

History

"**The Water Is Wide**" is one of the most popular "Folk songs" today, not at least because of its beautiful tune. The song has been performed and recorded by countless artists.

It is often called an "old Folk song" but in fact it is not that old. It came only to prominence after Pete Seeger introduced the song in 1958 on his LP *American Favorite Ballads*. In fact it was somehow courageous to designate the song as an "American Favorite Ballad" because it was barely known there at that time. Two years later in a songbook called *American Favorite Ballads. Tunes and Songs as Sung by Pete Seeger*, he described "The Water Is Wide" as "another song from England, collected by Cecil Sharp many years ago and titled by him 'Waillie, Waillie'" (p. 77). And on page 4 we can read that it was "printed by permission". A copyright by London publishers Novello & Co. - 1908 and 1936 - is acknowledged and for some reason he names *English Folk-songs from the Southern Appalachians* by "Cecil Sharpe" [sic!] as the source.

But that was not correct. The original version of "The Water is Wide" can be found in *Folk Songs From Somerset; Third Series* by Cecil Sharp and Charles Marson. This collection was published in London by Simpkin & Co. in 1906. Here it was still called "Waly, Waly". In the *Notes on the Songs* (p.76) a "Mrs. Cox, of High Ham" is mentioned as the source for both the words and the tune. Sharp also remarked that he had "noted this song in Somerset five times - tunes and words varying considerably" but that "our Somerset words have so much affinity with the well-known Scottish ballad 'Waly, Waly' that we are publishing them under the same title".

These notes are somewhat misleading. They seem to suggest that Sharp had collected the song in exactly this form. But in fact he had created it anew by collating bits and pieces from different field-recordings. What he regarded as "Folk"-versions of that old Scottish ballad were in fact mutilated fragments of two different broadside-songs. Already in 1954 J. W. Allen - in a seminal article in the *Journal of the English Folk Dance and Song Society* (pp.161-171) - has compared the published version with the original field-recorded variants in the manuscripts and was able to show convincingly how Sharp had put together this song. He even identified one of the two broadside ballads in question.

In fact this is a very fascinating story that shows how mutilated relics of ancient popular songs were reinterpreted as remainders of "old folk songs" and then – restored to honor and patched together to a new "old" song - started a second, even more successful life.

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Songs as you go