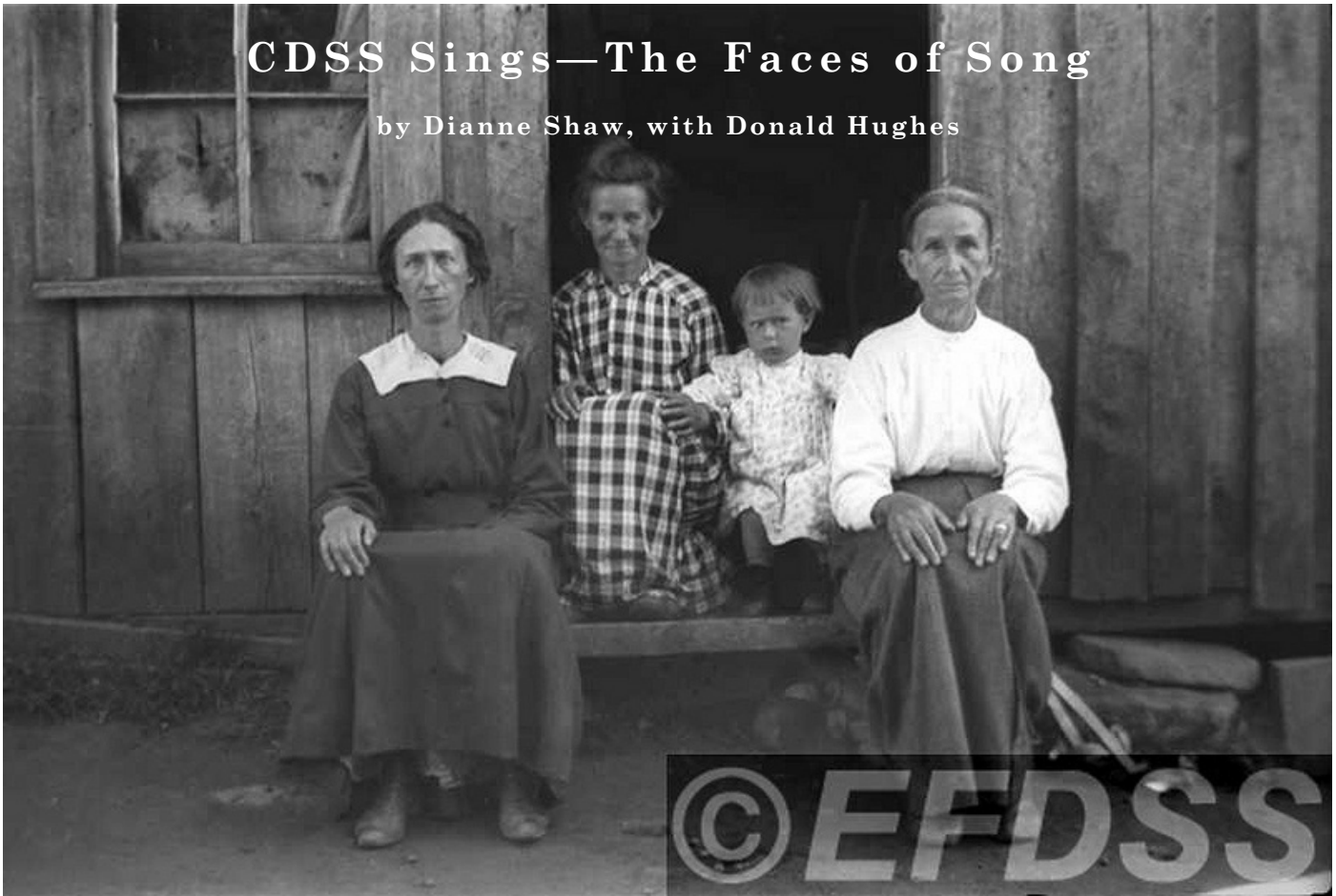


CDSS Sings—The Faces of Song

by Dianne Shaw, with Donald Hughes

Hannah, Becky, and Effie Mitchell, Burnsville, NC, 1916; photo by Cecil Sharp



When CDSS founder Cecil Sharp came to America in 1914, his goal was to make money with choreography, dance and music lessons, and lectures. He made his U.S. sojourn because he could not fight in WWI at age 54, and his music and dancing lessons, festivals and schools were closed because of the war. But the treasure he was to bring back to England was not just currency. When he left the U.S. for the last time in 1918, he carried with him a treasure trove of more than 1600 variants of English ballads that he and assistant Maud Karpeles had collected from 281 singers, and of photos that he took of the singers who had shared their songs.

The first U.S. exhibit of 24 of these rare photos was displayed January 20-February 11, 2017 at Through This Lens in Durham, NC, with other shows planned. The exhibition, developed by CDSS Board member Donald Hughes, with help from fellow CDSS members Catherine Shreve and Dianne Shaw, is part of a three-year centennial observance of Sharp's work in the U.S.

Donald explains, "During the 2015 CDSS Centennial much was said about Sharp and his contributions. I started to remember the North Carolina connection, and later more of the Appalachian link, and realized this important history was not being covered. A project was born!

"It is clear that Cecil Sharp was a dynamic man of many interests. He wanted to develop a folk movement for music and dance and establish an organization to further that movement.* His passion was hunting for and finding music and dance. For many years he covered South and West England. When he came to America for new opportunities, he was not expecting to hunt for music. The chance meeting with Olive Dame Campbell, through Helen Storrow, and the revelation of the existence of English ballads in America, charted a course he had not imagined—literally tramping through the American mountains to find native singers in the new land.

"It became his passion for being here. The lectures, teaching, and organizing became secondary to the quest for this improbable result of cultural migration to the new world. The results were three summers of fine experiences and the publication of definitive works of the ballads.

