

## Text and Memory in the “Oral” Transmission of a Crime and Execution Ballad: “The Suffolk Tragedy” in England and Australia

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The murder of Maria Marten by her lover, William Corder, in May 1827 became the object of intense public interest and frenzied media attention immediately upon the discovery of the body eleven months later in the subsequently notorious “red barn” where he had buried her. While popular interest persisted much longer—and indeed continues—the case itself culminated with Corder’s trial and execution by public hanging in August 1828 and prompted the publication of no fewer than nine different broadside ballads—sensational journalistic accounts in the form of songs printed on a single sheet and sold cheaply at stalls or by itinerant ballad-mongers.<sup>1</sup> Two of these songs offer significant insights into the nature of oral tradition; having been printed, sold, sung, remembered, and passed on by word of mouth for many decades, they have subsequently been recorded from country singers, starting with the first great wave of folksong collection in the decades immediately prior to the First World War and continuing on into the 1990s. This situation does not represent the “pure” oral tradition sometimes encountered in the field, as the songs were composed in writing and initially diffused in print, and some of the singers were undoubtedly literate, but this interlacing of literate and oral transmission has been the norm in English folk tradition throughout its recorded history. Juxtaposing the words of the songs as recorded from singing with the texts of the originals as published permits us to determine exactly what the processes of memorization, performance from memory, and voice-to-ear transmission can do over time to verbal narrative material originally in the form of texts.

Of those two songs, “The Murder of Maria Marten” (Roud 215), with issues from at least six London printers, several more from the provinces, and yet others without imprint, was by far the more successful. Its preeminent market penetration is confirmed by the score or more recordings of the song, about half with texts, from folk tradition. In 1979 the versions of this

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<sup>1</sup> “The Murder of Maria Marten” (Roud 215); “A Copy of Verses on the Execution of Wm. Corder” (Roud V482); “Wm. Corder” (Roud V484); “The Red Barn Tragedy” (Roud V483, possibly of Scottish origin); another “Copy of Verses” amidst the prose documents on the *Execution and Confession of W. Corder, For the Murder of Mary Martin in the Red Barn [sic]* (Roud V481); “The Suffolk Tragedy” (Roud 18814, also printed as “The Red Barn Murder”). (See Pettitt forthcoming for a comparative analysis of all of these.) Three further ballads are listed below; see note 23. Where feasible, individual songs covered in this study are identified by the respective numbers assigned to them in the now standard indexes established by Steve Roud and accessible via the website of the Vaughan Williams Memorial Library maintained by the English Folk Dance and Song Society: the Roud Folksong Index (Roud 2012a) and the Roud Broadside Index (Roud 2012b). Songs featuring in both indexes have the same number in each. These indexes supply specifics on individual broadside printings and recordings from oral tradition (and their publication); additional details are provided as needed in what follows.

song that were known at that time were analyzed by Flemming Andersen and myself (1979); however, the song now merits revisiting in the light of new versions recovered and new insights established in the interim. In the meantime, the present study explores the evolution of the other “red barn” ballad to make it into oral tradition, “The Suffolk Tragedy” (Roud 18814). In quantitative terms its impact has been far less impressive—three broadside printings and four singers—but by another criterion, geographical diffusion, it did much better, with two of those four singers being natives of New South Wales.<sup>2</sup> In focusing mainly on these Australian variants, this study continues and completes (with occasional retrospective corrections) an earlier study of the transmission of “The Suffolk Tragedy” presented in this journal (Pettitt 2009) but for reasons of space restricted originally to the longer of the two English versions. It is also an opportunity more generally to draw attention to the significance of its Australian diaspora for the study of English folksong, a significance which is founded on the strength of Australian tradition, ensured by the energy and professionalism of the folklorists who recorded it, and enabled both by their generosity in sharing their material and by the efficiency and courtesy of the National Library of Australia in respectively curating and facilitating access to its holdings.

### “The Suffolk Tragedy”: Broad sides

It will not be a major factor in what follows, but is a necessary, final setting of the scene to insist that the composition of the original version of “The Suffolk Tragedy” (as with all the other ballads on the case) will have involved more than merely versifying the available information. The news broadsides, not least in the crime-and-execution category, were in the business—later taken over by what we now call the tabloid press—of sensationalizing and emotionalizing the simple facts of criminal cases to which the regular newspapers of the time generally restricted themselves. When possible, the main protagonist of the narrative was not the victim of the crime, but its perpetrator, who now, arrested, tried, and condemned, faced the awful consequences of his actions. Furthermore, the Maria Marten case, as revealed in court and reported in the press, was easily within striking-distance of a well-established paradigm, the Murdered Sweetheart Ballad: “well-established,” that is, in the sense of a proven money-making track-record that issued a standing invitation to adjust the facts of a given case to meet its conventions. In the case of “The Suffolk Tragedy,” for example, this modification includes attributing to Maria Marten a non-existent pregnancy at the time of her death, and it may well be that adjusting the narrative to the sub-generic paradigm helps explain the relative success of the two ballads recovered from oral tradition.

Our particular song was issued under the full title “The Suffolk Tragedy, Or, The Red Barn Murder” by Thomas Ford of Chesterfield (active as a broadside printer until 1830 or 1832) and with the same title (give or take a comma or capital or two) in a version without imprint,

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<sup>2</sup> The “Maria Martini” [*sic*] written down from the singing of Frances Repetto during the Tristan da Cunha islanders’ involuntary exile in Britain following the volcanic eruption on the island in 1961 (Munch 1961:221-22) is actually a quite different song about a separate sweetheart-murder case, “The Berkshire Tragedy” (Roud 263), in the Irish-influenced “Wexford Girl” sub-tradition.

further distinguished by a woodcut depicting the murderer; a third, entitled “The Red Barn Murder of Maria Marten,” was issued by Plant of Nottingham (active until 1838).<sup>3</sup>

These three printings offer what is effectively the same text, with the same number of stanzas arranged in the same order.<sup>4</sup> Despite their different titles, the verbal discrepancies between the versions of Ford and Plant are sporadic and limited, the most substantive being of the order of “She straight went to” versus “She straightway to,” “buried under ground” versus “underneath the ground,” and “the City of London” versus “the City of London Town” (Ford’s version is given first in each case). Where they differ, the Ford version, measured by conventional grammatical expectations, is the more “correct” and will be the version quoted in what follows.<sup>5</sup> The version without imprint<sup>6</sup> differs from both of them in a number of verbal and typographical idiosyncrasies within individual lines, which on closer inspection are clearly the result of squeezing the text to fit the sheet’s narrow columns by reducing the number of letters. A variety of devices are deployed: “18” used for “eighteen;” “William” consistently abbreviated to “Wm.,” and the omission of (mainly) dispensable short words, including the all but total substitution of “the barn” for “the red barn.” Even though its illustrative woodcut derives ultimately from the very earliest of the journalistic reports on the case, it seems unlikely therefore that this print is closer to any lost original issue than those of Ford and Plant, and the fact that this portrait of Corder is actually printed sideways across the sheet confirms that this unknown printer was having problems with format.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Dates for the printers are based on the Street Literature Printers’ Register that (like the Roud song indexes noted above) is now part of the Vaughan Williams Memorial Library “Full English” database: see <http://www.vwml.org/search/search-street-lit#>. The London printer James Catnach issued a sheet headed *The Suffolk Tragedy, or The Horrors of the Red Barn*, containing both a prose account and an untitled song (copy at St. Bride Printing Library Broadside Collection, catalogue no. S750), but it is a variant of his *Execution and Confession of W. Corder; For the Murder of Mary Martin in the Red Barn*, and the song is accordingly the same as its “Copy of Verses” (Roud Broadside Index no. V481) mentioned above.

<sup>4</sup> In what follows, whatever the stanzaic arrangements in which the broadsides were printed or the oral versions transcribed, they will be quoted, referenced, and measured in terms of what is manifestly their basic performance unit—the ballad quatrain—of which these broadsides have 24. The quatrain comprises four lines with four, three, four, and three vocal stresses (musical pulses) respectively and employing an ABCB rhyming scheme.

<sup>5</sup> Quotation and discussion will be on the basis of *The Suffolk Tragedy; or, the Red Barn Murder* (Chesterfield: Thomas Ford, n.d.), Derby City Libraries, Local Studies Library, accession no. 60374, Thomas Ford’s Ballads, no. 121 (by kind permission). Plant’s version has been examined on the basis of Cambridge University Library, Madden Collection 20 (Country Printers 5) [accessed on Vaughan Williams Memorial Library microfilm no. 87], no. 116.

