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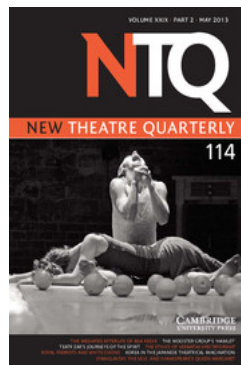
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## Remembering Ewan MacColl: the Agency of Writing and the Creation of a Participatory Popular Culture

In this article Owen Holland examines Ewan MacColl's early work in agit-prop theatre and his later activity as a songwriter, performer, and collector in the second British folk revival. He argues that his experience in the theatre provides a necessary route into understanding the problems of his later work – and what unites the 'two halves' is MacColl's consistent sense of the function of art (specifically his preferred media of drama and song) within a wider politico-cultural praxis. There is a contradiction in MacColl's praxis, however, in that while he wanted to create a popular culture of participation, his dogmatic textual strategies and exclusivist tendencies often became coercive enough to undermine his intentions. The discussion of MacColl's writing is situated within a critique of the problems that appear in his wider praxis, and Holland concludes by asserting that MacColl's agency as a writer was achieved through the development of a performance-oriented aesthetic. Owen Holland is a PhD candidate in the English Faculty at the University of Cambridge, affiliated to St Catharine's College. His research focuses on utopian fiction in the late nineteenth century, with a particular interest in William Morris.

*Key words:* Theatre Workshop, agit-prop theatre, performance aesthetics, second folk revival, politically committed cultural production.

EWAN MACCOLL was the stage name adopted by Jimmie Miller in dubious circumstances after the Second World War. Much of his work has now been forgotten, Joan Littlewood's name now being more readily associated with Theatre Workshop, the company they founded after working together in a number of agit-prop groups in the thirties; meanwhile, many of MacColl's play texts can only be found, unpublished, in Ruskin College Library in Oxford.

After leaving the world of experimental and alternative theatre MacColl became involved, with A. L. Lloyd, in the second British 'folk' revival in which he was active as a performer and collector; but his work on the genre-defining BBC 'Radio Ballads' series, with Charles Parker and Peggy Seeger, is often attributed to the sole efforts of Parker.<sup>1</sup> His creative interests were wide-ranging but united by the common foundation of political commitment.

In the analysis that is offered here, it is difficult to position MacColl's agency as a

writer owing to the plurality of forms of cultural production in which he was engaged. He remains a prolific but neglected writer. This article addresses the agency of writing within MacColl's wider cultural praxis, a predicament which is compounded by the ambiguous nature of his status as an author given that much of his work was collaborative. The discussion is situated within a critique of the attempt to mediate a participatory 'popular' culture, a project which was politically important to MacColl.

MacColl's first theatrical experience was with his local branch of the Clarion Players in Salford, mounting productions of Bernard Shaw's *Heartbreak House*, a stage version of Tressell's *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists*, and Galsworthy's *Strife*. MacColl (at this point still known as Jimmie Miller) soon became disillusioned with what he deemed to be a lax attitude to rehearsals and a repertoire hidebound by political gradualism. The group eventually split over disagreements about a sketch named *Still Talking*.



The Red Megaphones performing at Preston on May Day 1932.

The piece was collectively written and took the form of a purportedly open-ended political meeting; all pretence at formal staging was eliminated as the entire interior of the performance space became the stage. No props, costumes, lighting, or decor were required. No cue was given for the beginning of the performance, which began organically with two actors making impromptu political speeches on topics of contemporary relevance, posing as representatives of the two major political parties. 'Planted' actors interrupted them at pre-planned intervals, creating the illusion of spontaneity, and, more importantly, of audience participation; confused audience members often joined the debate.<sup>2</sup>

The heckling was designed to expose the hollow rhetoric of the established political system, bringing the audience to an awareness of their own potential agency and encouraging them to leave with a sense of their capacity to make similar such interventions. The audience were not kept apart from the action as passive spectators and consumers; rather, they were functionalized as a part of it. Importantly, though, the improvisatory nature of the piece meant that it was hard to contain in textual form.

From the outset, then, MacColl's conception of the theatre was political; his experi-

ence of writing was collaborative. He had joined the Young Communist League, the youth wing of the Communist Party of Great Britain, when he was fifteen, and the nature of his political commitment was such that he saw theatre as a tool in the class struggle. As Robert Leach suggests, 'Class becomes the site of conflict in MacColl's plays. Good and bad are mapped on to the class system by MacColl.'<sup>3</sup> There is a consequent tendency in much of his work to instrumentalize the aesthetic content to just such an intently didactic end, subordinating form to political function.

