

William Alexander Barrett- A Neglected Pioneer

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When I came across a battered copy of William Alexander Barrett's "English Folk-Songs"¹ in a second-hand bookshop some years ago, it started a lengthy search which has not so far achieved its objective. In the introduction to this early collection of 54 folk-songs (published before this term itself was in common usage), the editor mentions that it formed only a small part of a much larger collection. Aware as I was by then of most of the well-known collections of such people as Cecil Sharp, Ralph Vaughan-Williams and Lucy Broadwood, I was intrigued by this hint of undiscovered treasures of traditional song. During the extensive if sporadic research I have since undertaken, no trace has yet been found of the current location of the collection.² However, what has emerged is a picture of a man whose potential contribution to the early folksong revival was of major significance, and whose sudden death in October 1891 robbed the movement of one of its potentially most influential and important figures.



Figure 1: W.A. Barrett c.1865³

William Alexander Barrett was born in Hackney in 1834 and at the age of 12 became a member of the choir of St. Paul's Cathedral, beginning a lifelong association with that institution in particular and the contemporary world of music in general. Whilst he was at St. Paul's, where he was also educated, he was painted by Henry Barraud, as the central figure amongst three choristers, in a work entitled "We praise Thee, O God", which became a very popular Victorian engraving.



Figure 2 "We praise Thee, O God." Henry Barraud

When his voice broke he was apprenticed to a wood-engraver, but soon returned to a career in music as a choirmaster, solo singer, writer and critic. In 1859, when he was 25, he moved to Oxford, where he was lay clerk at Magdalene College and studied for a Bachelor of Music degree. He stayed there until 1865 when he returned to London, where he was appointed as Vicar-Choral, once again at St. Paul's. During the following year he was appointed as music critic on the *Morning Post*, where he was employed until his death. In 1871 he was appointed as a government inspector of music in schools and colleges with the eminent musician Sir John Stainer. At different times he was also editor of "*Musical Times*", the "*Monthly Musical Record*" and "*The Orchestra*".

It was in the pages of the first of these, the "*Musical Times*" that his interest in folksong first emerges when, in March 1889, as editor, he makes an appeal to his readers for "quaint songs", to include in a forthcoming publication on the subject. How this interest developed is interesting to note. By this time, Barrett was an accepted authority on church music and on English glees and madrigals. In his book on the latter subject,⁴ he notes that fascinating comment by Giraldus Cambrensis in the about the polyphonic tradition amongst peoples

living beyond the Humber and on the borders of Yorkshire⁵. His detailed research into choral singing must inevitably led to an interest in other aspects of popular musical traditions.

As early as 1882 he was giving public lectures on “Old English Ballads”, illustrated by performances Miss Constance Herring and Mr Albert James of “the Farmer’s Boy” and “Remember, Love, Remember”. It is not mentioned whether Barrett himself sang at this lecture, but his reputation as a fine singer is recorded in the history of the “Magdalene Vagabonds”, a group of mainly Oxford graduates who toured the country raising money for charity:

“He possessed a very charming alto voice which he used with great skill”.⁶

He was also quite an entertainer, exhibiting behaviour unimaginable in most of our esteemed folksong collectors, with the probable exception of Percy Grainger, as this reminiscence of after-dinner performances notes:

“There was no limit to Mr. Barrett’s repertoire. he would seize a long pole, jump on the table, and reproduce Blondin in burlesque. He would enact the girl circus rider, pulling kisses out of a half-scared mouth. He would ventriloquise and attempt to catch imaginary wasps in his handkerchief.”⁷

Barrett had a strong interest in many aspects of song and he was a central figure in the musical establishment of the day. The sparks that ignited his interest in folksong appear to have come from two other influential figures of the day, Andrew Lang and Sabine Baring-Gould. When asking for songs from the readers of Musical Times, he comments:

“Mr Andrew Lang and Mr Baring Gould have recently turned attention to English folksongs, pleading for their collection and preservation before they disappear and are no more known. The matter is certainly important for various reasons, and we hope that its urgency will lead to prompt measures of preservation.”⁸

This appeal appeared in the March 1889 issue of Musical Times. In the February issue of Longman’s Magazine, in his regular “At the Sign of the Ship” articles, Lang published an English version of the “Cap o’ Rushes” folktale and commented:

“Certainly there must be more English ‘marchen’, if people happy enough to live in the country would only take a little trouble to collect them.”⁹

Barrett lost no time in responding to Lang's suggestion, changing the object of the collection from folktale to folksong on the way. It is probable that the perceived increasing domination of the musical establishment by German influences was another spur, as Barrett comments:

“By the way it is curious to find Mr Lang, when talking about a thoroughly English subject, using the German word ‘marchen’. Our folksongs do not come to us from Germany, and surely there is no serious objection to the English term ‘legends’.”¹⁰

The other figure that influenced Barrett to produce his volume was Sabine Baring-Gould. His “Songs of the West” was originally published in four parts, the first of which appeared in 1889. In the preface, he made the urgency of the task of song collection seem clear:

“In five years time all will be gone; and this is the supreme moment at which such a collection can be made.”¹¹

To such a clarion call to action, Barrett, with his interest in song and his musical knowledge and influence was in an ideal position to respond. How far his appeal to the readers of *Musical Times* for “contributions of quaint ,traditional songs”¹² succeeded remains a matter for conjecture. However, there is evidence that he was collecting songs some years before. The note in “English Folksongs” to song number 45, *Undaunted Mary*, better known as *The Banks of the Sweet Dundee*, refers to its collection during a pleasure trip in 1877¹³. It is distinctly possible that if Barrett noted this item, it was not the only instance where he chose so to do. As well as providing some evidence for earlier collecting, the notes in “English Folksongs” also show that Barrett did not suffer from preconceptions that the folk tradition had an exclusively rural habitat. He notes that number 32, *Saucy Sailor Boy*, was popular with factory girls in his native East End of London¹⁴. Several other items from the capital are also included.

