

WORKS ON THE FOLK SONGS

Letter from Martin Graebe

Dear Dr. Almond,

When last I wrote to you I promised to let you know the outcome of my work on the manuscripts of folk songs collected by your Great Grandfather, kept in the library at Killerton House. It's taken me longer than expected but I now believe I understand the manuscripts, their context and their importance.

As we said in our show (of which you have heard the recording) most of the experts on folk music believe that the manuscript copy and the rough working notes, which Sabine Baring-Gould gave to Plymouth Library, is the full written record of his folk song collecting. In fact, the Killerton Manuscript turns out to contain significantly more material than the manuscript in Plymouth - something like 650 songs and their variants (compared with 203 in the Plymouth MS).

In a magazine interview from 1898, SBG describes four handwritten volumes full of songs and then, in a letter to the song collector Cecil Sharp in 1904, he refers to his 'Vellum covered book' as his source of reference. There are four vellum covered books in the Library at Killerton, three of which contain folk songs and which are, I believe, the fair copy that SBG wrote up for his own use as a reference. It is clear that this is the document from which the Plymouth MS was copied as it explains some of the errors in that manuscript. As I said above, however, the Killerton books contain a lot more material and it appears that he was working on them until at least 1916.

For those who are interested in English folk song this is a very important discovery, not only because of the new material but also because I believe that it gives us a better picture of what SBG was willing to accept as 'Folk Song' in the years after he published the two major collections 'Songs of the West' and 'A Garland of Country Song'. Certainly they show that, while he was constrained by his calling and by the taste of the times in what he could publish, he was much more broad-minded than these two publications suggest. That fits much better with the picture of the man and his zest for life that I had envisioned from his other writing.

The number of people who will find these manuscripts as exciting as I do is probably small and yet it is vital that the manuscripts are preserved because they are such an important record of folk culture in the South West of England. I know from talking with Denise Melhuish that you fully understand this and that you have taken a strong personal interest in the collection. Likewise, the National Trust have been very responsible in the way they have protected the manuscripts and the safeguards on access that have been put in place.

To date what I have done is to work my way through the three volumes of songs indexing them and recording the singers from whom they were collected. I have also transcribed some of the most interesting of the songs from the later volumes. It seems appropriate to check with you at this stage that you are happy for me to continue working with the manuscripts. The further work that I would like to do is as follows:

- I intend to give a copy of the index of songs that I have prepared to the National Trust at Killerton for the benefit of other researchers. Should there be any wider interest I would make additional copies available.
- I would like to write a paper for the Folk Music Journal describing and manuscripts and my findings about them for the benefit of other researchers in the field.
- I would very much like to start singing some of the songs and to encourage other people to do so. There are some wonderful songs in the manuscripts that I have not seen elsewhere as well as some new versions of songs that are known from other sources. It would be great to bring them back to life.
- I would like, in the medium term, to publish a selection of songs from the manuscripts from the later years of SBG's collecting, possibly associated with a new recording.

I would also like to make another suggestion that I know will be challenging (in recessionary times) but which I believe would be very worthwhile. I would like, with your permission (and also that of the National Trust), to try to get funding within the UK to copy the manuscripts so that they can be more readily available for study. This would relieve the problems of the National Trust not having proper facilities for research at Killerton. There are two appropriate places where a copy of the manuscripts could be housed and be available for study. The first is with the Devon County Library Service who already hold the Manuscript given to them by SBG. The second place would be the Vaughan-Williams Library in London which is where the original manuscripts of the major collectors of English Folk Song are housed I know that both of these libraries would welcome a copy of these manuscripts. The actual process of photographing the documents would have to be carried out with great care to protect the originals but I know it has been successfully done in other cases. This idea does depend on my finding a source of funds, either from one of the arts support agencies in the UK or from business sponsorship. I do believe, however, that the right place for the originals is with the rest of the library of folk song material. Many of the other books housed at Killerton are annotated in various ways that link with the manuscripts or have pages of notes related to their preparation bound into them. Many of the books on song by other authors and the collections of old ballads were references for SBG when he was writing 'Songs of the West' and 'Garland of Country Song' and I believe that the library as a whole is important for the light it throws on his way of working.

One thing that I should draw to your attention is the fourth vellum covered volume, similar in appearance to the three volumes of folk song, but which contains a mass of detail on the history and lineage of the Baring-Gould family. It may well be that this is all recorded elsewhere (I know Mrs. Briggs wrote up your family history in detail, for example) but of all the items in the library I believe this is a book that would be of inestimable value to any of your family who are researching family history.

I'd like to close by thanking you again for the opportunity to work with the manuscripts so far. I hope you will feel that it is appropriate that I should continue along the lines that I have outlined above.

Yours sincerely,

Martin Graebe