

Not such a favourable report ...

A review from the Anti-Jacobin, June 27th, 1891, Page 529

West-Country Songs and Ballads

It is strange that Mr Baring-Gould should have taken so much trouble to collect the traditional ballads and songs of the West of England and should then have treated his material in so slovenly and uncritical a manner. But perhaps it is not strange when we consider the unhappy development of the writer of 'Mehalah', that tragic masterpiece, into the writer of 'In Troubadour Land', a farcical guide book to Provence. Mr Baring-Gould has lost his style, he has lost all respect for his work or his public, he is not careful to write grammatically.

He has still, however preserved that interest in local eccentricities which has always been one of his characteristics and it is this interest which led him to collect from the mouths of the people in Devon and Cornwall some 300 traditional songs and tunes of which a hundred and ten are printed in the volume before us. 'In some instances', he tells us in the preface 'the ballads reveal a rudeness of manner and morals that make (sic) it impossible for me to publish the works exactly. We have endeavoured to obtain 3 or 4 versions of the same ballad and are by this means enabled to arrive at what we believe to be the most correct form of both. But as to the antiquary everything is important, exactly as obtained, uncleaned from rust and unpolished it is the intention of Mr Sheppard and myself to deposit a couple of copies of the songs and ballads, exactly as taken down, one in the Library of the Exeter and the other in that of the Plymouth Institution, for reference ...what we have done is to give samples of the various sorts, with not too large a preponderance of the earliest and most ancient melodies which, though to us of the highest interest, would not perhaps, meet with general appreciation.'" In a note to the fourth part Mr Baring-Gould's coadjutor Mr Sheppard writes that his drive has been to present the melodies 'in a form acceptable to the general public and in which they may hold their own in the great competition for public favour. Should they fail to do this' adds Mr Sheppard, 'they have yet another leg to stand upon; and put in their plea for some consideration as not ephemeral production (of whatever merit) but as melodies which may honestly claim to a place in a national collection of the genuine songs of the British people.' In other words Mr Baring-Gould and Mr Sheppard, after collecting these songs from the old song men - songs whose interest lies in their antiquity, their characteristic western flavour - have found no difficulty in polishing them up for the 'drawing room'. We should have thought that at all events Mr Baring-Gould's sense of humour would have allowed him to discern the absurdity of such a statement as Mr Sheppard's: If the ballads of the west cannot succeed in pleasing the drawing room public yet they are ballads of the west and may be acceptable of that ground.

Had the collection been properly edited it would have been an addition of real value to what we know of English folk songs. As it is the melodies seem to have been treated with deference, and not edited, like the words out of all recognition. For so much we cannot but be grateful. And when Mr Baring-Gould tells us that the words have been altered, 'to avoid grossness or banalities', he is not to be blamed as far as the grossness is concerned. But we are not so ready to accept the re-writing of a ballad because Mr Baring-Gould has decided it is banal. Here he is in danger of going beyond the duty of an editor. He himself, however, has no scruples of conscience and does not even pay so much homage to editorial virtue as to conceal his shortcomings and misdemeanours. Thus in giving the amusing ballad of Widdicombe Fair - at present, as he observes, the best known and most popular of Devonshire songs - he calmly says in a note, 'There is one more verse in the

original which I have been forced to omit from lack of room.' Every page of the notes contains statements like these: 'I have ventured to add the last verse;' 'There were 10 verses in the original: I have cut them down to 7,' 'The words ... were of no merit.' We cannot feel at all sure that this is as it should be and it happens too, that Mr Baring-Gould is not a clever versifier.

SBGAS Newsletter 1995/96, No. 21, p. 3