

## *The Songster and the Scholar*

*A Paper Read Before the Society, April 20, 1966*

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I REGRET that this modest paper will bring you no new scandalous tidbits about some prominent early American songstress and some prominent early American historian. I'm afraid that it won't even be mildly titillating. Earlier in the year, when I was corresponding with Ted Shipton about a possible title, he offered "Forty Years Among the Dancing Girls in LC." That is an admirable suggestion, and if you want, you may add it to mine as subtitle. Then again, it really isn't much less pertinent than some of the titles enterprising printers dreamed up in order to promote the sale of their songsters. Take, for instance, the unique copy of *The Amorous Songster* in the collections of the Grosvenor Library in Buffalo. This ninety-six-page collection, printed in New York City in 1800 "for the Sporting-Club," blows its own horn with great vigor. "Compared with this vigorous volume," says the title-page, "*The Frisky Songster* is a lifeless chap." I don't know about *The Frisky Songster* (no American edition has turned up, and I doubt that one was ever issued), but *The Amorous Songster*, with its stereotyped Phyllidas and Corydons, turns out to be a pious fraud.

In passing, I might muse momentarily upon the astonishing purity of our song collections. Despite a decade of personal bookworming in various libraries and hundreds of letters of inquiry all over the country, I haven't succeeded in turning up a single exemplar of any early American

songster which accurately could be termed even slightly spicy. This I find odd, since so many of our songs were borrowed from the mother country, where collections to delight hardened rakes abounded. Why our strange reticence to print suggestive songs, when Americans were hardly averse to turning an honest penny by printing other salacious literature, to judge by the evidence? When I asked Ted Shipton whether he could come up with any theory about this state of affairs, he gracefully sidestepped the question. If anyone here has some ideas on the subject, I'd be happy to learn about them later on.

Some half a dozen years ago, I made a rash attempt to bring to a conclusion my projected bibliography of American songsters published before 1821. I utilized the hospitable columns of the *Papers of the Bibliographical Society of America* to publicize a list of 113 unlocated and/or incomplete songsters I was seeking. At that time, I had studied at least one copy of each of the 376 complete songsters and thirty-seven incomplete songsters of which I then had knowledge. Now, in 1966, I have reduced the list of unlocated-incomplete songsters by ten items. Progress? I'm afraid not. When I last counted (just before leaving for Boston yesterday), there was a grand total of 586 songsters in my bibliography compared to 493 in 1960, and now that I am in New England again and fairly footloose, it wouldn't surprise me if the count passed 600 before the week is out.

However, enough is enough. As a more experienced hand at the game than I am once counseled me, "if you wait until you have located all the titles that belong in any bibliography, you'll be more of a ghost than a bibliographer." So, as of April 30, 1966, I draw the line. The flood of pre-1821 American songsters which must inevitably appear on May 1, 1966 will simply have to be content to be chronicled in a supplement.

It occurs to me that you may have no clear idea what it is I am talking about. I am talking about early American pocket collections of songs of the day, a sizable body of literature of exceptional social, political, literary, and musical interest, which has remained unknown territory among scholars, primarily because of the lack of a bibliographical map and guide book in an area where individual titles are notably rare, easily confused, and difficult to trace.

How do I define a songster? Very simply—a songster is any collection of three or more secular poems intended for singing, whether or not musical notation happens to be found with them. If a songster does contain musical notation I use the older English term “songbook” to describe it. While this is arbitrary, it does have a certain amount of historical justification, and it is a convenient subclassification. I count twenty-eight pre-1821 American songbooks.

In order to exclude broadsides, broadsheets, and sheet music, I further qualify my definition in two ways: (1) a songster must contain at least eight pages; and (2) it must have been issued as a book or a pamphlet.

The elements of the definition are easy to follow. If the word “secular” is not included, the floodgates are opened to the hundreds (perhaps thousands) of hymnbooks published here before 1821. It is difficult to think of a “collection” of songs containing less than three items, even though this limitation does eliminate a few eight-page chapbooks with two songs which might conceivably be considered songsters. Similarly, the eight-page limitation does knock out a few four- and six-page chapbooks with three songs which also might be considered songsters. In practice, however, the definition works out pretty well.

