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The 19th-century Taming of the Christmas Carol, from St Erth to Truro Transcript

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Joseph Bennett (1831 - 1911), chief music critic of the Daily Telegraph from 1870 to 1906, looking back at the early-nineteenth century, wrote:

When, in later years, organs became common and harmoniums spread over the land, the cult of orchestral instruments decayed, and...hardly a vestige remained. Societies were broken up, and the work of generations was undone.

One individual who had been determined that traditions - especially Christmas ones - should not be lost to the nineteenth century was Davies Giddy (1767 - 1839). Giddy was born in Cornwall and attended grammar school in Penzance and a mathematical academy in Bristol. After studying Maths and astronomy at Oxford University, Giddy entered public service, and throughout his life he was interested in literature, history, economics, and religion as well as in science. Giddy rose to the office of High Sheriff of Cornwall by the time that he was twenty-five, and became deputy lieutenant shortly afterwards. From 1804 to 1832 Giddy served as a Member of Parliament in Cornwall, briefly for the constituency of Helston, and then of Bodmin for over a quarter of a century. During his time as an MP, Giddy adopted his wife's surname of Gilbert in order to secure land in Sussex, the inheritance of which was conditional on the perpetuation of the Gilbert family name. As an MP, Davies Gilbert promoted science and the arts. He was known as an extremely committed public servant, who served on an inordinately large number of committees and who slept little. Gilbert was President of the Royal Society from 1827 to 1830 and died (appropriately enough for a man who changed the course of the history of the carol) on Christmas Eve of 1839.

The importance of Davies Gilbert to the re-invention of the Christmas carol in the nineteenth century can hardly be over-emphasized. The seriousness with which Gilbert's 1822 publication, *Some Ancient Christmas Carols*, was viewed by the mid-nineteenth century reformers is out of all proportion to its size. *Some Ancient Christmas Carols*, with the Tunes to which they were formerly sung in the West of England. Collected by Davies Gilbert, F.R.S. F.A.S. &c. contains eight carols; that's a mere eight tunes spread out over sixty-nine verses. With the exception of the ubiquitous 'While shepherds watched', none of the other seven have made it into today's congregational canon. But 'The Lord at first did Adam make' (which opens the collection) and 'A Virgin most pure' survive as part of today's choral repertoire. Davies Gilbert MP set the wheels of the carol revolution in motion.

1822 was a bumper year for Christmas in Britain and the United States. Gilbert published his carol anthology, and in New York, Professor Clement Clarke Moore (1779 - 1863) fleshed out the character of Santa Claus for the benefit of his children. For two decades after its first publication, Moore tried to keep his identity as the author of *A visit from St Nicholas* a secret; Moore felt that his reputation as a professor of Biblical learning might be damaged by association. Davies Gilbert had no such qualms about possible damage to his reputation as an MP by his association with traditional Christmas songs. Indeed *Some Ancient Christmas Carols* went to a second edition in 1823, the year after its first publication. The second edition of *Some Ancient Christmas Carols* included the words of a dozen more carols, but only one of them with music. Frustratingly, 'The first Nowel' made its first published appearance as the first of the added carols in the 1823 edition, but without music. This is only slightly made up for by the fact that music for 'The Helstone Foray' ('The Floral Dance' or, more properly, 'Furry Dance') brought up the rear of the collection. The only carol with music to be added to the second edition of *Some Ancient Christmas Carols* was the classic mid-eighteenth century hymn, 'Christians, awake, salute the happy morn'. The words are by the Manchester poet John Byrom (1692 - 1763) and the music by his young friend John Wainwright (c1723 - 1767/8). Quite apart from the excellence of the hymn itself, it has particular charm because Byrom's daughter, Dolly, asked her father to write her a poem as a Christmas present in 1749 and was rewarded with 'Christians awake'. A year later, John Wainwright brought his men-and-boys choir round to Byrom's house on Christmas Day 1750 to wassail the Byrom family with the poem as set to Wainwright's own tune. This rousing hymn has begun countless church services on Christmas Day ever since, although confusingly the tune is variously known as Mottram (a village in Greater Manchester, formerly in Cheshire near the Derbyshire border), Stockport (a town in Greater Manchester, formerly on the Lancashire/Cheshire border) and Yorkshire (completely wrong, whichever way you look at it).