His artistic work was not *solely* determined by his politics, but neither would we be able to comprehend its significance without considering his political commitment. MacColl's conviction soon caused him to grow impatient with the emphasis placed by the majority of the Clarion group on staging full-length plays. The experience of *Still Talking* convinced him of the need for a form of theatre which made a more immediate and direct connection with working-class struggle. For MacColl, the emphasis should be on participation rather than presentation, which was functionalized as both an aesthetic and an ethic in his writing. This, as he claims, was 'an intrinsic part of the dramatic situation' which created an 'elastic' form in

## THE HOME FRONT

- 1 THE NEW YEAR 1934
- 2 HUNGER
- 3 HUNGER MARCH
- 4 GRESFORD DISASTER
- 5 GRESFORD TRIAL
- 6 THE ANGLO-GERMAN NAVAL AGREEMENT
- 7 GESTAPO
- 8 TRINIDAD STRIKE

*The poem included in the Spanish episodes is by Hugh McDermid and is taken from "The Flaming Postmaster," a reply to the Fascist poet Roy Campbell*

## SPAIN

- 9 EXCHANGE
  - 10 PASHANARA
  - 11 JARAMA
  - 12 FRIENDS OF NATIONAL SPAIN
  - 13 THE FINDINGS
- ## MUNICH
- 14 LAUNCELOT'S DREAM
  - 15 PRAGUE 1938
  - 16 WHO KILLED JOHNNY THE CZECH?
  - 17 PEACE IN OUR TIME
  - 18 THE SECOND WAR TO END WARS
  - 19 RESEARCH
  - 20 WHO IS THE REAL ENEMY?

Programme for  
*Last Edition*.

which 'anything could happen without destroying the structure of the play'.<sup>4</sup>

MacColl concluded that a truly popular theatre could only be created through the operation of a militantly agit-prop street theatre. Accordingly, he founded the Red Megaphones, whose *modus operandi* was deliberately minimal, rejecting the structural complexities of naturalism. His performers were encouraged to train in dance and song and deliver performances in open, public spaces such as parks, city squares, outside factory, mill, or dock gates, at anti-war rallies and unemployment demonstrations (p. xxii).

### The Red Megaphones and 'Last Edition'

An important early script was *Last Edition*, a series of sketches which employed the living newspaper format to address the changing political situation from 1934 to 1940.<sup>5</sup> The form originated in the Red Army and Russian workers' clubs during the Bolshevik revolution.<sup>6</sup> It was a collaborative production, the whole company being involved in scanning the newspapers for suitable news items, which MacColl would work up into a documentary-cum-revue-style script after collective discussion. The script, as it is textually preserved in *Agit-prop to Theatre Workshop*, includes an 'Unemployment Episode' alongside treatments of the 'Gresford

Pit Disaster' of 1934, the 'Politics of Democracy', the 'Spanish Civil War', and a satirical treatment of the 'Munich Pact', which borrows the 'style of an American gangster film' (p. 30) to depict Hitler's manoeuvrings in the thirties, anticipating Brecht.

However, the fluidity of form makes this a peculiarly difficult piece to contain textually. The very topicality of the living newspaper, being kaleidoscopic and ephemeral, was easily forgotten beyond the context of the specific issue being represented. In 1938 alone *Last Edition* was rewritten on a weekly basis in order to take into account the changing geo-political situation, as well as the responses of the audience.<sup>7</sup> At some level, then, the audience was able to participate in and influence the presentation, but this influence was delayed and incremental.

The decision to employ the living newspaper was a significant tactical move in order to actualize the audience's political consciousness and reorientate it in a radical direction. *Last Edition* encouraged audience members to donate money to the Republican army fighting against fascism in Spain at the same time as it raised awareness about the abuses of colonialism in Trinidad (p. 29–30). It was a form designed to act as a tool for creating political consciousness, presenting a radical rereading of contemporary history to counter that of the mainstream press, with

the aim of creating a more honest political reality.

The search for such participatory cultural forms affected the media in which MacColl chose to work; drama, radio, and song are performance-based and geared towards collective reception. It also led to a desire for authorial self-effacement. MacColl would want to claim, with Walter Benjamin, that at the time he was working the 'distinction between author and public [was] about to lose its basic character'.<sup>8</sup> To create a popular culture of participation, MacColl had to synthesize a destabilization of the supposedly hierarchical relationships existing between writer and reader, actor and audience, producer and consumer.

### Performance Prioritized over Text

*Last Edition* was a movement towards a self-made form of theatre, rooted in performance over text, placing an emphasis upon spontaneity and flexibility. However, given the form's informational nature, MacColl's didactic intent inevitably asserted itself to reinforce those hierarchical relationships. The spectator remained an observer, consuming the information presented. The attempt to efface the trace of authorship from the text in the cause of popular participation was thus undermined.

The anxiety of authorship remained with MacColl when he became the in-house dramatist for Theatre Workshop, the name under which the remaining members of Theatre Union reassembled after the Second World War. As with the agit-prop scripts, the problem of textual instability arises because of the privileged determination of political content over aesthetic form. The published text of *Uranium 235* is thus printed with an alternative ending, 'following Theatre Workshop's practice of keeping the play up to date' (p. 126). A few lines into the new ending, the interlocutors are interrupted:

PUPPET MASTER: That isn't in the script.

WOMAN: No it isn't. At least it isn't in the original script.

SOLDIER: Which original script? I understand

there's half-a-dozen 'original' versions of the script. (p. 126)

The text's conscious instrumentalization to serve a didactic end meant that – like *Last Edition* – it had to be frequently modified to allow MacColl to respond to the changing historico-political situation, making it impossible to identify a unitary, authoritative version.

