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Alisoun Gardner-Medwin

The "Willow" Motif in Folksongs in Britain and Appalachia

The geographical relationship of the University of South Carolina with the Southern Appalachian Mountains is similar to the relationship of my own home, Newcastle-upon-Tyne in the south-eastern corner of Northumberland, with the Cheviot Hills that divide England and Scotland. Both hill ranges run from SW to NE, and both are comparatively poor and difficult land to farm. From the borders, on both sides of the Cheviots, were collected many of the greatest folksongs, including ballads, of England and Scotland, and similarly, from the Southern Appalachians, two centuries later, came many of the best examples of these same folksongs, transplanted to a new country, where they flourished and where they were collected in 1916-18 by Cecil Sharp, who had earlier collected in England.¹

A high proportion of the immigrants to the hill country west and north-west of the Carolinas and Virginia in the eighteenth century were Scottish or Scotch-Irish.² These latter were descendants of lowland Scottish people who

¹Cecil J. Sharp, *English Folk-Songs from the Southern Appalachians*, 2 vols. ed. Maud Karpeles (London, 1932). Unless otherwise stated, all references to Sharp are to this book.

²James G. Leyburn, *The Scotch-Irish* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1961). Herschel Gower, "The Scottish Element in Traditional Ballads Collected in America" in *Reality and Myth*, ed. William E. Walker and Robert L. Welker (Nashville, 1964).

I have discussed this migration, and the songs the emigrants brought in "The Ancestry of 'The House-Carpenter,'" *Journal of American Folklore*, 84 (1971), 414-27, esp. pp. 424-5.

had in the years following 1610 settled in what is now Northern Ireland. In the years leading up to 1776 many migrants of Scottish descent arrived in Philadelphia, from where they were encouraged to move inland to the Appalachian Mountains and along the Shenandoah Valley. These people brought with them their skills as subsistence farmers, enabling them to make a living from the difficult hill country of the Appalachians, and also their songs.

This migration, like others from the British Isles, ended abruptly in 1776. Although migration to the United States picked up again in the 1780s, it seems that the route between lowland Scotland, Northern Ireland and the hill country was no longer popular.

These people brought a variety of songs to America. They brought the long narrative ballads, the "muckle sangs," and they brought lyrics of all kinds. They brought children's songs, lullabies and songs to play games to. They brought the melodies of these songs also, and Sharp commented that these melodies are not like the melodies of Gaelic songs. He surmized that "the ethnological origin of the singers" was the North of England or the Lowlands of Scotland. But he also conjectured that the ancestors of his singers might have come from England, and then suggested that the tunes "would quite correctly be called English [since] England and the English-speaking parts of Scotland must, so far as folk-tales, folk-songs and other folk-products are concerned, be regarded as one homogeneous area."³ Such blatant chauvinism would have enraged Frances Collinson, who maintained that there is certainly something recognizably Scottish about Scottish folk-tunes,⁴ and also that a definition of Scottish folk-songs should "exclude the obvious importations of English folk-songs."⁵ Clearly the two kinds of folk-song are difficult to disentangle, since singers and fiddlers use both at will, and the printed word is open to all. I see this interrelationship of the folk-songs of England and Scotland as an interesting jungle, in which one can explore different pathways.

As the immigrants and their songs took root in the New World, changes took place. The songs were relocated; place names were changed so that the

³Sharp, "Introduction to the first edition, 1917," reprinted in the 1932 edition, p. xxxiv.

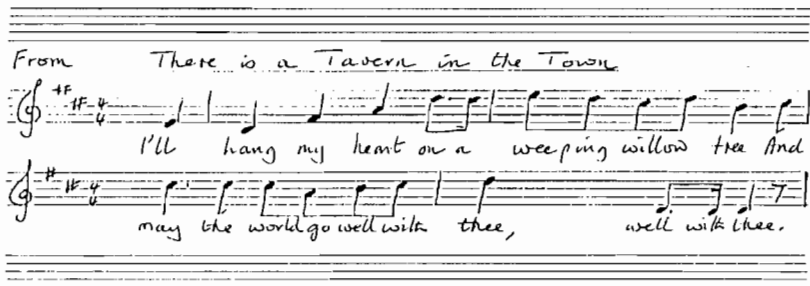
⁴Frances Collinson, *The Traditional and National Music of Scotland* (Nashville, 1966), p. 4.