<sup>6</sup> This version is available in Oxford’s Bodleian Library, Johnson Ballads 2889, online at <http://bodley24.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/cgi-bin/acwweng/ballads/image.pl?ref=Johnson+Ballads+2889&id=22763.gif&seq=1&size=1/>.

<sup>7</sup> This paragraph corrects the discussion of the relationship between the three printings in Pettitt 2009:435 n. 9, which had not spotted the motivation for the distinction between “barn” and “red barn.”

## Oral Versions: England

While not the main topic of this study, the English oral versions may be briefly glanced at as a means of introducing the song, as a basis for comparison with the way Australian tradition has treated it, and as an occasion for re-stating what is at stake in the analysis.

In relation to the broadside original with its 24 stanzas, the fullest of the two English derivatives is the ten-stanza version of Freda Palmer of Whitney in Oxfordshire, as recorded by Mike Yates in 1972 (it can be heard in Hall 1998, item 12).<sup>8</sup> Substantially more reduced is the five-stanza version collected (without melody) by G. B. Gardiner from the singing of George Digweed of Micheldelver, Hampshire, in 1906.<sup>9</sup> There follows a schematic stanza-by-stanza survey of how these two versions treat the original in terms of its overall narrative structure, the use of italics signaling which stanzas include direct speech by a character in the narrative, a factor that seems to be relevant in transmission:

### BROADSIDE

### ENGLISH ORAL TRAD.

#### Palmer      Digweed

#### *INCIPIIT*

1. Listen: it's a dreadful tragedy
2. of cold-blooded cruelty; but true.

#### *THE AFFAIR*

3. Maria Marten of Polstead
4. loved a farmer's son;
5. *pregnant, she asks him to fix the wedding day*
6. *and he reassures her.*

10. [i. e., sings this stanza last]

#### *THE MURDER*

7. Maria is dressed in men's clothes;      1.
8. *her mother, concerned, asks why:*      2.
9. *Maria says she'll meet William at the barn,*      3.
10. *and they will be married in Ipswich.*      4.
11. She goes, but eleven months later      5.

1.

#### *THE DISCOVERY*

12. her mother dreams she is buried in the barn,
13. *and asks Maria's father to take his spade,*      6      2. and 3.
14. *and with a neighbor dig up the floor.*      7.      3. (cont.)

<sup>8</sup> Palmer's Stanza 1 was not included in the recording as published "for technical reasons" but is supplied by Yates 2002:3. A further unpublished recording by Steve Roud from 1978 has a virtually identical text (personal communication, January 25, 2005). The recording from Hall 1998, item 12, is appended (with permission) to Pettitt 2009:441.

<sup>9</sup> London, Vaughan Williams Memorial Library, English Folk Dance and Song Society, Gardiner MSS., H214, quoted below with the permission of Librarian Malcolm Taylor. The original material is accessible via the "Take Six" digital archive at the website of the Vaughan Williams Memorial Library: <http://library.efds.org/archives/cgi-bin/search.cgi>.

- |   |    |    |
|---|----|----|
| 15. They dig where she told them to         | 8. | 4. |
| 16. and find a mangled body tied in a sack; | 9. | 5. |
| 17. the clothes (listed)                    |    |    |
| 18. identify the corpse as Maria’s.         |    |    |

***THE JUDICIAL AFTERMATH***

19. A warrant is issued for Corder’s arrest;
20. he is apprehended and imprisoned;
21. tried;
22. *found guilty*;
23. *condemned to be hanged*;
24. *the Judge urges repentance*.

With regard to the narrative, it is in accordance with the general trend for other ballads in the Murdered Sweetheart genre (including “The Murder of Maria Marten”) in English folk tradition that neither singer shows any interest in the judicial aftermath of the murder—typically the arrest, trial, condemnation, the lover-murderer’s regrets, the grief of his family, and the anticipated or actual hanging (Pettitt 2010). As a result of this curtailment, our song—which as originally published modulated decisively into the tragedy of a young man grievously punished for a dire fault—in performance sustains its opening focus on the tragedy of the innocent young woman whose misguided trust in a seducer proves fatal.

As can be seen, there are no additions at the stanzaic level, and the two singers—despite their separation in time, location, and gender—agree on essentials: Digweed sings nothing that is not also sung by Palmer. Meanwhile other subtractions in transmission, not least of the introductory remarks (*incipit*) and the opening moves of the narrative, result in a focus on the central, intense interactions between the principals. This focus is enhanced by the relatively high survival rate of stanzas containing direct speech that substantially shifts the essentially journalistic report towards the impersonal, efficient, climactic, and dramatic narrative style more characteristic of folk ballads, a tendency discernible in the oral tradition of broadsides more generally (Pettitt 1997).

This macro-scale traditionalization is echoed at the more detailed level by reformulations that produce both the verbal repetition patterns and the more formulaic phraseology also familiar from the vernacular aesthetic of traditional ballads.<sup>10</sup> The Freda Palmer version having been comprehensively dealt with from this perspective in the earlier study (Pettitt 2009), a brief glance at Digweed’s performance may suffice by way of illustration. It is short enough to be quoted in full, juxtaposed with the relevant stanzas of the original text (italics indicating potentially significant deviation, most of which is discussed in what follows):

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<sup>10</sup>For a succinct summary of folk ballad characteristics, see Gerould 1974 [1932]:11, 105-07.

**BROADSIDE**

11. She straight went to the Red Barn,  
and never more was seen,  
Until eleven months were past,  
the mother dreamed a dream,
12. That her *daughter was murdered* by  
the man she loved so dear,  
In the Red Barn, beneath the floor,  
her body was buried there.
13. Three times she dreamed  
the same dream,  
then to the father said,  
  
I beg you will rise instantly,  
and with you take your spade,
14. Our neighbour with his pickaxe  
will bear you company,  
To the far corner of the Red Barn  
where our daughter does lie,
15. They went to the Red Barn,  
to the corner they were told,  
The same spot the mother dream'd  
they raised the floor and *mould*,
16. When they had dug  
eighteen inches deep,  
the body there they found  
Tied in a sack, and mangled  
with many a ghastly wound.
17. Her shawl, her bonnet and pelisse  
in the grave were found,  
That eleven months had been  
buried under ground.

**DIGWEED 1906**

1. *Maria Martin* went to the red barn  
and *never was seen ni more*  
Till eleven months *was gone and past*  
her mother dreamed a dream
2. She dreamed that same dream  
*three times over*  
and to her husband *told*  
*Your daughter she is murdered*  
*and covered up with mould*
3. I'd have you rise  
and take your spade  
*and then to haste away*
- The red barn at the further corn  
you'll *find her body lay*
4. *The very first stroke as they struck*  
  
*they howked up the mould*  
Her *apron, bonnet and spencer*  
*and furbelows did behold*
5. They dug *full*  
eighteen inches deep  
and then her body found  
Tied in a sack and mangled  
with many a ghastly wound.

Amidst the overall stability, qualified by disruption of the stanzaic structure, internal verbal contamination has in two instances enhanced through echoing formulations the conceptual balance of the original between the mother’s spoken prophecy of where the body is and the father’s action that confirms it:

she is	“covered <i>up</i> with <i>mould</i> ” (2.4)
and discovered when they	“howked <i>up</i> the <i>mould</i> ” (4.2);
the prediction	“you’ll find <i>her body</i> lay” (3.4)
is fulfilled when they	“and then <i>her body</i> found” (5.2).

Modulation to more traditional formulation includes “never was seen n[o] more” (1.2), “was gone and past” (1.3), “three times over” (2.1), and “full eighteen inches deep” (5.1). The traditional-sounding “and then to haste away” (Digweed 3.2) of the mother’s instructions is actually a contamination from an earlier stanza in the original (10.2), now lost, in which Maria tells her mother of her plans. In the opposite direction, the list of clothes found with the body (4.3-4) is revised quite substantially from what would have been the next stanza had it been retained (17.1); it contributes to an in fact quite effective demonstration of stanza-building competence.

Symptomatically it is this same stanza that includes Digweed’s one entirely new line, “The very first stroke as they struck” (4.1). This line belongs to a familiar formula-complex in traditional balladry in which an action is narrated with a cognate noun and verb, perhaps most familiar as “The first *step* she *stepped* . . .” (Andersen 1985:265-71). The variant with stroke and struck is what Andersen properly distinguishes as a “fight-phrase” (1985:271 n. 58), less at home here perhaps than in “Little Musgrove” (no. 81 in Child 1965) at the beginning of the duel between Musgrove and the husband of the lady who has seduced him: “The first stroke that Little Musgrave struck.” In this instance, however, it may well be that George Digweed himself, rather than some predecessor in the chain of transmission, was responsible for the change; he also introduced the phrase “the very first stroke” with even less appropriateness into another song in his repertoire, “The Molecatcher” (Roud 1052),<sup>11</sup> and at exactly the same point in the narrative as in “Little Musgrove,” the confrontation after a husband bursts in on his wife and her lover.

