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# Mormon Folk Song and the Fife Collection

THOMAS E. CHENEY

A collector of folk song must first of all know what he is looking for. He must have some conception of what a folk song is.

A universally accepted generalization is that folk song must be the property of the folk. But to determine who are the folk and what constitutes possession is a problem which has led to disagreement among scholars. Is the term *folk* all inclusive? Is any member of society one of the folk, or does one cease to be of the folk when he attains the polish of education? Are the folk to be defined as the unlettered group? And are folk songs, as some people think, only those songs which are the product of nasal singers who adopt some spurious, pseudo-colloquial, sub-standard language? There are people who believe one must be either over eighty, illiterate, or a child of the hill country to be called a member of the folk. George Lyman Kittredge said: "*Folk* is a large word. It suggests a whole nation, or at all events a huge concourse of people."<sup>1</sup>

The folk, I think, includes all the people, without regard to sophistication or illiteracy, and, therefore, folk song is the property of the group, not that of one individual. The song must strike the universal chord of the great concourse of people. Early scholars—Francis Barton Gummere, Francis James Child, George Lyman Kittredge, Cecil Sharp, Reed Smith, Robert Gordon and others—maintain that the term "folk song" cannot be accurately used in identifying a song unless the song has had a period of traditional, oral transmission.

A conflated definition of folk song to which most authorities would subscribe would contain as essentials the follow-

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<sup>1</sup>Helen Child Sargent and George Lyman Kittredge, *English and Scottish Popular Ballads* (Houghton Mifflin, Boston), 1932, p. XIX.

ing qualifications: that the song have lost its identity as a consciously composed piece; that it have undergone verbal changes during oral transmission; and that it have been sung for an appreciable period of time, let us say two generations.<sup>2</sup>

There are many songs in Mormon tradition which can hardly be placed in this mold. For example, a temple is being built in St. George. A celebration is being held to memorialize completion of a certain part, and to stir the people to a devotion which will bring donated labor and funds to complete the structure, a man known to be "original" is asked to compose a song. He is not a literary or musical artist, rather a member of the folk who has already been identified as one who can put in words the feelings and thoughts of the unified people. He writes a song for the occasion which reflects so perfectly the group feeling and interest that it soon becomes a treasured memory to be sung long after completion of the temple. The song has not "undergone verbal changes during oral transmission." It has had little if any oral transmission.

Greenway, quoted above, says further:

. . . the requirements of transmissional changes is valid only as a proof that the folk have taken possession of the song; it should not be considered as a criterion in itself. . . . It must be a definition of greater flexibility than traditional interpretation of "folk," yet rigid enough to distinguish folk song from material on the lowest level of conscious art, like popular song. It must be built on the solid base that folk songs are songs of the folk; its qualifications should be seen as nothing more than tests by which full folk possession can be determined.<sup>3</sup>

Such songs as that referred to above are property of the folk, though possession is not determined by oral transmission. Evidence of folk possession is obvious. First, the song is created by a folk artist who writes words (which often apply as a "parody" to a well known tune). The folk like the song; they immediately accept it, not as an expression of the author but as their own expression. The author is so right with the homogenic, unified group that his expression is kin to what

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<sup>2</sup>John Greenway, *American Folksongs of Protest* (University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia), 1953, p. 5.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 7-8.

scholars have determined "communal authorship." They feel that the song is not what Charley says, it is what they themselves say.

To determine to what extent a song becomes the possession of the folk is the folklorist's problem. This can be no exact science. The white society of the south may decide that a person with one thirty-second part negro blood is a negro, but no reliable folklorist is foolish enough to deal with folk songs in terms of fractions. *Possession of the folk* being the key phrase in determining what is folk song, the scholar uses every means of finding the folk history of the song.

Many people have collected songs from the Mormon society. Among them are John Lomax, Austin Fife, Levitt J. Davidson, Lester Hubbard, and Olive Burt. Of these, Austin Fife's work has been the most complete. He plowed new ground. Unlike Lomax, Fife set out with a grant from the Utah Humanities Research Foundation to collect Mormon folklore exclusive of folklore of other areas. His work has great merit in that it is comprehensive enough to reveal ethnological traits of the society from which it came. His own comment regarding the extent of Mormon folksong is:

So abundant are the songs that the Mormon folk have composed and sung at all the critical moments in their history that, were every other document destroyed, it would still be possible, from folk songs alone, to reconstruct in some detail the story of their theology, their migrations, their conflict with the Gentiles, and the founding and development of most of their settlements from New York to San Bernardino.<sup>4</sup>

Certainly in the past Mormons did compose songs and sing about everything as Dr. Fife says. Yet to say that Mormon history could be reconstructed in some detail from folk songs alone is a romantic conception. Certainly the Fife collection, as it comes from the Library of Congress, does not show the possibility.

The collection is not the finished product I had been led to believe, but is absurdly disorganized. Long ago ditto copies

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<sup>4</sup>Austin and Alta Fife, *Saints of Sage and Saddle* (Indiana University Press, Bloomington), 1956, p. 316.

of titles in the Fife collection were circulated showing well organized materials under specific, logical headings as follows:

- A. Prose Accounts of Mormon Folk Song and Folk Singing.
- B. Germanic Folk Song Collected in Utah.
- C. Songs of Specific Mormon Regional Setting and Inspiration.
- D. Prose Accounts of Mormon Folklore.

These types and more are all in the collection sent out on tapes by the Library of Congress but they are a mulligan stew. To determine exactly wherein the fault lies is difficult, but I suspect it is largely the careless work of the Library of Congress.

The tapes sold to Brigham Young University reveal many faults, the most flagrant of which are as follows: Names of songs are rarely announced, though talk of less importance is inserted, and no indexing is provided with the tapes. The singer's name is not regularly announced; yet at times, often with a song and singer of little importance, name, home town, age, and how the singer came by the song are given.

