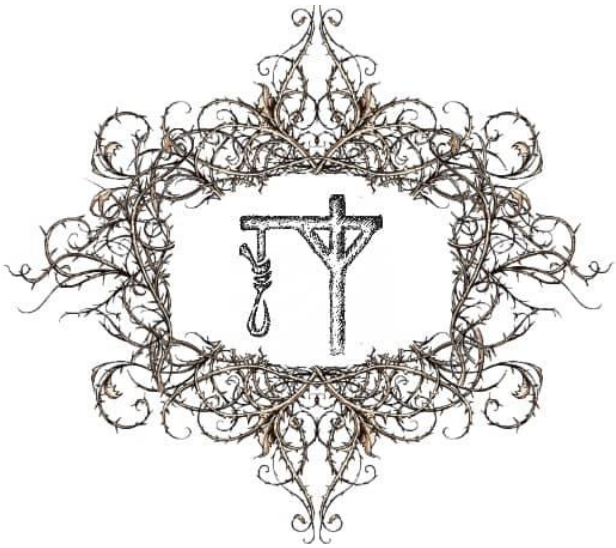
https://www.appalachianhistory.net/2021/08/the-pricketty-bush-and-british-origins.html



‘The Pricketty Bush’ and British origins

Estimated reading time: 5 minutes

Please welcome guest author Derek Piotr. Derek is a performer, folklorist and author based in New England, whose work focuses primarily on the human voice. His work covers genres as diverse as electronic, classical, and folk, and is primarily concerned with tenderness, fragility, beauty and brutality. He has collaborated with artists including Maja Ratkje, Don’t DJ, and Thomas Brinkmann across various disciplines. His work was nominated by the jury for Prix Ars Electronica in 2012, and has featured on UbuWeb and BBC.

Though the pandemic has not exactly abated, international travel restrictions began to lift in mid-2021, and I was presented with a rather remarkable opportunity to visit North Yorkshire in Great Britain for a few months. Given my recent work in the Beech Mountain area of North Carolina documenting “non-singers” (members of the community who had no background in vocal performance but nevertheless remembered old ballads), I thought it would be a good idea to probe Northern England for similar song memories.

I first came to know Steve Gardham through this very blog, after he had left a comment on an article I’d done regarding the singing of Lena Turbyfill’s daughter. I had reached out and discovered Steve’s website The Yorkshire Garland Group, as well as the hundreds (last count: 913) of recordings he had made for The British Library. Steve visited me in York from Hull, concertina in tow, and we spent an afternoon swapping ballads and discussing best practices for my time in England doing fieldwork.

The main goal I have when meeting informants is to find out if they know any Child ballads. “Child ballads” is the colloquial name given to a collection of 305 ballads collected in the 19th century by Francis James Child and originally published in ten volumes between 1882 and 1898 under the title *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads.* Many of these date as far back as the 1600s and are among the oldest popular tunes still in existence.

One fieldwork engagement that had proved fruitful was an expedition into Field Court, a retirement community in Heworth, York. Many of the residents did not recall Child ballads directly, but still remembered some folk-songs, many of which were local tunes (“The Blaydon Races”, “Ilkley Moor Baht At”).

Through Steve, I met Will Noble of Shepley. Will is a dry stone waller, and one of the last great source singers of Yorkshire. Will’s walling practice has taken him around the world, but he has always called Shepley his home. When I say Will is a “source singer”, I mean that, despite his extensive rehearsed and studio-recorded repertoire, he grew up farming and learned songs through immersion from his father, and his father’s two brothers. Though Will has been recorded extensively, Steve and I thought there might be a remote possibility that he remembered a tune that had not yet been documented. It turned out to be the best of news that our hunch proved correct.

Will Noble points out the Holme Valley from his farm in Shepley, West Yorkshire.

One song Will remembered an uncle singing was an American tune called “Roll Along Covered Wagon”, popular in the 1930s. Another of Will’s uncles remembered something much more ancient: a version of “The Maid Freed From The Gallows”, which was sung to Will when he was 2 or 3 years old under the title “The Pricketty Bush”. While one must go all the way down to Child’s “K” version of the tune to find explicit mention of a prickly or “pricketty” bush, I still immediately recognized the ballad. The song itself is indexed as Child ballad 95, and, along with Lamkin (Child 93), is one of the oldest English ballads in existence. Jean Ritchie and Charlie Poole have both recorded studio versions of this tune, and even Lena Bare Turbyfill, the main subject of my Appalachian research, was recorded singing a version for Herbert Halpert in 1939. Versions that hew a little closer to Will’s were recorded in England as performed by Sarah Anne Tuck, and Fred Hewett.

Will remembers riding around on an old Fordson tractor’s mudgards while his uncle sang this song. His verses were a little jumbled, and he hummed some missing words, but he still recalled the experience of hearing that ballad knee-to-knee from a family member, before the advent of popular media, passed down through pure oral tradition. The fact that the ballad still exists in living memory this way is truly remarkable. Many singers in Appalachia can, with great aplomb, sing songs learned through immersion from their parents or grandparents, and remember a great deal of songs passed knee-to-knee. Ironically, in Britain, the very birthplace of these ballads, this practice is dying out rapidly.

Sung by Will Noble,
Shepley, West Yorkshire, UK.

Collected by Derek Piotr at informant's home,
August 2, 2021. With comment by informant.

The Pricketty Bush
cf. Child, no. 95

"Well, it was my uncle, up at the farm with an old--
when I was like 2 or 3 y.o., I was always up at the
farm, and I used to sit when he did an old Fordson
tractor that had wide, flat mudgards, and I used to
sit on that, and ride 'round with him, all, wherever
I could, whenever I could. And he had a, just a little
bit, and it is a little bit of a song. And he called it
'The Pricketty Bush'."

"Do you remember that one, then?"

"Yes, well what bit I can remember it is like, 'cause
some of it I'll just have to allow...:

O, The pricketty bush,
or silver to set me free,
xxxx xxxx xxxx xxxx xxxx
xxxx xxxx xxxx xxxx xxxx xxxx
And it's all for the pricketty bush,
O, the pricketty bush.

"And that's all, all of it. But I absolutely
loved that."

Transcription of Will Noble's version of Child 95, "The Pricketty Bush"

Audio version of the above transcription.

Before we parted company, Will offered this disheartening wisdom: "It used to be, that when you looked out into the fields, they were always busy, full of activity. Now, except for maybe once a year, they're all very quiet. All the activity has moved to the roads, which used to be where the quiet was. It's quite sad, really". It is my fervent hope to continue to find these ancient fragments of ballads in the course of my fieldwork, and shield their memory from the violent inroads of modern civilization. A tradition so old that still remains in living memory is at once feeble and vibrant, and I feel duty-bound to look after it.