Taken together, and in juxtaposition with the broadside original, the two English versions confirm and further illustrate the trend of earlier results from experiments of this kind. English folk tradition involves the performance of verbal material retrieved from memory rather than improvisation anew at each performance on the basis of a remembered narrative skeleton (see Pettitt 1997). But repeated performance by a sequence of singers in a chain of transmission cumulatively produces substantial change in which subtraction of material not essential for the progress of the narrative tends to outweigh addition, and when addition or substitution—the subtraction of material and the addition of something else to replace it—does occur, the new

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<sup>11</sup> Vaughan Williams Memorial Library, George Gardiner Collection, GG/1/5/218, accessible through the VWML archive “Take Six” at <http://library.efds.org/archives/cgi-bin/search.cgi>.

material is traditional in the sense of comprising formulas or commonplace formulations from the song tradition as a whole, or lines or phrases from other, particular songs known to a singer.

Furthermore, the two English versions of the song represent, respectively, the two major stages that, according to the thesis of Tristram P. Coffin (1961), can be identified in the long-term trajectory of a given song subjected to these processes. While Freda Palmer's version, as demonstrated in my preceding study (2009), has brought the song to the point where it by and large conforms to the characteristics of the traditional ballad, Digweed's takes us a good deal further. It should not be dismissed as a fragment—or as an incoherent and arbitrary jumble of stanzas and phrases—but appreciated as a reduction (in the sense of a boiling down) to what Coffin termed an “emotional core,” those stanzas or lines that contain the essence of the song concerned—except that what we have here is perhaps better characterized as the “narrative core” (or even “dramatic core”) of “The Suffolk Tragedy,” preserving the irreducible sequence of disappearance, revelation, and discovery. It has a coherent beginning, thanks to Digweed's providing the name of the protagonist in his first line, “*Maria Martin* went to the red barn;” a fragment would have retained the original's “*She* straight went to the Red Barn” (11.1). There is a middle (the dream), and there is an end (to the girl's tragedy); the Digweed tradition agreeing with the Palmer tradition that the discovered body was “Tied in a sack and mangled / with many a ghastly wound” (repeated verbatim from the broadside in both cases) makes for an effective climactic image.

The remainder of the essay will explore whether this scenario for the impact of folk tradition on narrative song will also hold good for its Australian extension, whether it will need to be adjusted, or whether there are special factors at work in relation to the Australian variants.

### **Oral Versions: Australia**

Reports of the Maria Marten case deriving from the English press were published in Australian newspapers for the most part just as soon as contemporary means of communication allowed (for instance, *Sydney Gazette* 1828:3; *Sydney Monitor*, 1828:3), but there are no signs that this attention in the press gave rise to any local ballads on the case; the reports will at most have whetted the appetite for “The Suffolk Tragedy” when it did arrive. And since there is no evidence that “The Suffolk Tragedy” was either printed or sold in Australia, we must assume that the song was transported there as either a broadsheet in the baggage or a song in the memory of an earlier immigrant.

Both of the singers from whom the song was recorded were from New South Wales, and both were recorded singing it twice: Sally Sloane of Lithgow (in 1957 and 1976) and Carrie Milliner (née Bobbin) of Eden (two performances in 1995). The dates rule out any possibility that they had access to a broadside, inviting speculation on the exact line of transmission by which the song reached them. This line of enquiry has little to offer in the case of Sally Sloane, who is reported to have learned many of her songs via her mother from her maternal grandmother, Sarah Alexander, who before emigrating in 1838 lived in Belfast, Northern Ireland (Low 2003). None of the songs on the Maria Marten case has been encountered—on broadside

or in oral tradition—in Ireland. Sally Sloane also mentioned half a dozen others from whom she had songs, but pursuit of their repertoires or backgrounds would be unlikely to bear fruit.

Meanwhile a detailed genealogy of the Bobbin family traces the direct descent of Carrie Milliner and her several singing siblings from a Jeffrey Bobbin, who was born in Burnham Market, Norfolk, in 1815 and emigrated to New South Wales in 1849 (Smith and Harvey 2012; Carrie is no. 128, seventh child of fourth-generation Henry Bobbin, no. 42). This Jeffrey Bobbin would have been a teenager in England back in 1828 when the Maria Marten case was breaking news and the subject of intense media interest, and it may be relevant that most of the oral versions of that other red barn ballad, the “Murder of Maria Marten,” were recorded in East Anglia, doubtless because of the local interest of the events in Suffolk. If our song benefited from the same interest, then it is at least possible that it belonged to Bobbin family tradition throughout their time in Australia.

Recordings of Australian singers performing a song that originated as an English broadside can of course be approached from various perspectives. To rephrase a question posed in another post-colonial context by Richard Dorson (1978), are they [British] “folklore in Australia,” or “Australian folklore”? The quest for a distinct Australian folk song tradition (discussed, for example, in Dodsworth 2010), in addition to the recording of new “bush” songs created locally, would legitimately also explore how Australian singers handled their British heritage. Which English, Scottish, or Irish songs proved viable in the new environment? Were imported songs changed to achieve such viability? How was unchanged material reinterpreted? While the texts and analyses offered in what follows may provide material that could contribute to such a discussion, because of its point of departure and its predominantly formal focus, the perspective here is rather to see Australian folk tradition as an extension of English. For present purposes the Australian singers are re-colonized as English people who just happen to live a long way away.

Nonetheless, if for technical reasons rather than national, analysis of the Australian variants of “The Suffolk Tragedy” will involve more and other challenges than was the case with the English versions. Both Australian singers were recorded commenting on the song, and both, if in significantly different ways, signaled an awareness—indeed frustration—that there was something inadequate in the song as they sang it. While students of song tradition should not dismiss a performance as fragmentary by failing to meet their alien, literate, and literary criteria (Constantine and Porter 2003), in the case of Sally Sloane and Carrie Milliner the dissatisfaction is presumably by their own vernacular standards.

Juxtaposing the Australian oral versions with the broadside original therefore has potentially two distinct—indeed diametrically opposed and perhaps ultimately incompatible—purposes. As with the English versions, the exercise may provide insight into how this particular oral tradition handles song texts, but it is tempting to deploy that same broadside original to establish how the song would have been at some earlier, more vigorous stage in the singer’s knowledge of it, or in the family tradition of which she was the final recipient. Since this methodology incurs the danger of circular argument, the discussion to follow will at least attempt to distinguish between analyzing the song as they actually sang it and reconstructing the song as it would have been sung at some earlier stage. The latter would be a sterile, philological exercise if undertaken by the researcher alone, but in both cases the attempt is initiated by the singers

themselves. Ultimately, not least for those interested in the mixed oral-literate transmission more characteristic of English folksong than a pristine “oral tradition,” watching (hearing) the singers themselves struggling to reconstruct what they or their family once knew may be the most interesting and valuable feature of that particular exercise.

Otherwise the two Australian versions duplicate the pattern of their English counterparts, one exhibiting a length that might be expected of a song evolving into traditional, “ballad” mode and the other perhaps qualifying (at least as sung) as a reduction to the song’s narrative “core.” And for technical reasons the latter will be examined first.

### Sally Sloane

We have available two separate recordings of the song as performed by Sally Sloane: by John Meredith in March 1957 (Sloane 1957) and by Warren Fahey in May 1976 (Sloane 1976<sup>12</sup>). Each performance encompassed the same three stanzas, with only a couple of verbal discrepancies, more a question of transcription than of what was sung (is it “on the road” or “long the road;” “her dream” or “a dream?”).



We may note the relationship of these stanzas to the song as a whole and the English oral derivatives by repeating the relevant sections of the schematic survey:

Sally Sloane sings “The Red Barn.” (See Sloane 1957 for attribution.)

