

## Song Recordings from English PoWs in WWI

Gill Cawley

Before the First World War two academics, Wilhelm Doegen (1877–1967) and Alois Brandl (1855–1940) were working in the fields of English spoken and written language. Brandl studied in Vienna, Berlin and London, and in 1895 was appointed to the Chair of English Philology in Berlin. In 1901 he became President of the German Shakespeare Society. His interest was in the early and modern language, literature and culture of Great Britain.

Doegen studied literature, history and phonetics in Berlin. In 1899 he went to Oxford to study English language and phonetics with Henry Sweet, (who is believed to be the model for Henry Higgins in *Pygmalion* by George Bernard Shaw.) He became a teacher in Germany in 1904. During this time he became interested in the establishment of a sound archive of peoples' voices. He carried out field trips to England, France and Russia between 1910 and 1914. In 1916 he was appointed Director of the Sound Department of the Berlin State Library. He established the Lautarchiv (Sound Archive) at Humboldt University in 1920.

When the War broke out it seemed that Brandl and Doegen would have to suspend their studies in what were now enemy countries. In order to continue the work Doegen suggested that material be collected from prisoners of war, and the Royal Prussian Phonographic Commission, chaired by Carl Stumpf, was set up to oversee the work. The Commission was funded by the German Government, and the material collected was both for academic research and for training purposes. The expenditure was justified by the claim that when Germany won the war, and all its enemies became colonies, knowledge of local dialects would be useful to the colonial administrators.. Doegen and Brandl collected recordings of readings, spoken pieces, music and songs from prisoners of many nationalities in more than 70 camps.

This collection of recordings of singers is interesting because the motive of the collectors was not to collect folk songs but to study dialect. In these circumstances the singer chose the song for reasons of his own, and the songs were not rejected for inauthenticity. Potentially this would give a broader sample of what songs people actually did sing. Furthermore, the singers were all young men, whom collectors like Sharp might not have considered appropriate respondents. (He thought they were all "so infected with the modern spirit that it is hardly worth the gathering").

The treatment of prisoners of war was covered by the 1907 Hague Convention. Prisoners were allowed to keep their own possessions and receive Red Cross parcels. The Convention laid down standards for the conditions in which prisoners should be held, though in practice this was difficult to achieve, especially as German resources were needed for the war effort. Prisoners could be used to do work which was not connected with the war. In reality, life in the camps was grim. The men were often cold, hungry and uncomfortable. Sanitation was basic at best and illness was rife. The prisoners had to cope with the psychological effects of their imprisonment, and this was exacerbated by boredom. In order to stave off depression, the prisoners entertained themselves with shows, concerts and theatricals. This is what one of them said in a collection of wartime reminiscences:

*“About once a month we put on a concert, rehearsing in our hut at night to find out what talent we'd got. But we never had a great lot of talent, I can assure you of that! ... I'd done quite a bit of entertaining at the front with the 59th Divisional Concert*

*Party, called 'The Crumps'. I'd sing, tell a few jokes and did impersonations of George Robey and Harry Champion. ... Even in our barrack huts on a Sunday night we could get anybody who could recite something or perhaps tell a funny story. We called it our Barrack Room Gaffe and men would sing and everybody would join in the choruses. ... It helped to pass the time as the men were getting pretty down at one time. We just had to keep going, keep ... our spirits up."*

These were the men that Doegen and Brandl recorded. They made it clear to the prisoners that the work was purely academic and voluntary – there were no punishments for refusing to take part. They made over a thousand recordings of British prisoners on shellac discs. They asked for performances in the prisoners' local dialects. Most of the recordings in English were of the spoken word, either a reading of The Prodigal Son or dialect stories or poems, but a few were of songs.

Most of the prisoner of war recordings are kept at the Museum of Ethnology in Berlin, with a collection of more than 30,000 wax cylinders of music from around the world collected between 1900 and 1914. The rest of the collection, which includes the 200 English speaking respondents, comprised 1651 items of speech, song and instrumentals, and is now housed in the Sound Archive at Humboldt University in Berlin.