⁵Collinson, p. 1.

events appeared to take place locally.⁶ Again, as one might expect, some motifs were altered, so that they made sense in the Appalachian Mountains. Rationalization gives clues to the way of life of the settlers; "coon dog" in "Edward," or "buggies, mules and waggons," in "Lord Randal," speak of the frontier.⁷

I would like to look today at something more intangible than place names or practical details of frontier life. This is the "willow" motif, which is in English folksongs a symbolic element. Many people will know it as:

I'll hang my heart on a weeping willow tree
and may the world go well with thee.



For some people it may be a *harp* or even a *hat* that is hung up, and the song in which this appears may vary; "There is a Tavern in the Town" and "On Top of Old Smokey" are two that are well known. The symbol may also be remembered in the line:

All round my hat I'll wear a green willow.

It appears in one of Sharp's most famous English folksongs, "I sowed the Seeds of Love," from Sussex, published in 1912.⁸ The girl has been given a choice of flowers, but rejected all except the red rose.

⁶One of the Scottish ballads which shows this most clearly is "The House-Carpenter" (Child 243), see my article in note 2 above.

⁷"Edward" (Child 13) in a version from North Carolina in Sharp, I, 47. "Lord Randal" (Child 12) in a version from North Carolina in Sharp, I, 38.

⁸Cecil J. Sharp, *English County Folk Songs*, 2nd. edn. (London, 1961), pp. 216-22. The words and melody here shown are those I sang at the conference.

The musical score is written on five staves in treble clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a 4/4 time signature. The lyrics are written below the notes.

I sowed the seeds of love
 The willow tree will twist and the
 willow tree will twi - ne, often
 times have I wished I were in
 that young man's arms that once had this heart of
 mine, that once had this heart of mine.

5. In June I chose the red red rose
 For that is the flower for me.
 Often times have I plucked that red rosey bud
 Till I gained the willow tree.
6. The willow tree will twist
 And the willow tree will twine,
 Oftentimes have I wished I were in that young man's arms
 That once had this heart of mine.

This song is allusive in its use of the symbol; we need further information.

The symbol, you will all be aware, is present in the famous willow song sung by Desdemona in *Othello* the evening before she dies.

The poor soul sat sighing by a sycamore tree,
 Sing all a green willow;
 Her hand on her bosom, her head on her knee.
 Sing willow, willow, willow;
 The fresh streams ran by her, and murmur'd her moans;
 Sing willow, willow, willow;
 Her salt tears fell from her and soft'ned the stones;
 Sing willow, willow, willow.

* * *

Sing all a green willow must be my garland.
Let nobody blame him, his scorn I approve.

* * *

I called my love false love; but what said he then?
Sing willow, willow, willow;
If I court moe women, you'll couch with moe men.
Othello IV, 3, 51-2; 56-8

The song which Desdemona is trying to remember was known in England in the early seventeenth century, and several songs current about that time had refrains using the willow motif.⁹ Indeed, if one looks at how Desdemona recollects it, within the play, she does so in just the manner of someone trying to remember the words of a song. The "willow song" occurs when Desdemona is becoming aware that her husband no longer loves her. Ironies reverberate within the play, since in the previous scene Othello has most violently "scorned" her, Desdemona has also been weeping, and she is going to be accused of adultery. The willow motif itself would be recognized by the seventeenth century audience, for to wear the green willow seems to have symbolized mourning for a lost lover (man or woman), and there are many examples of its use in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries in England.¹⁰

It seems to have been a commonly understood symbol in song in England in the seventeenth century. It does occur in Scotland, in Forbes *Cantus* songbook of Aberdeen (1682).¹¹

Song Number XLVIII

1. How now, Shepherd, what means that?
Why wearst thou willows in thy hat?
Are they scarffs of red and yellow
Turn'd to branches of green willow?
They are changed, so am I;
Sorrows lives when joys do dye:

⁹W. Chappell, *Popular Music of the Olden Time* (London, 1855), I, 206-8.

¹⁰See the *OED* under *willow* I (d), as "a symbol of grief for unrequited love or the loss of a mate," and III (d), and under *willow tree*. This symbolic meaning seems to have been common from about 1560 to the end of the seventeenth century, and then more sporadic later.