The play was written in 1946, followed by the production of a longer version in 1947, with alterations made until about 1952. 'In the late forties and early fifties . . . [the author] believed, as many people did, in what Eisenhower called "Atoms for Peace"' (p. 126–7); however, a series of nuclear accidents at Windscale, Kyshtym in the Soviet Union, Three Mile Island, and elsewhere, led him to alter his position and revise the script (p. 127).

MacColl did not write according to what Pierre Bourdieu terms the 'aesthetic disposition'; he did not seek to assert the autonomy of production and thereby 'give primacy to that of which the artist is master – i.e., form, manner, style – rather than the "subject", the external referent, which involves subordination to functions'.<sup>9</sup> For MacColl, subject matter was paramount; textual emendation manifests the difficulty of attribution in relation to his fluctuating political position and illuminates the problems surrounding the agency of writing within his wider politico-cultural praxis. The proliferation of textual alternatives gestures towards the theoretical infinity of different versions available in performance, which cannot ultimately be contained in textual format.

The political efficacy with which MacColl sought to invest his writing paradoxically served to destabilize its durability. MacColl was more concerned that his play texts had a direct impact in performance, privileging the immediate contextual circumstances of production over the work's longevity; he did not write with a reading public in mind. This is perhaps why, of MacColl's seventeen full-length scripts, only three are published in this country.<sup>10</sup> The extent to which this practice affects his writing is demonstrable



Cover of the published text (above) and opening of the programme (below) for *Uranium 235*.

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MICHAEL REDGRAVE  
 presents  
**URANIUM 235**  
 by  
 EWAN MACCOLL  
 Production by IOAN LITTLEWOOD

**EPISODE 1—THE SLEEPWALKERS**  
 The Scientist ... HARRY CORBETT  
 Jitterbugs ... BARBARA YOUNG & GEORGE COOPER  
 Film Fans ... DOREEN WARBURTON & AVIS BUNNAGE  
 Sportsman ... FRANK ELLIOT  
 Every Girl's Uncle ... HOWARD GOORNEY

**EPISODE 2—ATHENS, 470 B.C.**  
 Democritus ... HARRY CORBETT  
 The High Priest ... EWAN MACCOLL

**EPISODE 3—THE LONG WINTER**  
 The Mother ... AVIS BUNNAGE  
 Minstrel ... EWAN MACCOLL  
 Witch ... DOREEN WARBURTON

**EPISODE 4—A VOICE IN THE WILDERNESS**  
 Giordano Bruno ... HARRY CORBETT  
 Paracelsus ... EWAN MACCOLL  
 The Inquisitor ... GERRY RAFFLES

**EPISODE 5—THE HUNGRY YEARS**  
 Manchester Businessmen  
 HOWARD GOORNEY & GEORGE COOPER  
 John Dalton ... HARRY CORBETT

**EPISODE 6—THE FOOLISH SCIENTISTS**  
 Mendeleef ... GERRY RAFFLES

— INTERVAL —

in the functionalization of formal devices. An important theatrical device frequently employed to make the audience aware of their potential role as participants in the action (and, by extension, society at large) was that of interruption. In *Uranium 235* the philosopher Democritus' exposition on the history of science is interrupted thus:

*The 1st Actor suddenly steps out of his role and interrupts the proceedings.*

1ST ACTOR: God! What a load of codswallop!

1ST ACTRESS: Why? What's wrong?

1ST ACTOR: The whole bloody scene's wrong.  
 (p. 83)

### Demystifying the Operations of Power

The actor's stepping out of character to interrupt the scene demonstrates that the course of history, like the course of a scene in a play, *can* be changed as a result of human intervention. Unlike the planted 'Man in the Audience', who assumes the scientists are 'the ones who're supposed to know all the answers', the scientist himself is adamant that the public are responsible for the course of history: 'It depends . . . [on] you' (p. 76). Interruption fractures the continuity of the action, where in a more naturalistic play it would be continuous and unbroken, and the responsibility for making sense of events is thereby transferred on to the audience, who must piece together the fragments for themselves. They are actively encouraged to participate in what the play has represented, to *make* its meaning.

By demystifying the operations of the stage MacColl also sought to demystify the operations of power and wealth in society, making explicit the analogous responsibility of the audience for the organization of social praxis. The formal device is not employed for its own sake, as a 'pure' aesthetic construct for detached contemplation; rather, it is consciously fulfilling a function which can only have its desired effect in a forum of collective reception.

The reception-oriented nature of MacColl's writing meant that the touring ethos was central to his political vision of Theatre

Workshop as a 'popular' company, signifying an attempt to engage the desired working-class audience on its own terms and in familiar surroundings. MacColl felt this position was vindicated after a run at Butlin's Holiday Camp, Filey, in 1946, where a successful performance of *Uranium 235* – attracting large audiences who 'treated the play as they would have treated an exciting game of football' – confirmed that a

working-class audience could be won for a theatre which concerned itself with the social and political problems of our time; furthermore, such an audience would accept any kind of experiment provided that what was being said continued to ring out loud and clear.<sup>11</sup>

MacColl's estimation of working-class audiences ostensibly contrasts with Bourdieu's reductive suggestion that such audiences are intrinsically hostile to *any* formal experimentation.

