

Awake Awake

Shirley Collins, *All in the Downs: reflections on life, landscape and song* (Strange Attractor, 2018)

Steve Roud, *Folk Song in England* (Faber, 2017)

REY CONQUER

In 1895, Sister Mary Neal left the West London Wesleyan Mission, which she had joined in revolt against the “pageant of snobbery” of her bourgeois upbringing, to set up a social club for young working women in order that they might experience “the beautiful things in life”. With Emmeline Pethwick she had already run a very successful girls’ club at the Mission; now, outside of its constraints, the two women could concentrate on the new club, which they named *Espérance*, and for which they had little money but a firm sense of purpose. Their chief concern was the promotion of the “natural joys” inhibited by urban life and industrialisation, which they brought to the club’s members through visits to the countryside as well as drama and dance. In 1905, looking for music for the club Christmas party, Neal was introduced to Cecil Sharp, whose folk song collecting activities were increasingly gaining publicity; within a few months, folk song, and then folk dance—specifically, morris dance—had become central to their activities, and the *Espérance* Club had begun to travel around the country performing and teaching, creating what would become a quite remarkable social movement. For a few years Neal and Sharp were a formidable team, her energy and skill as a publicist the motor for his ideas on folk dance and music, which he saw as a means to combat popular culture and reawaken the declining sense of Englishness among the lower classes. But he began to fear that her interest in dance as a force for social good was lowering the standard of the dances themselves; moreover, that she was claiming that she, not he, had been the architect of the “revival”, and that she was “posing as an expert”. Now, Neal’s supporters were “rank philistines”, the dancing “hoydenish” and Neal herself “quite incurably inaccurate”. By 1914 she had become a marginal figure.

Neal was a suffragette and a socialist; she thought that popular music from America was inappropriate for dance because of its associations with black culture, and that working class women could not be trusted to make their own entertainment; she also believed that working class women were better morris dancers because they were more in touch with the “spirit of the dance”. Much later she began to believe that the rift with Sharp had been caused by the fact that she had allowed women to take part in a dance that was in fact a “purely masculine ceremonial”, thus breaking a “law of cosmic ritual”. She was admired by the “red vicar” Conrad Noel on the one hand and the

“diehard Tory” and later McCarthyite Waldron Smithers on the other. At a fancy dress party around 1912, Ralph Vaughan Williams went as Neal, his costume including a placard that read “Power before Accuracy”.

Shirley Collins, in her lively and forthright memoir *All In The Downs* (2018), includes Neal as one of three women underappreciated in the history of folk song and dance, suggesting that her desire to improve the lives of working class women through morris dance, to “restore to the people... their inheritance of the earth”, should be a cause for admiration. Steve Roud anticipates this sort of claim in his long, immensely detailed if sometimes frustrating “social history of folk song through the ages”, *Folk Song in England* (2017), where he complains of Neal’s undeserved recuperation by revisionist historians of English folk music. Roud would have us see her not as a kind of underdog but rather as someone who exaggerated their own importance in the folk revival and who had, unforgiveably, railed against “the blighting touch of the pedant and expert”; the reality of her life and opinions was “messier”, he says, than contemporary scholars are willing to acknowledge. For both, questions that the Sharp-Neal antagonism brought into focus are central to their respective defences of folk song: who can make it? What does, and can, it do? Power, or accuracy?

Collins has no time for Sharp’s genteel, pedantic taming, but she is nonetheless committed to accuracy, which manifests itself in, for instance, an insistent fidelity to her sources. She sees her role as that of a conduit for the musical traditions of past generations, towards whom she feels a great responsibility (in the many song texts included in the book, she names, as she would in performance, the singer from whom the songs were collected). This results in a characteristic mode of performance, described by her friend and champion Stewart Lee as “egoless”, as he writes in the introduction to *All in the Downs*, and in the liner notes to her most recent album; “Collins”, he suggests, “doesn’t so much inhabit a song as surrender to it”. This mode, in its emotional detachment and lack of overt interpretation, derives its power from an inerrant clarity and accuracy of delivery, and is intended to allow the songs, and what she calls, echoing Neal, the “spirit” of the songs, to come forward unscathed and unadorned.