¹¹John Forbes, *Cantus, Songs and Fancies* (Aberdeen, 1682), from the facsimile edition published by A. Gardner in the New Club Series (Paisley, 1879). No page number, leaf K2.

It is Phylis only thee
That makes me wear the willow tree.

* * *

4. Is it she who lov'd thee now
And Swore her oath with solemn vow?
Faith and truth is truly plight
Cannot be so soon neglect.
Faith and truth, vows and oaths
Are forgot and broken both.
Cruel Phylis false to me
Which makes me wear the willow tree.

It will readily be understood from these two stanzas that the wearing of green willow branches indicates that the beloved has been unfaithful—in short, that the wearer has been jilted. A slightly different version of this song is in *The Golden Garland of Princely Delights* (1620) and another version was printed in 1765 by Percy in the widely influential *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry*.¹² So this song, and the symbolic motif of the willow tree, was known in both Scotland and England in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, but it is not clear how current it was in actual use in Scotland.

As Desdemona's song makes clear, the willow is associated with water, and thus with tears, and indeed willow trees grow along the waterways, especially slow moving rivers. It has branches that hang down "weeping" and often drooping into the water. The long slender flexible branches, wands, withies, could be used as whips, and also may be stripped of their bark to make wickerwork. A willow wand takes root easily (all too easily), and when older a willow tree often becomes rotten and hollow at heart. It is bitter in fact (since salicylic acid, aspirin, is made from the bark) as well as in symbol. "The Bitter Withy" is an English ballad in which Mary whips her son the Christ child with a willow wand.¹³ So as metaphor and symbol the willow has many ramifications. All of these associations of the willow as a real tree combine with the association of sorrow found in Psalms 137:1-2.

By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down, yea, we wept, when we remembered Zion.

¹²Chappell, I, 377. Thomas Percy, *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* (London 1765). In the Dover reprint of 1966 this song, which Percy called "The Willow Tree," is on p. 137.

¹³"The Bitter Withy" in *The Penguin Book of Ballads*, ed. Geoffrey Grigson (London, 1975), pp. 27-8.

We hanged our harps upon the willows in the midst thereof.¹⁴

The symbol of the willow for sorrow, specifically for lost love, continued to appear in song throughout the nineteenth century in Britain, and not only in folk-song. W. S. Gilbert could use the symbol to add pathos to his sad ballad of blighted affection.

On a tree by a river a little tom-tit
Sang 'Willow, titwillow, titwillow!'

The Mikado (Act II)

This symbol is found in many folksongs from England, in more or less clearly defined form. "The Willow Tree" comes from Hampshire.

O take me to your arms, love, for keen the wind doth blow;
O take me to your arms, love, for bitter is my deep woe.
She hears me not, she heeds me not, nor will she listen to me,
While here I lie alone to die beneath the willow tree.¹⁵

This, I fear, is sob stuff, self-indulgent lamenting. Yet the symbol is clearly present, as it is in another song, a ballad. This is "The Nobleman's Wedding," in which a jilted lover attends the wedding of his former love, and reproaches the bride:

"How can you lie on another man's pillow,
You that were a true love of mine so long?
Now you have left me to wear the green willow,
Quite broken hearted for your sake alone."¹⁶

This ballad is recorded by Laws¹⁷ as a British broadside ballad current in America, where it has been found from many states. The example below is from Brant Lake, New York, and was learned from the singer's mother in 1910:

¹⁴It was pointed out in the discussion which followed the reading of this paper that this phrase might have entered American song tradition by way of negro spirituals.

¹⁵Sharp, *English County Folk Songs*, pp. 113-5.

¹⁶P. W. Joyce, *Old Irish Folk Music and Song* (New York, 1909), p. 224.

¹⁷G. Malcolm Laws, *American Balladry from British Broadside* (Philadelphia, 1957), no. P 31, p. 264.

1. Once I was invited to a Nobleman's wedding
By a false lover that proved so unkind
It causes me now to wear a green willow;
It causes me now to bear a troubled mind.

3. Saying, "How can you lie on another man's pillow
As long as you have been a sweetheart of mine?
It causes me now to wear a green willow;
It causes me now to bear a troubled mind."¹⁸

The ballad is also known from Georgia, where it was collected by Sharp, but the willow has disappeared. Instead we have:

If any one should ask the reason
Why I put on my strange attire,
I'm crossed in love, that is the reason,
I've lost my only heart's delight.

