

The paper below was for the conference 'The Sea in Myth and Legend' 4th September 2009. The notes relate to that presentation in which myself and Liz performed the three songs at the appropriate point in the proceedings.

Songs from the Sea

This paper presents three songs written in traditional style in the context of the folklore which inspired them.

The Mermaid (Child 289)

In Brittany, the word 'morgan' means 'mermaid'. Whilst in Greece, she's a 'gorgon'. The former term seems to have taken on a life of its own in southern Italy, probably imported there by a French crusader back in the middle ages.

The Fata Morgana is a mirage occurring in the Straits of Messina, a narrow body of water between Sicily and the region of Calabria in southern Italy.

The term is Italian for Morgan le Fay who was the half-sister of King Arthur in Arthurian legend. Reputedly a sorceress and able to change shape at will, Morgan le Fay was sometimes said to live below the sea in a crystal palace that could also rise above the surface. The fata morgana effect was so named for the superstitious belief among sailors that she created illusory visions to lure men into a false port and to their death. The phenomenon is alluded to in the ballad, 'The Daemon Lover'.

*'what hills, what hills are those I see
Those hills so fair and high?
Those are the Hills of Heaven my love,
But not for you or I'*

The term first entered English usage as recently as the early 19th century, when it was used to describe an occurrence of the phenomenon in the Strait of Messina

Δεν ήταν νησί (Kazantzakis)

The myth says:

Ο Μέγας Αλέξανδρος είχε μια αδελφή γοργόνα που ζούσε στα νερά γύρω από την Κρήτη. Ποτέ δεν αποδέχθηκε το θάνατο του αδελφού της και για να πειστεί ρωτούσε τους ναυτικούς των πλοίων που περνούσαν από την περιοχή αν ήταν ακόμη ζωντανός ή όχι.

Αν η απάντηση ήταν όχι, έκλαιγε με τόσο πολλά δάκρυα που το φούσκωμα των νερών βύθιζε τα πλοία. Αλλά αν εκείνοι απαντούσαν «Ο Μέγας Αλέξανδρος είναι ακόμη ζωντανός και κατακτά τον κόσμο», τότε φύσαγε με χαρά τα πανιά τους για να τους στείλει με ασφάλεια στο σπίτι, τραγουδώντας...

Kazantzakis wrote the following short poem set to music by Hajzidakis and made famous by the singer Nana Mouskouri

Δεν ήταν νησί
Ήταν θερίο που κείτονταν στη θάλασσα
Ήταν η γοργόνα, η αδερφή του Μεγαλέξαντρου

Που θρηνούσε και φουρτούνιαζε το πέλαγο
Άμα λευτερωθεί η Κρήτη
Θα λευτερωθεί και μένα η καρδιά μου
Άμα λευτερωθεί η Κρήτη, θα γελάσω

The Mermaid (Child 289) 'Songbooks' 2008

As we were a-sailing along the Turkish shore
Wild was the gale and the billows did roar
What did we espy not ten leagues from the land?
But a mermaid with a comb and a glass in her hand

Oh where is King Arthur my brother? She cries
The truth you must tell me, the truth and no lies
For if he is living then safe home you'll go free
But if he is dead, you shall sink in the sea.

Then up spoke our captain and a wise man was he
I have ne'er seen your brother and the truth this must be
Though I've looked well to windward and a very long way
If he's living or dead, I'm afraid I can't say

Oh where ...

Then up spoke our bosun, a fine salty tar
I've ne'er seen your brother and I've travelled afar
I ne'er saw him at Spithead, Cape Horn or Cathay
If he's living or dead, well I can't rightly say

Oh where ...

Then up spoke our cabin boy, just ten years old
My dear mother has taught me that truth must be told
For the truth shames the devil, as you very well know
King Arthur he died many long years ago

Alas for my brother! The mermaid she cries
Now truth you have told me, the truth and no lies
Since he is not living you ne'er shall go free...
And our ship turned beam over, and sank in the sea!

Paul Davenport © Nov. 2007

The House that Jack built

In 1981 I travelled the highways and byways of Holderness in search of a dance tradition which was believed to have existed in that area.

The trail of dead ends and book references eventually led me to the village of Roos where the retired butcher, 80 year old Alan Foster gave me my first collected dances. The following song, however stems from the incidental reminiscences which Alan never tired of delivering.

'...ah,' he pause, 'that'd be the year that my father woke me in the middle of the night and put me in the horse and cart. We went to Easington where a ship was on the beach.' He

paused dramatically, 'course, it wasn't there the next day!' He grinned and waited for my comment.

'Did the tide take it back out?' I asked naively. He laughed, 'Come with me lad,' he rose from his chair and beckoned me to follow.

In the back yard was a veranda, a glassed roofed structure which stretched along the backs of the four cottages. The roof was supported by a long, tapering, round wooden beam.

'That's a ships mast' I said, the penny dropped as my eyes became accustomed to the strangely contrived timber supports to the structure.

