The Flowering Thorn

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Carpenters and Joiners are not hard to find in English traditional song. James Madison Carpenter is beginning to be recognized as one of the most significant collectors of English, as well as Scottish, song, while one of the best traditional singers at the beginning of this century was Mrs. Joiner of Chiswell Green in Hertfordshire (we do not know her first name) (Bishop 1998). Lucy Broadwood visited her on several occasions, and she sang a fine “Poacher’s Song.” This essay, though, is a search for the other carpenters and joiners, members of the occupations represented by those names. Although they were in other respects a militant and articulate group with a known singing tradition, there is no evidence that the songs they sang ever dealt with their work, and there are no songs with enough circumstantial occupational detail to suggest that it had a significant role. This contrasts, for example, with Germany, where collections of carpenters’ songs were edited by firms that sold the special outfits that they wore.¹ There are only two examples of songs featuring carpenters in the oral tradition, “The House Carpenter” and “The Cruel Ship’s Carpenter,” and in both the occupation is purely incidental (Porter 1992: 13).

By the nineteenth century, the carpenters and joiners were one of the best organized and disciplined of all occupation groups. In the country they owned their own tools and were found in every village. In the towns they combined until 1850 with the millwrights (later the basis of the engineering industry) in a union that included cabinet-makers, pattern makers, and joiners. By 1812 the illegal carpenters’ union in London had ten thousand pounds in the kitty. In 1825 they led a strike in the Potteries, the manufacturing district in the English Midlands. As a result, their pay rose by 1832 to nearly as much as an engineer’s and three times that of a weaver. In the 1840s, as with the shoemakers, a distinction emerged between the “honorable” and “dishonorable” parts of the trade, much like the one between “first fixers,” “second fixers,” and “shop fitters” today.² In 1860, in response to the need for a more-powerful organization after losing a strike the previous year, the General Union of Carpenters was “battered into insignificance,” and the Amalgamated Society of Carpenters and Joiners was formed (Cole and Postgate 1981: 406). It was one of the so-called Junta of unions, second only to the Amalgamated Society of Engineers (Morton 1974: 443).
The iconography of the union’s membership certificate indicates its elite status: The design plays down the physical and dynamic presence of its members. They stand to the side, very much at ease with plane and saw resting on the ground, which is strewn with other tools. Only the carpenter on the left strikes a semiheroic pose. However, the workers’ stature is achieved metonymically, by associating them with heroic signifiers drawn partly from the dominant discourse, partly from the neoclassical icons of the French and American Revolutions. These include plinths, columns, emblems of health and peace, and symbolic figures like Truth and Justice. However, they do not share the Romantic rhetoric of individualism espoused by those revolutions. Instead, the texts that are visible everywhere emphasize the power that comes from uniting and the humanity of collective action: The text on the architrave reads, “UNITED TO PROTECT NOT COMBINED TO INJURE,” and the one beneath the columns says, “INDUSTRY AND BENEVOLENCE UNITE US IN FRIENDSHIP.” The central panel is devoted to the key cooperative task of centering a bridge, one where many occupations are involved (see, for example, Michael Ondaatje’s novel *In the Skin of a Lion*). The foregrounding of a structure in this way is very common. From the early years of the century, “the various building trades offered the major outlet for skilled men” (Burnett 1974: 256), and the members identified increasingly with construction workers as a whole: The text beneath the seated figure at the top reads, “UNITED WE STAND.”

The results were not long in coming. In the next London strike, in 1872, they were supported by other construction workers and won. As late as 1875, their union was still larger than that of the miners and the textile workers (Applebaum 1992: 416). In this company, the silence of the carpenters seems unaccountable. Perhaps the rarity of their songs is explained by a proverb that was common in the seventeenth century: “The best carpenter makes the fewest chips” (Wilson 1992: 47). However, in the song record, it is precisely the chips that we must deal with: stray references, parodies, sexual metaphors that seem to stand apart from those who were following an occupation that, as part of the huge construction industry, still exists in virtually every street and village in the land.

**Ventriloquism**

There is some truth in the assertion by the Industrial Workers of the World that craft unionism undermines broader solidarity, and in the case of the song culture of the carpenters, there was certainly a situation where the songs all appear to derive from outsiders since their subjects are simplified and reduced. The fact that they were the subject of so many songs led to a situation of “speaking for
the other,” which, following Heidi Hansson and others, I characterize as a type of ventriloquism (Hansson 1998: 46–53). Hansson emphasizes that ventriloquism is an authoritarian position even when, as in this case, it is undertaken with the best of intentions: She gives the example of those feminists and postcolonialists who sometimes come perilously close to “inventing” those they describe (1998: 47). In this respect they are as reductive as the patriarchal and imperialist positions they seek to replace. In the field of ballads and folk songs, my starting point is a study by Mary-Ann Constantine, where she looks at the mediation of the events surrounding the wreck of the emigrant ship Royal Charter off the coast of north Wales during the last century. By setting the novelist, the religious homilist, and the journalist alongside the many sailors, passengers, and villagers of Moelfre that the songs and broadsides about the wreck attempt to foreground, she shows the impossibility of an unmediated voice, even in first-person narratives which supposedly documented the sailors speaking (1999: 65–85).

