

Robert Graves and the Modern Ballad Tradition

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Pentangle's version of the 'Lyke Wake Dirge' from the 1969 album *Basket of Light* is probably now the best known recorded version of the song. With Fairport Convention and Steeleye Span, Pentangle were at the popular forefront of the Electric Folk movement. Their single 'Light Flight' was used as the theme music for a BBC television drama, and this helped *Basket of Light* reach number five in the UK album chart. Whilst falling within the folk rock idiom, Pentangle eschewed the traditional rock group dynamic, preferring instead a jazz-derived approach; singer Jacqui McShee serving not as 'lead singer' but one individual instrumentalist in a group of musicians recognised as significant technical practitioners in their own right prior to the formation of the group: guitarists Bert Jansch and John Renbourn, and upright bassist Danny Thompson.¹

Britta Sweers's work *Electric Folk: The Changing Face of English Traditional Music* (2005) is the only major scholarly consideration of the electric folk movement, a movement which enjoyed a zenith of no more than a decade, yet whose influence in suggesting means for the interaction of traditional and contemporary material has diffused through the musical and artistic fabric of the British Isles and beyond to an extent that belies its brevity. Sweers notes that the movement was more than simply the electrification of traditional music, but a cultural reaffirmation – drawing methods and inspiration from the American folk-rock tradition, before reforming them as 'a counterreaction to the dominant American music cultures'. As such, it possessed a capacity to revitalise traditional material that prior attempts at revival had lacked:

Contrary to the general disappearance of

vernacular musics, the traditional material in England has become a new means of musical and cultural identity for the performers – who have subsequently revived a general interest in the tradition with their modern interpretations and compositions. Electric folk therefore has not only overcome the romanticised nineteenth-century ideas of traditional music, but also the stagnant development of the second English folk revival of the 1950s and 1960s. (p. 4)

The ‘Lyke Wake Dirge’, also known as the ‘Cleveland Lyke Wake Dirge’ in recognition of the particular part of Yorkshire from which it originates, is first noted historically in the seventeenth century, but is traditionally held to be far older, and to predate the Christianisation of the British Isles. Inevitably for a song preserved primarily in the oral tradition over such a period of time, significant variations in tune, words, and structure are recorded. Pentangle’s version uses the same tune as that recorded by the Young Tradition four years earlier – unsurprisingly, given that Renbourn and Jansch shared a house with the three members of the Young Tradition. The Young Tradition, in turn, derived their version from that recorded by the folk song collector Hans Fried. Transmission of the song, however, does not appear to have been altogether this simple. The Fried–Young Tradition version uses a set of words markedly different to those sung on the Pentangle version. These variations encompass not only minor textual emendations such as word substitution or ordering – where the Young Tradition sing ‘If thou from here away dost pass’, for example, Pentangle have ‘When from hence away are passed’ – but also major variations indicative of a different tradition of the song. Versions of this song are categorised by whether the third line of the first stanza makes reference to ‘fire and fleet’ or ‘fire and sleet’, and whether or not the deceased soul is tested at the Brig o’ Dread. The Fried–Young Tradition version uses ‘fire and fleet’ and omits the Brig o’ Dread; Pentangle’s does precisely the

opposite.

Pentangle seem to have learned the basis of the song from the Young Tradition, but when they came to record it, to have used a set of lyrics from a different source. Specifically, there is reason to suppose that the source was Robert Graves's 1927 *The English Ballad*.² The reasons for this hypothesis are, firstly, availability: published some forty years previously, Graves's collection remained a well-circulated and accessible collection of folk lyrics. Furthermore, a revised edition, entitled *English and Scottish Ballads*, was published in 1957, only twelve years prior to the recording. Secondly, convenience: although Electric Folk preserved the tradition of ballad-seeking from antiquated or oral sources, it was not regarded with the same fetishistic purity as by the more pedantic elements of the folk revival. The musicians of Electric Folk straddled, sometimes uneasily, the boundary between traditional performer and modern rock-star. While it is possible to suppose that Pentangle unearthed a long-forgotten version of the 'Lyke Wake Dirge' from a dusty manuscript or venerable rustic, it is more probable that, recalling the tune learned from the Young Tradition but not the lyrics, they used the lyrics found, divorced of music, in a popular modern anthology.

