

CDSS Sings—Bold Lovell

by John Roberts

The song “Whiskey in the Jar” is widespread in all the English language song traditions, though of course it probably gained its widest currency as an Irish pop-folk hit. In its standard form, a highwayman, Captain or Colonel “X,” ranges the “Y” mountains, and takes the loot back to his treacherous girlfriend. She calls the troopers, having disarmed him by filling his pistols with water, and off to the gallows he goes. The motif almost guarantees popularity. Highwaymen were romantic figures, in folklore at least, and many a one had his last confession from the gallows versified by the broadside poets, sold as songsheets in the days after the execution.

Dick Turpin was perhaps the most famous of these, in good part due to his ride from London to York on his horse Black Bess to provide an unassailable alibi (though this feat was in fact not his, but was ascribed to John Nevison, a highwayman of some 50 years earlier—and even that attribution is uncertain). But his legacy is celebrated in folksong, along with his horse.

So to get back to our song, but with another small digression. Modern folksong researches have huge advantages over their predecessors. A major grant to the English Folk Dance and Song Society has enabled the society to digitize its manuscript holdings, including the field notebooks of many of the major collectors, Cecil Sharp, the Hammond Brothers, George Gardiner, Ralph Vaughan Williams among them. And, for the last 20-some years, Steve Roud has been developing his index of traditional folk song lyrics. The Roud Folk Song Index, with almost 200,000 references to nearly 25,000 songs, is available online at the Vaughan Williams Memorial Library of Cecil Sharp House, the home of the EFDSS (<http://www.vwml.org>). Furthermore, it is linked directly with results from The Full English, the scans of the EFDSS folksong collections.

So let’s look it up. I start with “Whiskey in the Jar” in the search box, check Roud Indexes and the Full English, and find a number of results. But to eliminate other song motifs which might share the same title, I find an example I know to be relevant, and find the Roud number, 533. I use this for an Advanced search, which finds 128 results in all, many of which of course will be duplicates, the same version reprinted in different publications. But it will include a version with a different spelling of “whisky,” and versions called “Captain Kelly” and the like.

These results give a picture of the spread of this song. There are of course bibliographic references, but I soon come across a “Whisky in the Jar” collected in Hampshire in 1909, with immediate access to the collector’s (Gardiner) manuscript notes. “Wow!” I say to myself, “Paydirt.” I soon find Captain Everett on Calvary Mountain. I find a Scottish version from Ord’s Bothy Ballads (1930). That’s in my library, so an easy check—Captain Evert on Calvert Mountain. In New Hampshire I find Colonel Pepper on Gilgarra Mountain, collected by Frank and Anne Warner from the amazing Mrs. Lena Bourne Fish; in Ireland I find Captain Farrell on the far-famed Kerry Mountain; there are versions from the Ozarks, the Maritimes of Canada. It’s all over the place. But I know the version I’m really looking for was collected by Helen Hartness Flanders, so I go back to my advanced search, add the collector, and... well, I didn’t know Flanders also collected one from Mrs. Fish. She also got one from George Edwards of Burlington, VT, collected ca.1933. But I don’t find the one I’m looking for, also from George Edwards, published by Flanders in *The New Green Mountain Songster*.

Je suis désolé. Why isn’t it there? The song is called “Bold Lovell,” and I had always assumed it was a variant of “Whiskey in the Jar.” I first came across it on an LP called “Champions of Folly,” a 1975 recording by Roy Harris, the wonderful English folksinger who sadly passed away early this year. I had gone to NYC to see him sing on his first US tour, and he sang, a cappella, this song from his LP. The notes to that (by A. L. Lloyd) say that the song came to Roy via Lloyd, the remarkable author, translator, folksong collector and singer, and, often, folksong tinkerer. Lloyd had found it in the Flanders book, titled “Lovel, the Robber,” and on his album notes he had referred to it as a close cousin of “Whiskey in the Jar.” But not close enough, apparently. Using the book as a search criterion, I go back to Roud and finally find it as Roud No. 534, of which there are only a few examples, some broadsides unavailable to me and two oral versions, both from Flanders, both from Vermont. Flanders attests to the age of the song, quoting an 1821 letter from Sir Walter Scott to his son, asking him to pick him up “the Irish lilt of a tune to ‘Patrick Fleming,’ ” patently a version of the same song.

The Edwards song has a “Dol-de-dol...” chorus, with no “whiskey in the jar.” Perhaps it is this that

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Bold Lovell

As Lov - ell was out rid - ing out a - cross the mist - y moun - tains, Two
mer - chants, two mer - chants, their mon - ey they was count - ing; He reached for his
pis - tol, and he nev - er gave them warn - ing, He robbed them of their
mon - ey and he bade them both good morn - ing: Oh, the dev - il's in the wom - en so they
say, But how the dev - il can a fel - low let them be?