In the theatre . . . the popular audience delights in plots that proceed logically and chronologically towards a happy end, and 'identifies' better with simply drawn situations and characters than with ambiguous and symbolic figures and actions. . . . Their reluctance or refusal springs . . . from a deep-rooted demand for participation, which formal experiment systematically disappoints, especially when, refusing to offer the 'vulgar' attractions of an art of illusion, the theatrical fiction denounces itself.<sup>12</sup>

MacColl's conception of the theatre was anti-illusionist, emphasizing the value of formal experiment and asserting the capacity of a working-class audience to recognize that value.

The projected synthesis of form and content came with a significant caveat in that any formal experimentation had ultimately to be subjugated to the message it was designed to transmit, which must continue to 'ring out loud and clear', undistorted by the artifice of the device. The illusion had to be stripped away – not to further the demands of a hermetically sealed system of formalistic experimentation for its own sake, but better to illuminate the corrupt political reality.

Despite its anti-naturalism, the agency of MacColl's writing as a representational mode

is thus paradoxically reasserted. However, in this respect the denial of textuality is contradictory given that, at some level, there will always be a residual agency in the text, if only because performers need scripts to mount putative revival productions. Texts have the significant advantage of durability which the ephemeral medium of performance does not; consequently, they are vital to a work's preservation. It is in this sense that we should speak of the agency of *writing*. Such a conception of textuality became central to MacColl's work in the second folk revival, towards which he gravitated when Theatre Workshop found a permanent base at the Theatre Royal, Stratford East.

### 'Texts' in the Folk Tradition

In contrast to the self-conscious immediacy of MacColl's plays, the texts of the folk tradition are historically rooted. MacColl's communism convinced him of the debasing tendencies of commercial society as constituted under capitalism, which create the conditions necessary for the commodification of cultural products within an overarching 'culture industry'. He concluded that there are certain popular traditions and forms of expression, such as folk songs, which should be kept sacrosanct from such debasement and are consequently in need of protection from exploitation by appropriative market forces. Situating himself within a long-standing tradition, MacColl hoped, would function as a necessary bulwark against the encroaching threat of a homogenized culture of mass production.

MacColl's involvement with the folk song revival did not stop him writing – indeed, his contribution to the revival as a songwriter was prolific. But his agency as a writer was partially diverted by the extension of his praxis into work as a collector and editor. Raphael Samuel has suggested that the act of conservation 'is not an event but a process, the start of a cycle of development rather than (or as well as) an attempt to arrest the march of time'.<sup>13</sup> The folk revival was an opportunity for radical cultural archaeology; MacColl sought to recover artefacts from

their mediated and situated sources by re-contextualizing them, with the conviction that 'traditional music . . . could serve as a model for contemporary popular music'.<sup>14</sup> Textual preservation is intended to stabilize the tradition – functioning as a kind of bibliography for the movement – but it also requires innovation, if only to halt the decay and, perhaps, turn the tide, so that a rescue operation for relics of the past becomes a restoration, which in turn has the potential to become a revival.

MacColl's work on the pioneering series of 'radio ballads' for the BBC was an example of successful recontextualization: he embraced modernity's expanding horizons, exploiting the mass communication media in order to synthesize a new cultural form with the aim of popularizing a traditional one.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, the recognition of the potentially emancipatory forces of technological advancement continued his project of cultural democratization. As Walter Benjamin asserted, 'mechanical reproduction emancipates the work of art from its parasitical dependence on ritual', thereby opening up the possibility of collective reception across the airwaves at the same time as effecting a dialectical shift in the nature of artistic production.<sup>16</sup>

### The Ground-breaking Radio Ballads

These programmes employed a ground-breaking new genre of radio docu-theatre, synthesizing musical folk-pastiches with recorded actuality. This constituted an unprecedented event in British broadcasting history because it allowed the working-class interviewees to speak for themselves, rather than having their words re-recorded by BBC actors. The radio ballads were polyglossic in that they drew upon interviews with a range of railwaymen (*The Ballad of John Axon*, 1958), road builders (*The Song of a Road*, 1959), fishermen (*Singing the Fishing*, 1960), and miners (*The Big Hewer*, 1961) to construct a narrative about a specific section of the contemporary working class, in contradistinction to the monoglossic narrative style of the traditional ballad. The traditional form, which commonly relates a single event as a sequ-

ential narrative, was innovatively reworked to create sound pictures through fragmentary interlays of song, speech (actuality), music, and choral singing. Worryingly for MacColl, however, by the time of the last radio ballad (*The Travelling People*, 1964), high production costs had come to make the series economically unviable. Despite receiving critical acclaim, the radio ballads were simply not as popular as disc-jockey 'pop' music programmes, which attracted larger audiences at a fraction of the cost.<sup>17</sup>

What Ian Watson terms MacColl's strategic "'penetration" of the media in support of second culture' as well as his support 'for alternative cultural forms, [while working] within the established media in order to democratize them' was ceded to the archivist's instinct to record and preserve the rescued fragments of the folk tradition.<sup>18</sup> The agency of the collector stems from the fact that in setting out to preserve a tradition s/he also contributes to its construction. The folk tradition exists in a complex and contradictory relationship to popular culture in that it wants to claim itself as the popular music of the people, at the same as it maintains an illusion of musical and social difference. MacColl frequently adopted a dismissive position with regard to pop music, claiming that he was fighting for the preservation and popular resurgence of traditional songs, but not to watch them 'and the royalties accruing from their exploitation [being] appropriated by pop groups'.<sup>19</sup>

