

# English Folk Music on the Margin – Cecil Sharp’s Gypsies

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**ABSTRACT:** Cecil Sharp is the only English or even British collector who can be compared with such European giants as Béla Bartók and Zoltán Kodály, composers and collectors who undertook extensive fieldwork documenting the folk music of indigenous cultures including many Romani gypsy singers and musicians. Cecil Sharp only occasionally referred to collecting from gypsy singers. This paper identifies and examines Sharp’s encounters with the gypsy community revealing singers, recordings and photographs previously unidentified. It should be viewed as work in progress.

## INTRODUCTION

To musicians and scholars from English speaking countries, Cecil Sharp’s name will probably be very familiar. As a collector of English Folk Music, Dance and Song his legacy is unrivalled. By the time of his death in 1924 Sharp had collected some 5,000 folk tunes and published more than seventy volumes including his theoretical book *English Folk Song: Some Conclusions* (1907). His collecting activity can be favourably compared with that of Béla Bartók (1881-1945) and his colleague composer Zoltán Kodály (1882-1967) who collected and documented the folk music of indigenous cultures which included the Romani gypsies. This paper investigates Cecil Sharp’s collecting from gypsies in England and reveals that his contact with this community may have been more extensive than previously thought.

## 2 CECIL SHARP’S METHODOLOGY

Sharp was a passionate fieldworker. He began work in Somerset in 1903 and essentially followed the established practice promoted by the Folk Song Society in their ‘Hints to Collectors’ as recorded in the *Folk Song Society Minute Book 1* compiled in 1898. This advised, ‘Although folk music may be preserved in different strata of society, the classes from whom the most interesting specimens are most readily to be obtained are gardeners, artisans, gamekeepers, shepherds, rustic labourers, gypsies, sailors, fishermen, workers in the old fashioned trades, such as weaving and the like, as well as domestic servants of the old school, especially nurses’. There is a strong rural emphasis in this list and Sharp duly began his collecting in the rural West Country. As a music teacher based in London, he could only undertake field work in the school holidays and from 1904 – 1907 he spent 311 days collecting, mostly in Somerset and North Devon. After that he spent an increasing amount of time in Gloucestershire and Oxfordshire.

He travelled by bicycle, train and motor car (when offered a lift) to the dwellings of folk singers and musicians. His initial methodology was, ‘...to settle down in a town or village and visit the cottages. Thirty or forty songs may be forthcoming from a single singer, but only 3 or 4 are got at a time, consequently one gets to know the people very well’ (Sharp 1905a). Working with the local clergy and gentry he would identify and visit the known singers in the district, who would in turn recommend him to other singers in their family, or circle of friends and neighbours. Sharp collected from them in their homes, sometimes he found singers in the workhouse,

or in public houses, and he occasionally noted songs from people working in the fields or by the roadside. Sharp was seeking English folk songs and he sourced them wherever he could from whoever would be willing to sing to him. His methodology relied heavily on connectivity but sometimes serendipity brought him even greater rewards for example his meeting with a remarkable gypsy singer on the road in Devon.

### 3 GYPSY SINGERS

In August 1907 when Sharp was collecting in West Devon with his friend and collaborator Reverend Francis Etherington he had his first encounter with gypsy singers. Here is Cecil's description of the meeting; 'Yesterday after taking down many songs from Old Parish, we went onto Simonsbath where I wrote to you [Sharp's wife Constance]. We had decided to make our way over the moor to Withypool and were just wheeling our cycles up the hill when Etherington, gave a penny to a very dirty but picturesque little child who took it and ran to a small cart that was under a tree, down a little lane, and gave it to his father – evidently a gypsy. So I went up to him and chatted and broached the question of songs. No! He didn't sing any but his wife did, but she was in a house close by trying to sell some crockery. We waited, gave him baccy and played with a second child, a baby tied up in the cart...presently out came his wife, Betsy Holland, aged 26, a bright dark eyed woman. The baby coo-ed with delight directly she appeared. We attacked her about the songs which she had learned from her grandmother. A little persuasion and she sat down on a stone, gave her baby the breast, and then began a murder song...talk of folk singing! It was the finest and most characteristic bit of singing I had ever heard. Fiendishly difficult to take down, both words and music...I cannot give you any idea what it was like but it was one of the most wonderful adventures I have ever had. I photographed the baby and her and she is mad to have the picture and told me they were making their way down to Cornwall via Bideford and Barnstaple. They will be at Bideford on Saturday, and I shall, I know find it hard to keep away' (Fox-Strangways 1933: 41).



Figure 1 Betsy Holland and her baby photographed by Cecil Sharp in August 1907 ©EFDSS.