Collins has only recently reclaimed her rightful place in the English folk world. She was central to the second “folk revival” of the 50s-70s: she wrote to the BBC at 15, asserting that she wanted to become a folk singer, and was visited by the singer and collector Bob Copper off the back of this; she assisted Alan Lomax in collecting songs in the American South, having been introduced to him by Ewan MacColl (they were all three, with Peggy Seeger, in a short-lived skiffle band together); her albums, in particular *Folk Roots New Routes* (1964), a collaboration with the guitarist Davy Graham, and *Anthems in Eden* (1969), a collaboration with her sister Dolly and the Early Music Consort of London, definitively changed the direction of British folk. Various stories circulate from that time which seem indicative both of the mores of the scene and her role in it, and many of them are here in the

book: she was once threatened with a knife for crossing out the word “folk” on a poster in lipstick, annoyed that nothing but skiffle had been played; she was once flirted at by Jimi Hendrix; she was once told by Ewan MacColl, of whom her recollections, in this book and *elsewhere*, are entertainingly hostile, that folk singers did not wear nail varnish. She paints a vivid picture of the excitement and confusion and rivalries of this world, as well as the disturbingly patronising attitude many of its protagonists adopted towards her, making of her a kind of working class ingénue, her clear and distinctive voice contributing to some idea of childlike innocence.

After twenty-five years of intensive activity, gigging up and down the country and falling in and out with almost everyone, she all but retired from the scene: she lost her voice following a humiliating betrayal by her then husband which played out during rehearsals for an adaption of *Lark Rise to Candleford* at the National Theatre, one of the more poignant battles she retells in the memoir; she was subsequently unable to sing for nearly forty years. From then until early this century her life was for the most part quiet and anonymous: she ran an Oxfam shop, worked briefly as a “folk animateur” and then at the local job centre (having been threatened with sanctions if she did not accept), and dedicated time to exploring the countryside of Sussex, where she had grown up and to which she developed a renewed and deep attachment. The last three years, however, have resulted in a remarkable reassertion of the force and talent that she had brought to the scene sixty years ago: she upended the narrative of a documentary being made about her (released last year as *The Ballad of Shirley Collins*) by deciding to make a new album; this was *Lodestar*, recorded in her front room, which came out in 2016 and was widely praised. And now there is *All in the Downs*, which tells the story of her life and career and the making of both film and album in sometimes endearing, sometimes unsparing detail, interwoven with biographies of singers and collectors and discussions of class, region, authenticity, performance. (She leaves out her experiences song-collecting in the Deep South; these are the subject of her previous book, *America Over the Water* (2004) which she wrote after seeing that Lomax had downplayed her involvement in his own account of the trip.)

Steve Roud, as unmissable a figure in folk music studies as Collins is in performance, has also had a prolific few years. Primarily known for his enormous *Roud Index*, a catalogue of thousands of English-language folk songs and broadside ballads which he started compiling in the 1970s, he has published several books on folklore, and recently edited, with Julia Bishop, *The New Penguin Book of English Folk Songs* (2012). In *Folk Song in England*, which provides a valuable summary of a great deal of research into folk and other popular music, he has set out to bring some accuracy to folk song historiography. Implicitly aligning himself with Neal’s “pedants and experts”, he takes issue with what he calls “folk song for use”, namely, the idea that folk song, because of certain essential characteristics, might be particularly suitable for furthering certain social or political projects. He assures any

reader who has come to the book hoping for some sort of manifesto that it “will not make any grand claims for folk song”: folk song will not be claimed to be “*better* than classical music, because it is *of the people*”, nor to “make for better people” or provide an “antidote for modern ills brought about by alienation... or the fact that nobody talks to their neighbours any more.” “Most importantly,” –the section concludes– “being, or pretending to be, working class is not inherently better than being middle class or bourgeois.”