The recordings in the Sound Archive were made on shellac discs. The disc gramophone (as opposed to the wax cylinder phonograph) was invented in 1888 by Emile Berliner in the USA, and shellac discs were invented in 1897. Discs had the advantage over wax cylinders that they could be played back with less damage. Recordings were made directly onto the discs by singing or speaking into the horn of a carbon microphone.. Since 1999 the collection has been digitised, thus ensuring its preservation.

A personal information sheet was completed for each recording, saying where and when the recording was made, the name of the performer, the places he lived and his parents' birthplaces, what languages he spoke, read and wrote, what instruments he played. The collection is remarkably complete, especially when you consider that the fragile discs have been through the upheaval of the Second World War and the Russian administration of East Germany. Some information sheets exist with no records and some records with no information sheets. The collection was catalogued in 1935, and only one song in that catalogue has since lost its information sheet. This song is The Wiltshire Recruit, and without the catalogue the title would have been unknown.

In order to use this material I had to agree not to identify the singers and speakers on the recordings. I assume that when the original material was collected the personal information was recorded with an undertaking that the respondent would not be identified. This is good practice in sociological and anthropological research, and I am happy to continue to do so.

I obtained copies of all the recordings that seemed to be songs. In fact, many were the same song both sung and spoken, which makes it easier to hear the words. One has both versions on the same disc but usually they were separate recordings:

In all there were 29 songs from 19 performers. Six were English, 4 Irish and the rest Scottish. There had been two recordings of Welsh singers, but they have been lost. The museum also had about 30 songs in Irish, which I disregarded for the purposes of this project.

The recordings themselves vary in quality, although most are good.. These singers sang strongly. In fact, two of the respondents were professional. One was a music hall artist and the other an actor, and they both sang a music hall comic drunk song, Fu' the Noo, in one case complete with a spoken introduction, slurred as if drunk, in a strong Glasgow accent. Goodness knows how Doegen noted that down phonetically.

It is difficult not to imagine how the singers might have been feeling as they made the records. Some were defiant – there's a stirring Scots wha hae wi' Wallace Bled, and a spoken Song of Robert Emmet – both performed in ringing tones.

Songs about home and family become very moving when sung by a prisoner of war. In one case, for added poignancy, the singer was a prison warder in civilian life.

Many of the songs are still fairly well known – Robert Burns is well represented – but some are now obscure. In the twenty years before these recordings were made almost all the songs the prisoners sang were available in print, as broadsides, sheet music or in books. Some of the songs were taught in schools. Some of the singers would have learned their songs from music hall performers or other professional entertainers. Perhaps some of the singers learned the songs in the "traditional" way from someone of an earlier generation, but it was probably not many. That some of the songs were learned orally is implied by the number of songs where the title varies from the collected or written versions – six out of 29.

The influence of America can be seen in the collection. From the mid 1800s there was considerable interchange of sheet music and performers between Britain and America. Broad­sides were published on both sides of the Atlantic. The sheet music for the song Castles in the Air is an American publication, although it was written by a Scot, James Ballantyne.

Minstrel songs were published as early as 1843 (Old Dan Tucker) and English visitors to America were commenting on minstrel shows in the same year. 'A vast majority of stage performers on these shores were immigrants, chiefly from the British Isles,' Crawford comments, and 'once American performers created the conventions and took them to the British Isles, performers quickly mastered them' The actor and the music hall performer sang a minstrel song, Down among the sugar cane

Only two of the songs appear in Sharp's collection (The Banks of the Sweet Dundee and The Drowned Lovers/ The Scarborough Tragedy).

Sharp and Parry would certainly see signs of what they would consider contamination in this list of songs, but while the influence of the music halls is there, and most of the songs have a known, non-peasant author, we would nowadays generally accept most of the songs as "folk", or at least "traditional", whatever interpretation we may put on the words.