I've read about smugglers and pirates but they have eluded my presence, now here I was with a wrecker, or at least one complicit in this long standing maritime tradition. I met another last year in Devon, I understand that there are some cheap Yamaha motorbikes to be had round here' I remarked. 'They was BMWs!' he retorted then suddenly check himself, 'so they says, so they says.' He added with a cheeky grin

The House that Jack Built 'Songbooks' 2008

There's a lamp on the cliff top that flickers at night
Offers poor weary sailors both peace and delight
But it beckons the helmsman to rocks, out of sight
On the shore 'neath the House that Jack built.

They that trust to the light and pay no heed to charts
May soon find themselves stranded in strange foreign parts
There are those on this shore with the blackest of hearts
And they meet in the House that Jack built.

Chorus There is nobody knows, for there's no-one can tell
 What lies 'neath the water that flows in the well
 But someone is dead, for they're ringing the bell
 In the church near the House that Jack built

When a ship strikes the rocks, why then 'tis our plan
To plunder her cargo – take all that we can
Then we scour the shoreline and kill every man
On the rocks 'neath the House that Jack built

Then each gathers round with his horse and his cart
For to break up the wreck and disperse every part
To build stables and houses with consummate art
That look much like the house that Jack built

Chorus There is nobody knows, for there's no-one can tell
 What lies 'neath the water that flows in the well
 But someone is dead, for they're ringing the bell
 In the church near the House that Jack built

Now we watch for the excise and coastguard each day
For if they find our hoard e'er we get it away.
Why, then there'll be much more than Duty to pay
On what lies 'neath the House that Jack built

But they came on their horses while we took our chance
And they'd muffled their hooves so we'd not hear 'em prance
And now twenty-one wreckers are learning to dance

On a tree near the House that Jack built

Chorus There is nobody knows, for there's no-one can tell
 What lies 'neath the water that flows in the well
 But someone is dead, for they're ringing the bell
 In the church near the House that Jack built

Paul Davenport © Dec 2007

Weary the Tide

In my early childhood in the 1950s, I recall that, every morning the milk was delivered by an amazon called Dorothy. She dragged a cart which was stacked high with metal milk crates and she sang or whistled as she walked. The house opposite was occupied by the Jagger family and the father, Jack, was a 'sparks' or wireless operator on the trawlers. On one memorable occasion the taxi came to take himself and Jimmy Milne, a Scot who had the same line of work, to the dock for their fishing trip. As they went to the taxi door, Dorothy arrived whistling away without a care in the world.

It was years later that I found out the reason for what happened next.

The two men began arguing for what I thought was no reason. Jimmy stormed off leaving Jack to pay for the taxi. In the event the transport left empty. My mate John was Jack's son but he never said anything and seemed to regard the event as normal and unremarkable. I do remember it was a Friday.

Of course Jimmy, as a Scot was only too aware of the dangers of pigs, black cats, hares and whistling women, most especially, on a Friday. The famed Witches of Dunbar had whistled up storms and this superstition lies at the root of this song.

Just north of what is left of the village of Covehithe, Suffolk there is a strange phenomenon, a tree that stands in the sea. The trunk is carved with the names of what one presumes are young lovers. Not particularly unusual although the flints, driven into the whitened wood, almost like votive offerings add a particularly strange air to this beautiful beach.

The following song unites these folkloric 'facts' in a typically 19th century setting.

Weary the Tide

Oh Billy, you are my darling
Oh Billy, my own dear lad
Will you meet with me by moonlight
You're the only love I ever had
 Come meet with me down on the seashore
 Come to me down by the sea
 And I will be your own true love
 Under the trysting tree

 Weary the tide comes up, weary the tide goes down
 Rises and falls by the light of the moon 'til it washes away the town

She met with her own true lover
She met with him 'neath the moon
By the tree that stands in the water
But she granted her favour too soon
 Oh Billy now don't you dare leave me

A promise you made unto me
And you carved it with flint in the moonlight
On the trunk of the trysting tree

But he's laughed as she lay there a-weeping
Ah, your favour you gifted too soon
Where's your witness to what I had promised
Under the light of the moon?
Then he's sailed him away to the northward
Where Kessingland shone on the lee
And he's taken his boat to the fishing
Never thought of the trysting tree

But she screamed as the tide was turning
Oh Billy you shalln't leave me
And her love turned to hatred a-burning
And her heart grew as cold as can be
The pain it prick'd sharp as a thistle
As she turned and she faced out to sea
Put fingers to lips and she's whistled
Under the trysting tree

There's a gale has sprung out of the Lowlands
And it howled like a poor hell-bound soul
And it battered from Southwold to Yarmouth
Left scarcely a vessel whole
Oh Billy it cried, Come find me
Oh Billy return unto me
For the promise you made, it shall bind ye
Unto the trysting tree

Cold was the spring tide rising
Cold was the ice on the broad
Cold were the sightless eyes gazing
As she waits for the lad she adored
Small wavelets carried him to her
Lifted his head on her knee
And the sea-wrack held fast and entwined them
Unto the trysting tree