The book is divided into three parts: the first is a history of folk song collecting and scholarship; the second a history of folk song in the context of other contemporary popular music genres and their venues—pleasure gardens, parlours, music halls, radio; the third, “folk song in its natural habitats”, is a set of diverse chapters looking at, for instance, religious singing, bawdy and erotic songs, songs in dialect, the “singing habits” of sailors and soldiers. There are two chapters specifically on the tunes written by his previous collaborator Julia Bishop. An important chapter on “the mechanics of tradition” is left until last and could well have been placed closer to the beginning; and I suspect there are readers who will be put off by the fact that it is not until page 216 that the focus switches to folk song proper. One comes away, in fact, with the impression that there is not really such a thing as folk song proper, certainly not the romanticised notions either of merry peasants and maypoles or politically radical peasants and unbounded erotic energy; nevertheless Roud comes to its defence against iconoclasts such as Dave Harker (the implicit target of the comment on class above), whose *Fakesong* (1985) made a lively case for the need to subject the concepts “folksong” and “ballad” to “a lengthy period of political re-education”, seeing in them little more than an attempt on the part of the bourgeoisie to “mystify workers’ culture” and prevent international solidarity.

In terms of the popular understanding of folk song, Roud’s most important contribution is the emphasis he places on the process of transmission, an emphasis that is not new (it is the thrust of the influential definition worked out at the 1954 conference of the International Folk Music Council in São Paulo) but still often sidelined in favour of ideas of ancient origins, anonymity, orality. He is admirably forthcoming, if a little repetitively so, about what we do not know about the history of folk song and singing, and admirable, also, in refusing to neglect context, whether social or musical. If anything, the mass of detail on “other musics” does allow the idea of a distinctive folk tradition to disappear from sight at times, and this is probably for the good. But the desire to furnish us with facts as opposed to “making grand claims” often leaves the reader floating around amongst all of the information they are given, desperately looking for an argument or through-line, and what emerges, rather than any positive idea about what folk song is, or was, or has been, is Roud’s disapproval of “facile bourgeoisie-bashing”, which begins in his defences of collectors such as Cecil Sharp in the early chapters and continues in asides that pepper the later sections.

That the mode of telling might prevail over the material is a danger he is aware of, having said in an interview that a “balance” had to be found or else “you finish reading it and you think, I haven’t actually learnt anything other than how chatty Steve Roud is”. The idea of balance, or fairness, is another, related, theme that receives disproportionate attention and distorts his project; there are even points where the pursuit of balance leads him to criticise his own method and assumptions. He describes what he is up to in a particular chapter, for instance, as “feed[ing] our modern obsession with context”, which could be seen as a laudable example of self-historicising, but which comes across as a bit of an own goal. This exaggerated neutrality leads to odd moments of inconsistency: in a section on minstrel shows he concludes that it is very unlikely that current blackface traditions might not be racist in origin; yet the way that he describes the name change of a particular custom (Padstow “Darkie Day”) after it “came under fire from anti-racists” has a strong ‘PC gone mad’ flavour (on the other hand, despite taking pot shots at Marxists, he explains the fact of most folk scholarship coming from the left by noting that “the right wing has never been known for its intellectual capacities”). Moreover, the jovial pub pedant mode, in which certain histories are told through a kind of free indirect discourse, means that he sometimes ventriloquises, and therefore seems to endorse, claims that are simply false: one example is a passage on the tradition of metrical psalters which ends up seeming to state as fact that the biblical Psalms were “written in prose”, are “unsingable”, and that they “have no tunes”, none of which is true per se.