This position isolates a stylistically delimited conception of 'folk song' – a specific soundtrack – seeking to hold it in suspension from the sometimes convergent, sometimes divergent multiplicity of practices, tastes, and soundtracks within popular music activity. As Michael Brocken has said of the second revival:

To have identified hidden musical cultures was certainly valid, but to have done so via a political connoisseurship, a collective musical consciousness as an antithesis to popular music, is a limited reading of popular music history.<sup>20</sup>

The projected historical 'truth' of the folk tradition's representations was defined



against the commercially tainted products of the pop industry. To understand MacColl's contribution to the second British folk revival it is necessary to place the concept of 'folk song' in the historical context of its mediation.

### Mediating the Folk Tradition

Mediation encompasses the functional changes which songs undergo during the process of transmission between generations, communities, and classes. While it would be impossible to give a thoroughgoing account of the mediation of 'folk song' in this country within the limits of this article, I will try to emphasize the main trends and concerns in the work of some of the major historical figures.

Perhaps the most common charge which is applicable to the majority of mediators is that they adopted a prescriptivist approach: instead of seeking to describe popular song culture, they sought to classify and categorize what constitutes a 'popular ballad' or a 'folk song' in an attempt to justify their own theoretical manoeuvrings and inevitably restricted selections. Such mediation began with the emergence of a market for songbooks in the early eighteenth century, as distinct from the older trade in chapbooks and broadsides.

The early mediators – including Allan Ramsay, William Thomson, and Thomas Percy – came from humble social origins, but displayed upward social mobility. They expropriated products of working-class culture, treating them as property, in order to buy themselves into bourgeois social circles. The collected songs had, of course, to be made marketable to the middle-class book-buying public who could afford the songbooks, and this inevitably led to certain exclusions and emendations in the song texts. Ramsay, for example, constructed an Arcadian, nostalgically rural conception of Scots balladry, entitling his major collections *The Tea-Table Collection* (1724) and *The Gentle Shepherd* (1725). For the early mediators, the songs they collected became commodities. The very process of textualization can be said to com-



MacColl with Peggy Seeger during work on the radio ballads.

modify the song, turn it into an object, and displace its original functional value as a lived form of cultural expression, in order to instrumentalize it to a different end: that of profit.

Mediation can be either explicit, in the form of correction, or implicit, in the form of selection. As Dave Harker has stated, in the very process of collection, the mediators' 'own assumptions, attitudes, likes, and dislikes may well have significantly determined what they looked for, accepted and rejected'.<sup>21</sup> The question of deviation from a projected authorial 'original' was taken up by later collectors. William Motherwell was perhaps the first to idealize workers' songs as an expression of the universal popular (un)consciousness, theorizing notions of communal authorship (taken up by later scholars such as Francis Gummere and George Kittredge) and exclusively oral transmission.

Mediators such as Louise Pound, Frank Sidgwick, and Thomas Henderson adopted a more 'manuscript-oriented' conception of

transmission', all broadly subscribing to the idea of 'minstrelsy' (professional authorship).<sup>22</sup> They were consequently concerned to emphasize the possibility of a textual original, in the hope that all recorded songs could be traced back to a prior ur-text – presumably authored by a strolling minstrel at some point between the fifteenth and late seventeenth century.

### The Belief in a 'Lost Authenticity'

Sidgwick even postulated the existence of some ancient 'Aryan bard' as being the fountain of all balladry in Europe.<sup>23</sup> Henderson, meanwhile, professed outright contempt for the 'people' whose 'instinctively stupid interference with the original text' was held to be responsible for the degradation of the tradition.<sup>24</sup> The 'unconscious poet of the real traditional ballad', as Francis Child had put it, was deemed to have authored the pure original, which was preserved in the derivative broadside form only to be steadily corrupted once it had got into the hands of the folk themselves.<sup>25</sup>

Child was a Harvard-based scholar who had little contact with oral sources; it is thus hardly surprising that he downplayed such sources when theorizing the process of transmission and came to rely upon notions of textual authenticity, delimiting the theory of popular song culture within a hermetically sealed textual framework. His work was influential among later scholars who adopted the consensus that, whether produced by an anonymized collective or a forgotten individual, there was nothing consciously *artistic* about workers' culture; it was 'organic', passively reflecting social conditions, but there was no creative artifice or cognitive capacity.