I made one additional decision which did cause me some trouble. I did not anticipate, when I made up my mind to

consider as songsters all books of any nature containing a separate, discrete section of three or more secular poems intended for singing, just how far afield this would lead me. Had I known what I was letting myself in for, I would have ruled these out; not knowing, ignorance was bliss, and I am happier and wiser (although grayer) for the experience. For purposes of comparison, perhaps I should cite in full the descriptive title-page of a genuine, dyed-in-the-wool songster of the pre-1821 period:

The nightingale; or rural songster: in two parts, Part I.—Containing favorite, innocent, entertaining and sentimental songs. Part II.—Containing the most approved patriotic songs. [Many of which are original.] Dedham: printed by H. Mann. 1800.

This scarce 128-page songster—there are copies only in the Boston Public Library and in the American Antiquarian Society—contains ninety-four secular poems intended to be sung to music, rather accurately characterized by the title-page. As well as 182 such “general” songsters published before 1821, I find record of forty-three, eight-page chap-books, most of which contain one somewhat lengthy song and two or three other shorter ones. The following rare item (only the imperfect copy in the Brown University Library is known) will serve as example:

The tea-drinking wife. To which are added, The tempest. And Pretty Nancy. New-York: printed for the hawkers.—1797.

These one would expect to find classified as songsters. But what are we to do with:

The Free-Mason's pocket companion, or elements of Free-Masonry delineated. . . . New-York: printed by S. Loudon, printer to the State. (Under the direction of a Brother.) M,DCC,LXXXV.

which contains a section of seventeen Masonic songs? Or with: New joke upon joke, containing wit, humor, songs and glees. . . . Baltimore: printed and sold by Warner & Hanna. 1809.

which contains no less than 108 songs? Or with:

An oration, delivered at Bennington, Vermont, August 16th, 1799. In commemoration of the battle of Bennington. Published at the request

of the audience. By Anthony Haswell. . . . Bennington; printed by Anthony Haswell, 1799.

which contains seven "odes, songs, &c. performed on the occasion"? Or with:

The American ladies pocket book for MDCCXCVII. Philadelphia: published by W. Y. Birch, No. 17 South Second Street

the first in a long series of memorandum books, each of which contained a small anthology of the popular songs of the year? Or with:

The universal fortune-teller, and complete dream dictionary, with charms and ceremonies for knowing future events. By Margaret Finch, queen of the gipsies. Montpelier Vt. Printed and for sale at the Montpelier Book-Store. 1811.

into which is incorporated (with continuous pagination):

Amusement, or a new collection of pleasing songs, humourous jests, and the most approved country dances; selected from various authors. Montpelier Vt. Printed and for sale at the Montpelier Book-Store. 1811.

which contains nine songs and was also issued separately?

Or with:

The American academy of compliments; or, the complete American secretary: containing, the true art of inditing letters suitable to the capacities of youth and age: relating a familiar conversation between friends and acquaintance[s], husband and wife, children and parents, masters and apprentices, brothers and sisters, and kindred in general; also, love letters on all occasions, with others relating to trade and business of all kinds, in an apt, easy and plain style. Likewise, rules for directing, superscribing, and subscribing of letters: also the titles of persons of quality, and all other degrees: with dialogues very witty and pleasing, relating to love, familiar discourse, and other matters for improving the elegance of the English speech, and accomplishment in discourse. To which are added [I am still quoting], I. The art of good breeding and behaviour, with instructions for carving fish, flesh and fowl, after the new manner. II. The English fortune teller, as to what relates to good and bad fortune in maids, widows, widowers, and bachelors. III. Joyful tidings to the female sex. IV. Treatises on moles. V. Interpretation of dreams. With [at long last] a collection of the newest songs. Hudson: printed and sold by Ashbel Stoddard. 1805.

which contains twenty-four songs in a thirty-eight-page section of a 107-page book?

I realize that this is a long question, but it has a short answer. All these quiddities are, in fact, songsters and

should be so considered. And if they are so considered, they reveal the nature of American song in a somewhat different light than that shed by an examination of sheet music. For example, a careful check of the Sonneck-Upton and Richard J. Wolfe bibliographies would not lead to the idea that the Free-Masons were especially musical, yet a simple count of the number of songsters exclusively devoted to Masonic songs shows that no less than seventy-two such items were published before 1821, and virtually all eclectic songsters included some specimens of the genre. The category of Masonic songsters turns out to be larger than any other; in comparison, only forty-seven exclusively patriotic songsters can be listed. Furthermore, it is not generally accepted that our children did much singing before the advent of Lowell Mason, yet there is record of twenty-seven juvenile songsters. The popularity of the song text is attested to by the appearance of song collections in fifty-two miscellaneous publications such as orations, almanacs, memorandum-books, jestbooks, fortune-tellers, letter-writing instructors, and dancing manuals. There were also six French songsters published in the United States, as well as three bearing fictitious American imprints but published in Europe.