This is a book on song, and not songs, a focus which, perhaps counter-intuitively, also informs Roud and Bishop’s *New Penguin Book of English Folk Songs*, where they included the songs most commonly collected (that is, insofar as we can tell, the most popular) making theirs an explicitly sociological and not aesthetic project. The “old” *Penguin Book of English Folk Songs*—edited by A.L. Lloyd, the midwife of the second revival, and an ageing Vaughan Williams—was made up of songs which had previously only been published in the *Journal of the English Folk Dance and Song Society* and thus accessible only to members of the Society. Roud accuses them of having chosen the ones they thought “best”, ones which were “special and unusual”, but whatever their method, their stated aim was to make available to a wider public material that had previously remained “practically... private”. Roud complains, for example, that the first in this earlier anthology, “All Things are Quite Silent”, had only been collected—encountered “in the wild”—once, making it very rare indeed; but not only has it in the meantime become very solidly part of the tradition, it is singularly beautiful, for Collins “one of the loveliest and most poignant songs ever found in England”. Her own version of the song on *The Sweet Primroses* (1967), where she is accompanied by her sister Dolly on pipe organ, is exemplary, in which Collins’s light, almost breezy, voice belies—and in doing so sharpens—the “quiet and contained grief”, as Lloyd puts it in his own *Folk Song in England* (1967), of the wife of the press-ganged sailor.

Albert Lancaster—“Bert”—Lloyd was a self-taught former sailor and stockman, an expert in folk music not just of England but also Eastern Europe and Latin America, and a collector, anthologist and broadcaster of English folk song at a point when it had become unfashionable if not politically suspect. Moreover, he was a loyal and active member of the Communist Party of Great Britain and saw his journalism and the promotion of folk song, particularly industrial folk song, as an essentially political project. Roud does not give him this sort of introduction in *Folk Song in England*, perhaps believing him to be too well known. More crucially, however, he also omits any explicit discussion of the fact that their books share a title, and that his was published exactly fifty years after Lloyd’s, and for these reasons might well be seen as a pretension to revising or displacing this earlier book, especially given his redoing of Lloyd’s Penguin anthology only five years before. He does, in his brief discussion of Lloyd’s book, suggest somewhat patronisingly that those who “have the temerity to attempt something on similarly broad lines should have some humility (and humanity) in assessing its value, and not be too unkind”, but does not do this justice. For a thoughtful evaluation of Lloyd’s work and its intellectual assumptions, a better person to look to is Vic Gammon, an historian of folk music and folk song collection and important source for much of Roud’s book. Gammon sees Lloyd as “a major socialist intellectual”, the E.P. Thompson or Raymond Williams of folk music, and the yoking of radical history and Sharpian folksong scholarship that Lloyd attempted he describes as a “magnificent failure”.

Another of Lloyd’s most perceptive critics, Georgina Boyes, has commented on the “anti-intellectualism” of his writing, and she joins Gammon and Harker in emphasising its troubling reliance on the ideas and definitional framework of Cecil Sharp and other earlier collectors, ideologically and theoretically incompatible with his attempt at historical analysis. These are criticisms which cannot be disregarded, especially given that this intellectual debt, as Boyes argues, helped pave the way for the conservatism and tedious nationalism of parts of the folk subculture in the 70s, much of which lingers today. It’s worth pointing out, however, that a reader of Lloyd’s *Folk Song in England* (or indeed his articles on what folk song can do for workers and the left), while having to fight through what is certainly bad history and probably bourgeois ideology, at least comes away with a good and important sense of something having been at stake. Roud at one point begins a paragraph, “aesthetic judgements and class warfare aside, . . .”, and in doing so discounts what are perhaps the two most compelling reasons for which people are attracted to Lloyd, and to folk singing in general. Unlike Lloyd’s—with its many examples with both words and music of English songs, as well as snippets of songs from France, Spain, Hungary, Romania—this is not a book that makes you want to sing.

