

The James Madison Carpenter Collection of Traditional Song and Drama

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“Dr Carpenter from the Harvard College in America”

Well, this Dr Carpenter came to my house one night, late, about twelve o'clock, an' I knew, whenever I went to the door, that he was somebody! So he introduced himself an' said he was Dr Carpenter from the Harvard College in America. . . . He came collectin' a lot o' this stuff.

(Henderson 1981-82:417)

James Madison Carpenter (1888-1983) was until recently a relatively unknown figure in the history of Anglo-American folksong and British folk play scholarship (Jabbour 1998; Bishop 1998). Born and bred in Mississippi, he was university-educated and worked as a minister and teacher prior to entering Harvard in 1920 to do a Ph.D. in English. Under the supervision of George Lyman Kittredge, he wrote a thesis on “Forecastle Songs and Chanties,” based on fieldwork with retired seamen in the United States and in ports that he visited in the summer of 1928 on a Dexter



Fig. 1. James Madison Carpenter, *circa* 1938. (The James Madison Carpenter Collection, Archive of Folk Culture, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, AFC 1972/001 PH099.) Reproduced with permission.



Fig. 2. James Madison Carpenter in his Austin roadster, *circa* 1929. (The James Madison Carpenter Collection, Archive of Folk Culture, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, AFC 1972/001 PH101.) Reproduced with permission.

scholarship around England, Scotland, and Ireland. After gaining his doctorate in 1929, and encouraged by Kittredge, Carpenter returned to Britain in order to continue fieldwork. Armed with a portable typewriter and a Dictaphone cylinder machine, he bought a car and struck off northwards up the east coast (Figure 2).¹

Discovering the relative ease with which he could locate performers, Carpenter recorded folk music of all kinds, later including folk (“mummers”) plays² and other genres. Such was his success that his one-year sojourn turned into six and involved, by his own account, 40,000 miles of traveling. At a time when hardly any folksong collectors were active in Britain and the general view was that the business of collecting was more or less accomplished (see, for example, Howes 1932), Carpenter gathered some 3,000 songs, including ballads of the Francis James Child canon, bothy ballads (Northeast Scottish farmworkers’ songs), shanties, and carols, as well as children’s singing games, fiddle tunes, and folk plays. He recorded performers from whom collectors such as Cecil Sharp and Gavin Greig had noted items 30 years previously, such as Sam Bennett (Figure 3), and also a large number of other performers never before recorded. These latter included Bell Duncan (Figure 4), an 82-year-old Aberdeenshire woman who had some 300 songs in her repertoire. Carpenter claimed that she had “one of the most marvelous [*sic*] rote memories of all history” and regarded her as “the greatest ballad singer of all time” (Bishop 1998, 2004).



Fig. 3. Sam Bennett, Ilmington Morris fiddler, Warwickshire, *circa* 1933. (The James Madison Carpenter Collection, Archive of Folk Culture, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, AFC 1972/001 PH036.) Reproduced with permission.

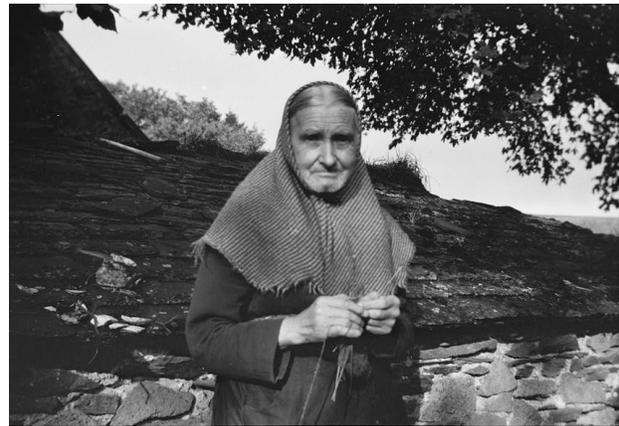


Fig. 4. Bell Duncan of Lambhill, Aberdeenshire, knitting outside her home, *circa* 1930. (The James Madison Carpenter Collection, Archive of Folk Culture, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, AFC 1972/001 PH095.) Reproduced with permission.