One fairly obvious observation about pre-1821 American songsters has rather significant implications for the music historian. If all but twenty-eight were issued without musical notation, is it not logical to assume that those who bought them must have been familiar enough with the tunes called for by the lyrics to sing them even without crotchets and quavers? That this is a reasonable assumption can be inferred from today's musically illiterate teen-ager, who buys a popular song word-book on the newsstands for a quarter, but who is perfectly capable of retaining in his head, in letter-perfect fashion, the tunes of the current "top ten." All he needs is the title—he can take it from there. Similarly,

all that was necessary in a songster was a tag such as: "Air: Derry Down" or "Tune: To Anacreon in Heaven." The rest was easy. Thus, a listing of the names of the tunes most frequently cited in songsters provides the scholar with a genuine indication of the truly popular musical repertory of the day. For those curious about the pre-1821 "top ten," here is the list given in order of the number of songsters in which the tunes were specified:

1. Rule, Britannia (91)
2. To Anacreon in Heaven (67)
3. In Infancy (49)
4. Derry Down (48)
5. God Save the King (43)
6. Attic Fire (41)
7. President's March (34)
8. Goddess of Ease (29)
9. Maggy Lauder (27)
10. The Battle of the Nile (26)

It is also pretty plain that in such cases where the stanza form is distinctive, it really isn't necessary to give the air. Thus, given a metrical structure so complex as that required by our national anthem, the late Richard S. Hill succeeded in identifying eighty-five poems (utilizing newspapers as well as songsters as sources) intended to be sung to the tune of "To Anacreon in Heaven" in print by 1820. The parody technique so common in young America enables us to do more than identify the popular tune repertory, however; because of the number of parodies based on a particular tune, their date of appearance, and the wide diversity of their subject matter, one can almost trace the social, economic, and political history of the country in terms of a single song. As an example of the technique, allow me to utilize the tune "Derry Down," one of the most beloved of eighteenth century ditties, with a characteristic anapestic tetrameter quatrain followed by a "Derry down, down, hey derry down" burden. The earliest songster appearances

date from *The American Mock-Bird, or Songster's Delight* (New York: printed by S. Brown, 1764); I cite one of two parodies:

You tell me, dear Tom, like a faint hearted toad,  
 You're surpris'd I'm so chearful when going abroad,  
 That, for your part, you'd have, if you were in my case,  
 A compos'd pensive mind, and a grave serious face.  
 Derry down, &c.

I do not find that this was especially popular in England—could the protagonist have been talking about emigrating to America? The most popular English parody, called “The Cobler” (an alternate title for the “Derry Down” tune, dating from 1728, is “A Cobler There Was”), begins:

A cobler there was, and he liv'd in a stall,  
 Which serv'd him for parlour, for kitchen and hall,  
 No coin in his pocket, nor care in his pate,  
 No ambition had he, nor duns at his gate;  
 Derry down, down, down, derry down.

This made its first songster appearance here in *The American Songster* (New York: printed for Samuel Campbell and Thomas Allen, 1788); it was reprinted eight times, the last time in *The Columbian Harmonist* (Philadelphia: printed by Thomas Simpson, 1814). The most youthful parody, evidently influenced by the sentimentality of the later years, came out in the widely used compilation by Luke Eastman, *Masonick Melodies* (Boston: printed for the author by T. Rowe, 1818):

As poverty once, in a fit of despair,  
 Sat weeping with sorrow, and press'd down with care,  
 Smiling Hope came to ask, what her countenance told,  
 That she was expiring with hunger and cold.  
 Derry down, &c.



This proved to be pretty much of a dud, but another Masonic song, first published in *The Free-Mason's Pocket Companion* (New York: printed by S. Loudon, 1785), was reprinted fifteen times, making it the most frequently seen "Derry Down" parody:

Fidelity once had a fancy to rove,  
 And therefore she quitted the mansions above;  
 On earth she arriv'd but so long was her tour,  
 Jove tho't she intended returning no more.  
 Derry down, down, down, derry down.

Another favorite item (reprinted fourteen times) went by the title:

BIRTH, PARENTAGE, AND EDUCATION,  
 OF DENNIS BULGRUDDERY

I was once born at home when my mother was out,  
 In her reck'ning an accident brought it about,  
 As for family honours, and such kind of fun  
 Tho' some boast of forefathers, yet I had but one.  
 Derry down, &c.