There seems an unfortunate tendency in contemporary histories of folk song and its revivals to downplay or dismiss with a certain condescension or embarrassment the political engagements of its proponents (Michael Brocken’s

The British Folk Revival, 1944-2002 is probably the most objectionable example of this, but it is visible also in rehabilitations of Cecil Sharp). Very few of the central figures of the Edwardian and mid-century revivals were not politically active—even Sharp was a Fabian and a Christian Socialist. Shirley Collins’s memoir makes for interesting reading in this regard. She was brought up by a communist mother and was made to sell the *Daily Worker* as a teenager, and this and the role of politics in the breakdown of her parents’ marriage seems to have put her off for life. On the other hand, she spent most of the 50s and 60s, in the language of the U.S. arrival card, “associating with known communists” (there is a funny scene in *The Ballad of Shirley Collins* where Stewart Lee presents her with her MI5 files), and her interest in folk song is based at least in part on its being the music of the “rural labouring classes”, the “despised and neglected”. This is not some kind of fetishism of the simple peasant, and what she seems to appreciate above all is the complexity of folk song, the various patinas and new meanings it takes on as it is made and remade by various singers and communities, with whom she feels a strong affinity. She is known for insisting that one cannot write a folk song; this is because in doing so the song-writer “denies the essential part played in it by those people who sang and handed those songs on to us”. Such commitments—to those without the leverage of capital—are visible throughout the book, and her career.

Gammon has written that while Lloyd might have been a “reassembler and tinkerer” this was only through his “unashamed love of the material”. Collins’s memoir may be driven by a desire, equal to Roud’s, to settle scores and justify a particular approach to folk song, but it is done with an unrelenting and subtle love: for the “material”, but also for the singers she has met, for certain houses, landscapes, items, instruments, friends, foodstuffs (she breaks off more than one friendship after being scolded for always drinking the creamy “top of the milk”, an attitude for which I have a kind of shocked sympathy; we might similarly applaud her theft of a letter from the Lucy Broadwood archive in order to “save it from the dust and mice”). It is this love that drives her performances, her unwillingness to let anything of herself get in the way of the beauty, mystery and emotional or moral complexity of the songs. Thus, she is anti-“tinkering”, and while she enjoys speculating on the origins of certain songs, the idea that one might attempt to restore a song to some sort of pure, original form (which for certain collectors had gone hand in hand with the excision of sexual innuendo) she sees as a form of cultural violence. She defends the “charmingly muddled” song, “Come All You Little Streamers” against the collector Anne Gilchrist, who had tried to “clear up some of the obscurities” and saw it to be in a “woefully corrupt and incoherent state”; as a singer Collins actively delights in its obscurities: “I welcome them, trusting both the singer and the song.”

Collins once found herself in Venice during carnival, and describes the “extraordinary, transforming experience” of wearing a mask: “I felt safe behind it, gazing out at the world, but invisible to other people.” While she

doesn't make the connection explicit, it is clear that songs function for her in a similar way: the attention is deflected onto the aesthetic object rather than the person carrying it, who tries to minimise the degree to which their own personality, or partiality, intrudes on it. It is not just, however, that this lets the song "through" the unfortunate mediator of the singer undamaged. It is that this style itself is part of the performance of folk song, that is, it constitutes folk song. Early collectors wrote of how singers sang with unmoved faces, often with closed eyes, in part as an aid to memory but also because, while emotional responses outside of the performance contributed to its beauty or sadness, a performance that interpreted or exaggerated these aspects of the song seems to have been considered out of place, even a bit gauche. This is an attitude visible, too, in later commentators such as Angela Carter, who wrote of the traditional singer Harry Cox, "he does not sing with his heart on his sleeve, as a grotesque parody of folksong like Joan Baez does, he sings from the heart", and here and elsewhere Collins makes the distinction between singing *to* people and *at* them.

