

English Folk Songs from the Southern Appalachians

Collected by Olive Dame Campbell and Cecil J. Sharp.

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Somebody once asked William Sharp (Fiona Macleod), "How many poets are there now living in the British Isles?" The answer came swift and sure, "Between three and four thousand." The questioner gasped in amazement, "Three or four thousand people upon whom the divine afflatus has even once descended?" "Yes," replied the Celtic poet with a smile, "for that is the population of the Hebrides, where every islander is a poet."

That is the kind of unexpected answer the collectors of this book of folk songs would give us if we were to ask them to name the musical center of America. Disregarding the great millionaire cities, New York with all its music schools and concerts, Boston with its academies and orchestra, Chicago with its opera, Mrs. Campbell and Mr. Sharp are clearly convinced that the musical capital of the United States is somewhere in the southern Appalachians, and they offer this book of over one hundred songs and ballads collected from the folk of that region as abundant evidence that they are right.

In his introductory pages Mr. Sharp tells some strange stories about this inaccessible land and its unknown people. There are, he says, between three and four million of these mountain folk scattered through a territory as large as France and possessing few roads most of them little better than mountain tracks. Civilization as we know it has hardly touched these people. Time has forgotten them. Very few can read or write but they are good talkers speaking an old-fashioned English without an American accent, and possessing, as Mr. Sharp well says, "that elemental wisdom, abundant knowledge and intuitive understanding which only those who live in constant touch with nature and face to face with reality seem to be able to acquire."

Economically these mountaineers are independent, each family extracting from its holding just what is needed to support life and no more. They have very little money, barter being the customary form of exchange. "They are immune," says Mr. Sharp, "from that continuous grinding mental pres-

sure due to the attempt to 'make a living' from which nearly all of us in the modern world suffer. Here no one is 'on the make.' Commercial competition and social rivalries are unknown." And all this exists in the fourth year of the great war, and within a hundred miles of the White House in Washington !

As to the beauty and interest of the songs and ballads here published for the first time there can be no two opinions. To quote Mr. Sharp again, and no one speaks with greater authority on this subject than he: "It is my sober belief that if a young composer were to master the contents of this book, study and assimilate each tune with its variants, he would acquire just the education that he needs, and one far better suited to his requirements than he would obtain from the ordinary conservatoire or college of music." That Mr. Sharp, who has done so much for the preservation of the folk songs and folk dances of England, should now be carrying on his life's work in this country, is a fact of first importance which future generations living in a kinder age than this will not fail to appreciate at its true value. The time will come, if there's a God in heaven, when our children will turn from the shameful history of these times to read with gratitude and delight of the saving of these beautiful songs, these faint, sweet echoes of old, forgotten, far-off things. And in those happier days our children will hear around them in the streets and parks and fields, as well as in the concert halls and in their homes the rich, new harmonies that will flow from these Appalachian wells of music undefiled.

WALTER G. FULLER.