

Little Powder Monkey Jim Revisited

An insight into a traditional Tristan da Cunha Folk Song from Peter Millington

Peter Munch collected some 45 songs and 25 dance tunes from the islanders during the Norwegian expedition to Tristan da Cunha in 1937/38. It seems that this may not have been part of his original plan. However, half way through his sociological research he recognised how central singing and dancing was to the culture of the island, and so he started collecting the songs and tunes. There was no sound recording equipment available, so he had to transcribe tunes and words by hand onto paper, although some islanders wrote out material for him, most notably Alice Swain (later Glass), whose skills in music, English and handwriting left him impressed.

This material languished until 1961, when he published an account with several songs, entitled "*Traditional Songs of Tristan da Cunha*" in the July-Sept issue of the *Journal of American Folklore*, coinciding with the eruption of the volcano. When Munch became reacquainted with the islanders during their exile in England and the subsequent resettlement, he re-collected some of the songs, and gathered further material. He was also able to call on recordings of the islanders at Calshot made by Maud Karpeles and Peter Kennedy of the English Folk Dance and Song Society, and additional material recorded by Roland Svensson. The outcome was a book: "*The Song Tradition of Tristan da Cunha*" published in 1970.

Note Munch's use of the word "tradition". We might call some of the songs folk songs, deriving from oral tradition, but others were popular songs with decidedly commercial origins. Some fell in a grey area in between. Munch deliberately and very wisely sidestepped the debate over which songs were "folk" and which "popular". Together they formed the musical tradition of Tristan da Cunha.

Munch was particularly interested in one song; "*Little Powder Monkey Jim*". This tells a poignant tale about a young sailor who sang cheerfully as he carried gunpowder from the magazine to the gun crews during Nelson's Battle of the Nile, but who was felled by a bullet at the moment of victory. This was sung by Fred Swain, who regarded it as *his* song. Munch reproduced this in both his article and his book, and in 1975 the song was the subject of another article in the *Journal of American Folklore* entitled "*Whatever became of Little Powder Monkey Jim?*" This looked at how the song had fared over time.

According to Munch, the evacuation of the entire population during the volcano years and exposure to modern day life effectively killed off traditional music on Tristan da Cunha. After returning in 1963, the old songs and dances were sometimes brought out for visitors, especially the Pillow Dance, but otherwise they largely remained unsung and undanced. This was particularly the case for "*Little Powder Monkey Jim*". Munch tells that Fred Swain was the target of much teasing over his rendition of the song. The reason why is unclear, but the result was that Fred dropped it from his repertoire, and it was not picked up by anyone else. Through a combination of lack of use and lapses of memory, the song had therefore changed significantly when Roland Svensson re-collected it in 1970 – more so than Fred's other songs.



*Fred and Mary Swain above and their daughter Alice
(whose obituary we report on Page 11) right, pictured by Peter Munch in 1938*

At this point, I should say that it is unusual for folklorists to collect from the same informant at an interval of decades, and very few "before and after" studies have been published. Munch's article on "*Little Powder Monkey Jim*" was therefore something of a pioneer. The declared purpose of Munch's article was to show how the lack of use and consequent lapses of memory affect oral transmission during one generation. This provides a useful insight into the accuracy of material gathered from elderly informants, as Fred Swain was 75 in 1970 when he was recorded by Roland Svensson.

The song had changed in two ways. Firstly, Fred had swapped round parts of the tune. The music for the verses was originally in two sections (A and B), with the chorus in a slightly different tempo. In the 1970 recording, Fred inserted the chorus after each half verse, and dropped the second halves of verses 1 and 2. However, he substituted part of the B tune at the beginning of the choruses.

Secondly, some of the words had changed, usually to something that sounded similar, but sometimes losing meaning – a phenomenon Munch calls "phonetic memory". For instance "Our foeman's flagship '*Orient*'" in 1938 has become "the foreman flaychip hardient" in 1970. Fred may have subconsciously changed unusual words such as "foeman" into the more familiar "foreman". Other apparent changes may be due to lapses of memory, but also possibly reflect the difficulty of transcribing Tristan dialect when English is not your first language.