### 4 BETSY AND REBECCA HOLLAND

On 24<sup>th</sup> August he wrote again to Francis Etherington; 'Well! I got to Barnstaple yesterday at four and biked slowly on to Bideford keeping my eyes open, but seeing nothing of our draggle-

taggles. Then I searched the waste places around Bideford till dusk, but could not find them, nor could I hear news of them from police or other people, nor from the post office where I enquired'. The next day he found them, 'Tent up, three children (there was one asleep in the cart when we met them) rolling about in the grass, Betsy superintending the cooking over a large kettle, Henry eating a large dumpling with a pocket knife'(Fox-Strangways 1933: 41-42).

This time Betsy sang three more songs plus the one which had so impressed Sharp at their first meeting to which he gave the name 'Execution Song' before identifying it as the broadside ballad 'James Macdonald' (Sharp 1907:87). Betsy told Sharp that she learned the song from her grandmother Rebecca Holland, and gave him a vague address near Honiton, Devon of 'Stafford Cottages'. No such address has been found although there is a Stafford Cross in the vicinity of Honiton. Four months later Sharp tracked down Rebecca and she remembered enough of the song for Sharp to confirm that it was in the Lydian mode, the only example of that mode he had found in English folk song, tonic C and F# and emphasising the notes E and A.

Sharp's close friend A H Fox-Strangways had made a close study of Indian music. He identified Betsy's song with the Indian 'Hamir-Kalian' mode. Sharp noted that he had found the song 'fiendishly difficult to take down', probably not only because of its unusual mode but because of the ornamentation and the slides and graces she almost certainly put into it. Sharp wanted to confirm the intervals by taking a phonograph recording. Rebecca Holland had forgotten most of the song but he got enough from her to hear the distinctive F# of the mode (Fox-Strangways 1933: footnote 41-42).

What do we know about Betsy and her family? Firstly there are Sharp's photographs – incidentally we have these for about 70 of the 300 plus singers from whom he collected in Somerset.

From census research we understand that Betsy Holland was born at Kentisbeare, Devon in 1880 and that her family travelled mostly around mid and north Devon and Western Somerset. Her family name was also Holland. Rebecca Holland was identified in the 1881 census at Coningsbury, Lincolnshire, living in lodgings. Lincolnshire was notoriously a centre for hired casual labour working under the 'gang' system. The census records that Rebecca was born at Wisbech, Cambridgeshire. Perhaps this was her real home: perhaps it was just another place on her travels.



Figure 2 Rebecca Holland, Betsy Holland's grandmother. ©EFDSS.

## 5 STORIES

I was keen to discover if here were any family memories of Betsy and Rebecca and also to determine if the family were still singing today and made contact with them through gypsy Mag-

gie Bendall Smith, herself a singer. Sharp's photographs of Betsy and her family were shown to Priscilla Holland, Betsy's grand-daughter, and Priscilla's second cousin Margaret Holland. Margaret recalls that 'Aunt Betsy used to always be singing' and that she had five sons and named them after her five brothers. Betsy's brother John married Rebecca Orchard. The Orchard family are well known West Country gypsy musicians, singers and step dancers today. Betsy died in 1960 and this, as far as is known, makes her the last of Cecil Sharp's singers to die.

Collecting from gypsies could have its hazards. The same day as Sharp collected from Rebecca Holland he also visited Priscilla Cooper (1873-?). She creates a dramatic portrait, a real 'Gypsy Queen' and is likely to be the source of the 'voice in the box' story in the Fox-Strangways biography of Cecil Sharp. The story goes that that one Christmas morning C# was noting songs by phonograph from a woman in a caravan 'when suddenly she stopped singing and, turning deathly white, announced that she heard her husband approaching, and as he was of a jealous disposition she was afraid that he would kill Mr Sharp. Sharp not wanting to be killed, opened the caravan door and shouted 'A happy Christmas to you. Stop a moment and listen. I've got your wife's voice in a box'(Fox-Strangways: 43). The man was delighted and refrained from killing Sharp.



Figure 3 Priscilla Cooper ©EFDSS

## 6 CYLINDER RECORDINGS

Some of Cecil Sharp's cylinder collection has been digitised by the National Sound Archive at the British Library and amongst the recordings that are now available on-line are two thought to be Priscilla Cooper. Cylinder No.54: 1, 'The Indian Lass' catalogued under the alternative title of 'The American Stranger' and Cylinder No.47. 'Basket of Eggs' both assigned a recording date of 1908. It seems likely that either or both of these are the recordings that Cecil made on that Christmas morning. Both are known broadside ballads. A copy of 'The Basket of Eggs' exists in the collection held at Bodleian Library in Oxford it was published in Liverpool by Armstrong sometime between 1820 and 1824. 'The American Stranger' also features on a broadside and there is a fine version published by Robert McIntosh of 96, King Street, Carlton, Glasgow, in the National Library of Scotland. Included in the lyrics is the line 'and I will clasp her in my arms in a cold winter night'. It sounds as if Cecil had lucky escape.