More tellingly still, Graves's version is not a simple replication of an older version but a synthesis of two sources: Walter Scott's *Border Minstrelsy* and Richard Blakeborough's *Wit, Character, Folklore and Customs of the North Riding*; yet the Pentangle lyrics follow it almost exactly. In the instances in which they do not, such as the aforementioned 'When from hence away art passed', which in Graves is 'When *thou* from hence away art passed' [italics added], the differences are more suggestive of omissions and alterations introduced by McShee the singer than of an alternative text: the omission of the subject in this instance, for example, is syntactically untenable. Any literate textual recorder would observe and correct it. In the immediate oral presentation of the song, however, it goes unnoticed. Of course, this inference equally means it is hard to determine whether the likely source was *The English Ballad* or *English and Scottish Ballads*, since the

only lyrical difference is that the former gives ‘fire and sleet’, with a note observing that ‘sleet’ is probably a corruption of ‘selte’ – salt – whilst the latter gives ‘selte’. McShee sings ‘sleet’, but simply speaking both lines aloud indicates the greater ease of this variant for a singer, quite possibly the source of the corruption in the first place.

From the practical perspective, there is little to choose between the two editions. Graves notes in his 1957 preface, ‘Ballads are nobody’s property, and if careless singers or illiterate printers have claimed the right to spoil them, who can deny us the right to guess how the originals went?’³ Graves was not merely a poet, but a poet with intuitive and learned prosody well suited to improving upon the existing, sometimes inelegant, versions of ballads transmitted by oral tradition. This, he rightly suggests, distinguishes the active poet from the purely academic scholar: ‘Not even the scholars – though they seldom risk a guess themselves.’ Graves’s scepticism about the academicising of British folk song is lightly worn, but underpins both anthologies. These are living, usable songs, not relics preserved statically. His lament in the 1927 preface, ‘This book is really incomplete without the music: unfortunately it has not been found practicable to include it’ (p. 17), only emphasises the status of both volumes as compromised in their purpose. In such an instance as Pentangle’s, where a version of the tune is known, they offer a richer and more rewarding set of accompanying lyrics, but they cannot stand alone as a practical tool for the transmission of songs.

Once Graves’s role as an editor is considered alongside that of his role as translator, however, it becomes clear that this compromised purpose is far more deeply embedded than by mere publisher’s reluctance to include accompanying music. The prefaces are fascinating, but speak from an editor himself uncertain of the purpose of his own anthology. The preface of the 1927 edition (as I shall continue to refer to it, though it is dated 1925) runs to twenty-nine pages and is, in essence, a manifesto for the place of traditional folk song within the turbulent post-First World War world. Indeed, *The English Ballad* might reasonably

be seen as the publication of an essay accompanied by textual versions of a number of folk songs. By 1957, he has substantially revised his critical viewpoint, and the preface to *English and Scottish Ballads* omits most of the earlier material. In its place, however, there is no fresh statement of critical intent; rather, the preface concentrates almost exclusively on the history of the ballad, and on the necessary observations on text selection. This new preface runs to scarcely twenty pages, and even that length is only reached as a result of far more extensive quotation from ballad versions.

There is not, of course, anything unusual in a critic revising his opinion over a span of three decades. However, the preface of *The English Ballad* is in many respects its *raison d'être*; shorn of that, the collection becomes anomalous, purposeless – too incomplete for the practicing musician, too modernised and populist for the scholar, too esoteric for the casual reader. To repudiate the 1927 volume is understandable, but to devote effort and resources to such a substantial and compromised revision appears wholly counter-intuitive. This is, however, a deliberately obtuse consideration of the 1957 volume – whilst in 1927 Graves's critical assessments of the intersection between modernity and tradition might be confined to an essay, they now required a book of their own. *English and Scottish Ballads* is no longer a stand-alone collection, but a lightly annotated companion piece to a work published eight years earlier: *The White Goddess*. The source material – textual and traditional – suggested by *The White Goddess* is, of course, vast, but these British ballads are prominent, and it seems likely that a reader encountering the references to them in *The White Goddess* and moved to seek out versions elsewhere would turn first to a volume compiled by the same author. *English and Scottish Ballads* appears to have been amended from the 1927 text to fulfil such a function better.

