

CDSS Sings—“Jack Went A-Sailing”

by Jeff Davis

When Brian Peters and I sat down to assemble the materials for our Sharp’s Appalachian Harvest, we were facing a big job. Cecil Sharp’s *English Folk Songs from the Southern Appalachians* is an imposing tome. We had in mind a single CD and one two-hour presentation—neither much time nor space to represent such a large collection. My 1952 Oxford edition contains 845 pages in two volumes. The title page tells us to expect “Two hundred and seventy-five Songs and Ballads with nine hundred and sixty-eight tunes.” As big as those numbers are, about half the songs collected and 644 tunes were not published. Included is Sharp’s original 1917 Introduction, Maud Karpeles’ 1931 preface, and her “Note to Preface,” added for this later edition.

The collection was gathered in just forty-six weeks over three summers (1916-1918). Scarcely hinted at in the book are the difficulties that Sharp and Karpeles encountered. Hidden away in a long list of acknowledgments, Karpeles mentions, “several occasions when Cecil Sharp was suddenly stricken with fever and lay seriously ill.” There is no more mention of great struggles with illness, and nothing at all about dental emergencies, awful weather, questionable food, long days of travel, and frustrations of every kind. These adversities, and the pleasures of the trips, as well, are narrated however, in Sharp’s diaries. Upon reading it all, I sensed that anybody but Cecil Sharp and Maud Karpeles would have packed up and sailed home. Brian and I have detailed these woes in the program. We also viewed and have used Sharp’s stunning (stunning!) photographs of the singers.¹

With every song, Sharp gave the singer’s name, the locale, and the date of the singing. It reminds me that these people were real people for these collectors. We moderns now read these names, but have no memories of the heat, the dust, the long walks over steep mountains, the log cabins full of family, the smell of okra cooking on the stove. With the book, songs, diaries and photographs in hand, Brian and I vowed to bring the singers to life as well as we could. This meant escorting the songs to life, too.

Here’s how I got at one song. “Jack Went A-Sailing” is listed as no. 65 in the book. The song is well remembered for a piece now two hundred years old. Versions of it have been found English-worldwide and it has been recorded by such eminent musicologists as Bob Dylan and The Grateful Dead. Florence Reese used a version of the tune for her famous “Which Side Are You On?” A Brooklyn-based band, Rasputina, has recorded it on an EP entitled

Ancient Cross-Dressing Songs. It may well be it is our heroine’s donning of atypical raiment that accounts for the continued popularity of the song.

Jack Went A-Sailing

Sharp’s first version of “Jack” comes from the singer who appears most often in the book.² “Sung by Mrs. Gentry at Hot Springs, N.C., Aug. 16, 1916” (opposite page). Her rendition begins as many do—in the middle of the story. Omitted is mention of our heroine’s previous suitors; omitted is Jack’s arrival on the scene; omitted is the father’s detestation of the unsuitable fellow; omitted (different from version to version) is the father’s attempt to buy off Jack, or have him “vanished,” or the girl’s bankrolling Jack’s hasty departure. Mrs. Gentry begins with Jack’s sailing, thereupon his true love disguises herself in “man’s array,” follows Jack to the wars, finds him wounded on the battlefield, carries him to a physician, he is healed, they marry. Mrs. Gentry’s version was typical and good and just seven verses.

Sharp and Karpeles collected 1,612 tunes from 281 singers. Only one song was accompanied. (Yes, just one.)³ Brian and I couldn’t produce a whole recording of unaccompanied singing though we have retained some; we needed some instrumental arrangements. I wanted to create a piece something like Clarence Ashley’s famous “House Carpenter.”⁴ For that, I didn’t need a beautiful tune like Jane Gentry’s; I needed a suitable one. I used version R, “Sung by Mrs. Frances Richards at St. Peter’s School, Callaway, Va., August 10, 1918” (see page 20). (Mrs. Richards’ name also appears often in Sharp’s book.) I like the result. Brian and I open the CD with “Jack” and close our live presentation with it.

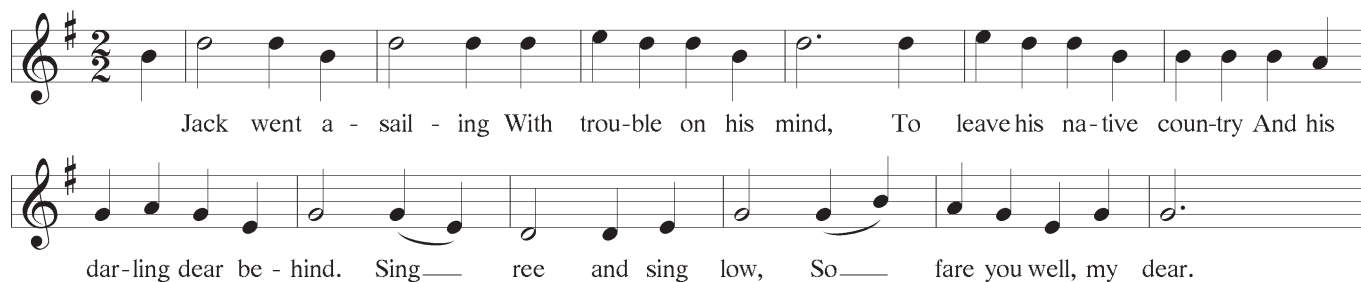
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Cecil Sharp & Maud Karpeles at the Berea (Kentucky) railway station. Photo by G Bradley