Since all narratives except some first-person ones are acts of ventriloquism, the same manipulation occurs in broadsides and sentimental and comic songs, from the seventeenth century to Bobby Darin. Paradoxically, such songs silenced the workers themselves by giving them a voice, one that was simplified and characterized by distance. However, because there is a dialectic between subject and object in the perception of other cultures, these outsider narratives can be read against the grain, in the light of what is known about the carpenters’ own expressive culture, and I will attempt this in the second half of the paper.

**Speaking for the Other**

When John Ruskin called carpenters in 1851 “the trade which of all manual trades has been most honoured,” the “honour” to which he was referring must have been that of the craft unions. It can hardly have been found in the work of sociologists, poets, novelists, or singers since they regarded the status of carpenters as uniformly low. In 1577 the parson William Harrison placed carpenters in the lowest of his four groups, people “to be ruled and not to rule others…. These have no voice or authority in our commonwealth” (Briggs 1985: 113), and today the joiner is still the archetypal nongentleman, as in Bobby Darin’s hit song “If I Were a Carpenter”:

If I were a carpenter
And you were a lady,
Would you marry me anyway?
Would you have my baby?
No carpenter, with one exception, has been the protagonist of a novel. The exception is *Adam Bede* (1859): George Eliot’s grandfather was a carpenter, and it is relevant to the subject of this paper that the book opens with the carpenter singing at his work.

Although carpenters were a mobile group, it is evident that we are not looking for a countrywide tradition with universal features. The only common characteristics are found in songs written by outsiders who were speaking (or singing) for them, and this has sparked my interest in a nonexistent tradition. Outsider songs may stand in either a familiar or parodic relation to the trade itself. Millers and tailors clearly belong to the second group, but carpenters and joiners appear in all periods as part of the regular milieu, not usually either diminished or stereotyped. There is evidence that from an early date carpenters were fairly closely involved with the popular song market as consumers, something one would expect from tradesmen known as readers of popular texts (Porter 1992: 32–36). This is seen from the way they often appear in roles, usually minor, in the broadsides. In a Bath and London broadside of about 1850, “The Carpenter, or, The Danger of Evil Company,” the hero comes under the influence of a drunken cooper, whose particular depravity seems to be his singing:

This Man [the Cooper] could tell a merry tale,  
And sing a merry song;  
And those who heard him sing or talk,  
Ne’er thought the ev’ning long.

But vain and vicious was the song,  
And wicked was the tale;  
And every pause he always fill’d,  
With cider, gin, or ale. (Carnell 1979: 100, verses 14–15)

The gin-filled pauses are a vivid detail. However, the carpenter resists the cooper and repents, just in time. In another broadside, “The Sale of a Wife,” which is exactly contemporary, he is a drunkard pure and simple (“too fond of his beer” [line 6]), who sells his wife for ten shillings (Shields 1981: 139).

Few of the song sheets go beyond such broad strokes in depicting carpenters, and this is particularly true when it comes to the tools of their trade, a reliable signifier of occupation. These are not merely emblems but marks of identity: In the opening scene of Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar* (1599), the absence of a visible leather apron and ruler provokes confusion and irritation in those the
carpenter is speaking to \textit{(Julius Caesar: lines 5–7)}. Songs are inconsistent in using these signifers. Particularly in sexual matters, carpenters are expected to use the full range of their tools. The joiner wins “The London Lady” in the face of competition from men of six other occupations by boasting,

\begin{quote}
I have (quoth he) an Augar sharp, 
if you’ll find Board, I’ll Bore it, 
I’ll drive a Nale that will not fail, 
[even] tho’ there’s been none before it. (Day 1987, 3:41, verse 9)
\end{quote}

On the other hand, the joiner who helps the weaver in “Bury New Loom” makes active use of his “level and rule” in his richly metaphorical encounter with her (Harker 1980: 199).

