Old Flemish Songbook Reprints

Published by

McKean, Thomas.
The Flowering Thorn: International Ballad Studies.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/9249.

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Old Flemish Songbook Reprints

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In 1989 the reprint of Jan Frans Willems’s collection Oude Vlaemsche Liederen [Old Flemish Songs] appeared, the first in a new series of Old Flemish Songbook Reprints. Volume five in this series appeared in 1998. The decision to reprint these old collections was made by the Koninklijke Belgische Commissie voor Volkskunde [Royal Belgian Ethnological Committee]. Three members of this committee are responsible for this particular project: Jozef Van Haver oversees the financial side, with the help of the Frans M. Olbrechts Foundation for the promotion of ethnological research in Flanders; Hubert Boone, leader of the Brabant Folk Orchestra and familiar with the Flemish folk scene, is the project’s spiritual father; and I am responsible for the scholarly aspect of the project. According to Boone, folk-music ensembles in Flanders are constantly on the lookout for reliable source material, heretofore very hard to find; the reprints project will therefore fulfill an identifiable need. Because of his close contacts in these ensembles, Boone will take on the task of promoting and distributing the reprints.

Each songbook was to be situated in its cultural/historical context, along with brief assessments of content and musical qualities. At the same time, various indices would be included so that the collections would be even more accessible to the user. In selecting volumes for reprint, we took into account the age of the collections and their geographical spread, for all of the Flemish provinces had to be represented.

The inaugural selection was the collection of J. F. Willems (1793–1846), who in 1846 published a first series of forty-eight Oude Vlaemsche Liederen in Ghent. While working on the second series, Willems unexpectedly passed away (24 June 1846). His brother-in-arms and close friend, Ferdinand Augustijn Snellaert (1809–1872), took over publication, bringing it to a successful conclusion. Two years later, in 1848, the Oude Vlaemsche Liederen appeared in book form from the same publisher. The entire collection consists of 258 songs with an extensive sixty-page introduction by Snellaert.

I have previously discussed the cultural/historical context of this publication in detail, particularly Hoffmann von Fallersleben’s role in it (Top 1996). Here I would like to restrict myself to looking at a few salient qualities and innovations in this remarkable and voluminous collection, especially as regards typology and public reception.
1. Snellaert’s now-obsolete introduction is, by any account, monumental. He speaks of the cultural/historical value of songs and singers in the recent and more remote past. As far as the collection itself is concerned, he takes a rather critical stance, bluntly mentioning its disappointing size and claiming that Willems could have collected far more in the twenty-six years from 1820 to 1846. The new, extensive bibliography, listing national and international song collections in print and manuscript form, is very creditable (pp. xxxiv–lvi). To anyone intending a comparative or historical study of Dutch and Flemish folk songs, such information will prove indispensable. The scholarly value of the collection is therefore beyond any doubt.

2. The collection contains 258 songs; yet, in fact, we can only speak of 255 because one has been included twice (no. 15 = no. 161), and the texts numbered 78 and 97 are only pseudosongs.1 Willems and Snellaert group their material into six categories: royal songs, historical songs, narrative songs, love and drinking songs, religious songs, and miscellaneous songs. While this classification is far from conclusive, it is at least a modest attempt to make rich and varied material accessible.

3. The philologist Willems used many different sources; almost half of the material was taken from manuscripts, printed songbooks, broadsheets, and other publications. Moreover, he received input from collaborators in France (Edmond de Coussemaker), the Netherlands, and Flanders, not all of whom, regretfully, were specific about their sources.

4. The editors added comments or annotations concerning language, melody, source, musical context, or national and international variants to nearly all the songs. This cannot but be seen in a positive light.

The book contains two true innovations: first, 106 songs, or 41.5 percent, were accompanied by musical notation, a ratio unheard of before the appearance of this collection. As mentioned before, this was a great step forward, even though contemporary commentators (for example, de Coussemaker, Van Duyse) sometimes strongly criticized Willems’s transcription methods. Second was the novelty of including some thirty songs either stemming from oral tradition or taken from printed collections but still sung in Willems’s and Snellaert’s time. The fact that the collection occasionally includes contextual background information only heightens its ethnological value. It is obvious, therefore, that Willems’s and Snellaert’s edition of Oude Vlaemsche Liederen was a milestone in the study of Flemish folk song, as well as inspiration to international scholars.

We should note here that Lootens (1835–1884) and Feys (1819–1906) had already collaborated ten years earlier on the edition of a small, but remarkable, collection of fairy tales, *Oude kindervertelsels in den Brugschen tongval* [Old Children’s Tales in the Bruges Dialect] (Brussels, 1868). Lootens copied and edited the texts and was helped on linguistic matters by Eusèbe Feys, doctor in philosophy and arts and a teacher at the Royal Athenæum at Bruges. In publishing the tales, both had gained sufficient experience to undertake a larger piece of work. Adding to their efforts were the musical contributions of M. A. Reyns, bandmaster at Bruges Cathedral and former laureate of the Brussels Royal Academy of Music, making this a very competent trio.