*A Choice Collection of Admired Songs* (Baltimore: printed by Dobbin & Murphy, 1805) was the first American source of "Dennis Bulgruddery," which was "sang by Mr. M'Farland, in the character of John Bull, on the London boards, with great applause" in 1803. The broad humor of this song by George Colman the Younger was echoed in the following, taken from *The Vocal Remembrancer* (Philadelphia: printed by William Spotswood, 1790):

There was an old man, and, tho' 'tis not common,  
 Yet, if he said true, he was born of a woman;  
 And though 'tis incredible, yet I've been told,  
 He was once a mere infant; but age made him old.  
 Derry down.

A bit more popular—it was printed in five songsters—is a twelve-stanza assault on the hypocrisy of the clergy first published in *The Syren, or Vocal Enchantress* (Wilmington: printed for James Wilson, 1797) which begins:

A parson, who had a remarkable foible,  
Of minding his bottle, much more than his Bible;  
Was deem'd by his neighbours to be less perplext,  
In handling a tankard, than handling a text.  
Down, down, down, derry down.

But it is in politics and war where the value of the parody is most plain. Here, for example, is a rare instance of a Loyalist version of "Derry Down" from the fragment of *Loyal and Humorous Songs* (New York: Hugh Gainé, 1779) in the Society's collections:

Ye sons of Old England, hold honour in view,  
Hibernian heroes, firm, active and strong;  
Staunch hearts of Old Scotia, Americans true,  
Attend whilst I sing, and join chorus in song.  
Derry down, &c.

It was the War of 1812 that truly awoke the American muse, however. From *The Naval Songster* (Fredericktown, Md.: printed by M. E. Bartgis, 1814) comes "John Bull and Brother Jonathan; or, The Seven Naval Victories" in twenty-three stanzas, the war's favorite ballad using the "Derry Down" tune:

John Bull, in a passion, once stoutly resolv'd,  
That he'd settle accounts, in dispute long involv'd  
For John had found out by his looks, it appears,  
That Jonathan ow'd him a grudge for some years.  
Derry down, &c.

And from a different *Naval Songster* (Charlestown: printed by J. White, 1815) comes an eleven-stanza version of "Constitution and Guerriere:"

By the trident of Neptune, brave Hull cried let's steer,  
 It points out the track of the bullying Guerriere;  
 Should we meet her, brave boys—seamen's rights be the cry:  
 We fight to defend them, to live free or die.  
 Derry down, &c.

The influence of Thomas Paine is evident in "The Placemen and Pensioners' Address to the Swinish Multitude" in twelve stanzas, reprinted eleven times after its first appearance in *A Tribute to the Swinish Multitude* (London printed; New York: reprinted by S. Loudon & Son, 1795):

Ye vile swinish herd, in the sty of taxation,  
 What would you be after disturbing the nation?  
 Give over your grumbling—be off—to your sty!  
 Nor dare to look out if a king should pass by.  
 Get you down, down, down, keep you down.

Strong Federalist sentiments are expressed in the eight stanzas of "The Farce of French Liberty" from *The Social Companion, and Songster's Pocket Book* (Portsmouth: printed for S. Larkin, 1799):

By gar 'tis von shame, says de French democrat,  
 To see dese d—'d English, dey laugh & grow fat;  
 Vile dey stick to deir king and deir old constitution,  
 And turn up de nose at our grande revolution!  
 Derra dong, dong, dong, derra dong.

and in the thirteen stanzas of "The Five Headed Monster; or, Talleyrand Dissected," characterized in *The Federal Songster* (New London: printed by James Springer, 1800) as "a new song for the jolly tars of America":

I'll sing you a song, my good friends, with your leave,  
 Not unlike the old tale of our grandmother Eve;  
 It is of a serpent, as you'll understand,  
 That cloven foot reptile, the vile Talleyrand.  
 Derry down, down, down, derry down.

By now, I'm sure you grasp the simple point I am trying to make. Scholars have used broadsides, newspapers, and sheet music in their continuing search for that which illuminates our past. They really shouldn't neglect songsters—even if they contain no sexy songs.

In closing, may I ask one ornithological question? Can anyone give me a logical reason why, when William Bradford of Philadelphia decided to reprint an English songster of the early 1760's called *The Bull-Finch*, he chose to change its name to *The Wood-Lark*? I'm just curious.

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