

SE Guardian Leader Pages

HD Response: This great folk song collector was not a controlling manipulator: English cultural life owes a great deal to Cecil Sharp's passion for music, song and dance, says Yvette **Staelens**

BY Yvette Staelens

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LP Your article about the eight folk "stars" assembled to write a song suite about Cecil Sharp, "the great song collector . . . [who] helped lay the foundations of the modern folk revival", demonstrates that they are peddling myths and prejudices (Deconstructing folk's man of mystery, Film & Music, 25 March).

We learn that contemporary songwriter Steve Knightley is seeking inspiration from "images of Sharp on his deathbed, haunted by the ghosts of the singers from whom he's collected music demanding the return of their songs" - a take on the view that Sharp appropriated songs and that his folk singers felt a sense of loss. Nice idea, but far from the facts.

TD My research undertaken as part of The Singing Landscape Project and my work as a professional folk singer reveals that Sharp was a diligent, highly motivated folk music, dance and song collector who, by the time of his death in 1924, had collected some 5,000 tunes and published more than 70 volumes. He is the only British collector who can be compared with such European giants as Bartok and Kodaly.

Sharp saw the process of song-collecting as very much a transaction. He gave singers money and tobacco in exchange for songs; he gave them copies of the wonderful portrait photographs that he took; and in the case of one of his most prolific singers, Louie Hooper of Westport in Somerset, he gave her a concertina. This can be seen today at Cecil Sharp House in London, headquarters of the English Folk Dance and Song Society.

Yes, he was constricted by Edwardian sensibility and could only publish what was acceptable, but evidence indicates he took songs down as accurately as possible, and these are preserved today in his field notes.

It is difficult to comprehend the relevance of the American songwriter Caroline Herring's comment that "at a time when 13% of the population in the Appalachians was black, Sharp wilfully ignored them". Of course he did, he was seeking English folk songs from the descendants of the people of these islands. So he also ignored those of Dutch-German descent.

I am equally mystified by Knightley's comment that "with Sharp there's this great body of work, and nothing about the man". You say this is due to "Maud Karpeles, Sharp's faithful assistant . . . who fiercely protected his legacy . . . writing an anodyne biography that depicted him as a saint". This references Karpeles's 1967 biography. But Sharp's biography was first published in 1933, by Karpeles and AH Fox Strangways. Anybody who thinks that this book portrays Sharp as a saint ought to read it.

Your article also talks of "a controlling manipulator who presented a false idyll of rural England by excluding anything that didn't fit his agenda" - clearly based on David Harker's research in the 1970s and 1980s. But later research showed that Harker's statistical methods were based on false assumptions.

Sharp, without the benefit of hefty research grants, pursued his passion for folk until his death - gathering an astonishing archive of music, song and dance. Without his efforts and those of a host of largely forgotten collectors, our cultural life would be the poorer.

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