Returning to the United States in 1935, Carpenter gave occasional lectures and went on to take up a series of teaching posts in universities and colleges. Initially he continued to work on editing and transcribing parts of his collection for publication, a goal he never realized. He

¹ For Carpenter’s account of this trip in a later tape-recorded interview, see <http://www.abdn.ac.uk/elphinstone/carpenter/biography/audio/>.

² The folk (“mummers”) play is a traditional, seasonal drama that is widely known in England and also in parts of Scotland, Wales, and Ireland. It was performed at feast times such as Christmas or Easter by groups of working men seeking a contribution of food or money to enhance their enjoyment of the festival. For more information, see Cass et al. 2000.

eventually retired to Mississippi and in 1972 at the age of 83 sold the collection to the Library of Congress (American Folklife Center 1996).

The Carpenter Collection

The Carpenter collection thus contains materials documenting British and American traditional song and drama. It also contains a smaller amount of instrumental folk music, traditional dance, children’s folklore, custom, folktale, and dialect. The bulk dates from his six-year sojourn in Britain, but there are also items from New York, New England, North Carolina, and Mississippi, some of the American items having been collected from relatives or via his students. Carpenter developed a method of documenting contributors using a Dictaphone cylinder machine on which he made recordings of the songs as sung, but usually just one or two stanzas’ worth, in order to capture the melody. He would then take down the complete text as dictated—two lines at a time—by the contributor, sometimes then making handwritten emendations to the dictated text in order to correct it and supplement it on the basis of contributor consultation (Bishop 1998).

The papers contain text transcriptions of the folkloric items (Figure 5), music notations of some of the songs (Figure 6), and descriptions of customs and children’s games. Calculating the number of folkloric items in the collection is complicated by the fact that, because of Carpenter’s collecting methods and then the subsequent transcription and editing of his materials, many exist in a number of iterations. In approximate terms, the collection contains the texts and tunes of 700 Child ballads, 700 sea shanties, 1,500 other songs, 270 mummers’ plays, and 50 instrumental tunes, collected from roughly 800 contributors.

The physical collection comprises some 13,500 pages of papers, 179 cylinders (representing

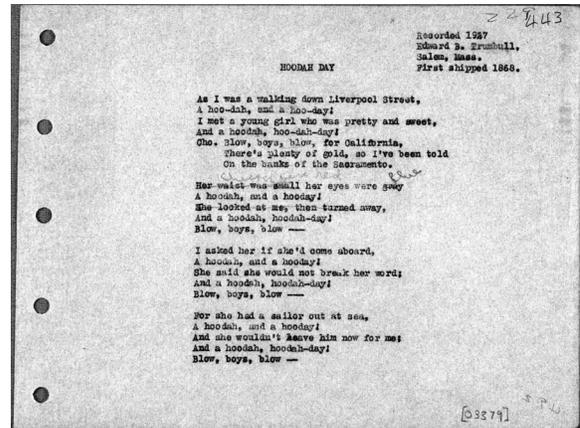


Fig. 5. Text transcription of “Hoodah Day,” as sung by Captain Edward B. Trumbull, Salem, Massachusetts. (The James Madison Carpenter Collection, Archive of Folk Culture, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, AFC 1972/001/MS p. 03379.) Reproduced with permission.

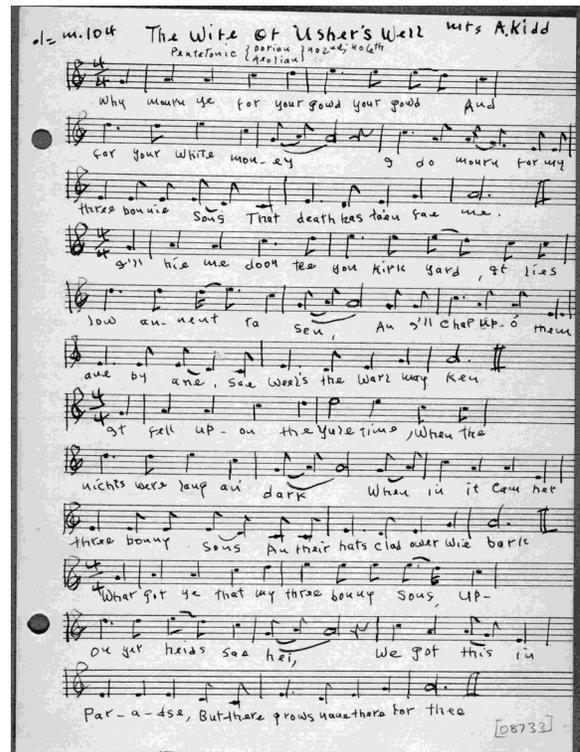


Fig. 6. Music transcription of “The Wife of Usher’s Well” (Child 79), as sung by Mrs. Annie Kidd, Glen Ythan, Rothienorman, Aberdeenshire. (The James Madison Carpenter Collection, Archive of Folk Culture, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, AFC 1972/001/MS p. 08733.) Reproduced with permission.