#### BROADSIDE

#### ORAL TRADITION

##### ENGLISH      NSW

Palmer Digweed      Sloane

#### INCIPIT (1-2)

#### THE AFFAIR

- |   |     |  |
|---|-----|--|
| 3. Maria Marten of Polstead                             |     |  |
| 4. loved a farmer’s son;                                | 10. |  |
| 5. <i>pregnant, she asks him to fix the wedding day</i> |     |  |
| 6. <i>and he reassures her.</i>                         |     |  |

#### THE MURDER

- |   |          |    |
|---|----------|----|
| 7. Maria is dressed in men’s clothes;                 | 1.       |    |
| 8. <i>her mother, concerned, asks why:</i>            | 2.       |    |
| 9. <i>Maria says she’ll meet William at the barn,</i> | 3.       |    |
| 10. <i>and they will be married in Ipswich.</i>       | 4.       | 1. |
| 11. She goes, but eleven months later                 | 5.    1. | 2. |

#### THE DISCOVERY

- |  |  |    |
|--|--|----|
| 12. her mother dreams she is buried in the barn, |  | 3. |
|--|--|----|

<sup>12</sup> My thanks to Warren Fahey for his permission to quote this version in full.

- |  |    |            |
|--|----|------------|
| 13. and asks Maria's father to take his spade, | 6  | 2. and 3.  |
| 14. and with a neighbor dig up the floor.      | 7. | 3. (cont.) |
| 15. They dig where she told them to            | 8. | 4.         |
| 16. and find a mangled body tied in a sack     | 9. | 5.         |
| 17. the clothes (listed)                       |    |            |
| 18. identify the corpse as Maria's.            |    |            |

**THE JUDICIAL AFTERMATH (19-24)**

More even than Digweed's selection, Sloane's three consecutive stanzas might be said to capture the absolute narrative (and dramatic) core of the ballad, straddling the moments of disappearance and discovery, while also implying nearly all the rest of the narrative we need to know (with the now expected indifference to the judicial aftermath): the courtship, the pretended departure, the murder, and the discovery. This particular selection of three stanzas also pins down the core of the ballad in terms of place: as we shall see, the Red Barn is mentioned (at the end of a line) in each of the three stanzas: she will go there (st. 1); she goes there (st. 2); her body resides there (st. 3). And the same focusing on essentials is true of characters and their relationships. The Judge is long gone; the husband/father is excised completely; the lover is an object of affection in the first stanza and the cause of death in the third, but emphatically off-stage, thought of and dreamed of. This is at heart a ballad about women and their relationships. The only characters directly seen or heard are nameless women who are essentially defined by their relationship to each other through a key word in each stanza: "Oh mother" (1.1), "her mother" (2.4), and "her daughter" (3.1).<sup>13</sup> And the selection is also very neat and self-contained in formal terms: three stanzas, three characters, three references to the red barn, three invocations of dreaming ("dreamt . . . dream . . . dreamt"), three weeks between the disappearance and the dream; one stanza before the crime, one stanza after the crime, one in between for the transition.

At the verbal level the three stanzas are reproduced from the broadside with perhaps less reformulation than the English singers:

**BROADSIDE**

**SALLY SLOANE 1976**

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| <p>9. Mother! I am going to the Red Barn<br/>to meet my William dear<br/>His friends won't know me on the road,<br/>and when I do get there</p> <p>10. I'll put on my wedding robes,<br/>then we shall haste away,<br/>To Ipswich Town, to-morrow is fixed<br/>for our wedding day.</p> | <p>1. <i>Oh</i> mother <i>dear</i> I am going to the Red Barn<br/>To meet my William dear<br/><i>They</i> will not know me on the road<br/><i>Nor</i> when I <i>shall</i> get there.</p> |
|---|--|

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<sup>13</sup> The named exception is William, but he is defined in relation to one of the women as "my William" (Sloane 1.2).

- |  |  |
|--|--|
| <p>11. She straight went to the Red Barn,<br/>and never more was seen,<br/>Until eleven months were past,<br/>the mother dreamed a dream,</p>      | <p>2. <i>Straight away</i> she went to the <i>old</i> Red Barn<br/>And never more was seen<br/><i>When three long weary weeks had passed</i><br/><i>When her</i> mother dreamt <i>her</i> dream.</p> |
| <p>12. That her daughter was murdered by<br/>the man she loved so dear,<br/>In the Red Barn, beneath the floor,<br/>her body was buried there.</p> | <p>3. <i>She dreamt</i> her daughter was murdered<br/>By <i>the lad</i> she loved so <i>well</i><br/><i>At the very far corner of the red barn</i><br/>Her body there did <i>dwell</i>.</p>          |

Indeed, in one instance a verbal discrepancy is to be explained not by alteration in transmission, but by indebtedness to a variant form of the broadside: Sloane's "Straight away she went" presumably derives from the "straightway" of the Plant of Nottingham print, which differs in this from the Ford of Chesterfield text used for comparison here. And what seems to be a new formulation, "At the very far corner of the red barn" (3.4), has actually been shifted from a later but lost stanza (14.3), facilitated by the narrative connection between the mother's dream and her consequent instruction to her husband (a process we also saw in action in Digweed's version).

Compared to the English versions (Digweed and Palmer) there does seem to be less here by way of internal verbal contamination, and it is very small-scale: "*her* mother dreamt *her* dream" (2.4); "Mother *dear* . . . / . . . William *dear*" (1.1-2). Reformulation to a more traditional idiom is also on the level of single words—for instance, "lad" for "man" (3.2) and "the *old* Red Barn" (2.4). The latter may however be influenced by one or other of the popular songs invoking an "old red barn" (for example, Roud 15785, "The Cows are in the Clover;" Roud B109425, "The Old Red Barn").

External interference from another song certainly participates in Sally Sloane's most radical reformulation, in which the journalistic broadside's factually correct specification of the lapse of time between Maria's disappearance and her mother's dream, ". . . *eleven months* were past" (11.3), is replaced by "When *three long weary weeks* had passed" (2.3). Given the prevalence of threes in many forms of folk narrative, the change is itself a step in the direction of the traditional and may also have been influenced by the "three times" the dream was dreamed in an original line (13.1) that Sally Sloane partly remembered (see below). But this traditional law of three may merely have been the enabling context for the introduction of the specific formulation "three long weary weeks" from another song in Sally Sloane's recorded repertoire, "The Old Oak Tree Murder" (Roud 569; for text see Sloane 1976<sup>14</sup>). The connection in the singer's mind, conversely, will have been encouraged by the circumstance that the latter song is also about a murdered sweetheart, the phrase occurring at exactly the same point in the narrative and likewise referring to the anxiety of girl's mother. When her daughter fails to return from a tryst with her lover "beneath the old oak tree," she spends "three long weary weeks" looking for

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<sup>14</sup> Not to be confused with the one about tying "yellow ribbons" on an old oak tree, this song can be heard being sung by Sally Sloane on "Songs that Made Australia: Maids of Australia," part of a ten-program radio series broadcast in the early 1980s by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation. The program is available at [http://warrenfahey.com/audio\\_oz\\_songs-4.html](http://warrenfahey.com/audio_oz_songs-4.html), and this particular performance is found 3 minutes and 33 seconds into the broadcast.

her. “The Old Oak Tree Murder,” unlike “The Suffolk Tragedy,” probably was part of Sally Sloane’s heritage of Irish songs from her maternal grandmother: the Roud Indexes reveal both that two Dublin prints survive from the second half of the nineteenth century and that the song has been recorded from oral tradition in Northern Ireland.

Sally Sloane’s performance also manages to reveal the impact of the singing tradition in a more technical way: its reinforcement of the ballad stanza, corresponding to one singing through of the melody, as a narrative unit. The original song was printed in eight-line stanzas (or double ballad quatrains), and the text was evidently written with this arrangement in mind, as there are occasions where there is a run-on in sense between the last line of one ballad stanza and the first line of the next (that is, between the fourth and fifth lines of a textual eight-line stanza). But in the instance where this occurs in the material surviving as Sally Sloane’s version, the melodic (ballad-)stanza unit has asserted itself through reformulation affecting the syntax:

- |  |   |
|--|---|
| 11. ...<br>Until eleven months were past,<br>the mother dreamed a dream, | 2. ...<br>When three long weary weeks had passed<br>When her mother dreamt her dream. |
| 12. <i>That</i> her daughter was murdered<br>...                         | 3. <i>She dreamt</i> her daughter was murdered<br>...                                 |

Having sung them to two collectors at an interval of 19 years, these three stanzas can legitimately be appreciated as Sally Sloane’s rendition of the song, but she was explicitly aware that there was more. After her performance for Warren Fahey in 1976, she offered the following remarks (Sloane 1976; I have tabulated Warren Fahey’s transcript, supplied italics to identify song-fragments, and provided specification of their place in the original):

You know there are bits in it I can’t remember, where her body was <i>  tied up in a sack and mangled</i> <i>  with many a dreadful wound.</i>	[= broadside st. 16.3] [= broadside st. 16.4]
The cook, I think, mangled her up and put her in the bag. Her mother <i>  dreamt the same dream</i>	[= broadside st. 13.1]
for three weeks and <i>  the neighbour with his pickaxe</i> is part of it too.	[= broadside st. 14.1]
Anyhow they dug in the ground and <i>  there they found</i> where she was.	[= broadside st. 16.2]

The only erroneous assertion here (but an extravagant one) concerns the role of the cook as accessory. There is nothing in the broadside original to as much as hint at it, and it is hard to see by what logic some earlier version could have introduced this motif into the song. Perhaps a

murderous cook from some other popular narrative, sung or otherwise, has somehow intruded into her thinking about the song.<sup>15</sup> The detail of the mother dreaming the same dream “for three weeks” does not originate with the broadside either, but it is altogether plausible and may be a secondary effect of the contamination just discussed specifying three weeks as the period of Maria’s disappearance.