Davies Gilbert did an extraordinary thing when he assembled his carol book. He revived the carols of his youth and preserved a unique corner of eighteenth-century folk history. At first glance, the rhythms and harmonies of Gilbert's transcriptions look awkward. There are some irregular metrical moments and some distinctly non-textbook bass lines - most of the music is given in straight two-voice (Treble and Bass) versions. But Gilbert captured the folk essence of these pieces. The repertory is, quite literally, homespun. And Gilbert was only interested in preserving this music as he remembered it of old, and not through the filter of musical academe or urban propriety. Gilbert's work is refreshingly rustic. Had he been a more competent musician, this late-Georgian pioneer might have been tempted to make 'improvements' to the material printed in *Some Ancient Christmas Carols*. But Gilbert did not himself transcribe the music: that was a task undertaken on Gilbert's behalf from

existing manuscripts. And Gilbert thoughtfully prefaced the publication by writing about himself in the third person – an indication to the purchaser that he wished to retain some presentational objectivity when it came to these cherished carols:

The Editor is desirous of preserving them in their actual forms, however distorted by false grammar or by obscurities, as specimens of times now passed away, and of religious feelings superseded by others of a different cast. He is anxious also to preserve them on account of the delight they afforded him in his childhood; when the festivities of Christmas Eve were anticipated by many days of preparation, and prolonged through several weeks by repetitions and remembrances.

William Sandys (1792 - 1874) is more often than not spoken about in the same breath as Davies Gilbert. Their carol books were published within a dozen years of each other, and they formed the vanguard of the early-nineteenth century revival of the ballad carol. Sandys (pronounced 'Sands') worked as a London solicitor for a dozen years, but his passion was music. Sandys was a more accomplished musician than Gilbert, but ironically this creates problems for the modern performer. Gilbert had relied on transcriptions from pre-existent written sources, whereas Sandys engaged in some on-the-hoof transcription from oral sources as well. And Sandys himself became involved with the process of transcription. Hugh Keyte, writing in the *New Oxford Book of Carols*, is quite blunt:

The eighteen tunes are amateurishly lithographed, with major omissions and mistakes, and the musical transcriptions themselves are mostly on a low level: some are misbarred; several seem to be fumbling transcriptions from performance, with a peculiar style of chordal 'vamping' in the bass stave which indicates the harmonies without giving the parts. Such basses as are given are shapeless and repetitive, and cannot bear comparison with the coherent and independent basses in Gilbert's book; moreover, someone seems to have tried to bring them into conformity with the rules of classical harmony.

While strongly worded, I wouldn't disagree with any of that. And Keyte therefore concludes that Sandys farmed out the musical editorship of the volume to someone else. Certainly the editorial standard of the eighteen carol tunes at the end of the volume is in marked contrast to that in the main body of the book. The eighty carol texts which form the main body of *Christmas Carols, Ancient and Modern* are well presented. Indeed the orthography in the main part of the book shows that Sandys was a man with an eye for detail and a methodical mind. So it could be that someone else was responsible for the poor musical editorship within the volume. It's also possible that Sandys – with his passion for music and a certain amount of training by music professionals while he was a young solicitor in London – decided to have a go himself. A little knowledge can be a dangerous thing, and Sandys might have decided to dabble in something that would best have been left to someone else. But Sandys must at least be congratulated for providing us with the earliest known examples of the tunes of 'The first Nowell', 'I saw three ships', and 'Tomorrow shall be my dancing day' – poor though their Bass lines are in these versions.

In 1823, as Davies Gilbert's enlarged edition of *Some Ancient Christmas Carols* was being printed, William Hone (1780 - 1842) published *Ancient Mysteries Described*. Hone was a writer and publisher with a colourful history of money troubles; he was also a campaigner for social justice and a prototype investigative journalist who believed passionately in the freedom of the press. Hone recognised that carols were no longer the province of the higher echelons of society but were practised only by 'the industrious servant-maid and the humble labourer'. Hone regretted the fact that the cost of buying carol sheets had spiralled:

I recollect the sheet of Carols twice its present size, with more than double the number of cuts, and sold for a half-penny; but alas; 'everything is changed;' the present half sheets are raised in price to a whole penny.