35 continuous hours of examples), 220 12-inch lacquer discs (Carpenter's own copies of the cylinders), 563 photographs, and 40 drawings. Following its deposit in 1972, most of the papers in the collection were microfilmed by the Library of Congress and a list of their contents made. The discs were also copied onto analog audiotape. The sheer scale of the collection and its unstructured state, however, made it difficult to navigate and search without a catalog and indexes. It was also hard to reference with precision as neither the physical pages nor the microfilm frames were numbered. Nonetheless, a number of scholars at this time drew attention to the collection's existence, contents, and potential (for instance, Palmer 1989; Cawte 1979-80).

In 2002 the American Folklife Center at the Library of Congress obtained funding to digitize the papers—and later the remaining materials—of the Carpenter collection. At the same time, a team of scholars based in the United Kingdom and the United States,³ with specialisms in the genres represented in the collection, obtained United Kingdom funding to catalog the collection. Working in close cooperation with Folklife Center staff, the Carpenter Collection Project team prepared and published online an item-level, searchable catalog in Encoded Archival Description.⁴ The intention is that the image and sound files will eventually be linked to this metadata and mounted online for free public access, subject to the relevant permissions. At present the collection is accessible at the Archive of Folk Culture, Library of Congress, and via the microfilms. A scattering of items from it have been published (see, for example, Palmer 1986; Hayward 1992; Roud and Bishop 2012) and recorded in new performances (Walser 2010).

Interest of the Collection

The value of the Carpenter collection can be gauged from several different viewpoints. In the British context, it is one of the most extensive and diverse collections ever made. It is also the first to use sound-recording consistently and the first to be gathered by an academically trained collector. It was made in the interwar period when there was a lull in folksong collecting, and as such it fills the gap between the collections made at the turn of the twentieth century (such as those of Sharp, and Greig and Duncan) and those made in the mid-twentieth century (such as those of Alan Lomax, Hamish Henderson, and Peter Kennedy). In a few cases, Carpenter's singers also contributed to these earlier or later collections, with Carpenter providing early sound-recordings for them and also in some instances evidence of further repertoire; in other cases, he documented the repertoires of prolific singers who might otherwise have remained unknown to collectors.

One kind of material found most plentifully in the collection is the Child ballad. The collection contains some rare and unique examples, such as "The Wife of Usher's Well" (Child 79) and "The White Fisher" (Child 264),⁵ as well as distinctive variants of better-known ballads,

³ For further details of the members of the team and the various stages of the project, see the Carpenter Collection Project website: <http://www.abdn.ac.uk/elphinstone/carpenter/>.

⁴ The James Madison Carpenter Collection Online Catalogue is available at <http://www.hrionline.ac.uk/carpenter>.

⁵ See Bishop 2003.

such as “The Twa Sisters” (Child 10) and “The Bonny Earl of Murray” (Child 181).⁶ Carpenter insisted on the documentation of both words and melody, and in a few cases the collection contains the first or the earliest extant melody for a particular ballad, such as “The Wylie Wife of the Hie Toun Hie” (Child 290). It also greatly amplifies the ballad tune record overall, although none of the tunes appears in Bronson’s compendium of extant ballad tunes and previously unpublished texts, *The Traditional Tunes of the Child Ballads* (1959-72), despite the fact that the collection is listed among Bronson’s sources. This is because, as Bronson’s headnotes suggest, Carpenter was still planning to publish these tunes himself at this point (Bronson 1959-72:IV, 71).

Sea shanties are also extensively documented in the Carpenter collection. These work songs had previously been documented by others from the first half of the nineteenth century, first in travelers’ narratives and then by antiquarians and folklorists. The period in which Carpenter carried out his fieldwork allowed him to document them from the last generation of British and American (including African American) seamen to work in the era of commercial square-rigged sail. His work resulted in the largest early collection of sound-recordings to document shanties from sailors who had used them at sea. They thus offer unique evidence of performance details, such as melodic, rhythmic, or textual variation from stanza to stanza in this highly fluid genre, while also illuminating the relationship between the songs and the work with which they were associated.

