

Songs through the periscope

..... Or, Folk Song Detective in action

An eccentric view of folk song analysis pioneered by our Chairman as an antidote to real life

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During the lunch-break of the Sheffield meeting, the conversation turned to rivers mentioned in song-titles which were not quite what they seem. For example, is there a river called Dundee, so clearly referred to in 'The Banks of the Sweet Dundee', and where is Nancy that is evoked in 'The Streams of Lovely Nancy'?

Ruairidh Greig, suggested that the former should actually be spelt 'The Banks of the Sweet Dun Dee', because the River Dee was once a dirty brown colour, but I was not convinced by this suggestion however ingenious it may sound, and I cannot find any evidence that the Dee was ever that colour. But his suggestion proved to be just the clue that I needed. On the way home I mused over the problem and with the aid of my indexes (of which you may have heard) and my expert knowledge of the subject of Folk Song, I can clear up this mystery. In fact, the 'Dee' part of the title is a red herring as it was introduced into the song by a short-sighted broadside printer in the early C19th. This can be easily tested. Working by candlelight, take your glasses off, close your good eye, and read the title of the Catnach broadside of the song and you will discover that it should read 'Banks of the Sweet Dun Cow' - and this is obviously what it was originally. This makes the whole thing quite clear, and indeed it sheds important light on the real meaning (hidden for over 100 years) of the whole song. By checking the standard social histories of the C19th, one can easily discover that when the Rochdale Pioneers formed the Co-op Bank they couldn't afford proper premises and anyway all the decent corner properties were already owned by their rivals, so they hired a room in the back of the pub called the Dun Cow, and their potential customers were thus exhorted to 'bank at the sweet Dun Cow' (I am not sure why it was called the sweet Dun Cow - perhaps there were two in the town and this one also sold confectionery). In the light of this new knowledge one can see that the whole song is about the working classes (given the heroic title Undaunted Mary) slaying the capitalist bosses (the Squire) and thereby gaining their wealth.

The Streams of Lovely Nancy proved no more difficult to my incisive analysis. On checking the original manuscripts, I discover that Cecil Sharp's informant had no teeth, and Cecil himself had a head-cold on the day in question, so it is not surprising that he mis-heard the title and first line, which should be "O the dreams of lovely Nancy are divided in three parts..". This is thus an excellent example of the psychological folksong. Freud, whose work on dreams is justly famous, pointed out the three-fold nature of the human psyche - the Id, the Ego and the Superego. The song is therefore patently concerned with a young female's erotic nocturnal fantasies - the second line is "where the young men and maidens will meet their sweethearts". Other verses speak of diamonds, sailors, flying high and the "noise in the valley" making the "rocks for to ring".

I would welcome comments on the above, or details of other such investigations for circulation to members of the Forum.

Steve Roud

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Further to the discussion on the origins of "The Banks of the Sweet Dundee", I would accept our Chairman's doubts about my theory on the "dun" referring to the brownish colour of the River Dee, if

the Scottish river was intended - but there is no indication of "North British" origin. I would prefer to site the ballad in Cheshire, where the said river certainly attains not only "dun", but many other tints and hues in its lower reaches near the chemical works.

However, months of concentrated research last weekend have produced a new theory. I have discovered that following the defeat of Napoleon at Waterloo and the restoration of the Bourbon dynasty in France, the victorious allies, in a scheme largely disregarded in most histories, re-established an earlier version of the European Union, complete with a common market and even a C.A.P. (Cake Accumulation Policy). This latter policy was intended to store cake, particularly long-lasting fruit-cake, as a means to offset popular distress and hunger in years of bad harvests.

The good intentions of the original pre-revolution scheme were totally misunderstood by the French mob when announced by Queen Marie- Antoinette. Consequently, the later revival of the scheme was based in England, as were the intervention stores. These of course were the banks of sweet Dundee near which undaunted Mary took her stand.

Now, as for the "Streams of Lovely Nancy", you will note the line in the first verse, "And the noise in yonder village ... etc". " Noise " is of course an early term for a group of musicians. The short-sighted broadside printer has misread the first word of the title, which should refer to the choir practice , "where young men and maidens do meet their sweethearts", at the "SCREAMS of Lovely Nancy" this being an equivalent early term for a choir. I suspect the white ivory castle on black sands refers to teeth on the blackened gums of the open-mouthed singers, but I'm still working hard on the rest.... more revelations to come!

Ruairidh Greig

Sadly, the thread dies out at this point. Unless you know something