Hone listed eighty-nine carols that still had currency in 1823. Of the nine that we still recognise now, six were included in either Gilbert (G) or Sandys (S):

A Virgin most pure as the Prophets did tell – G 1822, S 1833

Christians awake! Salute the happy morn – G1823

God rest you, merry gentlemen. – S1833

Hark! the herald angels sing – S1833 (words only)

On Christmas night all Christians sing

The first good joy our Lady had – S1833 (words only)

The holly and the ivy, are now both well grown

This is the truth sent from above

While shepherds watch'd their flocks by night – G1822

Between them, Davies Gilbert, William Sandys, and William Hone did much to raise awareness of the plight of the

carol. Their influence on the history of the Christmas carol was significant. Yet none of them was a professional musician. It was perhaps inevitable that the next push would be led by highly-trained Victorians rather than gifted Georgian amateurs.

In 1847, the Soho-born musical antiquary Dr Edward Rimbault (1816 - 76, descendant of a Huguenot refugee family) published *A Little Book of Christmas Carols*. This elegantly thin, dark teal-blue publication is a thing of great beauty, containing just six carols with easy-to-play keyboard accompaniments – and to help singers, the top line of the piano always doubles the tune. Rimbault persuaded Cramer, Beale & Co. of 201 Regent Street to publish a quarto document that was attractive, instructive, and typographically clear. The drawback of textual and musical legibility was that the words of the verses appeared on subsequent openings to the music of each of the first five carols. So turning pages backwards and forwards was a necessity when performing from sight. The alternative was to buy more than one copy so that the accompanist could play from the music pages, and the singers could turn over to the words of the verses without depriving the pianist of music. Before *The Boar's Head Carol* came four carols, all of which are still performed regularly today in one form or another: 'The first Nowell' (a media favourite); 'A Virgin most pure' (in church); 'God rest you, merry gentlemen' (on the doorstep); and 'I saw three ships' (by brass and silver bands). 'God rest you' is given in two versions. The first version is the tune most generally associated with this carol today and is subtitled by Rimbault 'as sung in the streets of London'. The second version – mostly unfamiliar today – is subtitled 'as sung in Cornwall'.

A Little Book of Christmas Carols was the early-Victorian gift book of choice: concise, handy, beautifully crafted, with one foot in the past and another looking towards a brighter future, containing six tunes, all of which are highly optimistic examples of the genre. Indeed, further optimism is lent by the list of contents, where the first version of 'God rest you, merry gentlemen' (the London one of Rimbault's day and the universal one of ours) is tagged with the words: 'The most common and generally popular of all carol tunes. It is frequently sung in both the major and minor modes.' Rimbault gives 'God rest you' in the minor (as we use it today) but it's heart-warming to know that its mode could be changed, at the drop of a hat, depending on the nature and stage of the proceedings. A bunch of Christmas carollers might arrive at someone's door singing in the minor, and leave – amply rewarded both fiscally and epicureally – giving voice in the major. In his Preface, Rimbault mourns what he sees as the passing of the carol tradition in his own day:

The practice of carol-singing continued with unabated zeal till the end of the last [18th] century, since which it has declined, and many old customs have been gradually becoming obsolete. In the northern counties, and in some of the midland, carol-singing is still preserved. In the metropolis a solitary itinerant may be occasionally heard in the streets, croaking out "God rest you, merry gentlemen," or some other old carol, to an ancient and simple tune.

In spite of the pioneering carol publications by Gilbert and Sandys, there was little interest in the inclusion of traditional carols in church worship in the first half of the nineteenth century. Not until 1850 did the publisher Novello start to advertise anthems, hymns, and carols for use in church at Christmas. The anthems were predominantly extracts from Handel's *Messiah*, along with other choral works by the likes of Henry Purcell and Handel's contemporary Maurice Greene (1696 - 1755). The texts were fit to accompany Christmas worship but hadn't specifically been designed for the purpose. The hymns comprised a variety of arrangements by Vincent Novello of 'O come, all ye faithful', and some new tunes to 'While shepherds watched' and 'Hark, the Herald Angels sing'. The carols were nothing of the sort. They were light Christmas songs: new compositions by the now largely forgotten Rev. Henry Havergal (1820 - 1875), Dr Thomas Ions (1817 - 57), and Alphonso Matthey:

O! Christmas is the Season,
When mirth dethrones grave Reason,
fa la la!
Let us join the festive ring!
And around the yule-clog sing!
Haste to choose our Christmas King!
For old Time is on the wing!
Let us join the festive ring!
Let us laugh and loudly sing,
fa la la!