Carpenter also made sound-recordings of well-known English fiddle players such as Sam Bennett and John Robbins when they were in their prime, allowing the study of transmission and variation (Bradtke 2008, 2012). The British mummers’ plays in the collection are some of the earliest taken down from actual performers rather than upper-class observers; noted from performers recalling the tradition prior to the First World War, they help to throw light on the status of dubious or “improved” texts collected by others (Cass 2012). They also contain contextual information detailing accompanying songs, costumes, names of other performers, and where and when the play was first learned or performed (Roud and Smith 1998:496).

The collection thus has the potential to contribute to social and cultural history, popular culture, and local history in a number of contexts. Furthermore, it has significant comparative value, for it adds to and sometimes overlaps with other folklore collections, providing opportunities to augment our understandings of the history and geographical spread of various traditional song types and folk play sub-genres, as well as their concomitant variation. This value is particularly pertinent in the present context when a panoply of historical resources and retrieval tools is becoming available through digitization and the Internet, opening up new vistas for comparative research more generally.⁷

⁶ On “The Twa Sisters,” see Atkinson 1996; on “The Bonny Earl of Murray,” see Olson 1997.

⁷ See, for example, “The Full English” (<http://www.vwml.org/search/search-full-english>) and “Tobar an Dulchais”/“Kist o Riches” (<http://www.tobarandualchais.co.uk/>).

Examples from Current Work on a Critical Edition of the Carpenter Collection

The Carpenter Collection Project team has been preparing a critical edition of the Carpenter collection since 2004.⁸ This edition will take the form of a multi-volume published work, arranged by genre and sub-genre, involving an innovative and symbiotic relationship with the online presentation of the raw materials of the collection that have been digitized by the American Folklife Center at the Library of Congress. The aim of the edition is to enhance access to the collection for scholarship and performance, and to promote its use by bringing together related items in the genres represented in the collection and presenting them in an authoritative manner. Carpenter's own plans for publication will thus finally be realized and the contribution of all performers represented in the collection publicly acknowledged.

Ballads

Preparation of the edition has involved locating Carpenter's collectanea within the broader context of oral literature and literature. Work on the headnotes, filling in the histories of the ballads, and making use of modern resources plays into an interest elsewhere among the research community in the relationship between oral and printed ballads and songs. We now know that up to 90 percent of English and Scottish folk songs were in print at some stage in their existence, mostly in the form of cheap broadsides and chapbooks (Thomson 1974:274; Wehse 1975). Carpenter went out of his way to emphasize that his contributors had not seen ballads in print, implying that his collection was an entirely oral corpus. In fact, he makes notes to that effect so often that they have aroused suspicion. Paradoxically, though, among the items in the collection is a chapbook, *The Battle of Harlaw; to which are added, Willie's Drowned in Gamrie; and Bogie-side* (Fintray, printed for the booksellers, 1849-85?). Prior to this find, it had not been noted that "The Battle of Harlaw" (Child 163) had circulated in cheap print. Indeed, it has sometimes been claimed—or at least implied—that the ballad had been in oral circulation since the time of the battle (in 1411) notwithstanding the lack of any evidence to that effect.

Hatton of Fintray is a village outside of Aberdeen, and the Scottish Book Trade Index lists John Cumming as a grocer, draper, and printer there in the period 1849-85, and he was later succeeded by his son William. A search in library catalogs shows other items with a Fintray imprint, including songsters with titles such as *The Bennachie Budget*, *The Railway Rhymer*, and *The Buchan Sangster*. Individual ballads and songs identified from a cursory consultation of online catalogs include "The Duke of Gordon's Three Daughters" (Child 237), "Gill Morrice" (Child 83), "The Blaeberry Courtship" (Roud 1888), "Sir James the Rose" (Child 213), "Andrew Lammie" (Child 233), "Tullochgorum" (Roud 5658), and others, all frequently collected in the Aberdeenshire area (including by Carpenter).