Stylistically, all these singers have certain common traits. Apparently none of them needed a note, but could pitch their songs accurately. (It was Brandl's practice to end each recording with an A(435 hz) from a tuning fork so that the playback speed could be set) They tended to sing higher than we are accustomed to today; the high tenor was popular in Victorian singing, possibly because it allowed for better projection which was necessary in music halls and concerts before amplification was available.

All the singers had good voice production and excellent projection, with remarkably clear diction. They were obviously all good singers and confident of their abilities.

It is refreshing to hear young singers. The youngest was 19 and the oldest 40. So many source singers were recorded in old age when their voices were failing. While the limitations of recording technology have caused a certain loss of quality, these singers are performing with great vigour. The old singers must once have been able to sing over the noise of a pub, so the prisoners' recordings give an idea of how the source singers might have sounded in their youth.

In working on this material it is difficult not to speculate about the feelings and emotions of the singers. Hearing those ghostly voices, and knowing the circumstances in which they were recorded, it is easy to be moved to pity and sympathy, although a sentimental approach can be misleading. The performers were all volunteers. It is obvious from soldiers' memoirs and reminiscences that singing was a major factor in keeping up morale, and the music hall artist and the actor had obviously worked up their duet for *Down Among the Sugar Cane*, though whether for the recording or for a concert cannot be known. They seemed to enjoy performing it, though it was probably of little use for the study of dialect.

As likely as not the prisoners were fascinated by the process of being recorded, intrigued to hear their own voices played back and glad of the opportunity to do something interesting and different to break up the long months of captivity. Brandl's and Doegen's interest in them, in the way they spoke and what their background was would have been refreshing for men who must have felt sidelined, unable to fight, unwanted by their captors. One singer offered comments before and after his song, which show a certain feistiness.

One photograph exists of Brandl and Doegen collecting their recordings. It featured on the BBC4 programme *How the Edwardians Spoke*. The prisoners are waiting their turns, while Brandl is watching the man speaking into the horn. Doegen is holding up the words, with his left hand on the back of the prisoner's neck, apparently to ensure that he does not move away and affect the volume. This programme also identifies two of the singers, presumably with the permission of their surviving relatives. Of the others, whether they survived and came home or not, I have no information.

Only 2.8 of British servicemen (approximately 170,000) were captured on the Western Front. These 20 performers are an insignificant sample of a small minority of the total numbers of servicemen. Furthermore, they are self selected, and had been asked to provide examples of dialect, so they would probably have chosen older songs, but they clearly sang songs that were familiar, and which they were accustomed to singing.

There was one instrumental recording in the collection., a selection played on the bagpipes by an army musician, possibly the Regimental Piper.

These prisoners of war recordings allow us an aural snapshot of a lost world; since the remembering and transmission of songs is a dynamic process it is a rare opportunity to look – or rather listen – back to the songs people actually sang, and to speculate on where they learnt them. All the men were born in Victoria's reign. Those who survived came home to a very different world. Many of their songs are too sentimental for modern tastes, but what they sang is what people have always sung and will always sing – the popular songs of their day and the day before. The good ones are remembered and eventually the bad ones are forgotten. Despite all the arguments and attempts at

definition, the songs that remain become traditional. I shall give the last word to Alois Brandl: 'We do not stand before a peaceful river but before an ever changing stream'.