The cylinder recordings require further research since the voices appear to belong to two singers, with 'The Basket of Eggs' giving the impression that the singer has a more mature

voice and 'The American Stranger' is being sung by a younger woman. It is tempting to speculate that these recordings may indeed be the voices of Rebecca, whom Sharp was so keen to record, and Priscilla who were known to be travelling together when Cecil visited them.

## 7 HIDDEN GYPSIES

There is evidence that Sharp enjoyed other musical encounters with the settled gypsy community. Some were identified as gypsies by Sharp whilst others have recently been identified as gypsies through oral history research with their descendants. One such gypsy was Emma Glover (1856-1929) of Huish Episcopi. Sharp visited her several times from 1904 until his last visit on the 6<sup>th</sup> January 1909. Emma's maiden name was Hughes, a well-known gypsy family name in the West of England, and she married a 'gadje', or non-gypsy, William Glover.



Figure 4 Emma Glover ©EFDSS

A close examination of Emma Glover's photo reveals that she is surrounded by wood chippings and has some on her dress. Oral history tells us that the Glovers lived 'near the gypsies near Wagg Drove'. A 'drove' in the Somerset Levels is a place where willow saplings were grown for basket making and, among gypsies, for making clothes pegs. Outwardly the Glovers were upwardly mobile as witness Emma's daughter's very fine hat. Her son looks rough but became a non-conformist preacher. But look again at those wood chips. Was Sharp very subtly trying to tell us something about Emma's identity and what she had been making?



Figure 5 Emma Glover, her son William and daughter Lillian ©EFDSS

Other Sharp singers from gypsy families have also been discovered and research continues with their descendants to reveal chains of connection. A good example has been provided by informant Janet Govier. Janet revealed that she is related to both Emma Glover and another of Sharp's singers, known gypsy Lucy Carter. Janet's father's grandmother was Emma Glover and Lucy Carter was her great grandmother on her mother's side of the family. Another informant who did not wish to be identified explained that, yes they were a descendant of one of Cecil Sharp's female singers and that she was a gypsy but that gypsy ancestry was a sensitive issue

within the family and that her grandfather had been teased at school because of it and called 'Gyppo' and had always denied the connection in public.

## 8 LUCY CARTER

Other singers were overt about their cultural identity. For example Lucy Carter (1829-1912) who lived in the village of Tintinhull with her husband Isaiah, a basket-maker. She was a gypsy and proud of it, and told Cecil Sharp's fortune, he recounts, 'I produced the customary piece of silver and off she went. I had crossed the water twice...I had an enemy; he was short and dark and cunning and was plotting to do me great harm etc. I eventually tore myself away, and as I shook hands at the door of her cottage she put her face close to mine, looking me deep in the eyes and whispered, 'When you are in trouble, you do think of the old gypsy-woman; she can help you, for she's a seventh daughter!' (Fox-Strangways:38).



Figure 6 Lucy Carter ©EFDSS

Lucy gave Sharp comparatively little material, but he was obviously very fond of her, even though on one occasion she ruined his efforts to collect by setting going a musical box which could only play 'The Bluebells of Scotland' and could not be stopped. Among her songs was 'The Cripple of Cornwall' which she learned as a girl from her great-grandmother Sibariah. The photographs that Cecil took are interesting in giving faces and circumstances to people we would otherwise know only as names. They are also invaluable in terms of the care that Sharp took to place his singers in context, often by providing an indication of their occupation or identity through their clothing, the tools and implements they were carrying and the setting.

## 9 CONCLUSION

Following his fieldwork in England, Cecil Sharp travelled to the Appalachians to try to discover the antecedents of the folk songs he was collecting. His theory was that within these isolated communities lived the descendants of English settlers and that their isolation meant that their folk song culture was likely to still contain early material. Could it be that he might have discovered similar material if he had enquired more deeply into the folk song culture of gypsies around him in England, people isolated by life-style rather than geography? Chris Bearman's research work (2000, 2001) has demonstrated that a range of socio-economic groups are represented amongst Sharp's Somerset singers from landowners to labourers. Using census returns, par-

ish records, obituaries etc., it is possible to identify where they resided and to create some understanding of the relationships between them. Behind this we come to a more shadowy group who define themselves as gypsies, people on the move and in the margins. The contribution of gypsy singers to English folk song collections is not fully understood and research and publication continues to investigate them as a dynamic factor in folk song transmission and longevity (Richards 1987, Shephard no date, Yates 2006, Burgess 2006 et al). It was Ewan McColl and Peggy Seeger (1977:15) who suggested 'that the travelling people have become the real custodians of English and Scots traditional song'. Work continues to explore this idea to endeavour to understand the gypsy traveller community's contribution to English Folk Song heritage.

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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