None of this proves that Carpenter's contributors did not learn their ballads orally, but it does demonstrate that these songs need to be understood as part of a rich oral/print culture and not as evidence of an unadulterated oral folk tradition. There has in recent years been a growing

⁸ This work has been funded to date by a series of grants from the National Endowment for the Humanities (United States), the British Academy, the Royal Society of Scotland, and the Marc Fitch Fund (United Kingdom).

recognition of the place of print in vernacular culture throughout both England and Scotland, but there is still much research to be carried out in this area (Cowan and Paterson 2007; Atkinson and Roud 2014). How widely did broadside and chapbook publications circulate? What sort of range of songs did they offer to the populace? Who bought them, when, where, and why? What did they do with them once purchased? These are just some of the questions that this field of cheap print poses in relation to what are frequently thought of as “folk” or “orally transmitted” ballads and songs.

Many of the same items appear, too, in larger—and therefore presumably more expensive—songsters and anthologies, some dating back to the eighteenth century. These publications are not all of a piece, and some might have been aimed at a “bourgeois” readership, although little is currently known about their readership. Even so, Carpenter collected “The Child of Elle” from his stellar ballad singer, Bell Duncan, in a text that certainly derives ultimately from Thomas Percy’s *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* (1765), and “Jock of Hazeldean” (Child 293), also from Bell Duncan, in a text written by Walter Scott and first published in Alexander Campbell’s *Albyn’s Anthology* (1816). The latter is a beautiful production with engraved musical settings, although the poem was subsequently printed widely (Bishop 2004). It is unlikely that Bell Duncan learned these ballads from publications of this kind, but it is nonetheless likely that at some stage somebody did.

And what of the melodies? The bulk of songsters and chapbooks carry no music notation, and it is thought unlikely that—except perhaps in the bourgeois parlor, with piano accompaniment—even the musically literate would have acquired ballad and folksong tunes directly from printed notation. If this supposition is correct, it provides powerful evidence for the continuity of an oral tradition—at least as far back as the bulk of the folksong tunes can be traced (perhaps to the late eighteenth century)—concurrent with the printing of the words to songs. The Carpenter collection, especially in view of its geographical concentration, offers potentially important evidence for research along these lines.

Dreg Songs

Just over 50 years ago, song collector Francis Collinson set out to find a lost musical tradition, the dreg songs of the Firth of Forth, Scotland. For hundreds of years the Firth had been home to a thriving oyster fishery that had given rise to a unique worksong tradition. “Dreg songs” were sung by oystermen as they rowed or sailed over the oyster beds towing dredges. The songs were improvised to fit the wind, tide, and work. The oyster stocks declined, however, and the fishery ended around 1900, 60 years before Collinson set to work. He found only traces of the song and was told that “John Donaldson (late) of Cockenzie was said . . . to have recorded the Dreg song in the 1930s for an American folksong collector not identified” (Collinson 1961:13). That collector was James Madison Carpenter who spent time collecting in Cockenzie, Port Seton, Musselburgh, and Newhaven—places with deep connections to the oyster fishing and the dreg song. Altogether, Carpenter collected dreg songs from about a dozen singers, making a cylinder recording of one performance of the rowing song that lasts for nearly five minutes.

Further research into this unique singing tradition, stimulated by Carpenter’s data, led to a unique event in June 2012 in which the songs were sung on their home waters for the first time

in a century (Calder 2012). Recordings and notes from the Carpenter collection were used by contemporary members of Scottish coastal rowing clubs, facilitated by Bob Walser of the Carpenter project team, to re-create the songs in their boats on the Firth (Walser 2012). This transatlantic collaboration involved archives, scholars, rowing clubs, and the community of Portobello, with the resulting event celebrating tradition, cooperation, scholarship, and Scotland all while also being covered in the Scottish media.⁹

Conclusion

The Carpenter collection thus has the capacity to enrich contemporary comparative scholarship and contribute new insights into longstanding research questions. It also has the potential to inform local and family history, and to act as a resource for the co-production of research and performance. The aim of the edition, which is currently nearing completion, is to draw attention to these possibilities and provide a firm foundation on which to build them.

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⁹ This event was made possible with support from the School of Celtic and Scottish Studies at the University of Edinburgh, Napier University, the Library of Congress, the Elphinstone Institute at the University of Aberdeen, the American Folklore Society, the British Academy, and the National Endowment for the Arts (United States).

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