CHRISTMAS CAROLS

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From Village Green
to Church Choir

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English Christmas carols are a hotchpotch, like the English themselves. Perhaps that's why they are so popular. They have the power to summon up a special kind of midwinter mood, like the aroma of mince pies and mulled wine and the twinkle of lights on a tree. It's a kind of magic.

How did they get that magic? Most of these songs were not composed as Christmas carols. Many were not 'composed' at all. Almost all did not begin life with the words they have now. Some didn't have words at all. Several evolved from folk songs: some are evolving still. One much-loved carol started out as a song about a delinquent farm-boy and a couple of dead cows. Many of the most 'English' carols have at least one ancestor in another country, in the mountains of Austria, or nineteenth-century America, or a Pyrenean hillside, in Lutheran psalters, handsome volumes of illuminated plainsong or sturdy hymnbooks from Finland, first opened by the flickering light of a fire in some stone hall one dark evening, deep in the sixteenth century.

The origins of the word 'carol' are almost as murky as the history of some of the tunes themselves. Most European languages, living and dead, have been quoted as the source of the word, though most writers agree that there is a dash of French in there somewhere.

In the beginning, a ‘carol’ was a celebratory song, with dancing. There is no exclusive connection to Christmas. Music is in the traditional ‘stanza and burden’ (or ‘verse and refrain’) format. It certainly has nothing to do with church. In about 1400, the gory tale of ‘Sir Gawain and the Green Knight’, as translated by J. R. R.Tolkien, tells us

> The king lay at Camelot at Christmas-tide with many a lovely lord … to the court they came at carols to play … they danced and danced on, and dearly they carolled.

Choirs sang church music. Everyone else sang carols. Tolkien’s version of ‘Sir Gawain’ draws the distinction between ‘songs of delight, such as canticles of Christmas’ and ‘carol-dances’.

Folk carols on Christian themes were sung in the field and the graveyard, and on semi-magical processions round the parish. Their texts often cover the entire Christian world-view, from creation to resurrection. Today, we tend to just snip out the bits we want at Christmas, for example ‘Tomorrow shall be my dancing day’ and ‘The cherry-tree carol’, which was not how our mediaeval forebears used these songs at all.

Fifteenth-century English carols began to take on some of the sophistication of the church composer. The texts are ‘macaronic’, freely dropping Latin words and phrases into an English lyric:

> There is no rose of such vertu
> As is the rose that bare Jesu.
> *Res Miranda*.

The music is in the ubiquitous verse-and-refrain format.

By the sixteenth century, the word 'carol' could find itself loosely applied to any song with a seasonal connection, still definitely not just Christmas. An ancient and mysterious folk song appeared under the title 'Corpus Christi Carol' in 1504. Court composer William Cornysh was paid the handsome sum of £20.00 for 'setting of a Carrall upon Xmas day' at around the same time as Wynkyn de Worde included the entirely secular 'Carol of hunting' in the collection which he (rather confusingly) called 'Christmasse carolles' in 1521. One of William Byrd's consort songs from around the 1580s, designed to be sung at home, has the sub-title 'A Caroll for New-Yeares Day'. A text sung in church at Christmas could also be a 'carol', whether the words make any reference to the Nativity or not: a 1630 publication refers to 'Certain of David's Psalmes intended for Christmas Carolls fitted to the most common but solempne Tunes'. These 'Carolls' are just the psalms of the day. Neither words nor music have any seasonal content.

Protestants wanted to grab the best tunes back from the devil and the pub. During the Reformation, secular songs and well-known chorales started to be used in worship. Compilers of tunes for psalm singing, hugely influential and popular, put them in their psalters. Alongside this went a passion for education. School songbooks sprang up everywhere. One such book, *Piae Cantiones ecclesiasticae velerum episcoporum,* is the source of a large number of our best-known carols. In France, dancing-masters and *chefs du choeur* started noting down little rustic *Noëls* and incorporating them into published collections, for teaching, playing, dancing and singing, and sometimes adding new words. All feed into the tradition we have today.

