Allen* appeared on the screen. Before anyone reminds me that Samuel Pepys described this very piece, sung by one of his lady friends in the capital in 1666, as a "little Scotch song", let me quote ballad authority Steve Gardham, who confirms that a "Scotch song"

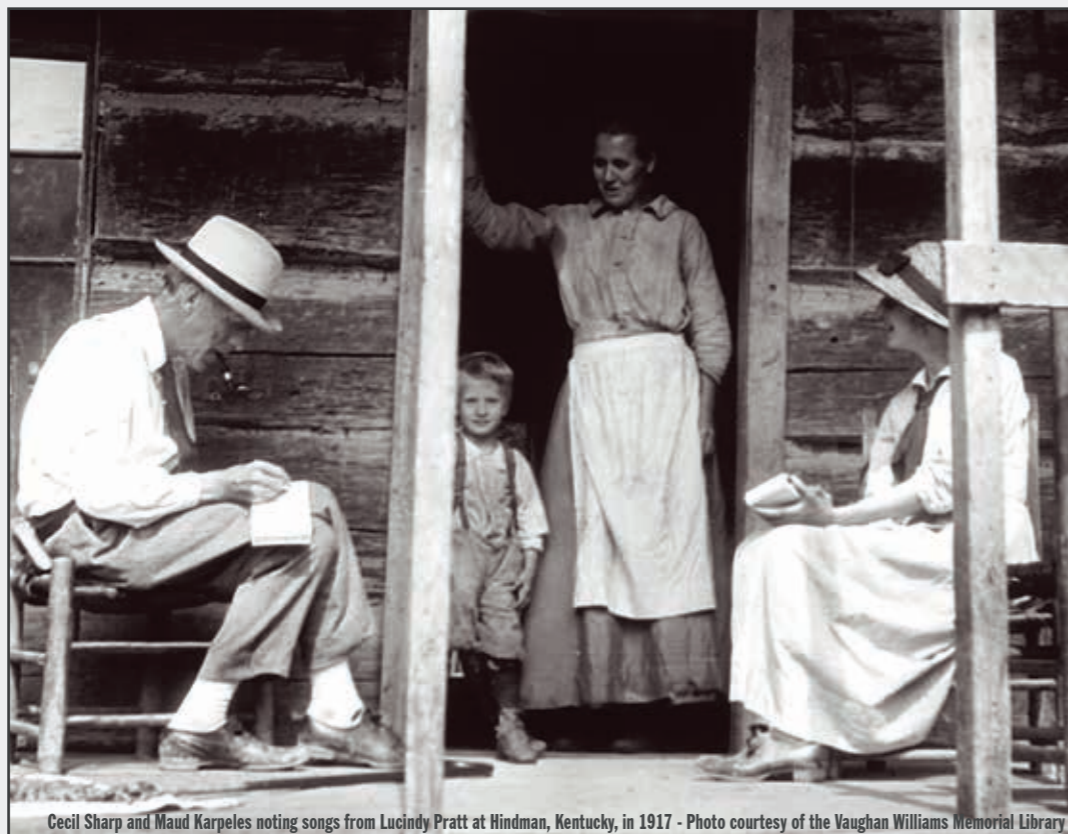
during that period described a composition for the London stage written in "pseudo dialect from anywhere north of Watford". Even *The Gypsy Laddie* (*Black Jack David*), often claimed for Scotland, has an equally strong singing tradition in England, while the historical connection between the ballad and the abduction of a Scots Earl's wife is disputed by contemporary ballad scholars, who believe it to be a 'bolt-on' rather than an original element.

Outside of the Child ballads, Appalachian repertoire is full of English songs. One of the most popular, *Turtle Dove* (aka *The Blackest Crow* / *Roving On A Winter's Night*) includes lyrics found in *My Love Is Like A Red*,

of Britain as a whole, not an exclusively Scots-Irish or, worse still, 'Celtic' tradition.

Let's look now at what the names of those mountain folk can tell us. Great modern musicians like Jerry Douglas and Tim O'Brien proudly celebrate their Scots-Irish ancestry, and names like (Jean) Ritchie and (Bill) Monroe can be traced right back to Scotland. But English names too are numerous amongst the roll call of mountain musicians: Ralph Stanley, Roscoe Holcombe, A. P. Carter, even Dolly Parton and the Everly Brothers, all carried names from South of the Border, while the absurdly talented Dirk Powell is of Welsh descent. In the case of two prominent singing families well known to folklorists,

myth – which led to well-meaning schoolmarm forcing bewildered mountain children to perform Shakespeare in the mistaken belief that their local tongue resembled Elizabethan English – was popular 100 years ago but is now discredited. The tale of the Scots-Irish migration is romantic and stirring, has plenty of fascinating evidence to back it up, and undoubtedly forms a key element in the Appalachian story. But it's not the only element, and the part played by those English settlers – just as adventurous in their quest for new pastures as their Ulster fellow-travellers, and just as steeped in song and music – needs to be celebrated equally. Let's not forget them.



Cecil Sharp and Maud Karpeles noting songs from Lucindy Pratt at Hindman, Kentucky, in 1917 - Photo courtesy of the Vaughan Williams Memorial Library

Red Rose - but those words were printed in London over 100 years before Burns wrote his song. The commonest Appalachian murder ballad, *Pretty Polly*, evolved from the English broadside *The Gosport Tragedy*. Mountain favourites like *The Cuckoo* and *The Maid Freed From The Gallows* have been collected 10 times more frequently in England than in Scotland. Of course there are other Appalachian ballads and songs much more clearly linked with Scotland or Ireland, such as *The Two Brothers*, *Young Hunting*, *Jackie Munro* and *Rose Connelly*. But mountain balladry is a legacy

we have specific evidence of English ancestry: the Hicks clan of Watauga County, North Carolina, who became good friends and key sources for distinguished song collectors Frank and Anne Warner, and whose relative Jane Gentry was Sharp's most prolific singer, were descended from English migrants to Virginia who later moved into the mountains; the Sheltons of Madison County, many of whom sang for Sharp, had a similar tale to tell.

None of this is to claim that Appalachian culture is or was exclusively Anglo-Saxon. That

Brian Peters is a singer, musician and researcher. His article on Cecil Sharp's Appalachian collection is published in the current issue of *The Folk Music Journal*, and he will be leading a weekend of workshops entitled *From Albion To Appalachia*, with Anna Roberts-Gevalt and Jeff Warner, at Halsway Manor, Somerset, on 18-20 May.

A lot of information on North American ballad versions and their British roots is available under the 'Lyrics' tab on the website www.bluegrassmessengers.com

THE LIVING TRADITION

Subscribe to the leading Traditional Music magazine



Packed with information, news, reviews and features leading you to the best live and recorded music, clubs, concerts and festivals in the UK, Ireland and further afield. Keep in touch with the definitive guide to the traditional music scene.

www.livingtradition.co.uk