“A most remarkable result from all this work came from Sharp’s love of taking photographs. This was part of the story and a gift of remembrance he would send back to people. The strong desire to document, and the personal nature of his relationship with the Appalachian people, resulted in a set of powerful and introspective images for history to hold. We are most indebted to the Vaughan Williams Memorial Library at the English Folk Dance and Song Society for giving CDSS permission to produce this exhibit.”

Before their U.S. travels, Sharp and Karpeles were already collaborators, first meeting in London in 1910. Karpeles (1885-1976) was a social worker helping at a settlement house where she developed a folk dance club as a way to engage the children with whom she was working. She developed a passion for folk dancing, and her club became involved with Sharp, demonstrating dances as part of his lectures. Their alliance was forged.

Sharp’s and Karpeles’ collecting took place over months-long visits between 1916-1918 in five Appalachian Mountain region states: North Carolina, Virginia, West Virginia, Kentucky and Tennessee. They were assisted by Olive Campbell in Asheville, NC, and received underwriting from philanthropist Helen Storrow of Boston, founder of Pinewoods Camp.

They began their journey in Asheville at the invitation of Mrs. Campbell, who later founded the John C. Campbell Folk School in Brasstown, NC, in memory of her husband. Campbell, also a collector, introduced the pair to area singers, and Sharp and Karpeles traveled over treacherous footpaths and by cart to visit with singers, beginning in nearby Madison County.

Once residents understood that the pair were neither German spies nor potential land purchasers, they freely shared their songs as Sharp noted the music while Karpeles wrote down the words.

One of the first singers they met was Jane Gentry in Hot Springs, NC [see song next page]. She gave them 70 songs and ballads, more than anyone else in all their travels. Gentry’s great granddaughter, Daron Douglas, continues the family legacy of ballad singing.

The first collection, co-authored by Sharp and Campbell, was published in 1917: *English Folk Songs from the Southern Appalachians, Comprising 122 Songs and Ballads and 323 Tunes collected by Olive Dame Campbell and Cecil J. Sharp*. A later edition, published in 1932, was edited by Karpeles.

Sharp and Karpeles described the singers in their diaries. After visiting Alex Coffey’s family, he noted, “We said goodbye with genuine reluctance. They are thoroughly nice people, with nice feelings. They never did anything snobbish or affected or unpleasant... and were not in the least bit shy or overawed... took us just as we were and obviously interested in our lives which were so different from their own.”

The ballad singing affected the pair: “While Mrs. Wheeler sang *The Green Bed* her children—of whom there are 13 (6 of her own, 7 of her husband’s)—sang the air in unison softly with serious grave little faces. It had a wonderful effect which I shall not readily forget.”

Sharp summarized their travels, writing, “It is no exaggeration to say that some of the hours I passed sitting on the porch (i.e. verandah) of a log-cabin, talking and listening to songs were amongst the pleasantest I have ever spent.”

The photo exhibit will be shown next at the Mountain Heritage Center, Western Carolina University, Cullowhee, NC (June and July), and the Pine Mountain Settlement School, Harland, KY (October). Anyone interested in booking the exhibit may contact Donald Hughes (csharpnc@gmail.com).

The North Carolina Folklife Institute and the Country Dance and Song Society are sponsoring the observance and recognition of this important work. The English Folk Dance and Song Society is providing generous support, and the project is made possible in part by the North Carolina Humanities Council, a statewide nonprofit and affiliate of the National Endowment for the Humanities. For more information on the work and travels of Cecil Sharp and Maud Karpeles visit: cecilsharpinappalachia.org.

* Sharp founded the English Folk Dance Society in London in 1910; the first American branch of EFDS would become the Country Dance and Song Society.

To hear a WUNC Radio podcast about the opening of the Durham photo show go to <http://wunc.org/post/how-cecil-sharp-collected-sights-and-sounds-appalachia>. You also may want to read passages from Sharp’s Appalachian diaries, <https://www.vwml.org/vwml-projects/vwml-cecil-sharp-diaries>.

*Among the songs collected by Sharp and Karpeles, was *The Grey Cock*, which Lorraine Hammond says: “was one of Jane Gentry’s loveliest songs, and Peggy Seeger’s version is exquisite, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=viepsmcLO6k>.” A facsimile of the ballad is at <http://www.traditionalmusic.co.uk/english-folk-songs/>, #30, pp. 128-129.*

The Grey Cock

as sung by Mrs. Jane Gentry, collected by Cecil Sharp, 1916

The musical score is written in treble clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a 4/4 time signature. It consists of six staves of music with lyrics underneath. The lyrics are: All on one sum-mer's eve-ning when the fe-ver were a-dawn-ing I heard a fair maid make a mourn. She was a-weep-ing for her fa-ther and a-griev-ing for her moth-er, And a-think-ing all on her true love John. At last John-ny came and he found the doors all shut, And he ding-led so low at the ring. Then this fair maid she rose and she hur-ried on her clothes To make haste to let John-ny come in.

2) All around the waist he caught her and unto the bed he brought her, And they lay there a-talking awhile. She says: O you feathered fowls, you pretty feathered fowls, Don't you crow till 'tis almost day, And your comb it shall be of the pure ivory and your wings of the bright silveree (*or silver grey*). But him a-being young, he crowed very soon, He crowed two long hours before day; And she sent her love away, for she thought 'twas almost day, And 'twas all by the light of the moon.

3) It's when will you be back, dear Johnny, When will you be back to see me? When the seventh moon is done and passed and shines on yonder lea, And you know that will never be. What a foolish girl was I when I thought he was as true As the rocks that grow to the ground; But since I do find he has altered in his mind, It's better to live single than bound.

Tune notation by Kate Barnes.