For Collins, then, a style of singing that does not inject emotional or moral interpretations minimally damages the authentic song. Such concerns were common, and different understandings of "authentic" delivery caused deep tensions between different singers and clubs. (This was a period when, thanks both to these changed ideas of authenticity and better recording technology, there was a trend for people copying the styles of traditional singers, incorporating in this aspects that were not properly part of their style such as accent or, as many of these singers were now old men and women, breathlessness and tremor.) Ewan MacColl and Peggy Seeger set up what became known as the "Critics' Group" in the late 1960s, in which folk singing technique and style were studied and members given feedback on stylistic aspects of their performance. The group met with resistance and distrust for all sorts of reasons, but in part for the fact that their exercises demystified the singing process, and formalised performance styles. While MacColl, with his background in theatre, certainly took the group down a very specific (that is, Stanislavskian) path, what the whole activity implied was that there was no neutral: that the uninterpretative style was itself a style. As Seeger later explained, "This is what we did in the Critics' Group: we turned our singers into actors; because when you're singing, well! essentially you're acting."

The balance between what of a song could become one's own and what should and must remain 'other' is delicate, and while Collins downplays her own involvement she makes a point of noting the singer from whom she learnt the song, its origins, composition if known, and so on. This can of course be seen as an underscoring of its authenticity, and a flag-planting *for* authenticity, but also suggests the way in which songs become understood as bearing the trace of previous singers only after the fact. It is not, in this view, for an individual singer to lay claim to a song, but for those around them to recognise their imprint on it, something which, to return to the example of MacColl, is

particularly visible in the effacement of authorship as almost automatic: many of his songs had begun to be regarded within only a few years of their composition as “traditional”, such as his lullaby “Cannily, cannily”, written initially for the singer Isla Cameron. A more extreme example is the song “The Shoals of Herring” which MacColl composed for the *Radio Ballads* using the experiences, idiom and speaking style of the fisherman Sam Larner; on hearing the song Larner claimed to have known it all his life.

To perform a song “histrionically”, to use the term often applied to MacColl’s own performances, would be to take ownership of it, to make certain claims for the veracity of its content as applied to you, the singer. To someone like Collins this is “crass” and “embarrassing” (even when, as with the bleak songs on Collins’s *Love, Death and the Lady* (1970) recorded during her divorce from the man producing the record, they in fact relate to one’s experiences). This attitude is reflected in, for example, the way that singers will not change the gender of the singing persona to fit their own (which, depending on the song, can be used to bawdy effect, but can also give a poignant sense of simultaneous universality and unbridgeable distance, an effect, in multiple senses, queer). It can also be seen in Collins’s more forgiving attitude towards questions of setting and instrumentation, which, in acting on a tangent to the words and their delivery, are a safer way to manipulate (enhance, undercut) the content of the songs, something that she has been interested in, and often at the forefront of, throughout her career, whether the viols and recorders of *Anthems in Eden* or the electric guitar of *No Roses* (1971). This also creates a kind of melancholic distance, particularly audible in the instrumentation on folk records around 1970, combining implicit and explicit nostalgia (*Anthems in Eden* describes the changes to rural life caused by the first world war) with what can be heard as an ironic recognition of the unreality of authenticity, an acknowledgement that, as Ewan MacColl put it in his autobiography, “in a sense, all folk songs are forgeries”.

A central part of this nostalgia focuses on England and “Englishness”, and we can see these records, with their dirge-like qualities, as a requiem not only for a lost—and for the most part imagined—way of life, but also for the idea of England at all. Despite his title, “Englishness” is a concept that Roud, unlike Lloyd, basically ignores, but it is frequently put under pressure by Collins, where it is addressed in the form of questions: “was there ever a peaceful or innocent England? How could there be with such a dark and violent history as ours?”; “Why should ‘Englishness’ be so important? And what is it?”. As with song texts which seem to have lost a clear plot or direction, she is happy to allow for there to be a degree of inexplicability about attachments to England. She is less ambivalent about the local, and her real love is for Sussex; she loves songs collected in Sussex, regardless of how far they have travelled, and folk customs from Sussex, many of which were recreated only in the last few decades, and she often connects aspects of these to the landscape of the county. Where love of England might be inexplicable, she is convinced of Sussex being essentially lovable, and in an interview with