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Table 1 Database

	ID No.	Date rec	Title		Initials	Age	Occupation		Home	Camp
1	00410100.WAV	15.2.1916	The Auld Folks at Hame	sung	JG	37	prison warder	Scots	Aberdeen	Dyrots
2	00440101.WAV	15.2.1916	Scots wha Hae	sung	RD	32	labourer	Scots	Aberdeen	Dyrots
	00440102.WAV	15.2.1916	Scots wha Hae	spoken	RD	32	labourer	Scots	Aberdeen	Dyrots
3	00460200.WAV	15.2.1916	O' a' the airts the wind can blow	sung	JG	37	prison warder	Scots	Aberdeen	Dyrots
4	01030100.WAV	20.3.1916	Fu' the Noo	sung	PF	23	music hall artist	Scots	Inverness	Merseburg
5	01040102.WAV	20.3.1916	Lads o' Killiekrankie	sung	PF	23	music hall artist	Scots	Inverness	Merseburg
6	01050101.WAV	20.3.1916	Fu' the Noo	sung	DD	31	actor	Scots	Inverness	Merseburg
	01050102.WAV	20.3.1916	Fu' the Noo	sung	DD	31	actor	Scots	Inverness	Merseburg
7	01130200.WAV	21.3.1916	Castles in the Air	sung	EJ	20	soldier	Scots	Aberdeen	Merseburg
8	01170100.wav	22.3.1916	Farmer's Boy (version 1)	sung	AG	29	gym instructor	English	Yorkshire	Merseburg
9	01180100.WAV	22.3.1916	Louisiana (duet)	sung	PF	23	music hall artist	Scots	Inverness	Merseburg
	01180100.WAV	22.3.1916	Louisiana (duet)	sung	DD	31	actor	Scots	Inverness	Merseburg
10	01200100.WAV	22.3.1916	Jessie's Dream	sung	EJ	20	soldier	Scots	Aberdeen	Merseburg
11	01990101.WAV		The Wiltshire Recruit	sung				English		
12	02040100.WAV	10.5.1916	The Nameless lass	sung	JW	37	assistant brewer	Scots	Dalkeith	Gottingen
13	04270100.WAV	22.7.1916	Loch Lomond	sung	GC	29	soldier	Scots	Aberdeen	Sennelager
14	04280101.WAV	22.7.1916	Comin' thro the Rye	sung	GC	29	soldier	Scots	Aberdeen	Sennelager
	04280102.WAV	22.7.1916	Comin' thro the Rye	spoken	GC	29	soldier	Scots	Aberdeen	Sennelager
15	04290101.WAV	22.7.1916	John Anderson My Jo	sung	GC	29	soldier	Scots	Aberdeen	Sennelager
	04290102.WAV	22.7.1916	John Anderson My Jo	spoken	GC	29	soldier	Scots	Aberdeen	Sennelager
	04300101.WAV	22.7.1916	Loch Lomond	spoken	GC	29	soldier	Scots	Aberdeen	Sennelager
16	04360100.WAV	22.7.1916	Scotland the Brave etc	bagpipes	AS	25	musician	Scots	Edinburgh	Wahn
17	04420101.WAV	5.10.1916	Farmer's Boy (version 2)	sung	WL	33	soldier	English	Kent	Wahn
	04420102.WAV	5.10.1916	Farmer's Boy (version 2)	spoken	WL	33	soldier	English	Kent	Wahn
18	04650100.WAV	7.10.1916	The Farmers Daughter	sung	SW	29	butcher	English	Dorset	Wahn
	04670100.WAV	7.10.1916	The Farmers Daughter	spoken	SW	29	butcher	English	Dorset	Wahn
19	08810102.WAV	14.6.1917	Farmer Giles	sung	FE	19	soldier	English	Norfolk	Quedlinburg
	08810103.WAV	14.6.1917	Farmer Giles	spoken	FE	19	soldier	English	Norfolk	Quedlinburg
20	08840102.WAV	14.6.1917	"Scotch song"	spoken	TF	35	shoemaker	Scots	Linlithgow	Quedlinburg
21	10560103.WAV	25.9.1917	Where the River Shannon Flows	sung	ED	29	maurer?	Irish	Waterford	Giessen
	10570100.WAV	25.9.1917	Where the River Shannon Flows	spoken	ED	29	maurer?	Irish	Waterford	Giessen
22	10580100.WAV	26.9.1917	No One to Welcome me Home	sung	JMA	27	farmer	Irish	Carlow	Giessen
	10590101.WAV	26.9.1917	No One to Welcome me Home	spoken	JMA	27	farmer	Irish	Carlow	Giessen