Little Powder-Monkey Jim

Fred Swain, 1938 (Tristan da Cunha)

A
yarn I've got to spin, it's how I heard my old Dad tell of a
gal-lant lit-tle he-ro who on board the Vic-t'ry fell. He was
brim-men full of cour-age, he was just the sort of lad to
make the sort of sai-lor that our Na-vy al-ways had. Now
Lit-tle Pow-der-Mon-key Jim was the pet of all the crew, with his
flax-en hair so cur-ly and his pret-ty eyes so blue. The
boat-swain al-ways said that's how, that what got o-ver him, the
cho-rus of a sai-lor's song was sung by Lit-tle Jim:
Soon we'll be in Lon-don town, Sing, ma lad-die, oh! to
see the King in his gol-den crown. Sing, ma lad-die, oh!
Hea' ho, on we go! Sing ma lad-die, oh!
Who's a- feared to me to foe! Sing, ma lad-die, oh! Oh!

First verse and chorus words above, other verses each followed by the chorus :

2. In ninety-eight we chased the foe right into Bony Bay,
And we fought away like *n*****s* all the night till break of day.
Our foeman's flagship *Orient* was blown away sky-high,
The Admiral and all his crew, and serve them right, said I.
Now Little Jim was in the thick of all the fire and smoke
And seemed to think that fighting hard was nothing but a joke,
For he handed up the powder from the magazine below
And all the while was singing as if his pluck to show:

3. Now Little Jim was book' for us-the fight was just on won,
And the musket bullet picked him off before the song was sung.
They carried him to a cockpit, and a-smiling he did lie,
The sailors, well, there went a man, somehow they pipe his eye.
"Ma lad", says Jim, "don't fret for me, but if the shore she see,
Give a kiss to dear old Mother, and say it come from me."
For it never was a braver heart could serve our gracious King
Than Little Powder-Monkey who so gaily used to sing:

Editor's Note: We have decided not to publish the word disguised by asterisks in verse 2 which was in the original 1881 song and sung by Fred. Today it is likely to cause offence, although in this case it is clearly a positive acknowledgement of the courage (and tenacity) of black warriors. If sung now, perhaps 'fought away like lions' might be appropriate?

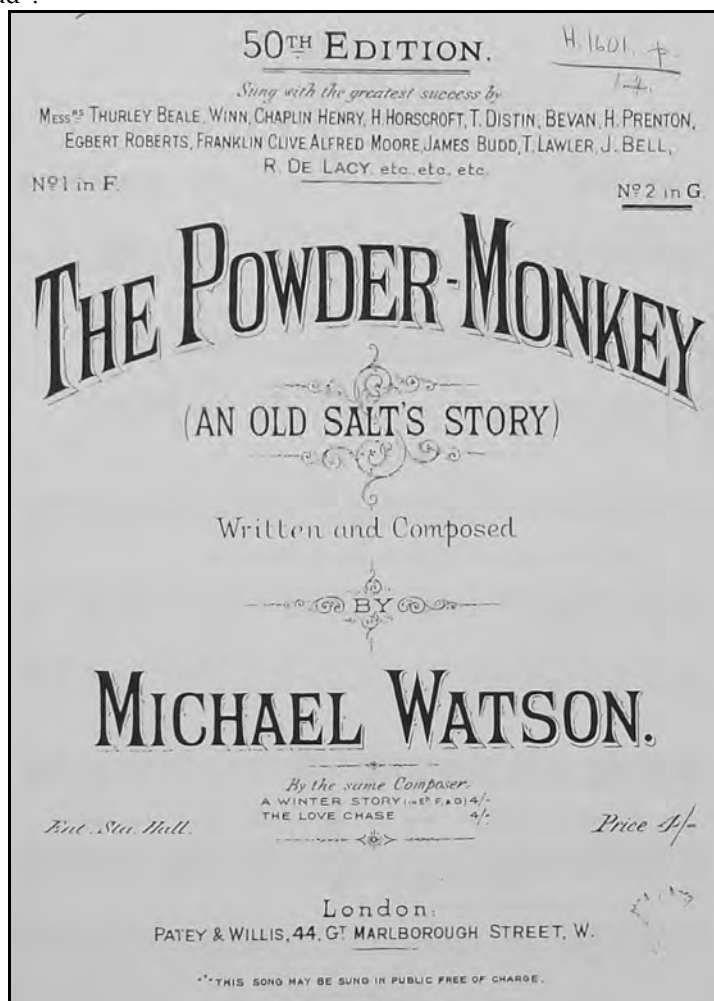
Little Powder Monkey Jim Revisited continued