The use of the term 'folk' in its application to workers' culture dates from the 1840s and to workers' songs only after the 1870s.<sup>26</sup> It was in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that the first British 'folk song' revival took place, associated primarily with the work of Cecil Sharp and his followers. Sharp had sought to give official sponsorship to 'folk' culture in order to manufacture a consensus of national unity, inscribing and

reinforcing an integrationist ideology against the threat of working-class solidarity. 'Folk song' would be used to improve 'the musical taste of the people, and to refine and strengthen the national character'.<sup>27</sup>

In step with Matthew Arnold's ideas about a cultural vanguard of bourgeois ideologues, Sharp planned to institutionalize 'folk song' within the state education system, which, he hoped, would do 'incalculable good in civilizing the masses'.<sup>28</sup> The Board of Education were inclined to agree, assuring teachers in the Public Elementary Schools that the songs taught to their largely working-class pupils should be as simple as possible:

It is not necessary that infants should *understand* all the words they sing, as the chief appeal is not to the intellect, the training of which is the purpose of almost every other subject in the curriculum, but through the *spirit of the song* to the *unconscious mind of the child*. [My italics].<sup>29</sup>

The distinction between 'folk' and 'popular' music, for Sharp, hinged upon the question of its peculiarly communal and *racial* character; 'folksongs' were 'race-products' in which 'true' citizens and patriots were 'united . . . by the subtle bond of blood and kinship'.<sup>30</sup> Sharp attempted to locate an essentialist racial stratum of national character in search of a stable past, suitable for reconstruction.

His nostalgic romanticizing of the English peasantry, blended with a reactionary critique of industrialism, was an attempt to intervene in contemporary workers' culture and manipulate the popular taste through the construction of the artificial category of 'folk song'. His project was clearly serviceable in an explicit programme of ideological indoctrination and bourgeois social control, placing a dangerous emphasis on racial elitism. The emergence of the English 'folk song' tradition is bound up with this ideological aberration; Pickering and Green suggest it occurred as part of a 'conscious manufacture . . . of a national musical culture, and involved a concerted effort to remould the popular in the image of the dominant culture'.<sup>31</sup> To that extent it was a hegemonic construction.<sup>32</sup>

The tradition was then mediated back to the people as a 'genuine' 'folk' culture, which was in danger of being buried beneath an encroaching and debased 'popular' culture of the urban music hall. Entrenched in the history of the 'folk song' concept is its dogmatically asserted elevation as an 'authentic' mode of representation, set against the artificiality of the popular; however, such isolationism was itself artificial and just another feature in the folk tradition's construction. In the sphere of cultural praxis, meanwhile, all texts exist within an inter-textual constellation, making it impossible to achieve the isolation of one soundtrack from another.

### The Second 'Folk' Revival

The second revival had its intellectual roots (or, rather, its baggage) in the first, most amply evidenced by the textual legacy of documents – in the form of manuscript and printed collections, scholarly monographs, and learned articles in the *Journal of the Folk-Song Society* – which were used by MacColl and A. L. Lloyd, his collaborator and CPGB comrade, to construct an authoritative canon of songs.

MacColl's first significant anthology, *The Singing Island* (1960), was heavily dependent on the classical canon of Child ballads, thereby partially replicating that canon. But MacColl and Lloyd broke with the established tradition in so far as they sought to mobilize 'folk' culture as a medium for oppositional politics. Sharp's disciple, Ralph Vaughan Williams, had characterized 'folk song' as a 'spontaneous, unself-conscious, unwritten musical utterance'.<sup>33</sup> The politicized nature of MacColl and Lloyd's project meant that that they were concerned to overturn this self-dynamic and organic construction of the tradition by stressing the dynamism and agency of the working-class culture-in-waiting, acknowledging the folk as creators of their own cultural traditions.

In this respect, of course, the project was an ideologically motivated intervention, like Sharp's. It had the beneficial effect of extending the boundaries of the 'folk' dis-

course to encompass previously de-selected songs; and much erotic and bawdy material, which had been deemed unsuitable for the social mores of the first revival's intended public, was restored. More significantly, Lloyd and MacColl created the category of 'industrial song', both in performance (in the selection of their repertoires) and published collections.<sup>34</sup> However, by situating himself within the folk tradition, MacColl also implicated himself in its internal discursive pressures and incongruities. As a performer and collector in the second folk revival MacColl was unable fully to extricate himself from the contradictions implicit within the earlier tradition.

In his work as a collector MacColl continued in the tradition of Sharp, collecting songs from a number of oral sources, including Sam Lerner, Ben Bright, George Dunn, the Elliot family of Birtley, and the Stewarts of Blairgowrie. MacColl's working-class background meant that he was able to communicate with his sources in a way his predecessors could not. While Sharp's sources may have inclined towards a certain degree of self-censorship in response to the intrusion of an unknown, middle-class scholar, MacColl's sources, by contrast, were receptive and willing to share their repertoires.<sup>35</sup>

### Problems of Authenticity and Agency

Certain dichotomies, however, remained. The 'authentic' community singers were passing on their songs – fetishized as manifestations of the unmolested tradition – to MacColl, the collector and song-carrier, whose status as a participant observer was not neutral or objective.<sup>36</sup> In their work with the Stewarts of Blairgowrie, MacColl, along with his partner and collaborator Peggy Seeger, recognized the impact of their presence as collectors and the effect that it had on the family:

Our first recording session with the Stewarts was memorable. . . . As soon as recording was mentioned, Belle began to sing, even before the microphone was out. She was not yet accustomed to the routine set up by visiting collectors. . . . Singing was part of normal family life.<sup>37</sup>

However, over the course of their sessions together, MacColl witnessed the Stewarts come under the spell of what he termed 'performance syndrome'. The migration of the Stewarts from the family home to folk clubs, concert halls, and festivals led them to adopt what MacColl deemed to be 'stereotyped formats of presentation, borrowed from the music hall, cinema, and television'.<sup>38</sup> In becoming aware of their status as performers, the style of performance changed undesirably because it was no longer part of 'normal' family life.