The Quietus demonstrates the circularity of this sort of affection: “This is the thing with landscape, it’s the same with, you know, when you love somebody: you love them, you love the landscape; other people will love somebody else and love other landscapes and you can’t necessarily justify it”, she begins. “But here” –in the South Downs– “you can; because I mean, especially the Seven Sisters for instance, you know, the great chalk cliffs, and, and the turf is so short and springy here, and it makes such a great difference when you walk, and skylarks up in the air...”. This seemingly insufficient justification through description gets exactly right the degree to which love often cannot be explained outside of a bare naming of features of whatever it is that is loved, whether person, or landscape, or place; the way that the enunciation is itself the justification.

In the sleeve notes to Eliza Carthy’s *Anglicana* (2002), commended by Paul Gilroy in his *After Empire* for its “precious ability to transport English ethnicity into the present”, Carthy describes it as “a record of Englishness as I feel it”, a line that was regularly quoted in reviews and articles at the time of its release. What was often missed out was its continuation, “with people who were around me at the time, no border checkpoints, nobody pushed out, just what it is.” (This principle was later explored in the cross-cultural folk project “The Imagined Village” –after Boyes’s book of the same name– in which Carthy participated.) Of course, as is made somewhat more explicit in albums like PJ Harvey’s *Let England Shake* (2011), “what [Englishness] is” *is* in fact border checkpoints and so on: as Angela Carter has written elsewhere, “OK, so there’ll always be an England; but what are the English doing to stop it?” Carthy’s point seems to be that certain kinds of attachment might best be got at –both expressed and held to account– through a kind of restatement, that critique might in this case only be possible through a conscious rechanneling or re-enunciation of the same. This idea is quite powerfully audible in *Lodestar*. During the Q&A with the directors of *The Ballad of Shirley Collins* at the Rio cinema in Dalston, the directors discussed with Stewart Lee Collins’s “Cruel Lincoln”, which, notably, features incidental birdsong from outside the makeshift studio of her front room, making of this very gory ballad –“There was blood in the kitchen, there was blood in the hall / There was blood in the parlour where the lady did fall” –an eerie pastoral. “You never get a sense from her delivery who is right and wrong”, one director said, which struck me and a friend as false: it seemed, from the delivery and the setting and the distance between them, fairly clear that everyone’s sympathies lay with the mason who murders the lord’s wife as revenge for withheld pay.

What neither Roud nor Collins get quite right is that you can’t get away with not picking a side. Folk songs are not ideologically neutral, because they only exist in the singing; and they are sung by all sorts of people, some of them socialists and internationalists, some of them invested in a racially inflected “Albion”. If we set any store by the idea of tradition then we must take seriously our role, not as preservers or observers of folk music, but

entangled in its shaping, deciding, as naively and tendentiously as previous singers and audiences, what we pass on and what we jettison. Carter ends her essay, “Now is the time for singing”, on the following optimistic note: “folk song has now been emancipated from its function of pressure valve of the creative urge of the anonymous masses[. . .]; and we can all appreciate it for what it is and what it can be and what it can mean to us.” Whatever we make of this as history, her conclusion seems about right; and this means that the onus is on us to find out what it can be—to make, in Lloyd’s phrase, “folk-song-with-teeth”. We can see this at work in the contemporary folk singer Sam Lee’s critical reworking of the antisemitic “The Jew’s Garden”, or indeed in Collins’s vatic, uncanny detachment in “Awake awake”, the opening track of *Lodestar*, which Collins describes as a “powerful statement of intent” for the album:

Awake awake sweet England, sweet England now awake
And to your prayers obediently and to your souls partake.
For our Lord, our God is calling all in the sky so clear,
So repent, repent sweet England, for dreadful days draw near.