In contrast to Willems’s work, the *Chants Populaires flamands* only contains songs and texts from oral tradition. Lootens’s and Feys’s eminent example was Edmond de Coussemaker, a member of the Société d’Emulation, who had collected his song material in the French arrondissements of Dunkerque and Hazebrouck, and who had, in 1856, published his *Chants populaires des Flamands de France* with the brothers F. and E. Gyselynck, Ghent, who had already published Willems and Snellaert (Top 1995). Just like their predecessors, Willems-Snellaert and de Coussemaker, Lootens and Feys stress the exclusive value and importance of material from the active oral tradition, which is much more than just a pastime. Handling such material requires expertise. In their Avant-propos (pp. i–xi), they phrase their position this way: “Leur but est purement scientifique et archéologique, et c’est à ce titre principalement que l’ouvrage a été accepté par la Société d’Emulation de Bruges, toujours disposée à encourager les publications de nature à jeter du jour sur l’histoire nationale” [Their goal is purely scientific and archaeological, and it is mainly because of this that the work was accepted by the Société d’Emulation de Bruges, which is always disposed toward encouraging publications that throw light on national history] (1990:ii).

Another argument in favor of collecting songs is their observation that “ces productions s’altèrent, s’effacent de la mémoire et tendent à disparaître entièrement, avec la vie de famille, le travail en commun, les réunions autour du foyer, les longues veillées d’hiver, le chant dans les écoles” [These productions...
change, disappear from memory, and tend to disappear entirely, along with family life, common labor, gatherings around the fireside, the long watches during winter, singing at school (1990: iii). This pessimistic view is shared by many Romantic collectors devoted to popular culture during the nineteenth century.

The fact that Lootens and Feys copied down their song material from one basic source, “une dame de la bonne bourgeoisie de Bruges,” is exceptional. “Cette dame d’une intelligence remarquable, douée d’une excellente mémoire, possédant le sentiment de la mélodie et du rythme, avec un goût prononcé pour les chansons, a su retenir à peu près tout ce qu’elle a entendu” [a solidly middle-class lady from Bruges.... This lady, of remarkable intelligence, gifted with an excellent memory, with a feeling for melody and rhythm, and with a pronounced penchant for songs, has been able to retain almost everything she has ever heard] (1990:iii). This lady is probably Lootens’s mother, born in Bruges in 1795 (Stalpaert 1946).

The Chants Populaires flamands is therefore a nineteenth-century collection which the singer had learned partly from her parents, in particular her mother, and which she repeatedly sang during her school years. This leads the authors to pay closer attention to the educational situation in nineteenth-century Bruges, and more particularly to the narrative texts children related while making bobbin lace, the so-called tellingen, “countings,” which make up the second part of the collection.

As the title and subtitle make clear, the collection is divided into two distinct parts: 161 Chants populaires and 21 Poésies populaires diverses. Songs and items of folk poetry are not only undeniably old, but because they have been passed down in an oral tradition, they have also been molded in a remarkable way. The fact that the editors have been extremely careful in dealing with the language, rhythm, and musicality of these pieces of sung folk culture makes the collection exceptionally precious. As a result, it has been welcomed enthusiastically, both nationally and internationally.

The third volume in the reprints series is devoted to the collection Honderd oude Vlaamsche liederen [One Hundred Old Flemish Songs] (Namur, 1897) by the Reverend Jan Bols (1842–1921). The collection consists of the selected results of Bols’s intensive fieldwork in the province of Flemish-Brabant. His informative introduction outlines the methodology he employed, and he discusses oral tradition with great expertise and appreciation. At the same time, he exhorts everyone, in particular civil authorities, major cultural organizations, journalists, and “folklorists,” to pay even more attention to popular musical culture, which is threatened by the era’s unfavorable cultural climate. As a child of his
time, Bols does not see a bright future for popular culture. Yet he will not lay down arms and, through his edition, seeks to prove that there are still opportunities for success.

Thanks to the part played by his brother Gustaaf, Bols was able to add excellent musical annotations to each of the songs. In addition, he provides an interesting popular-cultural background to many of the songs, as well as first-hand information concerning the circumstances of performance. Moreover, since Bols, contrary to his predecessors, explicitly underlines the value of broadsheet songs and adduces evidence for his claims, his collection acquires an extra dimension.