Table 1 Database - Continued

	ID No.	Date rec	Title		Initials	Age	Occupation		Home	Camp
23	10590102.WAV	26.9.1917	Song of Robert Emmet	spoken	JM	27	farmer	Irish	Carlow	Giessen
24	10690101.WAV	27.9.1917	Coach the Piper	spoken	PS	40	soldier	Irish	Cork	Giessen
	10690102.WAV	27.9.1917	Coach the Piper (cont)	spoken	PS	40	soldier	Irish	Cork	Giessen
	10690103.WAV	27.9.1917	Coach the Piper (cont)	spoken	PS	40	soldier	Irish	Cork	Giessen
	10690104.WAV	27.9.1917	Coach the Piper (cont)	spoken	PS	40	soldier	Irish	Cork	Giessen
	10690105.WAV	27.9.1917	Coach the Piper (cont)	spoken	PS	40	soldier	Irish	Cork	Giessen
	10690106.WAV	27.9.1917	Coach the Piper (cont)	spoken	PS	40	soldier	Irish	Cork	Giessen
25	10710101.WAV	27.9.1917	The Pride of Siscarrol	spoken	JMC	35	shoemaker	Irish	Belfast	Giessen
	10710102.WAV	27.9.1917	The Pride of Siscarrol (cont)	spoken	JMC	35	shoemaker	Irish	Belfast	Giessen
	10710103.WAV	27.9.1917	The Pride of Siscarrol	sung	JMC	35	shoemaker	Irish	Belfast	Giessen
	10710103.WAV	27.9.1917	The Pride of Siscarrol (cont)	sung	JMC	35	shoemaker	Irish	Belfast	Giessen
26	12400102.WAV	15.3.1918	Haul Boys Haul	spoken	JP	35	fisherman	English	Lancashire	Ruhleben
27	12420100.WAV		The Scarborough Tragedy	spoken						
28	14920101.WAV		Annie Laurie	sung						
	14920102.WAV		Annie Laurie	spoken						
29		9.5.1916	It's a Long Way To Tipperary	sung	CJ	28	miner	English	Lancashire	Gottingen

Table 2 Songs and sources

	Title	Writer: Composer	Roud ID	Appendices
1	The Auld Folks at Hame (I canna leave the auld folks)			Broadside
2	Scots Wha Hae	Burns	S251124	Broadside
3	O' a' the airts the wind can blow	Burns		
4	Fu' the Noo	Grafton & Lauder	S150063	
5	Lads of Killiecrankie (Lass of K)	Lauder	S212413	
6	Fu' the Noo	Grafton & Lauder	S150063	
7	Castles in the Air	Ballantyne	S140516	sheet music
8	Farmers Boy	? Whitehead	S144441	
9	Louisiana	Avery & Hart: Mack & Smith	S304825	Sheet music
10	Jessie's Dream	Campbell: Blockley		Broadside
11	The Wiltshire Recruit (Bungay Roger)		( S171081)	
12	The Nameless lass	Ballantyne: Mackenzie	B107701	Broadside
13	Loch Lomond	Scott arr. Finlay		Broadside
14	Comin' thro the Rye		B35860	
15	John Anderson my Jo	Burns		
16	Scotland the Brave			
17	Farmers Boy (Version 2)			
18	The Farmers Daughter (Banks of Sweet Dundee)		S136438	Broadside
19	Farmer Giles		S148398	
20	Scotch Song (Willie brewed a peck o mault)	Burns	B57117	
21	Where the River Shannon Flows	Russell		Sheet music cover
22	No one to Welcome me Home		S246418	
23	Song of Robert Emmet			
24	Coach the Piper		B93875	
25	The Pride of Siscarrol (The blind Irish Girl)			Broadside
26	Haul Boys Haul			
27	The Scarborough Tragedy (The drowned lover)			
28	Annie Laurie	Douglas or Cunningham:Scott	S167499	Broadside
29	It's a Long Way to Tipperary	Judge		