Jack Went A-Sailing

As sung by Mrs. Gentry, 1916



Jack went a - sail - ing With trou-ble on his mind, To leave his na-tive coun-try And his
dar-ling dear be - hind. Sing— ree and sing low, So— fare you well, my dear.

She dressed herself in men's array,
And apparel she put on;
Unto the field of battle
She marched her men along.

Your cheeks too red and rosy,
Your fingers too neat and small,
And your waist too slim and slender
To face a cannon ball.

My cheeks are red and rosy,
My fingers neat and small,
But it never makes me tremble
To face a cannon ball.

The battle being ended,
She rode the circle round,
And through the dead and dying,
Her darling dear she found.

She picked him up all in her arms,
She carried him down to town,
And sent for a London doctor
To heal his bleeding wounds.

This couple they got married,
So well did they agree;
This couple they got married,
And why not you and me?

(Note: This paragraph is mostly for banjo players. All others may flee.) Mrs. Richards' tune is in a gapped scale; that is, it's missing a note (the seventh); the third is a bit weak. Even more important is that the thing is plagal—the tonic (F in both Sharp's notation and my version) falls right in the middle of the scale. When the tune comes to rest it mostly resides at a C instead of at F (the second and fourth strings rather than the third). I've tuned the banjo to the "sawmill" tuning, tuned to F. The whole thing feels different to the hands than most other songs in the tuning.

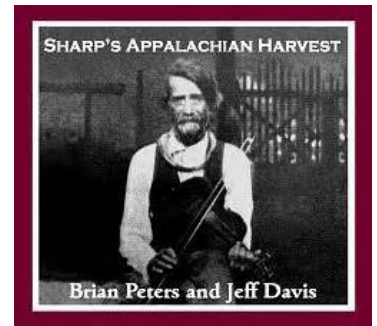
¹ You might imagine me huddled in a carrel somewhere in the fourth sub-basement of some faraway library, but no: The diaries and photographs can be found on the website of EFDSS (English Folk Dance and Song Society). Search under the Vaughn Williams Memorial Library, <http://www.vwml.org/vwml-projects/vwml-cecil-sharp-diaries>. Many thanks to Malcolm Taylor.

² Mrs. Gentry is the only one of these singers about whom a biography has been written. See: *Jane Hicks Gentry: A Singer Among Singers*. Betty N. Smith, The University Press of Kentucky, 1998.

³ *Play of a Fiddle: Traditional Music, Dance, and Folklore in West Virginia*, University Press of Kentucky, 1998. Gerry Milnes states that singing while playing is an African-American tradition that spread late to the mountains via the minstrel shows.

⁴ Adding banjo to an old ballad nicely melds the British and African-American traditions of the rural South. Ashley's "House Carpenter" can be heard on Harry Smith's famous "Anthology of American Folk Music," Smithsonian-Folkways, 1997.

Jeff Davis has been collecting and playing traditional music since he was a teenager, when he discovered the old-timers through Frank Warner and Pinewoods Camp. He's always found himself as interested in the singers as in the songs. He's played in six countries, including England where he met longtime friend Brian Peters.



In October 2015, Jeff and Brian will be appearing in the eastern United States with their Sharp's Appalachian Harvest, drawn from Cecil Sharp's century-old collection. The two will be performing the music, accompanied by Sharp's photographs of informants, maps, transcriptions and readings from the diaries. The tour will range from Boston, Massachusetts to Durham, North Carolina. In July, they'll be at The Library of Congress. For more information and dates, see <http://www.jeffdavisoldmusic.com>. CDSS is delighted to be a sponsor of this tour. (And to be selling the recording, <https://store.cdss.org/component/mijoshop/product/1011-sharp-s-appalachian-harvest?search=sharp>.)

Jack Went A-Sailing

As sung by Mrs. Frances Richards, 1918

O Jack he's gone a - sail - ing With trou - ble on his mind, To leave his na - tive
count - try, His dar - ling girl be - hind — Lil - ly, Lil - ly hoo, Sweet Li - ly I love
you. — Lil - ly, Lil - ly hoo, Sweet Li - ly I love you.

Tune typeset by Peter Barnes