After the West Flanders and Flemish-Brabant collections, the editors of the reprints series devoted a volume to the province of Limburg: the work of the teacher Lambrecht Lambrechts (1865–1932), *Limburgsche liederen* [Songs from Limburg]. Encouraged by the success of Lootens-Feys in Bruges and Bols in Brabant, Lambrechts built up a sizeable collection of songs from his native area from the 1890s on. After reaping the harvest, he vigorously sought publication, but while individual items were easily placed in Limburg journals, full publication was slow in coming. International interest did exist, particularly from the *Jahrbuch für Volksliedforschung*, which in 1932 published a contribution called “Flämische Volkslieder” ([Flemish Folk Songs]; the German title is somewhat misleading since the entire article was published in Dutch). This article contained eighteen songs, among which are Limburg variants of the “Heer Halewijn” [Sir Halewijn] song, and various annotations and bibliographical references.

A few years after Lambrechts’s death, the Committee for Old Folk Songs at last published eighty songs with annotations in two volumes (1936 and 1937), edited mainly by the committee’s chairman, Professor Paul de Keyser. The criteria which led to the choice of “ballads,” love songs, “comical and satirical songs,” and children’s songs, however, are nowhere made clear. Moreover, the fate of the unused material remains a mystery; it is likely that a considerable part of the original collection has been lost. All in all, these facts only support the case for reprinting the material.

In 1998 it was the turn of the province of Antwerp to feature in the series when volume five appeared: *Oudkempische volksliederen en dansen* [Old Campines Folk Songs and Dances] by Theophil Peeters (1883–1949). The musically trained Peeters, son of a verger-cum-organist, traversed the Antwerp Campines on his bicycle between 1899 and 1910 in an attempt to track down traces of ancient popular musical culture. According to direct testimonies, he
had a particular musical ear and had some of his contributors repeat songs once or twice to ensure he had correctly understood both text and melody. Musicological research of the melodies has ascertained that Peeters recorded some ancient examples. Hubert Boone is consequently convinced that the Peeters collection contains exceptional pieces of popular musical culture and, moreover, includes numerous examples of the influence of liturgical modes on our popular musical patrimony (Boone 1998).

Volume five of the reprints contains four collections of Oudkempische volksliederen en dansen as they were posthumously published in 1952 by Jozef Nuyts for the Committee for Old Folk Songs. In all, the four collections contain 47 religious songs, 33 love songs, and 63 occasional songs, or a total of 143 songs with a wide variety of content. To this must be added thirty-one dances, described in some detail as regards style, attributes, and circumstance. As such, the collection constitutes a unique and rich sampling of the popular musical culture in the Campines, a region of distinctive cultural/historical development.

The scholarly relevance and musical quality of the five collections published so far are beyond any doubt. The oldest one (Willems-Snellaert) most accords with a nineteenth-century view of the editing of old songs, which usually do not deserve the name “folk songs.” Willems and Snellaert borrowed greatly from the old Dutch and Flemish songbooks on the one hand, yet at the same time showed some interest in the song as sung. Their collection is a first step toward preserving the sort of living song material that later came to us in great numbers through the likes of Lootens-Feys, Bols, Lambrechts, and Peeters. These collectors were among the first to open their ears to the people of their native areas. Each in his own way annotated and documented his material with musical notation, giving Flanders an interesting, varied, historical, and authentic collection of musical sources.

It is all the more remarkable, therefore, that Flemish folk musicians have not greeted the reprints with great enthusiasm, despite their reasonable cost (€20–25). This has been an unpleasant surprise for the publishers, one which has prompted a number of questions: Do our modern folk musicians have no need for the material because they do not know how to handle it in a contemporary way? Are the themes of the songs obsolete or outdated? Do traditional musical qualities no longer appeal to contemporary musicians, who may be more interested in international melodies? Who can say? Whatever the answers to these questions, the reprints are a great success in academic terms, and the series continues. 2005 will see a reprint of the Iepersch Oud-Liedbook [Ypres Book of Old Songs], and others are in the planning stages. Academia does have its rights.
Notes
1. It seems that these texts never have been sung. They were poems written by Hoffmann von Fallersleben, but Snellaert thought they were real songs and therefore included them in the collection.
2. I would like to thank Isabelle Peere, who has commenced a thorough study of this remarkable collection (see her contribution to this volume), and who will continue and expand this research.
3. After many disappointing attempts, Lambrechts had to concede that full publication would not be forthcoming in the foreseeable future. Even contact with Dr. Johannes Koepp, who in 1928 had published Untersuchungen über das Antwerpener Liedbuch vom Jahre 1544 [Enquiries into the 1544 Antwerp Songbook] and who was obviously interested in Flemish song material, failed to lead to publication. See Nygard 1958 for a full treatment of “Heer Halewijn.”
4. The bicycle appears to have been an essential tool to early song collectors. Consider Gavin Greig in the Northeast of Scotland in the early twentieth century (Smith 1957; ed.).

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All page references in the text are to the reprint editions.