The remainder indicates that at some earlier stage Sloane’s version of the song (or the song as she heard it from another singer) included all or parts of three more stanzas from the original’s Discovery section. That they all come *after* the full stanzas Sally Sloane does perform suggests her memory became more vulnerable towards the end of the song. The indications are that, like the English versions, the narrative in this proto-Sloane version ended with the striking image of the uncovered body “tied in a sack and mangled”—these are the first and most complete of the lines that Sally Sloane recalls from the “bits” she does not remember fully. It is also striking that Sally Sloane does not even have faint memories of any of the stanzas prior to those she performs, suggesting that prior to this point the song had already modulated into something more resembling a traditional ballad, beginning in the fifth (or perhaps fourth) act. It may also be a symptom of traditionalization that (even including the remembered fragments) we have now lost both the location of the action (except for the “red barn”) and the name of the victim; the lover murderer is now merely a generic “William” (who in Scotland would already have been reduced to “Willie”).

### **Carrie Milliner and the Bobbin Family Tradition**

Our knowledge of “The Suffolk Tragedy” in the singing tradition of the Bobbin family of New South Wales, while substantial and multifaceted, has come to us exclusively via Caroline (“Carrie”) Maud Bobbin (1926-2005), who married Roy Milliner in 1945. She was one of ten siblings, at least four of whom (Carrie herself, Phoebe, Nance, and Tom) were familiar to the Australian folk song revival as singers with a rich heritage of popular song of many kinds. This song inheritance was preserved and cultivated in what informed observers have characterized as the “fertile isolation” of the bush near Eden, where the family made a living cutting railway sleepers (Roweth and Roweth 2006a).<sup>16</sup> Carrie herself reported learning songs from her father (Roweth and Roweth 2000), but it is equally evident that others of his generation were also active singers and relevant in relation to this song. Bobbin family songs have been extensively recorded by a number of collectors, but our fascinating cache of texts of and information on this particular song is due entirely to the joint collecting and recording efforts of Australian folklorists Rob Willis and John Harpley, the former furthermore having been extraordinarily generous in making unpublished material available and in supplying factual detail vital for

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<sup>15</sup> There are no murderous cooks in her other songs. There is a wicked Cook in “The Pink Flower,” one of the Grimm brothers’ fairy tales, but he merely arranges things to look as if a child has been slaughtered (Grimm and Grimm 1992 [1812]:283-86).

<sup>16</sup> A taste of the style of this generation of Bobbin singers is found in “The Bobbins of Nulliga,” a production by John Meredith Folklore Films available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NfcD25p2Y00>.

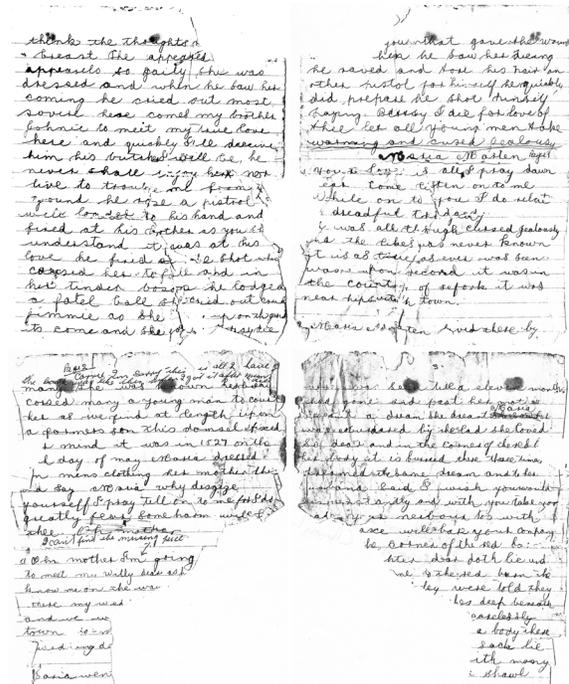
pinning down the status of this song in the Bobbin family tradition (see also Roweth and Roweth 2006b).<sup>17</sup>

The central circumstance, unique among the texts examined in this study, is that the song was evidently not part of the active repertoire of the immediate informant. By her own account, Carrie Milliner had heard performances as a young child (of 5 to 7 years) by two of her aunts, “Aunt Anne” (1885-1960, her father’s sister), and “Aunt Lil” (1902-1957, wife of Carrie’s uncle Lancelot Leighton Bobbin). She could recall the melody and some words or phrases, but during a recording session in 1994 was unable to offer a viable performance. Whatever its other contributions, therefore, Rob Willis’s fieldwork documents and contextualizes a verbal reconstruction exercise from within the tradition, vastly more comprehensive than what we have just seen with Sally Sloane.

In that exercise, one circumstance was pivotal: Carrie’s Aunt Lil had kept a “songbook” in which she had written out the words of her songs. Lil Bobbin herself having passed away in 1957, Carrie Milliner applied to her daughter, who in an act qualifying simultaneously as cultural conservation and vandalism, tore the relevant pages out of the songbook and sent them to Carrie. This damaged the book, but preserved the text of this song; while the book itself is now probably lost, Carrie Milliner, at their next encounter, made the excised pages available to Rob Willis, who photocopied them and has in turn made copies available for this study (see Figs. 1-4). As a bonus, since what the songbook calls “Maria Marten” begins half way down the verso of a sheet, we also have a substantial extract of the preceding song, “The Rambling Bachelors” (which will play a minor supporting role in what follows).

The text is written out as prose across the page, and, to judge from the varying stroke-width, with a pen that was dipped in an inkwell. The sheets concerned—evidently from a rather squat exercise book with lined pages (21 lines per page)—are old, worn, and have been considerably damaged, with substantial and irregular bits of paper missing so that the text lacks lengthy word-sequences. This damage is particularly relevant for the second sheet, which has “Maria Marten” on both sides and towards the bottom tapers to a narrow sliver preserving only ten or so letters per line.

The damage was evidently not incurred during the removal of the pages from the songbook; it is all along the outer edges of the sheets, and a note added at the top of the first full page to include “Maria Marten” explains: “Carrie I’m sorry this is all I have, the book was like this



Figs. 1-4. Four pages from the “songbook” of Lily Bobbin (“Aunt Lil”). Courtesy of Rob Willis.

<sup>17</sup> Thanks to Rob Willis and the National Library of Australia for permission to use and quote this material, both the performances and his discussions with Carrie Milliner (listed in the References as Milliner 1995).

when I got it after mum died.” The daughter of Aunt Lil who wrote this apology also alerts us to another odd feature. 12 lines down on this same page the text breaks off in the middle of a line at the words “Oh Mother” (Maria’s reply at the beginning of st. 9 of the broadside), which seem to be lightly crossed out. In the next (originally blank) line is the note “I can’t find the missing piece,” but really nothing is missing: for some reason the transcript has broken off, only to begin again after one skipped line—and in a noticeably smaller hand—with “Oh mother I’m going. . . .” We shall probably never know what intervened, but at least the note confirms the next generation of this branch of the family (as represented by Carrie’s cousin) did not sing the song either.