But I'll put on my strange attire,
And I will wear it for a week or two
.....
Till I change my old love for the new.

But how can you lie with your head on another man's pillow
When you proved your love so late to me?
To bear it any longer she was not able
And down at her bridegroom's feet she fell."¹⁹

The symbol of the willow has gone, been transformed into a strange attire, yet the symbolic meaning remains clear.

When we look at songs collected from the Appalachian area we find that a song may contain the phrase "willow tree," but without any symbolic meaning. The ship usually called the "Golden Vanity" becomes the "Golden Willow Tree."²⁰ Similarly, a description of a girl as "like the weeping willow"²¹ and a statement that "My dwelling is under the willow tree, but I'm

¹⁸Sara Cleveland, *Ballads and Songs of the Upper Hudson Valley*, FSA-33 (Folk-Legacy Records, Sharon, CT, 1968).

¹⁹Sharp, II, 83.

²⁰"The Golden Willow Tree" (Child 286) in *The Frank C Brown Collection of North Carolina Folklore*, ed. N. I. White (Durham, NC, 1957), IV, 120.

²¹Sharp, II, 17.

going to get married next Sunday" (in a very cheerful song)²² show that in these songs the symbolic meaning has quite gone. In one song from Virginia, willow is used for wife-beating:

Wednesday boys I went to the woods
to get me some hickories to make her good,
As I passed by the willow so green
I cut me the toughest that ever was seen.²³

Yet it seems that green willow for mourning because of a lost lover was indeed understood as a symbol, remembered and applied anew in songs from the Appalachians. "Fond Affection" seems to show this:

Many a night when you lay sleeping,
Dreaming in your sweet repose,
I, poor girl all broken hearted
Lie and listen to the wind that blows.

When I was down on low-oak river
Sitting under a weeping-willow tree
I could hardly keep from fainting
When your turned your back on me.²⁴

The symbol also seems to be present in a Southern Appalachian version of "The Cuckoo":

2. Come all you young girls,
Take warning by me;
Never place your affections
On a willow tree.
The leaves will welter
And the roots will run dry.
My true love has forsaken me,
And I cannot tell why.²⁵

More lively is a retort to an unwanted suitor, in "Loving Nancy":

²²Sharp, II, 189.

²³Sharp, I, 341.

²⁴Brown . . . *North Carolina Folklore* (Durham, NC, 1952), II, 403.

²⁵Sharp, II, 177.

Begone, begone, you proud and flattering fellow
 What bring you here to torment me?
 Go put on a suit of the green willow
 For it's my true love you never shall be.²⁶

This symbol, the wearing of green willow to show loss of a lover, was clearly current in both England and America until this century, but there is not such clear evidence from Scotland. John Ord's collection of twentieth century songs from Aberdeenshire includes a song related to "Fond Affection," but without mention of a willow tree.²⁷ He does have a song in which green laurel has a similar meaning:

But by our next meeting I hope you'll prove true
 And change the green laurel to the violet so blue.²⁸

He also has:

I'll hang my harp on a willow tree,
 And I'll off to the wars again;
 My peaceful home has no charms for me,
 The battlefield no pain.

For the lady I love will soon be a bride,
 With a diadem on her brow,
 Oh! why did she flatter my boyish pride?
 She's going to leave me now.²⁹

Ord comments that this song was apparently composed about a young man who had fallen in love with the young Queen Victoria. Whatever the circumstances, this song shows the willow motif current as a symbol for mourning for lost love in Scotland up to the twentieth century.

In conclusion, this brief over-view of a single motif shows that it was well-known in England from about 1600 onwards. In America there are examples of the words only being used, without the symbolic meaning, but it is also clear that the symbol was understood and continued to be used within the folk song tradition. However, it seems that in Scotland this particular

²⁶Sharp, II, 226.

²⁷John Ord, *Bothy Songs and Ballads* (Edinburgh, 1930), pp. 181-2.

²⁸Ord, p. 182.

²⁹Ord, pp. 56-7.

symbol did not take root except sporadically. So one is forced to return to Sharp's comments, for in this particular instance, in contrast to the occurrences of the traditional ballads, it would seem that America, including the Appalachian area, has preserved an element from English, not Scottish, folk-songs.

Newcastle upon Tyne