Munch was unable to trace the history and origin of this song, although he said it was “evidently a British Navy song” and a sea shanty in form. I can reveal here that in fact the words and music were written by the English ballad composer W. Michael Watson under the original title “*The Powder-Monkey (An Old Salt’s Story)*”. It was a very successful song. Mr. Willis of his publishers Patey & Willis, speaking to the ‘*Pall Mall Gazette*’ the day after Watson died in 1889, said, “His first great success was scored in 1881 with ‘*The Powder Monkey*’, and since that time we have sold nearly 60,000 of the ballad”.

The British Library has a copy of the 50th edition of the sheet music, the cover of which lists numerous professional artistes who had performed the song. When Patey & Willis sold their copyrights at auction in 1896, “*The Powder-Monkey*” was sold for the considerable sum of £380 to Edwin Ashdown Ltd., who went on to print further editions. Additionally, the words were printed in song sheets in the USA and appeared in popular song books at least until the Great War. The British Library Sound Archive holds three gramophone recordings of the song, one of which is dated 1930. An unfortunate lyric in the second verse means that it is unlikely that it would be sung in public nowadays without alteration.

Now we know the ultimate origin of the song, we can repeat Munch’s comparison backwards, so to speak. The tunes are recognisably similar – both are in the key of G – but the 1938 Tristan version is written with a lilt, whereas Watson’s original has even quavers, except in the chorus. The original melody was arranged for piano accompaniment and uses interesting chord sequences that do not transfer well to unaccompanied singing. The Tristan version has been simplified, effectively ironing out musical phrases that require accidentals and the more sophisticated chord changes of the original. The result is arguably better to a folk singer’s ears.

By contrast, the words have pretty much remained intact, but for a few trivial exceptions. The most noticeable difference is that the original lyrics are written in an affected style with lots of apostrophised words – eg “He was brimmin’ full o’ courage, an’ was just the sort o’ lad.” In another change, “Bowky Bay” (i.e. Aboukir Bay, Egypt) has become “Bony Bay” on Tristan. “Bony” or “Boney” was of course a common nickname for Napoleon Bonaparte, Nelson’s opponent at the Battle of the Nile, and it is possible that this change had occurred before the song reached Tristan.



Cover of the 50th edition of *The Powder-Monkey* sheet music which then sold for 4 shillings



***Fred and Mary Swain in their Tristan home in 1965
The unusual door behind was salvaged from the 1878 wreck
of the US bark ‘Mabel Clark’***

Photos reproduced by kind permission of Cathrine (Trine) Munch Snyder

Either way, Fred’s song became part of the Tristan da Cunha song tradition. And Tristan is not the only place where this has happened. Versions of “*The Powder-Monkey*” have been collected from traditional singers in England and in Nova Scotia, Canada. Fred was therefore in good company.

Association member Peter Millington is a Senior Honorary Research Fellow at the University of Sheffield, and has had a lifelong interest in traditional customs and folklore. He became interested in the traditions of Tristan da Cunha after finding by chance a photo on the web of the shenanigans on Old Year’s Night. He runs the Master Mummers website: www.mastermummers.org
Music reproduced by kind permission of the American Folklore Society.