Bold Lovell (as sung by Roy Harris)

As Lovell was out riding across the misty mountains,
Two merchants, two merchants, their money they was counting;
He reached for his pistol, and he never gave them warning,
He robbed them of their money and he bade them both
good morning:

Oh, the devil's in the women so they say,
But how the devil can a fellow let them be?

He went to a public house and counted out his money;
He called on the landlady to bring forth pretty Polly.
But while they was talking, and thinking of no matter,
She stole away his pistol and she filled it up with water:

As Lovell and Polly were taking their sweet pleasure,
In walked the troopers, saying, "Lovell, you must leave her!
For a long time you've been riding on the road to the gallows,
So come along with us young man and be a decent fellow."

He reached for his pistols but they wouldn't fire for water;
They lathered him well and gave to him no quarter.
Polly, she cried, "If I'd known that they was coming,
I'd have fought them like a tiger, love, although I am a woman."

"I have two brothers and they're both in the Marines;
One of them's at Chatham and the other one's at sea.
Bold, brisk and lively lads, and champions of folly;
I'd rather they was here today than you, deceitful Polly."

As Lovell was climbing up that old gallows ladder,
He called out so gaily for his highway cap and feather:
"Well, I've always been a lively lad, but never murdered any;
I think it bloody hard to swing for liftin' a bit of money!"

Web extra! An mp3 file of Roy Harris singing "Bold Lovell," <http://www.cdss.org/programs/cdss-news-publications/cdss-news>.

Tune typeset by John Roberts

differentiates Roud 533 from 534, as the plot is essentially the same. Lloyd the tinkerer has rationalized the verses and anglicized some of the references: Plymouth Mountain becomes the Misty Mountains, a phrase Lloyd has used before: his translation of “Laszlo Feher” from the Hungarian (made famous by Judy Collins as “Anathea”) starts, “Laszlo Feher stole a stallion, stole him from the Misty Mountains...” But the real kicker is the chorus. The popular Irish song we started with has the line “The devil’s in the women and you never can lie easy,” which is not included in our song. But, I surmise, thinking it too good an idea to omit, Lloyd reintroduced as the chorus, “The devil’s in the women so they say, but how the devil can a fellow let ’em be.”

John Roberts developed his interest in British folksongs in high school, and has been singing them ever since, most notably with longtime partner Tony Barrand and Nowell Sing We Clear. A retired morris dancer, he now gets most of his exercise in English country dance, to which he will soon be returning after a break. John recently sang this song, accompanied by Lisa Preston on harp, in a memorial session for Roy Harris at the Mystic Seaport Sea Music Festival.



(What Dancing Taught Me, cont. from p. 17)
 find them today. In other words, I will not be afraid to change arrangements, paradigms, or motives. The body remembers new dances in time. Change is unchangeable and necessary. Nothing is constant. The dance ends, another begins. Partners may change. The reel changes to a waltz.

The good news is the seasons still change in rhythm. That pulse is my religion. And I can still count on two hands the number of people who are close to me, in whom I trust. Connections don’t need to number in the hundreds, as on a dance floor. Natural seasons and cycles, and the polytheistic rituals I observe, provide abounding sustenance as do my close friends. I take heart in these things.

As for the recent barrage of bad manners, particularly during this presidential election year, from all sides I don’t know what to do with that. I wish people would learn to dance, or write, or otherwise communicate effectively. I suppose there will always be people who want to bang their heads together, or who can’t pull themselves out of the electrical sockets.

Here is what I can do: I will always present with a firm handshake, be attentive to my place in the big picture, as in sets, and laugh at myself when I lose my place for a minute. I can gracefully lend the weight of my convictions with my every step, and love the dance of life.

Maybe if I keep offering that love to people, I can create a new dance, one person at a time.

Laurel’s parents, John and Mary Owen, were Berea College Country Dancers in the 1950s, and went on to teach dancing at Christmas Country Dance School at Berea, KY, and CDSS dance weeks at Pinewoods Camp in MA. Laurel grew up dancing and playing violin and piano, and has recently taken up the viola. She has taught English clog, the Shim Sham, waltzing, and the two-step at various times.

Did you read the Hive Mind column on page 5? Next time we’ll be talking about:

Group Leadership—Welcoming New Voices, Avoiding Burnout

Some groups have decades of history, managed by the same handful of people. Other groups have cultivated new leaders, and work to ensure turnover in key roles. In principle, most of us see the benefits of turnover, but in practice it can be hard to find the right balance between welcoming new leadership and maintaining continuity. How has your group approached the challenge of accommodating new people and ideas, avoiding burnout, and keeping everyone happy? Please share your stories at www.cdss.org/hive before October 1st. We welcome both success stories and cautionary tales—all give helpful perspective.