In the mid seventeenth century a more extreme brand of Protestantism took hold in England, with its stern disapproval of any kind of levity in church, or indeed anywhere else. The Puritans, famously, banned Christmas. As always, though, we need to see this in context. Puritans banned a lot of things. Christmas was not the mad, musical midwinter party we have come to know since. It went as part of a general assault on saints' days and elaborate ritual in church practice as a whole, and as part of a rather arcane dispute about which took precedence when a liturgical fast fell on the same day as Christmas. The jollity, of course, came back in a great whirl of enthusiasm at the Restoration in 1660. Carols, like life, were mainly an excuse for having fun. Songs about drinking, wassailing, drinking, eating, dancing and drinking were especially popular.

The more measured Protestantism of the very last Stuarts, William, Mary and Anne, made its own distinctive contribution. The beginnings of congregational hymn singing in the eighteenth century give us familiar carols like 'While Shepherds Watched', still closely based on the old style of metrical psalm singing. These words have been sung to all sorts of different tunes, each one reflecting the social and religious preoccupations of the singers. The Wesleys and Watts gave their followers lengthy devotions to sing on the dusty road, which have been absorbed into the popular consciousness. Watts's lovely 'Cradle Song' turns up, suitably distorted by the Chinese whispers of an oral tradition, as the words of an English folk song. Parish churches, with their distinctive bands of instrumentalists and 'West Gallery' choirs, mixed fashionable metropolitan musical style with a love of hymn singing and their

own intensely local traditions to create something sturdy, uniquely English and full of character.

In the mid nineteenth century, antiquarians and folklorists like William Chappell began to collect and publish their native folk songs. There are several important books devoted just to Christmas carols. Joshua Sylvester (a pseudonym) illustrates this new spirit of historical enquiry, and acknowledges some of its pioneers, in the introduction to his own 1864 book:

> Forty years ago an antiquary wrote complainingly; 'Carols begin to be spoken of as not belonging to this century, and yet no one, as I am aware of, has attempted a collection of these fugitives'. Several gleaners since then, however, have entered the field, Mr. Davies Gilbert, Mr. Sandys, Dr. Rimbault, and Mr. Thomas Wright have each garnered their gleanings into little volumes. From these I have derived much assistance in the compilation of the present work.

Sandys has turned out to be the most fruitful for our modern carol tradition, though, as Sylvester acknowledges, these early books overlap a good deal.

These men were compilers, working from existing sources like ballad sheets or the libraries of earlier collectors. The next stage, in the early twentieth century, was for the new generation of 'gleaners' to go out into the highways and byways and hear folk carols for themselves. Cecil Sharp explains how it's done:

> Only a few weeks ago I asked two old men who were singing to me whether they knew a certain carol. One of them said that he did; the other, the elder of the two,

> shook his head doubtfully. Whereupon the younger singer stood up and, dragging his companion up beside him, said encouragingly: 'Stand up, and think you've got snow in your boots, and it'll come to you all right.' And it did!

Most of the early books and ballad sheets didn't contain tunes. The oral tradition was so well established, you could happily assume your reader would already know them. Often it was enough simply to print the name of the tune, or, if the words were in a common metre, allow the singer to use any matching tune which he already knew. This contributed to the huge variety and lack of standardisation about which tune goes with a particular text. Even when the same tune was used in different towns and villages, it could differ between one and the other. The same tune could exist in scores of versions, alike in essentials, quite different in detail. When Sharp and others started writing down the tunes as people actually sang them, it became clear how an oral tradition militates against uniformity. Stainer's 'God rest you merry, gentlemen' has a different first note from Sharp's (the first degree of the scale instead of the fifth). Stainer got the tune from the streets of London. Sharp collected it in Cambridge. That interval of fifty miles shows up as the musical interval of a perfect fifth.

Some 'folk songs' may well also involve the presence of a real author or composer. Sharp wrote:

> In several parts of England I have found carols which are peculiar to certain villages, by the inhabitants of which they are regarded as private possessions of great value, to be jealously guarded and retained for their own use. These are not traditional or folk carols but the elementary

' … discordant caterwauling …': carol-singing in London. The ubiquitous ballad broadside sheets have words and pictures, but no tunes.

