

## SONGS OF THE WEST

100 years ago the first part of a wholly remarkable book was published. That book was "Songs of the West" and had as its subtitle "A collection made from the mouths of the people". The man who wrote it was himself a remarkable character, the Reverend Sabine Baring Gould, the Squire and Parson of the parish of Lewtrenchard in West Devon. Baring Gould was also a scholar, antiquarian, collector and a prolific author of both fiction and non-fiction. He was a man who was, in many ways, out of step with the rest of his generation.

Baring Gould was born in Exeter in 1834 to a father whose career with the East India Company had been cut short by a carriage accident. His childhood was unsettled since his father preferred to escape the boredom of England by travelling through Europe for the greater part of the year. This meant that Baring Gould had little formal schooling but this did not prevent him from scraping through Cambridge, though he could never get to grips with mathematics. His unconventional views and behaviour were obvious even then and he was a persistent critic of the establishment (particularly that of the church) throughout his life. Tales of his eccentricity abound and it is well documented that he taught at Hurstpierpoint with his pet bat on his shoulder. Another of his admirers, John Betjeman, said of him "What curate in an industrial parish in the North today would dare to single out a millgirl and have her sent to a place where she could learn to speak in an educated style and then marry her? What local council would allow a squire today to rebuild his house in a Rhenish style as did Baring Gould in Lewtrenchard? What vicar and Diocesan Advisory Committee would allow a squarson to remove tablets from other churches and put them up in his own, as Baring Gould did at Lew?"

Yet for the greater part of his life Baring Gould was content to settle in Devon where he was responsible for the welfare of the few hundred people that lived in his parish and his manor. This left him time to spare for travelling regularly as he had when he was a boy, for raising his large family, for renovating his house and his church and for writing the astonishing number of books, pamphlets and magazine articles that actually paid for these other activities. No totally reliable list of his publications exists but the best available estimate credits him with 211 publications excluding any of the magazine articles. To most people who have heard his name it is as the writer of a favourite hymn - probably "Onward Christian Soldiers", but of all the achievements of his 90 years on this Earth, he himself rated most highly that of collecting the folk songs which were published as "Songs of the West".

He worked on the collection for a total period of 12 years and travelled over a large part of Devon and Cornwall. He visited old singers in their homes and in the fields. When touring he would stay with friends and invite the old singers to join them. He was not, himself, a good musician and was helped in his work by two other men, Dr Fredrick Bussell and the Reverend H W Fleetwood Sheppard. When time permitted, one or other would join Baring Gould on his visits and take down the melodies while Baring Gould noted down the words. Baring Gould could not, in his era, have published the songs as recovered since they were too robust for Victorian ears. Rather than publish with blank spaces or dotted lines as some other collectors chose to do Sabine took the course of modifying the words where necessary. He has been criticised for this over the years but it is hard, in reality, to see what other course of action was open to him.

It was originally intended that the book would be published in three parts but, in fact, it ran to four. It was not, of course, the first book about folk songs since there had been several collections of ballads published in the 17th and 18th century. It was not even the first book of songs collected

directly from the singers since the Reverend John Broadwood had published his *Sussex Songs* privately in 1843. It was, however, the most ambitious collection made to that date and the book set the pattern for the first folk revival at the end of the last century. The conventions devised by Baring Gould were to become the standard practice and, in particular, his recognition that the songs were linked to individual singers who were usually identified in the text. This, coupled with the way he writes about his singers as friends, if not actually equals, is what is special about Baring Gould.

That first edition was written in association with Fleetwood Sheppard and this led to the peculiarity of the collection in that Fleetwood Sheppard would not work with any of the songs collected by Baring Gould's other collaborator, Frederick Bussell. This was on the grounds that he felt unhappy arranging any song that he had not "pricked down" himself since he felt that he could not catch its special character unless he had heard it sung himself. The second edition of *Songs of the West*, published in 1905, was very different to the first since Cecil Sharp took over the musical editorship and reintroduced a number of Bussell's contributions, arranging many himself, as well as using some of Bussell's own arrangements. He also re-arranged many of Sheppard's songs.

For a few years at the beginning of the century Sharp and Baring Gould worked closely together and Sharp was a regular visitor to Lewtrenchard. As well as *Songs of the West* they produced "English Folk Songs for Schools" in 1907 and in the same year Sharp dedicated his "English Folk Song - some conclusions" to Baring Gould. What exactly caused their friendship to fade is unclear but certainly Baring Gould's references to Sharp in later years became less flattering. He certainly believed that Sharp's arrangements were not generally as good as Sheppard's but it is most likely that he was unhappy about Sharp's success in setting up a Folk Establishment in London. Baring Gould was constitutionally unable to get on with establishments of any kind whether of Church, State or the Folk Song Society.

Baring Gould died in 1924 at Lewtrenchard and was buried in his own churchyard just across the road from his house. In West Devon there are still old people who remember him and most of those do so fondly. To Folk Revival singers in Devon and Cornwall he has left a legacy that will be a source of joy for centuries to come.

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