The exact status of Aunt Lil’s songbook in relation to the Bobbin singing tradition is not altogether clear. It was evidently not made at the behest of some earlier folk song collector, and neither the format nor its condition suggests it was intended as some kind of memorial for later generations. A practical function is more likely, but it is a complicating factor that Aunt Lil was a Bobbin only by marriage. That her maiden name was Palmer need not prompt speculation of a connection with one of the two English singers from whom the song has been collected, Freda Palmer of Whitney, Oxfordshire; while women singers invariably have their names from fathers and husbands, as often as not they have their songs from their mothers and (in the case of both Carrie Bobbin and Freda Palmer) their aunts. The thought is nonetheless a reminder of the more general, valid point that Lily Palmer may have brought some songs of her own into the Bobbin family tradition, and if the Maria Marten ballad was one of them, then it would perhaps have been closer to English tradition than many of the Bobbins’ songs. Piecing together evidence from the Bobbin genealogy cited above (Smith and Harvey 2012) and an internet query from a genealogist of the Palmer family (Coleman 2003), it is a near certainty that Lily Palmer (Aunt Lil) who was born in 1902 in Charters Towers, Queensland, was the daughter of an emigrant, Emily Palmer, born in Tiverton, Devon, c. 1877 (although the match in surnames actually suggests she was born out of wedlock). On the other hand, the fact that the song was also sung by “Aunt” Anne Bobbin may suggest Lil was the recipient. Writing down the songs may have been her way of learning them and integrating herself into a singing tradition that was evidently a significant feature of family identity.

But for whatever reason it was written down, the songbook text of “Maria Marten” is relevant for the present investigation in two ways: firstly as a direct, if imperfect, witness to the state of the song as known to the generation preceding Carrie Milliner’s some time before the mid 1950s; secondly as a point of departure for Carrie’s own attempt at reconstruction. For in anticipation of their next recording session, Carrie Milliner transcribed the text from the song book, filling its lacunae as best she could, and in due course showed the result—two pages in her own hand headed “Maria Marten (song)” —to Rob Willis. Rob Willis copied, preserved, and made available this transcription (see Figs. 5 and 6) for this study. Finally at that later encounter on May 26, 1995, Rob Willis recorded two separate performances of the song by Carrie Milliner, interspersed with their substantial and informative discussion on the process. The recording of this entire interview was subsequently deposited with the National Library of Australia (Milliner 1995). It provides the basis for the following analysis, the expediting of which was in turn greatly enhanced by central excerpts supplied directly by Rob Willis.

Thus we have available no fewer than four texts of the Bobbin “Suffolk Tragedy”: 1) the damaged text from Aunt Lil’s Songbook, 2) Carrie Milliner’s written reconstruction, and 3-4) her two recorded performances. Given their respective provenances and the methodological problems noted at the outset, it will clearly be best to resolve discussion into two phases: first, a direct and effectively philological confrontation with the text in Aunt Lil’s Songbook, as an albeit imperfect witness in our (outsider’s) attempt to reconstruct the song as it was when still alive in the Bobbin family tradition; second, a discussion of Carrie Milliner’s parallel reconstruction efforts, supplementary to our first effort, but mostly as a topic of interest in its own right, as reflecting the perceptions and competences of an insider.

*Aunt Lil’s Song*

Of the general points that can be made about the Bobbin tradition of our song as represented by the text in the songbook, the most striking is that it conserves far more of the broadside than any of the other derivative versions, English or Australian. We may recur to the now familiar summary:

**BROADSIDE**

**Aunt Lil’s Songbook**

***INCIPIIT***

- |                                       |    |
|---------------------------------------|----|
| 1. Listen: it’s a dreadful tragedy    | 1. |
| 2. of cold-blooded cruelty; but true. | 2. |

***THE AFFAIR***

- |   |    |
|---|----|
| 3. Maria Marten of Polstead                             | 3. |
| 4. loved a farmer’s son;                                | 4. |
| 5. <i>pregnant, she asks him to fix the wedding day</i> |    |
| 6. <i>and he reassures her.</i>                         |    |

***THE MURDER***

- |   |                       |
|---|-----------------------|
| 7. Maria is dressed in men’s clothes;                 | 5.                    |
| 8. <i>her mother, concerned, asks why:</i>            | 6.                    |
| 9. <i>Maria says she’ll meet William at the barn,</i> | 7. <i>(imperfect)</i> |
| 10. <i>and they will be married in Ipswich.</i>       | 8. <i>(imperfect)</i> |
| 11. She goes, but eleven months later                 | 9. <i>(imperfect)</i> |

***THE DISCOVERY***

- |   |                            |
|---|----------------------------|
| 12. Her mother dreams she is buried in the barn,      | 10. <i>(imperfect)</i>     |
| 13. <i>and asks Maria’s father to take his spade,</i> | 11.                        |
| 14. <i>and with a neighbor dig up the floor.</i>      | 12.                        |
| 15. They dig where she told them to                   | 13. <i>(imperfect)</i>     |
| 16. and find a mangled body tied in a sack            | 14. <i>(fragmentary)</i>   |
| 17. the clothes (listed)                              | 15. <i>(one word only)</i> |
| 18. identify the corpse as Maria’s.                   |                            |

***THE JUDICIAL AFTERMATH***

While its length might lead us to expect a “balladized” modulation of the broadside original along the lines of Freda Palmer’s, the content suggests that this process has at most taken only a few steps. Retention of verbal material has been considerable. Of the broadside’s first 17 stanzas, 15 (clearly recognizable even when imperfect or fragmentary) are retained, and in their original order. There are no additional stanzas. The only omission not due to damage comprises the two-stanza exchange in which the pregnant Maria begs her seducer to marry her and he offers reassurances: this omission is in line with a general tendency for oral versions of murdered-sweetheart ballads to downplay the pregnancy, and none of the other versions of the song retain these stanzas.<sup>18</sup> And for the first time we have a “folk” version of “The Suffolk Tragedy” that retains all the opening business: the performer’s call for attention and characterization of what the song has to offer, the setting of the scene, and the introduction of the characters.

Indeed, it is not even possible to be quite certain that, like the other versions (and most folk versions of most other murdered-sweetheart broadsides), the Bobbin tradition lacked the judicial aftermath. As we have seen, Aunt Lil’s daughter seems to have perused the manuscript quite carefully before excising and sending the sheets, but the fact remains that the last word written (and not just the last word surviving) on the reverse of the last sheet sent to Carrie is “shawl.” This word takes us just beyond the “tied in a sack and mangled” image preferred by other singers as a conclusion, but furthermore it is also the second word in the first line of the broadside’s stanza 17. We can suspect, therefore, that the text continued at the top of the next page of the exercise book—that is, the recto of the next sheet—with at least the rest of this stanza (listing the clothes) and perhaps the next (identification of the victim), and we cannot entirely rule out that it may have continued into the trial.

But despite this apparent strategic conservatism, it had likely been some time, or some generations, since anyone in this line of tradition had access to the printed original, for the latter’s opening line—a typical broadside “come all ye” formula—was evidently at some stage garbled beyond recognition and subsequently reconstituted into something that felt more appropriate to the context:

## BROADSIDE

1. Young lovers all, I pray draw near,

## SONGBOOK

1. Your love is all I pray dawn [d?]ear.

And at this detailed level the verbal material has been subjected to some other interesting changes, reflecting oral tradition and retrieval from memory. These modifications include the precise setting of the action:

3. In the County of Suffolk  
'twas in Polstead Town,

3. It was in the County of Sefork  
it was near hipswitch town.

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<sup>18</sup> Given the ubiquity of bawdy songs in both English and Australian folk tradition, this practice seems to be a matter of vernacular generic decorum rather than prudery: sex is simply out of place in a tragic love-story.

“Sefork” may represent local pronunciation of “Suffolk” rather than an actual change: perhaps Aunt Lil was writing down the song as someone else sang (a scenario that might explain the erasure and fresh start noted above). Meanwhile the lesser known Polstead has been replaced by the better known Ipswich (again perhaps in local pronunciation), borrowed from a later line.

Most interesting of the changes—and the result of a process encountered with two of the other oral versions discussed here—is the revised formulation of the song’s major theme:

2. As for cold-blooded cruelty

2. [It] was all through *cursed jealousy*.

In the absence of the specific reference to pregnancy and the girl’s marriage plea, jealousy is not altogether illogical as the murderer’s motivation, and there is a related and overlapping sub-genre of murder ballads in which a sweetheart is killed by her lover not because she has become an encumbrance, but because he is insanely jealous. The expression “cursed jealousy” does not seem to be commonplace in the ballads within this tradition, but it does occur in one that is particularly relevant for present purposes. Several of the singers of the extended Bobbin family sang what Chloë and Jason Roweth (2000) call—on the basis of its opening line “Come all ye rambling bachelors” rather than its topic—“The Rambling Bachelors,”<sup>19</sup> which ends with the valediction “Let all young men take warning of *cursed jealousy*.” There is a further link between the two songs that may have triggered the contamination, in that both the sweethearts were slain by their lovers at a secret rendezvous where they arrived wearing male attire to avoid recognition. That Aunt Lil herself knew this song (with a variant of this line, “Let all young men take warning and cu[r]sed jealousy”) is demonstrated by its presence in her songbook, a substantial extract surviving as noted above on the pages her daughter sent to Carrie Milliner with the text of “Maria Marten,” which it immediately precedes. It may also—just—be possible that the contamination occurred as the songs were being written into the songbook, “cursed jealousy” from the “Rambling Bachelors” appearing just five lines before the phrase’s occurrence in “Maria Marten” and also directly above it at the end of a line.