Such prescriptivism bears the hallmarks of Sharpian nostalgia, seeking to deny the Stewarts any chance of moving beyond the prescribed 'organic', 'authentic' context of family- and community-based performance. MacColl failed to recognize that, even within the family home, it would be impossible to isolate the Stewarts from the influence of popular cultural forms such as cinema or television.

Moreover, as Ian Russell has shown, there is already a dynamic of self-conscious artifice at work in any performance, even in an apparently 'organic' context.<sup>39</sup> In this instance, MacColl's retrograde sentimentalism reconfigured the tradition's essentialist 'purity', thereby reasserting Sharp's elitist dichotomy between 'folk' and 'popular' song, overlooking the value of re-contextualization as an agent of popularization. Without the dimension of human agency and choices which are acted upon, cultural praxis is no more than a collection of fossilized habits and superstitions; it is inert and not progressive. As Brocken has commented, 'the eternal contradiction of revivalism [is that] in order to popularise [a] tradition one has to recontextualize it'.<sup>40</sup>

A cultural phenomenon specific to the second revival was the institution of the folk club, which provided a forum for recontextualizing and transmitting the rescued fragments of the tradition through establishing a network of performance venues. The folk club was a significant part of MacColl's cultural praxis, especially given that his own 'Ballads and Blues Club', begun in November 1953 at the Theatre Royal, provided a

catalyst for the subsequent proliferation of such clubs nationally.<sup>41</sup> Between 1957 and 1961 the club relocated to a room above the Princess Louise pub in High Holborn, which, as Ben Harker attests, 'played a significant part in inventing the institution of the British folk club'.<sup>42</sup>

The club finally reincarnated itself as 'The Singers' Club' in Soho Square. The practice of including floor singers in the performance furthered MacColl's earlier exploration of the possibility of destabilizing the relationship between performer and audience. Like the theatre, the folk club was a social performance space, an alternative cultural institution which created an atmosphere of informal and participatory congregation capable of generating what Roland Barthes would recognize as *musica practica*.<sup>43</sup> The audience was encouraged to become involved in the revival as creators, not just spectator-consumers.

However, even in this relatively progressive sphere of his praxis, MacColl was unable to overcome the problematic cultural nationalism implicit in the folk tradition. His first collection, *The Singing Island*, provided a ready-made repertoire for the 'new generation of young singers . . . discovering their national music', which was to be held in splendid isolation.<sup>44</sup>

The direction of the second British folk revival was influenced in some quarters by a reactionary shift against the emergence of the American-inclined 'skiffle' movement which mushroomed in the fifties. The debate crystallized around MacColl's controversial decision to introduce a policy at his Singers' Club in 1961 that forbade performers to sing anything but the songs of their 'own native tradition', designed to encourage young English singers to sing 'English' songs, rather than badly imitating Woody Guthrie or Leadbelly.<sup>45</sup> The rule had been unofficial since around 1958, when many skiffles began to migrate to MacColl's 'Ballads and Blues Club', but its prescriptive institutionalization as a policy was decidedly unpopular and alienated many performers.

MacColl reconfigured Sharp's nostalgic construction of 'folk song' as a dying oral

form, in need of defensive preservation, as a nationalist response to perceived 'American cultural imperialism'.<sup>46</sup> By switching from a strategy of innovative, forward-looking re-contextualization of traditional material to one of entrenchment, thereby closing down creative possibilities, MacColl was steering the revival on a course which could only lead to inward-looking ossification. Moreover, this purism was inherently contradictory because it ignored the history of hybridity and cross-fertilization that has existed *between* different cultural and musical traditions within the British Isles alone. The prescription of a delimited 'authentic' context for the performance of 'English' folk song brought a dynamic of exclusion into being, privileging certain styles of presentation and compositional choices, which militated against the popular.<sup>47</sup>

Popularity implies a dynamic and progressive connection between the cultural heritage and contemporary praxis; the more prescriptive MacColl became, the less room there was for creative hybridity.

### 'Dirty Old Town'

To resurrect MacColl as an agent of the popular, after having examined the contradictions at work in his wider cultural praxis, we must return to the agency of his writing. To demonstrate MacColl's definitive contribution to popular song I would like to focus on what are, paradoxically, two of his best *and* least known songs, both realized in dialogue with his politico-cultural praxis. The contextually specific circumstances of composition, however, have not precluded these songs from achieving popular status.

'Dirty Old Town' was written in haste to cover a scene change in Theatre Workshop's production of MacColl's *Landscape with Chimneys* (1951).<sup>48</sup> MacColl's youthful experience of unemployment with the National Unemployed Workers' Movement clearly illuminates the alienating effects of industrial capitalism. There is a certain degree of CPGB idealization of the industrial proletariat, which expresses the paradoxical political conservatism of nostalgia. The song's suc-

cess, however, lies in the fact that its formal existence as an 'art' object is not subjugated to these concerns.