The fact that both these cases involve a joiner may give the misleading impression that a distinction is being made, but significantly the two occupations are rarely differentiated in songs (as today in the United States). A joiner works mainly at a bench in the shop, making windows, doors, picture rails, and skirting boards. A carpenter works (often outside) on frames, joints, floors, and roofs. In \textit{A Midsummer Night’s Dream} (ca. 1595), Peter Quince is a carpenter and Snug a joiner, but only one seventeenth-century broadside known to me makes the distinction (Day 1987, 3:295). In Scots the term “joiner” is still used for both. The use of joiner or “joyner” predominates over “carpenter” in the early broadsides by a ratio of about two to one.

There are no persistent traits of character, although carpenters are often represented with happy dispositions. Rudolf Steiner wrote that “someone who knows how to make a table will always be happy,” and this was evidently the case in the seventeenth-century broadside featuring “Jolly Ralph the Joiner” (Day 1987, 3:176). In Ireland, too, the stereotype persists, as in the opening lines of Tommy Makem’s “Black Velvet Band”:

\begin{quote}
It was in the town of Tralee 
To the carpenter’s trade I was bound; 
Many an hour’s sweet happiness 
I had in that neat little town.\textsuperscript{5}
\end{quote}

Although Voltaire maintains in \textit{Candide} (1759) that a carpenter’s job is incompatible with honesty (Applebaum 1992: 383), there is little evidence that in England they were considered dishonest as a group. It is true that several songs
like the well-known “Hard, Hard Times,” sung on both sides of the Atlantic, associate them with poor workmanship:

Then here comes the carpenter, he will build you a house:
He will build it so snug that you’ll scarce see a mouse.
There’ll be leaks in the roof, there’ll be holes in the floor,
The chimney will smoke, and it’s open the door.
[Refrain]And it’s hard, hard times. (Fowke 1981: 53)

However, I have only found this verse in Newfoundland sets. In a song entitled “A Chapter of Cheats or The Roguery of Every Trade,” it is said that “the carpenter will hammer in your table broken nails (Palmer 1974: 180), but this occurs in a list of more than thirty occupations, including bonnet makers and potato merchants, hardly trades that are a byword for sharp practice. Once again, the complaint seems to be directed at an individual rather than a group.

A carpenter’s work was clearly thought to give a person a distinctive identity: In the great majority of cases (the main exception being “James Harris [The Dæmon Lover],” Child 273), their trade replaces their name. This is the case in the only strongly negative portrait, “The Cruel Ship’s Carpenter”: In Henry Burstow’s 1893 version, for example, the central figure is only identified as “William,” which is of course the generic name for a sailor (Broadwood 1902: 172). “The Cruel Ship’s Carpenter” is often called “Pretty Polly” in the United States and is one of the most popular songs on both sides of the Atlantic to derive from an English broadside. Hugh Shields has a memorable account of a performance by Sarah Makem: “Sarah’s singing…lasted 2 mins. 45 secs., during which she enters her house, boils the kettle, makes tea, lays the table, pours the tea for her husband and herself, drinks a mouthful and pronounces either the tea, or the ballad, or the confluence of circumstances ‘Good!’” (Shields 1993: 176). “The Cruel Ship’s Carpenter” apparently derives from a mid-eighteenth-century broadside, “The Gosport Tragedy,” and as its subtitle, “The Perjured Ship-Carpenter,” suggests, the carpenter is not only cruel but incapable of keeping his word. No other English songs or broadsides seem to make this association, but there is a German broadside version (ca. 1850) of the folktale of a returning son who is murdered by his parents where the father is a joiner (Cheesman 1989–90: 60–91; 1994: 92–95. The tale appears on English broadsides as “The Liverpool Tragedy”).

Since “The Cruel Ship’s Carpenter” is a ‘Jonah,’ an evildoer whose presence prevents a ship from sailing, it is tempting to link it with the known association of
builders with magic and ritual. Henry Burstow’s song is set in Worcester, where the carpenter promises to marry his sweetheart and introduce her to his friends before joining the king’s navy. Instead, he murders her concealing the body, but the murder is revealed when the ship he is to sail on refuses to move. The ship’s carpenter solemnly swears that he has not murdered anyone, at which point,

As he was turning from the captain with speed
He met his Polly, which made his heart bleed;
She stript him and tore him, she tore him in three,
Because he had murdered her baby and she. (Broadwood 1902: 173)

This must be one of the rare cases where the number of strips a revenant tears her lover into is determined by the rhyme. It is a reminder that the carpenter is by no means in control of the situation: The magic is not his, and this is true of the only other supernatural ballad to feature a carpenter, “The Dæmon Lover” (Child 243). In this ballad, enormously popular on both sides of the Atlantic, a seaman returning to his lover after many years entices her away from her husband, a ship’s carpenter, with fatal results. The husband is a “homely” minor character, as Kittredge calls him, yet he seems to dominate the moral action in several ways (Sargent and Kittredge [1904] 1932: 543). It is his suicide that closes the earliest known version, the seventeenth-century “Warning for Married Women” (Day 1987, 4: 101), and as the status of the troth plighted with the seaman becomes more marginal, the carpenter’s role expands. In the Appalachians and elsewhere, where ship’s carpenters were not a common sight, the title “The House Carpenter” replaced “The Dæmon Lover” and has remained perhaps the most common name for the song (with a change of emphasis: As Atkinson points out, in America “the woman plainly belongs with her carpenter husband and not at all with the former lover” [1989: 605]).