Only with the 1853 publication of Helmore & Neale's *Carols for Christmas-tide*, set to *Ancient Melodies* was interest in old carol melodies really set alight. *Carols for Christmas-tide* did two significant things. First, it put English words in place of Latin ones. And secondly, it leap-frogged the recent past and foraged material whose origins stretched from the twelfth to the fifteenth centuries. As Professor Mark Connelly wrote in 2012.

For the Victorians, medieval England was something that appealed to both conservatives and liberals. The conservative vision took comfort in the sense of order, structure and social harmony, while the liberal vision placed more emphasis on the struggle for liberties which were enshrined in law...The desire to understand the past, find in it lessons, parables, and indeed parallels for the present formed a major strand of nineteenth-century intellectual and cultural thought.

Rev. Thomas Helmore (the musical half of the Helmore & Neale team) harmonized the medieval melodies in four parts and added an occasionally independent piano accompaniment. Rev. John Mason Neale made lively translations of the carols, although in two cases he went off-piste and supplied totally new words to the thirteenth-century originals. One of these was 'Good King Wenceslas', a brilliant/horrific adaptation/corruption (depending on your point of view) of a medieval spring song.

The Victorian (1837 - 1901) embracement and re-invention of Christmas was now in full swing. Edward Rimbault's *A Collection of Old Christmas Carols* of 1861 contributed to the noisy celebrations. Rimbault's eclectic anthology contained thirty-three items, including old French and German tunes, a mutilated fifteenth-century English carol, an item from Thomas Ravenscroft's *Melismata* of 1611, a Bach chorale, some nineteenth-century creations, and traditional tunes from Cornwall, Devonshire and Somersetshire (as Rimbault quaintly called them), as well as Wiltshire, Kent, Derbyshire, and Lancashire. Much of today's canon is present. 'The first Noel' is there, as are 'I saw three ships', 'Christians awake', 'Hark! the herald', 'O come all ye faithful', and The Queen's College version of 'The Boar's-Head Carol'. 'God rest you merry Gentlemen' (no comma) is accompanied by both its London and Cornwall tunes, whereas 'While shepherds watched' is married to the London tune of 'God rest you' but in the minor key. 'The Holly and the Ivy' is given to an old French tune. And from Gilbert and Sandys come 'The Lord at first had Adam made' (in Gilbert's tune, not that of Sandys) and 'A Virgin most pure' (set in Gilbert's triple metre rather than the inappropriate duple metre of Sandys).

By the time that Edward Rimbault (1816 - 1876) compiled *A Collection of Old Christmas Carols* in 1861, he had amassed a large library. Rimbault had an eye for important historical material, and his desire to acquire such artefacts was demonstrably overpowering. In the early 1840s, Rimbault was involved in the 'abstraction of various rarities' (as Alec Hyatt King euphemistically put it in 1963) from the library at Christ Church, Oxford. In other words, Rimbault stole books. Context is everything, and it might be that a deal of some sort had been brokered with the college authorities. Then again, it doesn't seem as if it had been. This distasteful, and rather shocking, affair was exposed by Walter Hiscock on the back page of *The Times Literary Supplement* of 11 February 1939 – over sixty years after Rimbault's death. Even at such a distance, it's difficult to have sympathy with an antiquarian who clearly had little regard for sharing the nation's treasures with other potential admirers of this material.

As a clerk working for a London firm of solicitors, William Henry Husk (1814 - 1887) was more inclined to stay on the right side of the law. Husk's *Songs of the Nativity* was first published in 1864 and revised four years later. Although he earned his living working for a law firm, Husk also contributed articles to the first edition of the prestigious *Grove's Dictionary of Music and Musicians*. Husk's carol anthology is a remarkable creation and represents many years of sifting and refining of material; material that stretches over half a millennium:

The carols here given were produced at various times extending over a period of nearly five hundred years. Care has been taken in selecting them to observe impartiality between the old and the new;—the productions of the remote past, and those of times nearer to our own,—so that the book shall present a fair specimen of both without exhibiting an undue preference for either. Many of the pieces...are introduced into a collection of carols for the first time.