The first verse's juxtaposition of the phraseology of conventional love song ('my love . . . dream . . . my girl') against the romanticized industrial landscape ('gas-works croft . . . old canal . . . factory wall') sets up an internal tension which enacts the speaker's (or singer's) ambivalent attitude towards his home town – a place of upbringing, but not belonging. The symbolic movements of escape, manifest in the 'clouds . . . drifting across the moon' and the night-train which '[sets] the night on fire', prove insubstantial as the verse moves towards the insistent titular refrain, returning the speaker to the grim, quotidian reality of the 'Dirty old town, dirty old town' – both colloquially familiar and detested for its filthiness – from which there is no escape after all.

The struggle to escape from the home town's syntactical placement at the climax of the verse intensifies in the final verse, which makes the refrain line the object of the projected revolutionary upheaval ('We'll chop you down like an old dead tree / Dirty old town'), couched in a pastoral metaphor of tree-felling.

The song successfully foregrounds its form so that the ostensible 'message' of alienation is not determined over the song's construction as an aesthetic object; the mode of representation – the popular song – is privileged above what is represented. 'Dirty Old Town' has achieved its popularity cumulatively; many other performers, including The Dubliners, The Spinners, Rod Stewart, and The Pogues, have reinterpreted the song; and this cumulative conception of the 'popular' allows us to account for the chronological specificity of a song's popularity.

The Dubliners popularized the song to the extent that it is now widely assumed to be a 'traditional' song in Ireland; the paradox of praxis is that, consequently, it *is* a traditional Irish song.<sup>49</sup> The praxis of reception determines popularity both synchronically and diachronically; it is a perpetual process of 'becoming', in reaction against assimilation and the constancy of 'being'. The different

versions of the song tacitly juxtapose different interpretations (employing different instrumentation and vocal inflection) thereby demanding that attention be paid to the song's existence as a song, privileging form over function, technique over theme, and refusing the simplistic reduction of 'art' to 'life'. This stylistic relativism does not, however, neutralize the function of the representation. Rather, the song's specificity of content, which is testament to the success of MacColl's agency as a writer, does not preclude universal 'identification' – in the naive sense – which has contributed to its popularity.<sup>50</sup>

### 'The Shoals of Herring'

MacColl's creative method implicitly recognized the popular song's polysemic hybridity, which can both attest and facilitate successful recontextualization, as demonstrated in his composition of 'The Shoals of Herring' for the radio ballad *Singing the Fishing*.<sup>51</sup> MacColl worked with the recorded reminiscences of Sam Larner, an eighty-two-year-old fisherman, to create a first-person narrative relating Larner's early days at sea. Through paying close attention to Larner's breathing, tone, and phrasing, MacColl produced a set of lyrics which he set to an adaptation of a melody traditionally associated with the ballad 'The Famous Flower of Serving Men'.

Larner responded to this accomplished example of folk-pastiche by claiming to have known the song all his life. The representation's artificiality was (mis)taken for a genuine manifestation of the 'tradition', demonstrating that music created out of the folk legacy involves conscious artifice. The success of the lyric resides not in its experiential 'authenticity' but rather in its capacity to be used as a vehicle for the performance of 'authenticity'. While it is a label MacColl would have rejected, it is perhaps appropriate to speak of the songs he produced in dialogue with the projected tradition as being neo-folk, a term which acknowledges the debt to the past at the same time as recognizing the value of pastiche.

### The Necessity of Hybridity

All fresh shoots on the old trunk of tradition will be hybrids, if healthy, folk roots are to explore new routes, stretching the limits of the tradition's discursive boundaries and creative possibilities. MacColl's songs attest this healthy attitude, manipulating traditional material in new musical and cultural contexts, in opposition to the restrictive delimitation of, for example, a 'purely' textual approach.

But in his wider cultural and scholarly praxis he made the purist's mistake of validating certain performance models at the expense of others, seeking to 'impose strict musical and social codes on reception while culture and meaning were becoming ever more diverse'.<sup>52</sup> His commitment to pre-existing forms led to an effacement of himself as an autonomous producer – manifest in Larner's failure to recognize MacColl's authorship – which was the very condition of his successful agency as a writer of popular song. To become popular, MacColl had, paradoxically, to be forgotten.

MacColl's search for participatory cultural forms in the theatre led to his conception that the agency of writing lies in its self-negation through performance, a dynamic which he continued to explore as a songwriter in the folk tradition. His writing was always functionalized within his politico-cultural praxis, but it is also his writing which redeems the contradictions in his praxis. The emergence of the second folk revival – which MacColl was instrumental in facilitating – created a relatively autonomous cultural space in which the impulse of creativity was not yet tethered to the interests of an industry (although the revival was later appropriated in that direction).

The ease with which MacColl's songs lend themselves to being reinterpreted by other artists is a measure of the status of song as a participatory cultural form. MacColl's success as a songwriter was to write songs that would eventually escape the trace of his authorship – which is not to deny his agency as a writer, but to recognize that it operates by a process of negation. This does not

resurrect flawed notions of a Sharpian self-dynamic, organic tradition – the songs are authored – but it recognizes that the author must be willing to part with their creation in order for his work to achieve popular status.

MacColl's best songs are, we might say, gifts which are selflessly, fathomlessly given up. This conception of the agency of writing as self-negation goes some way towards reconciling individual agency (MacColl the writer) and collective participation (the audience of song-receivers who take up the song and pass it on) in the generation of our common cultural praxis.

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