In one of the few fresh sections introduced to the 1957 preface, Graves notes that 'The world of folk songs and ballads is a savage and mysterious one; indeed, a great many of them, though disguised in Christian dress, belong originally to the ancient pagan

witch cult – or “Old Religion” (p. viii). This allusion refers the reader back to Graves’s brief discussion of ballads in *The White Goddess*, which poses the question more starkly: ‘Is Christianity a suitable religion for the poet? And if not, is there any alternative?’⁴ Within the complicated history of *The White Goddess*, the defining feature of the ballad tradition is the cultural connection it embeds, as a vestige of the society enjoyed by the original poet, ‘the leader of a totem-society of religious dancers’. The emphasis is upon the symbiotic connection between poet and community, which modernity has sought to disestablish, yet the special status of the poet remains foremost. There is an overwhelming unity of purpose to *The White Goddess*, into which *English and Scottish Ballads* is co-opted, yet this comes at a cost. The 1927 preface lacks *The White Goddess*’s originality and unity of thought, but against this must be weighed its greater practicality of insight.

The 1927 preface is poignantly soaked through with the events and aftermath of the First World War. It is perhaps this keenly felt personal history that helped persuade Graves that the longer preface had become outdated, or at least, that its historical context was too specific, and thus it should be discarded. Yet while the shock and immediacy of the late cataclysm clearly colours the historical context which Graves employs, his reading of the new modern society proves remarkably prescient. He identifies the key element of the ‘ballad’ as its communal composition, which he ascribes in the first instance to the functioning of the group mind. His anthropology is, from a twenty-first century vantage point, suspect: his reliance on William MacDougall’s group mind theory draws it uncomfortably close to theories of eugenics which are antithetical to Graves’s social criticism. Had, for example, Lévi-Strauss’s work been available to him, his anthropological foundation would have been far sturdier. Yet it is testament to the good reasoning of his conclusions that they retain structural integrity even as their foundations are undermined. He charts the development of ballad composition from the ‘chorus-leader’ to the bard, who is ‘definitely outside the group’ and has become ‘a

professional' (p. 15).

This is a significant alteration of emphasis from *The White Goddess*, which assumes the special status of the poet-creator is a *fait accompli*. In the 1927 preface, communal composition remains achievable even within the modern world, and indeed, the war offered Graves first hand examples of this. This leads him to a conclusion with strikingly enduring cultural currency:

One of the reasons why people talk so little now about the surprising social changes that temporarily appeared during the late War, is that they are bewildered and ashamed to think how often they sank their individualities into the national, local, or regional group-mind: for to keep one's individuality is by most Englishmen, at any rate of the educated classes, considered to be somehow a greater thing than good citizenship. This is the fundamental difference between primitive and modern society, that under civilization the community has broken up into a number of individual centres loosely bound by bureaucratic administration and settles its disputes or common-policy by majority-voting or bayonet-superiority. In politics this individualistic idea is expressed by the general horror of socialism and communism, in religion by profuse sectarianism, while in poetry and music [...] about the only quality which modern critics agree to acknowledge necessary is 'individuality,' which usually implies the poet's bid for personal ascendancy over the slower-moving part of the community. (p. 11)

Without supposing to co-opt Graves into a Marxist critical rubric, it is nevertheless worth acknowledging that there is much here which fits well; most notably the acknowledged distinction

between ancient and modern which does not elevate the former as a bucolic impossible-ideal alternative to the latter, but uses it to inform its discontent with the specific iteration of modernity on display. There is considerable prescience too in Graves's assessment of the artistic trajectory likely to occur in the nascent Soviet Union. Questioning whether 'Russia is a truly communal state' or rather 'a despotism unwillingly borne by the people', he nevertheless acknowledges that if 'communism can become a habit, communal art may be expected as readily as communal ploughing' (p. 16). Whilst unequivocally no Bolshevik, Graves's deliberation and his wartime experiences engender in the 1927 preface a radicalism of thought which assumes a natural succession within the peculiar British artistic socialism espoused by Blake, Morris, and Wilde. *The White Goddess* can claim a far lesser stake in such a heritage.