The geographical spread of the songs in the collection is wide, reflecting the range of the contributors to his quest: counties from Yorkshire and Lancashire to the north, to Gloucestershire and Somerset to the west, Bedfordshire, Surrey and Sussex to the south and east. Specific locations mentioned include Shoreham and Slimfold in Sussex, Twynning in Gloucestershire and Melksham in Wiltshire. Other occupations are mentioned as sources in the brief notes: riverside boatmen, straw-plaiters, glove-makers and navvies as well as the unemployed.

By the exacting standards of subsequent developments in folk-song scholarship, the authenticity of his versions can be questioned. Barrett was quite happy to fit together a tune and verse from one version to a text from another¹⁵. His standards were those of his day and his concern was to present songs for people to sing, not for academics to dissect. He had a collection of broadside ballads and almost certainly used them to “correct” or “improve” collected or donated texts.¹⁶

Having been afflicted with a bad case of influenza in the spring of 1891, according to his obituary, William Alexander Barrett collapsed and died on the morning of 17th October 1891:

“It is understood that Mr Barrett was attacked by apoplexy shortly after rising from his bed, and died before medical aid could be procured”¹⁷.

Whilst his sudden death at the age of 57 ended his contribution to the first folk revival, it is interesting to conjecture how that revival might have otherwise progressed. With his background knowledge, his musical contacts, his journalistic skills, his links with the educational establishment, his energy and enthusiasm, might the Folk-Song Society have been founded some five or six years earlier? Might extensive fieldwork have started before Sharp and his contemporaries? What if Barrett, with his response to the Lang and Baring-Gould appeals, had focused the contemporary interest in folksong shown by others, including Frank Kidson and Lucy Broadwood?¹⁸ The subsequent revival might have been very different, with greater public support and more enthusiastic acceptance by the musical establishment.

What happened to the collection? His books and papers were left to his son, Francis, who was also a musician and journalist. On his death, in 1925¹⁹, Barrett’s books and papers were sold in an auction at Hodgson’s Rooms²⁰. The printed catalogue includes, as lot 624:

“MSS.- A collection of manuscript music, mostly in the hand of Mr. W.A. Barrett, comprising original compositions, music to old songs, ms. notes for his lectures on Irish lyrical humour, etc. in 4 portfolios and 2 parcels.”²¹

This is where my search stopped. I have been unable to trace any record of the purchasers at the sale.²² Did this lot include the “much larger collection” referred to in the introduction to “English Folk-Songs”? This must remain, at present, matter for conjecture, but if anyone comes across a large file of folksong manuscripts with W.A.B. on the cover, do please let me know!

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¹ “English Folk-Songs”, Wm. Alexr. Barrett, Novello, London, n.d.[1891]

² Items from his library are in the British Library and the Folger Shakespeare Library, Washington D.C. His collection of broadsides was donated by Maud Karpeles to the Vaughan Williams Memorial Library, from which it has since gone missing.

³ Photograph courtesy of the President and Fellows of Magdalene College, Oxford.

⁴ “English Glees and Part-Songs”, William Alex. Barrett, Longman, Green and Co., London 1886

⁵ Op.Cit. p.20-21

⁶ “The Magdalen Vagabonds”, E. Vine Hall, 1909, unpublished MS, Magdalene College Archives MS 539

⁷ “The Magdalen Vagabonds” by One of Them, *The Herefordshire magazine*, April 1907, p.149

⁸ *Musical Times*, vol.30, no.553, 1st March 1889, p.148

⁹ “At the Sign of the Ship”, Andrew Lang, in *Longman’s Magazine*, vol.13, February 1889, p.415

¹⁰ *Musical Times*, vol.30, no.553, 1st March 1889, p.148

¹¹ “Songs and Ballads of the West”, Rev. S. Baring Gould and the Rev. H. Fleetwood Sheppard, Methuen & Co., London, n.d. [1889-1892], p.ix.

¹² *Musical Times*, 1st April 1889.

¹³ “English Folk-Songs”, p.78

¹⁴ *Ibid* p.45

¹⁵ E.g. No.34 William and Mary, pp.58-59

¹⁶ Although the broadside collection is missing, as note above, a partial list was made by Roy Palmer. It includes, for example the “Grand Conversation of Napoleon” (no.39, p.68).

¹⁷ *The Musical Times*, November 1st, 1891, p.659

¹⁸ Notes by L.E.B. in the *Journal of the Folk-Song Society* mention Dr. Barrett on several occasions, referring to the Honorary Degree of D.Mus. awarded to him by the Trinity College, Toronto.

¹⁹ “Groves Dictionary of Music & Musicians”, E. Blom (ed), Macmillan, London, 1954, p.457

²⁰ 25th -26th June, 1925.

²¹ Bodleian Library, shelfmark 2591 d.2

²² With the exceptions at Note 2 above.