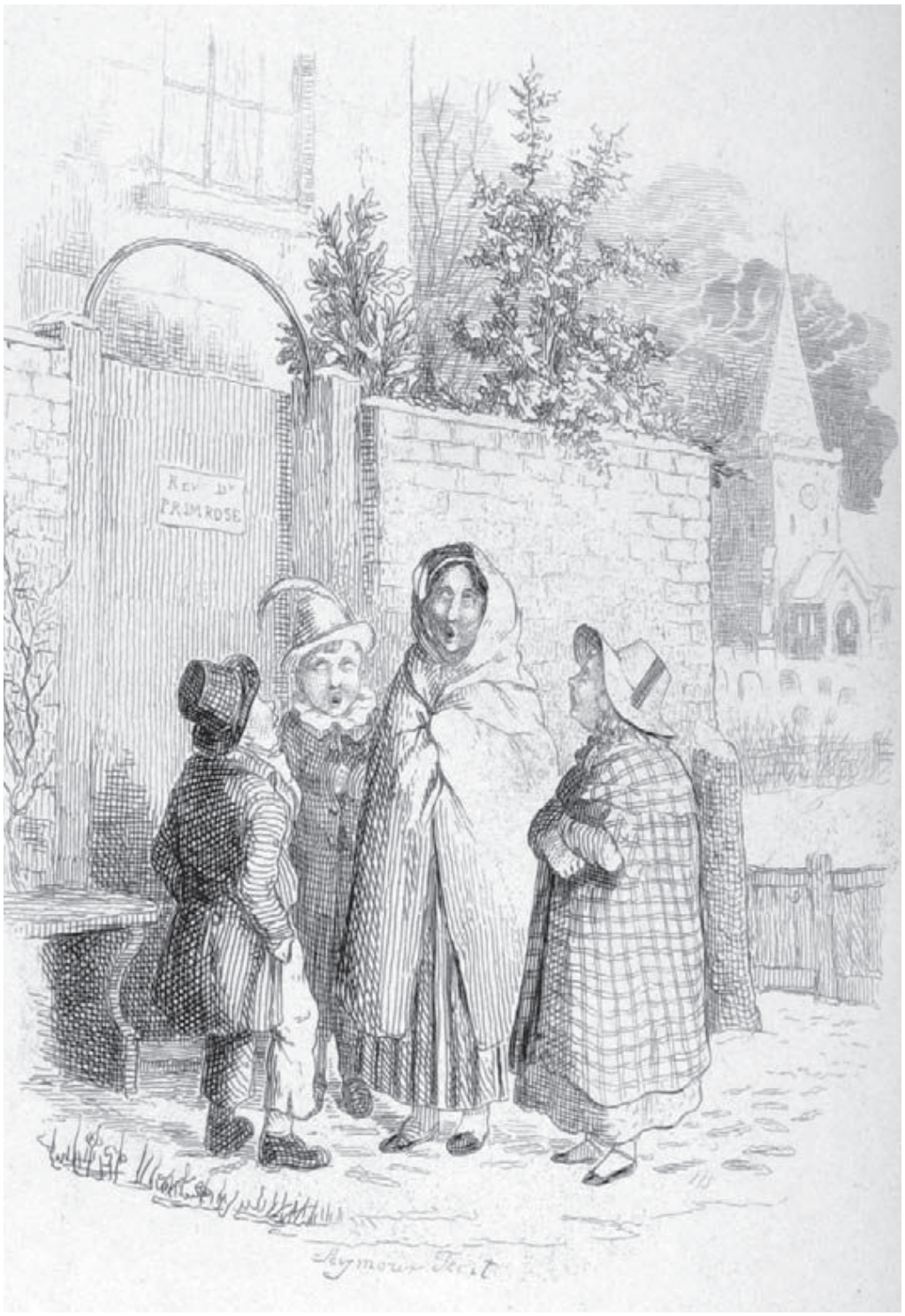
> compositions of simple musicians, very possibly of those who in the old days were members of the Church bands. They are easily distinguished from the popular carol by the formal nature of the music and words, and also by the fact that many of them are written in parts. Some of these compositions are by no means without merit. The melodies, if not inspired, are usually strong and sincere, and, plainly, the expression of genuine feeling.