Despite this enhanced role, others are still speaking for the carpenter. Unlike the jolly mood that pervades other broadsides, it is for his “distress,” the predicament of what Harker calls a “respectable and timid artisan” (1992: 333), that the carpenter is known. In short he is less what his wife calls him in “A Warning for Married Women,” “a carpenter of great fame” (verse 21), than a cheated husband, as much a cuckold as the superstitious carpenter of “The Miller’s Tale,” described by Chaucer as a “riche gnof [lout]” (Robinson 1957: 48, line 3188). “Riche” is the key word here: Artisans like the carpenter were ranked well above seamen in 1695 by Gregory King and earned about twice as much (Harker
1992: 314), so there is an element of class revenge in the way James Harris (or his dæmon) manipulates the well-born Jane Reynolds and displaces his rival.

**Speaking for Oneself**

Between 1817 and 1820, the London carpenter and builder Charles Newnham, who used to attend popular musical plays and had firsthand experience of the body snatchers, wrote an account of his life and work (Burnett 1974: 288–89). However, this is an almost unique example of a personal narrative by a carpenter which has survived. This applies most strikingly in the field of occupational song, where, as we have seen, only a handful feature carpenters. There are a number of possible reasons for this. Paradoxically, ventriloquism silences people by giving others their voice (Hansson 1998: 47). Songs of sexual preference can usually be assumed as reliable a sign that a song originated inside an occupation as today’s bumper stickers which read, “Carpenters could use a few screws.” Thus, “The Sandgate Girl” from Newcastle, England, a city where the carpenters had a tradition of singing, tries unsuccessfully to reject a keelman, “an ugly body, a bubbly body, / An ill-far’d ugly loon,” in favor of a joiner (Lloyd 1978: 111, lines 29–30; Thompson 1971: 459; “The Sandgate Girl” was first printed by John Bell in 1812). At least until the nineteenth century, similar songs were sung by miners and navvies in the North-east and changed if they were adopted by members of other occupations (Porter 1992: 79–80)

Apart from a ribald student song sung in Michigan in 1956, I have found no other examples in English of carpenters being set above others. There is also a Gaelic waulking song from Bannal where a woman extols the virtues of Calum’s son, a carpenter who works with oak and a joiner with his saw, who can lay a floor so evenly:

'S e mo leannan gille Caluim
Cairpentir an daraich thu.
Hé mo leannan, ho mo leannan...

'S e mo leannan saor an t-sàbhaibh
Leigeadh lobht an lår gu dlùth.
My love is the sawing joiner
Who can lay a loft floor tightly
(well).

'S e mo leannan am fear dualach
Thogaibh fonn anns an taigh chiùil.
My love is the curly haired one
Who can raise a tune in the session
(literally “music house”).

[My love is Malcolm’s lad
You’re a carpenter of oak!]
Eventually, though, he deserts her. Songs like these, which equate sexual desirability with the universal sense among skilled workers of the uniqueness and attractiveness of their own craft, are clearly based on an inner understanding of the carpenter’s work. At the same time, such songs have a complexity of their own. The perspective throughout is a woman’s, and by avoiding too much circumstantial detail, the songs manage to speak simultaneously on an individual and group level. As in most occupational songs, love and labor are fused.

The reference to the musical skill of Calum’s son in the waulking song is an important indicator of the link between working with wood and making music. There are many accounts of individual carpenters singing (for an example from Arizona, see Logsdon 1989: 224). Byron left one highly circumstantial account from Venice at the beginning of the nineteenth century:

On the 7th of last January, the author of Childe Harold, and another Englishman, the writer of this notice, rowed to the Lido with two singers, one of whom was a carpenter, and the other a gondolier. The former placed himself at the prow, the latter at the stern of the boat. A little after leaving the quay of the Piazzetta, they began to sing, and continued their exercise until we arrived at the island. They gave us, amongst other essays, the death of Clorinda, and the palace of Armida; and did not sing the Venetian but the Tuscan verses. The carpenter, however, who was the cleverer of the two, and was frequently obliged to prompt his companion, told us that he could translate the original. He added, that he could sing almost three hundred stanzas, but had not spirits (morbin was the word he used) to learn any more, or to sing what he already knew: a man must have idle time on his hands to acquire, or to repeat, and, said the poor fellow, “look at my clothes and at me; I am starving.” This speech was more affecting than his performance, which habit alone can make attractive. The recitative was shrill, screaming, and monotonous; and the gondolier behind assisted his voice by holding his hand to one side of his mouth. The carpenter used a quiet action, which he evidently endeavoured to restrain; but was too much interested in his subject altogether to repress. From these men we learnt that singing is not confined to the gondoliers.

(Byron 1818: canto iv, note)
However, it must be conceded that examples from England are very sparse. Literary evidence can never be ignored, although, for example, the fact that in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* Bottom the weaver says he will ask the carpenter Peter Quince to write a ballad for him called “Bottom’s Dream” can hardly be regarded as conclusive evidence of singing (4. 1. 213–14).

During the period when songs were being collected from tradition bearers, collectors indisputably gave precedence to the songs of individuals over communal ones like anthems, work songs, or the songs of organized labor. This may be why no strike songs of carpenters survive in the way that the struggles of the gesellen (postapprenticeship carpenters) against the masters in Hamburg in the 1790s were supported by songs.9 There is one piece of evidence, in the form of a ban, that points to carpenters in the north of England having sung together: In Newcastle in 1812, the Philanthropic Society of House-Carpenters and Joiners prohibited “disloyal sentiments” and “political songs” (Thompson 1971: 459). We may infer from this that these house carpenters sang political songs (otherwise there would be no reason for a ban). Such negative evidence suggests the way practices can be discovered from gaps in the record.

There are isolated indications of the role of song in carpenters’ lives. Perhaps the greatest English traditional singer of recent years, Walter Pardon, was apprenticed at fourteen to a carpenter and worked at the trade, including his time in the army, all his life (Pardon 1977: sleeve notes). As we have seen, the novel *Adam Bede* opens with the carpenter singing, and he can be relied on to sing “Over the hills and far away” (chap. 23), but singing is not part of his social being.

None of these cases, drawn from a period of more than four centuries, suggest that carpenters sang occupational songs: I have found no songs in Walter Pardon’s repertoire, for example, that deal with his work, either realistically or metaphorically. Songs by others that do deal with the work of carpenters have very little circumstantial detail. In particular technical terms, which are of course numerous in the field of woodworking, are almost entirely absent. They are a good indicator of insider songs: As Leigh Hunt remarked of the carpenter in his pastiche of Chaucer,

\[
\text{termés of one craft he knew,}
\]
\[
\text{Which, save of carpenters, are known of few.}
\]

(Hunt 1923: 127; see also Porter 1992: 76)
In view of the evident status of carpenters and joiners among skilled craftsmen from medieval times, and the great power and prestige of the construction unions at the height of the industrial revolution, the lack of insider songs remains puzzling. This paper has itself, of course, been an act of “speaking for,” but it is above all a study of the importance of looking at lacunae in our song record. Feminist and gay studies in particular have emphasized the significance of the gaps and silences in our tradition. The known song is only the visible part of a vast network, and we must return to the countless individual narratives that make up the polyphonic discourse of the carpenters’ own culture.

Notes
1. I am grateful to Barbara Boock of the Deutsche Volksliedarchiv in Freiburg for this information.
2. Thompson 1971: 285, 260, 272, 263, 291, 346, 277, respectively. First fixers build the framework of a house, while second fixers add the details that will be visible in the finished building. Shop fitters are responsible for the work traditionally done by joiners. I am grateful to Kane Watson for this information.
3. “Chips,” or today “chippie,” have long been sobriquets / monikers of the carpenter. The Oxford English Dictionary cites 1785 for “chips” and 1913 for “chippie.”
4. Ruskin 1874: 1, appendix 38; the passage was written more than twenty years earlier.
5. “He might by that means as well anoint him a livery, as a Gentleman” (Briggs 1985: 113).
7. I wish I was a pretty little girl and I had lots of money. I would marry a carpenter’s son; he’d be as good as any. He would pound and I would pump and we would pump together. Oh, what fun we would have, pumping one another (Cray 1992: 368).
8. Bannal, Waulking Songs (Greentrax CDTRAX 099, 1996: track 11a). I am indebted for this reference to T. A. McLean, who also made the translation.
9. I am grateful to Barbara Boock of the Deutsche Volksliedarchiv in Freiburg for this information.

References

**Recordings**