As an example of the disorganization of this copy, the following is recorded on reel 9, side 2:

- Blue Mountain ..... Sung, it appears, by Karl Gifford  
(This is sung by the same singer on side 1 and repeated here. A discussion of the Blue Mountain legend is on reel 11.)
- Clementine ..... Sung by boys' quartette
- Don't Fence Me In ..... Sung by boys' quartette
- The Utah Trail ..... Sung by boys' quartette
- Navaho Indian Song ..... Sung by an Indian
- Jesus Loves Me ..... Sung by Indian Children  
(The Indian children sing this song again on reel 12 in English and then in Navaho language.)
- Sioux City Sue ..... Sung by boys' quartette
- That Silver Haired Daddy of Mine .... Sung by boys' quartette  
(This same quartette sings "In the Garden" and "The Missouri Waltz" on reel 12.)
- Haunted Falls ..... *Read* by Austin Fife  
(This song is sung on reel 14 with the same words.)
- Give My Love to Nell ..... *Read* by Austin Fife

The collection is not all folk song, as it is called. About one-eighth is folk tale—good folk tale—but not song: Nephite stories (reels 6, 8, 18), folk poems (reels 6, 7, 11), J. Golden

Kimball stories (reel 7), interview on the Kirkam Band (reel 8), Danish immigrant prayer (reel 8). These and other comparable folk tales should be in a separate collection of folklore.

About another one-eighth of the tapes is consumed by Dr. Fife's reading names of songs in various collections and in quoting songs. This practice is of questionable value. Undoubtedly he has copies of the songs available in his collection. To read for conveying the words to the listener (Dr. Fife certainly did not read them for the oral expression) is wasteful of tape when they can so easily be duplicated in print.

Another fault which could so easily be corrected on these tapes is false starts and repetitions of songs. I know Dr. Fife's problems in recording from the oral tradition of the folk. The microphone-shy singer gets frightened, forgets, tangles words, and often calls to the collector, "Stop it, I get tied up on these old songs." We have a good deal of this bumbling on these tapes which could be removed without loss.

Some songs are repeated in their lengthy entirety for such reasons as to supply a verse missed in the first singing or for no apparent reason. Some examples of this repetition are "The Double Tragedy" (reel 11), "Belle Brandon" (reel 12), "Come, Come, Ye Saints" (reel 12). Another undesirable error is repetition of the same song, sung without variation as to music or words by different singers. This phenomenon occurs frequently in the Fife collection. "The Mistletoe Bough" (reels 2, 11), "Belle Brandon" (reel 12, 13), are examples.

Many songs included are not folk songs. Even a loose interpretation of the term *folk song* would not permit use of some songs in this collection.

Austin Fife and his wife, Alta, obviously collected these songs from oral circulation. Their use of many songs which are not true folk songs is not a serious breach. But Dr. Fife or the Library of Congress should have at least checked and edited out of the collection all songs which can positively be identified as not folk.

The following songs found in the collection cannot be called folk songs: "Don't Fence Me In," "The Utah Trail," "Sioux City Sue," "In the Garden," "Missouri Waltz," "I'll Take You

Home Again, Kathleen," "The Big Rock Candy Mountains," "Oh, Ye Mountains High," and "Come, Come, Ye Saints." Many others can be questioned. Folk song characteristics may be discerned in these songs as they may be discerned in the compositions of Stephen Foster, but that fact does not make them folk song. They are widely circulated, published songs. With the exception of the two hymns named last, they have not, in the form Dr. Fife published them, varied from the published version either in words or music. The folk have not expanded nor shrunk them, improved nor corrupted either words or music. They are not the property of the folk in origin, nor have they been confiscated by the folk to become their own tradition. The hymns, "Oh, Ye Mountains High" and "Come, Come, Ye Saints" may have had origin in folk tradition and may have had some traditional inheritance, but when Dr. Fife recorded them they had long since been part of the Mormon hymnology to be found in all Mormon hymn books. They have established themselves in the literary and musical tradition—have been promoted, as it were, out of folk tradition.

The final tape in the Fife collection contains all songs in Spanish, sung, it appears, by Mexican children. At any rate, the children say they learned the songs in Mexico. The Spanish songs are not translated or interpreted, and no explanation is given to relate the songs to any folk song pattern or group. One obvious thing is that they are not in the Mormon tradition.

Another group not in Mormon tradition are Indian songs in Indian language. The fact that some of the Indians who sing them are Mormon converts hardly makes the songs a part of the Mormon heritage.

Another small part of the collection came from girls at Occidental College who sang songs they "learned in camp," or from their associates, or in a chorus of which they were members. Most of these songs show little relation to traditional folk song.

One singer, Effie Cormack, furnished the Fifes with many significant folk songs. Mrs. Cormack, a resident of California and a Mormon convert, came from the South. The songs she has in her memory all came out of her own South, and, as one would expect, many of them reflect the traditions of that area

with its racial, geographical, and local heritage. Mrs. Cormack's songs have not been sung in Mormon society enough to become Mormon thought or expression. To consider them Mormon folk song would be as ridiculous as calling "Yankee Doodle" a Russian song because it was sung by a former American who became a Communist.

If the Fife tapes were properly edited, the area called Mormon folk song could be put on half the tape it now covers. This muddled work on these tapes reflects carelessness in the work of the Library of Congress and, whether it should or not, casts doubt on the work of Austin and Alta Fife. More than that, it sheds a cloudy light upon folklore and folklorists.

Even so, the Fife collection is extremely valuable. It contains masses of true Mormon folk song, bright tones in folk music, and literary touches in lyrics.