He quotes one, which, 'while it lacks the freshness, the *naiveté*, and indeed pretty nearly all the typical and characteristic qualities of the folk carol, is nevertheless quite as good as some, and far better than many of the modern Christmas hymns annually sung in fashionable Churches and Chapels', adding, 'there is, perhaps, no branch of folk-music in the creation of which the unconscious art of the peasant is seen to greater advantage than the carol'.

His tone appears slightly condescending to modern ears, but Sharp, king of the collectors, was unquestionably 'strong and sincere', and a scholar.

The dedicated idealism of Sharp, Lucy Broadwood, J. A. Fuller-Maitland and others is of crucial importance in the story of the carol (although even then the word 'carol' had not taken on its exclusively Christmassy connotation: a 1903 book specifically refers to 'Easter carols and Christmas songs', and an important publication of 1924 collects what it calls *Fifty-two Songs for Christmas, Easter, and Other Seasons* under the catch-all title *The Cambridge Carol-Book*.)

Many carols are clearly local variations or expansions on authored originals. Some have an artfulness which, as Sharp suggests, implies the existence of an author but with no clue as to who might have done the deed. Translations complicate



Carol singing in the country: much more genteel.

things further, not just between languages, but from one style of religious practice or one century to another. Many fall between the cracks or slip down the back of the pew. So, if you occasionally get to the end of a chapter in this book slightly unsure about who wrote words or tune or bits of either: me too. It's all part of the tradition.

Collecting songs in the field also, of course, exposes you to the vagaries of the various performers you happen to meet. Writing in the 1920s, Marjorie Kennedy-Fraser refers to the work of the Rev. Patrick Macdonald of Kilmore, Argyll, who published a book of two hundred airs in 1784:

> Apropos of the luck of the collector in hearing the best versions of airs, Macdonald remarks that in noting the tunes, 'perhaps he has not always given the best sets of them, as he may not have had the good fortune to hear those sets…When he had frequent opportunities of hearing an air, he chose that set which appeared to him the best, the most genuine. When he had not such opportunities, he satisfied himself with writing the notes which he heard.

There is an element of choice, of editing, in what the collector does. Vaughan Williams takes this one stage further, regarding his published versions of tunes as a further variant, and allowing himself to add or smooth out musical details: the long note before the last line of 'O Little Town of Bethlehem', for example, is his invention. Mr Garman of Forest Green didn't sing it like that.

This creative unreliability of the field collection comes vividly into focus when technology allowed collectors to start making sound-recordings around the beginning of the

twentieth century. Thanks to the wonderful British Library sound archive, we can listen to the crackling sounds of men and women, some of whom watched as children when the lads of their village marched off to fight Boney, singing carols and slurping tea. Often, memories are remarkable. Sometimes melodies get muddled and songs stutter to a stop. Husbands and wives have a little bicker about what comes next. Regional accents can be completely impenetrable.

The fruits of these 'gleanings' are priceless in every sense. As late as the 1970s, the great folklorist Roy Palmer is collecting variants of carols, and the stories to go with them, including the man who enjoyed going to the pub on Sunday afternoons in the 1940s, where he learnt a local variant of 'While Shepherds Watched' from a man called Bill, who was 'a carpenter, but he didn't like work, Bill. He preferred to get his living by sleight of hand, and he avoided work like the plague'. The story ends 'we used to go up there, and I started to learn to play the banjo. And then I met my wife, and I gave it up'. Of such is history.

So far, much of this has nothing to do with church. The liturgy, the content of divine worship, was prescribed by law and was no place for most of these irreverent impostors.

In the nineteenth century the church began to make a distinctive contribution of its own. The clergy played a crucial role as editors, translators, composers, arrangers and authors. A number of familiar items were newly written in America. The stirring congregational tub-thumper, and the organ to go with it, were the invention of the Victorians.

Their successors, perhaps prudently, sought to ameliorate some of its excesses. The Introduction to the English