But it would be wrong not to note an alternative explanation along the same lines but in connection with another song, the very popular ballad entitled “The New York Trader” (Roud 478). It belongs to a cluster of songs (“Captain Glen” and “Sir William Gower,” both also Roud 478; “Brown Robyn’s Confession,” Roud 62) in which a ship is saved from disaster when its captain confesses to some heinous crimes and is thrown overboard. The crimes vary, but specific to “The New York Trader” are the following lines (recorded, as it happens, from a Norfolk singer in 1921), which provide an almost exact parallel to the whole of the reformulation in Aunt Lil’s songbook (Williams and Lloyd 1971:72-73):

I killed my wife and children three,  
*All through that cursed jealousy,*  
 . . .

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<sup>19</sup> This song does not appear in the Roud index.

Evidently a very popular song, it has been recorded from tradition in both Britain and North America, ultimately deriving from a nineteenth-century broadside ballad that achieved several printings; of these, all that were able to be consulted included this line.<sup>20</sup> But while the internal similarities are stronger, the external connections are weaker: perpetrator and victim in “The New York Trader” are not lover and sweetheart, and there does not appear to be any evidence of this ballad circulating, as broadside or folk song, in Australia.

Given the imperfect or fragmentary nature of several of the remaining stanzas from the song’s core narrative (murder and discovery), it is not easy to demonstrate the emergence at the verbal level of traditional features, but we have, for example, the enhancement of “eleven months were past” (11.3) to “eleven months had *gone and past*” (9.3), and the conceptual link between the mother’s dream and the instructions it prompts has enabled a classic instance of the generation of verbal repetition through contamination:

12.2 In the Red Barn beneath the floor,	10.2 and in the	<i>corner of the red barn</i>
14.4 To the far <i>corner of the Red Barn</i>	12.4 To the	<i>corner of the red barn</i>

This version, especially in the introductory phases, is also particularly fond of regularizing the beginnings of sentences into a uniform formulation:

2.1 As for cold-blooded cruelty	2.1 [ <i>It</i> ] was all through cursed jealousy
3.1 In the County of Suffolk	3.1 <i>It was</i> in the County of Sefork
3.2 ’twas in Polstead Town,	3.2 <i>It was</i> near hipswitch town
7.1 In eighteen hundred and . . . ,	5.1 <i>It was</i> in 1827,

But the overall impression, at both the narrative and verbal levels, is of considerable conservatism in relation to the broadside, so much so that with the exception of the last few lines (where the problems are not merely due to textual losses) there are few challenges in reconstructing at least an approximation of what the undamaged notebook would have contained. Perhaps symptomatically, this is one of the few instances in which a version of either of the Maria Marten ballads recovered from tradition retains the original and correct spelling of the family name (here both in the text and the title) rather than the otherwise almost invariable “Martin.”

### *Carrie Milliner’s Reconstructions*

For Carrie Milliner, these damaged pages, supplemented by a few words and phrases recalled from the singing of Aunt Lil and Aunt Anne, were her central resource in reconstructing the song for the folklorists studying the Bobbin family tradition. And the value of our study of

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<sup>20</sup> Consulted versions include those of the Bodleian Library, available at [http://bodley24.bodley.ox.ac.uk/cgi-bin/acwwweng/regsrch.pl?wert=new+york+trader+\[title\]&recnums=:1486:1693:5060:11685:17055:27932:48960:50775&index=1&db=ballads](http://bodley24.bodley.ox.ac.uk/cgi-bin/acwwweng/regsrch.pl?wert=new+york+trader+[title]&recnums=:1486:1693:5060:11685:17055:27932:48960:50775&index=1&db=ballads), and the English Broadside at the National Library of Scotland, accessible at <http://digital.nls.uk/english-ballads/pageturner.cfm?id=74891632>.

her reconstruction will reside not so much in that reconstruction’s product, which under the circumstances hardly qualifies as a “folk” version, but in its process, which may provide a rare insight into the ways of thinking of a singer about song dynamics.

*The Written Text*

*Mania Marten (song)*

Mania Marten young in years  
 most lovely to be seen  
 was courted by a farmer's son  
 your love is all I pray for dear  
 Come listen unto me  
 while unto you I do relate a dreadful tragedy  
 It was all through cursed jealousy  
 and the love was never known  
 It is as true as ever was seen  
 was put upon record it was in  
 it was in the court of justice  
 it was near Ipswich town  
 Mania Marten lived there by  
 the name she was known  
 her beauty caused many a young man to court her  
 as we find at length upon a farmer's son his counsel  
 forced his mind  
 it was in 1827 on the 18th day of May  
 Mania dressed in man's clothing  
 her mother this did say  
 Mania why disguise yourself I pray tell unto me  
 for I do greatly fear some harm will come to thee  
 Oh Mother I'm going to meet my willy dear  
 no one will know me along the road  
 or will they when I get there  
 and we will go into Ipswich town  
 and live the wedding day  
 Mania no more was seen till eleven months had gone

and paid.  
 her mother reports a dream. three nights in a row  
 she dreamt Mania was murdered  
 by the lad she loved so dear  
 and in the corner of the red barn  
 her body it is buried there  
 three times she dreamt the same dream  
 and to her husband said  
 I wish you would remember instantly and with you take  
 your neighbour too with pickaxe and a spade  
 he will have your company  
 and in the corner of the red barn  
 her daughter dear doth lie  
 and in the corner of the red barn  
 and as the stonemason did  
 they found her cloths deep beneath  
 a grave dug carelessly  
 and Mania's body in a sack lay there  
 and round her neck a shawl.

Figs. 5-6. Carrie Milliner’s Written Reconstruction. Courtesy of Rob Willis.

In the first instance, we may consult the written version that was the first product of her reconstruction efforts. While this version is manifestly a transcript of the songbook text supplemented through attempts at filling the gaps, there are a few instances where Carrie seems to be recalling words or formulations, ultimately deriving from the broadside, from some source other than the songbook—presumably her own recollection of performances. For example, from a pair of songbook lines (7.3-4) of which the damaged pages preserve only

as h[ ] know me on the wa[y]  
 [ ] there,

Carrie constructs (8.3-4):

no one will know me along the road  
 or will they when I get there

close to the broadside's (9.3-4):

His friends won't know me on the road,  
and *when I do get there . . .*

This reconstruction involves not merely filling the gaps in the songbook but “correcting” it, rejecting the obviously intended “the way” in favor of the actual original “the road.”<sup>21</sup> Such instances may be just enough to suggest that Carrie's distant and sporadic reminiscences of performances by her aunts reflect an earlier phase in the family tradition retaining more verbal features from the broadside than the version recorded in the songbook: if she did hear the song as a young child, it would have been in whatever form it had during the early 1930s.

But the reconstruction process, as Carrie Milliner reports, was arduous.<sup>22</sup> There are instances where Carrie is totally subordinate to the text in the songbook and others which take her text further from the broadside, for example, in narrating the search for the body in the barn. The broadside's

15. They went to the Red Barn,  
to the corner they were told,

is reproduced imperfectly in the songbook's

13. and [        ]me to the Red Barn,  
the [        ]hey were told.

Carrie reintroduces “corner” but deploys it in the first of the lines and is reduced to constructing something new out of “told” in the second—actually the kind of “filler” associated with the decline of late-medieval minstrelsy:

14. and in the corner of the red barn  
*and so the story's told*

Another more traditional shift away from the broadside concerns the location of the events. As we saw, the original “county of Suffolk” became “county of Sefork” in Aunt Lil's songbook, but while this change, as suggested, may be a reflection of local pronunciation rather

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<sup>21</sup> Compare also Carrie's rendition (9.2-4) of the songbook's 8.2-4 with the broadside's 10.24, her correction (3.4) at the songbook's 2.4 closer to the broadside's 2.4, and her version (7.4) of the songbook's 6.4 in relation to the broadside's 8.4.