This is not simply an issue of expressing a critical preference for Graves's earlier or later stance: the 1927 edition was not only radical, but practical in a manner which finds resonance with the later development of British folk tradition. In an oddity which perfectly illustrates 'the stagnant development of the second English folk revival' alluded to by Swears, when *English and Scottish Ballads* was published in 1957 it attracted critical ire not from the scholars whom it consciously slighted, but from those who supposed themselves continuers of the very tradition Graves celebrated. 'Mr Graves knows that ballads were sung,' one William Montgomery noted in the *Journal of the English Folk Dance and Song Society*. 'He is not aware that they are still sung.'⁵ It is a strange and petty-minded review, symptomatic of a mindset which seeks to turn tradition into dogma in a forlorn attempt to avert the all-pervasive influence of modernity. Meanwhile, from the still-segregated United States, the musics which had developed from the African-American folk tradition were popularised by young, mostly white musicians with electric guitars, who were finding fame on both sides of the Atlantic. Rock 'n' Roll was happening.

'[T]hose of us who are most critical of modern life,' wrote

Marshall Berman in *All That is Solid Melts Into Air*, ‘need modernism the most, to show us where we are and how we can begin to change our circumstances and ourselves’.⁶ A living tradition, such as Graves recognised in folk song, could not be an inert bulwark against the full weight of history, but it could, as it always had, aid people to locate themselves within the confused mass of modernity. Electric Folk, borrowing, adapting, combining the vibrant newness of rock ‘n’ roll with self-conscious *antiquism*—a reflexive adoption of the emblems and modes of past times to emphasise progressive modernity, analogous to today’s Steampunk—forged something with a cultural relevance and vitality far greater than that which could be mustered by the retrograde interiority of the staid revivalists. Pentangle, eschewing individual pre-eminence in favour of a group identity, and an American blues lexical register in favour of antiquated Yorkshire dialect, in many ways embody the profound and vital newness which Graves recognised as precisely the cultural function of a healthy tradition, a demonstration of Berman’s famous paradox, ‘to be fully modern is to be anti-modern’ (p. 14).

As a recorder and critic of the folk song tradition Graves was unabashedly a modernist. His anthology, in both its 1927 and 1957 incarnations, was on an intrinsic level a response to the brutal and brutalising modernities of the First World War. If, in its revised, post-*White Goddess* incarnation it becomes more squeamish about meeting the modern head-on in an acknowledgedly futile effort to divert its course, this too must be seen as a regrettable symptom of the modernist tendency. As Berman emphasizes, ‘modernists do not try and blend or merge themselves with their past [...] but rather to “bring it all back” into the past, that is, to bring to bear on their own past the selves they have become in the present’ (p. 333). For Graves in 1957, the unwillingness of the present self to persevere with the ideal of community radicalism espoused in the 1927 edition and the transition to the more gradual ‘radicalism of the individual’ found in *The White Goddess* are in themselves modernist gestures. The 1927 preface reads as a prototype for much of the cultural momentum of the 1960s, in particular the

Electric Folk movement. In other words, it was a work whose time had come, and in the relentless regenerative cycle of modernism Graves was far from alone in judging time having come as effectually identical to time already past.

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NOTES

¹ Britta Sweers, *Electric Folk: The Changing Face of English Traditional Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 84.

² Robert Graves, *The English Ballad: A Short Critical Survey* (London: Ernest Benn, 1927), p. 41.

³ Robert Graves, *English and Scottish Ballads* (London: Heinemann, 1957), p. xxv.

⁴ Robert Graves, *The White Goddess* (London: Faber, 1952), p. 422.

⁵ William Montgomery, 'Review of *English and Scottish Ballads*,' in *Journal of the English Folk Song and Dance Society* (December 1958), *Folkinfo*, <<http://www.joe-offer.com/folkinfo/songs/467.html>> [accessed 11 October 2013].

⁶ Marshall Berman, *All that is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (London: Verso, 1984), p. 128.