<sup>22</sup> It is proper to add that she did have access to information about the Maria Marten case independently of the songbook, as she and two sisters and a brother were celebrated for their rendition of one of the many melodramas based on the case, which they knew in the form of a set of 78-rpm records (see Roweth and Roweth 2006b). It may be this access that explains Carrie Milliner's most striking “correction” of the text. The broadside, reflecting an error in its journalistic source, dates Maria Marten's disappearance to May 19. Aunt Lil's songbook text lacks the number, but Carrie (6.1-2) gets it right: “it was in 1827 / on the *18th* day of May.”

than an actual change, Carrie writes (and in performance sings) “Sefort.” This modification may rather reflect local geography, there being a Seaforth in New South Wales. It is a suburb of Sidney, but the last letters of “county” have been smudged in the songbook, and Carrie writes and sings “court of Sefort,” perhaps as a last glimpse of the case’s judicial aftermath. Relocating the action of ballads not merely to a place closer to home but to one that sounds somewhat similar to the original is a feature of tradition and indeed occurs in the English branch of transmission in our song, with Freda Palmer, in Oxfordshire, replacing the distant Ipswich with the nearby Islip.

Carrie Milliner’s most substantial intervention, however, comprises her three new opening lines, of which only the third has any direct relationship to the songbook text (borrowing “courted” and “farmer’s son” from st. 4):

*1. Maria Marten young in years  
most lovely to be known  
was courted by a farmer’s son  
your love is all I pray for dear*

Our first instance of a substantial addition to the broadside, these lines seem to have been prompted by the feeling that the songbook’s opening line, “Your love is all I pray dawn [d]ear” (a garbling, as we have seen, of the broadside’s “You lovers all I pray draw near”), was an odd beginning and needed not merely correction to “your love is all I pray for dear” but motivation—presumably as words spoken by the farmer’s son in his courting of Maria. These lines derive, astonishingly, from a quite different broadside ballad on the case of which nothing has been seen or heard since its publication in the illustrated pamphlet *Murder of a Young Woman in Suffolk . . .* printed by Catnach close to the events in 1828. It begins:

1. A horrid deed has come to light,  
Most awful for to hear!  
You have not known, or heard the like,  
Since happened that of Weare.
  
2. *Maria Marten, young in years,  
And lovely to behold,  
Was courted by a farmer’s son,  
Who had great store of gold.*

This song should, accordingly, be added to the two red barn ballads known to have survived in oral tradition.<sup>23</sup> But the addition has broader consequences, for it reallocates the first line of the old first stanza as the fourth line of a new first stanza, leaving a new second stanza of only three lines and a potential knock-on effect for the stanzaic structure of the rest of the song.

### *Carrie's Sung Reconstructions*

The implications of Carrie's opening intervention for the song's stanzaic structure are not immediately apparent (to us or her) in her written reconstruction, set out as it is in lines that sometimes represent one ballad line, sometimes two, and with no indication of stanza divisions. This is far from the case, however, with her two performances, for now the stanza as a song unit can be clearly discerned, signaled by the rounding of the melodic pattern and an emphatic pause for breath. Fitting the new written material into this performance vehicle will produce a misfit for which a solution will have to be found.



Carrie Milliner sings "Maria Marten": first performance. (See Milliner 1995 for attribution.)

In the first performance the discrepancy between text and melody clearly takes Carrie Milliner by surprise, and after a long hesitation she is reduced to matching the lexical element of the second stanza to the musical unit by repeating its third line:

#### **Aunt Lil's songbook**

1. Your love is all I pray dawn [?]ear  
     come listen on to me,  
     While unto you I do relate  
     a dreadful Tragedy,

#### **Carrie's first singing**

1. Maria Marten young in years  
     most lovely to be known  
     was courted by a farmer's son  
     your love is all I pray for dear.
2. Come listen unto me  
     while unto you I do relate,  
     a dreadful tragedy [pause . . . ]  
     *a dreadful tragedy.*

In her second performance—following some quiet rumination on how to fit precisely the original opening words to the melody in their new position—Carrie opts for the alternative of compressing the second stanza's three lines into two and then completing this stanza by moving up the first two lines of the next:

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<sup>23</sup> It is one of three additional songs discovered at a late stage in this article's progress to publication (October 2013) in a contemporary scrapbook collection of printed material on the case, now in the Arents Collection of the New York Public Library (Arents BIP AL 01-355, p. 133). The other two songs are the "Copy of Verses" (first line: "A deed of murder, dark and dread") in the *Particulars of the Trial and Execution of William Corder* and the *Copy of Verses Written by William Corder . . .* (first line: "Come all you thoughtless wild young men"). The assistance of the staff of the NYPL Rare Books Division is acknowledged with thanks.

**Aunt Lil’s songbook**

**Carrie’s second singing**

...  
 come listen on to me  
 While onto you I do relate  
 a dreadful Tragedy,  
 2. [It] was all through cursed jealousy  
 and the likes was never known.

...  
 2. Come listen unto me  
 while to you I tell, a dreadful tragedy  
 It was all through cursed jealousy  
 and the likes was never known.

This alteration solves the problem of the second stanza, but it of course merely pushes the problem ahead, for the next stanza will have to comprise the two remaining lines of this one and the first two lines of the next stanza, and so forth.

Indeed, it is a characteristic of both performances, because of either this problematic start or later problems of the same kind, that they suffer from a chronic lack of synchronization between the stanzas as verbal units (as signaled by syntax and rhyme) and the stanzas as musical units (as signaled by melody, cadence, and pauses for breath). The words comprising a “verbal” stanza are often split between two “musical” stanzas, disconnecting the two rhyming lines so that the second line of one (musical) stanza now rhymes with the last line of the preceding stanza. Conversely, sentences now tend to end in mid-stanza, to a hovering musical cadence, rather than at the end of a stanza, where syntactical conclusion would be reinforced by melodic closure, the latter now falling in mid-sentence. The result is an endemic unease in the performances, and it is odd that an experienced singer could not spot this very practical discrepancy. The ultimate source of the problem is of course the imperfection of the text being used for the reconstruction, but the cause of the unsuccessful engagement with it is signaled both by what is said in the interview and by the sound of rustling paper throughout the performances: on both occasions Carrie Milliner is singing the words she sees on the text of the written reconstruction in front of her rather than subjecting them to some kind of shaping process between eye and voice.

This practice is evidently the norm for this singer at this stage of the recording process, where Carrie Milliner is supplementing her already-recorded but active repertoire with songs from family tradition, the reconstruction of which needs further enquiry and consideration. Her performance in this same interview of “The Rambling Bachelors” (which goes somewhat better) is prefaced by her looking through what is evidently a pile of sheets (mentioning other songs she spots) to find the text, and there is a moment halfway through the performance where the exclamation “where’s the rest of it?” is a prelude to more paper-shuffling.<sup>24</sup>

Written and printed texts, verbal memory, and oral performance have gone hand in hand in the song traditions of the English-speaking world for several centuries in a generally



Carrie Milliner sings “Maria Marten”: second performance. (See Milliner 1995 for attribution.)

<sup>24</sup> This is also Carrie Milliner’s reconstruction of a song she could insufficiently recall at earlier recording sessions, but she has evidently had access to other (and better) sources than the extract (corresponding to sts. 6-13) in Aunt Lil’s songbook; the sigh with which the performance ends nonetheless hints at dissatisfaction.

productive symbiosis, and the relationship between songbook and performance is emerging as central to understanding the art of the medieval minstrel (Taylor 2012): the two fields might indeed be usefully juxtaposed. Too strong a textual orientation can, however, clearly produce problems, and these emphasize the importance of memory and retrieval from memory within performance in a process for which “oral tradition” is an inadequate designation. On that day, otherwise filled with memories, the role of memory has—for the minutes devoted to this song—been usurped by writing in the form of a received text whose imperfections have been remedied pen-in-hand to generate a new text as the basis of performance. Had Carrie Milliner achieved her reconstruction in her mind and/or committed it to memory earlier and then sung it from memory, things might have gone otherwise.

For an English academic to pronounce Carrie Milliner’s performances of “The Suffolk Tragedy” aesthetic failures would be impertinent, were it not that we have her own concurring judgment by her own vernacular standards (and in her own vernacular idiom). Each singing through of the song concludes, in the first case under her breath and in the second out loud, with a frustrated “Bloody hell!” These are assessments (hers and mine) in the specific context of the verbal reconstruction of a recently “lost” song—not of her powers as a singer, or as a preserver and mediator of a cultural heritage. British and North American students of English-language folk song have as yet attributed insufficient significance to Australian song tradition in general and the Bobbin family in particular. But even though Carrie Milliner left school at age 9, and by her own account was anything but a diligent pupil, it would seem that the presence of a written text, if only in a beaten up exercise book, was enough to awe her into a literate approach, downplaying the aural, mental, and oral competences that were surely still integral to the singing tradition in Australia at this time.

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