

# Two Gardeners of Song: Exploiters or Preservers?

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Recent scholarship on the folksong revival in both Great Britain and the United States has emphasized the interventionist nature of the movement. A series of charges has been made against professional folklorists: that they exploited informants for their own gain, that they used an imagined age of innocence as an excuse to keep the lower classes in their place, and that they exploited folk melodies for scholarship or composition. While we recognize the harm done by many collectors, this paper examines the work of two women who represented folk music research at its best: Annabel Morris Buchanan (1888-1983) of Marion, Virginia, and Ann Geddes Gilchrist (1863-1954) of Lancaster, England.

One of the leading critics of folk intervention in this country is David Whisnant, who wrote extensively on Buchanan's work in *All That Is Native and Fine*. While Whisnant is careful to avoid blaming Buchanan for the racist excesses of the other leaders of the White Top Folk Festival, he does include her in the circle of city slickers who he feels manipulated the music of poorer rural folk for their own profit (Whisnant 1983).

Two books present criticism similar to Whisnant's but concern the folk revival in England. Georgina Boyes, in *The Imagined Village*, suggests that the English Folk Revival is in fact a construction of an idyllic past that never existed:

On the one hand, urban popular culture, its context and consumers, could be demonstrated to be inferior, because folk culture had such high aesthetic, academic, and historical connotations. Conversely, on the other hand, as a form of working-class expressive culture, folksong could also be presented as evidence of the artistic creativity of the proletariat. . . . From its earliest inception, what differentiates [the Folk Revival] from

earlier publication of songs and dances collected from the people is its directly interventionist nature. Folk song and dance are not to be transcribed for archival purposes or popular entertainment but used as an instrument to effect a cultural change (1993, 3-4).

In his book *Fakesong*, Dave Harker carries the arguments of Boyes and Whisnant into a specifically Marxist context. Noting that preservation of folk culture is encouraged by repressive governments in Eastern Europe, Zimbabwe, South Africa, and Great Britain, he concludes that these states reinforce nationalism in an attempt to "fend off danger of the only power which can challenge them—international working-class solidarity" (1985, xi). While Harker does not specifically attack Gilchrist, concentrating on more famous figures such as Francis James Child and Cecil Sharp (1985, xiv), he makes his goals clear:

Even in a sane world, after the revolution, it will not be possible to take concepts such as "folksong" and "ballad" out to be shot. However, they stand a fair chance of being put on trial, and then being locked up, or subjected to a lengthy period of political re-education . . . there is no point in attempting . . . to rehabilitate such concepts. They are conceptual lumber, and they have to go (1985, xii).

Against such formidable opponents, then, we spring to the defense of our two gardeners of song.

It is all too easy to underestimate the contributions of Gilchrist and Buchanan to folk music research. Gilchrist, in remote Lancaster, was never as visible as the London folklorists, and she did not leave major manuscripts or published books as Cecil Sharp did, but between 1906 and 1952 she contributed more articles and annotations to the *Journal of the English Folk Dance and Song Society* than any other single member. As Margaret Dean-Smith pointed out, "a very great deal of Anne Gilchrist's genius—her incomparable knowledge of melody—found expression in a vast correspondence rather than in published work" (1955, 218). Cecil Sharp, Lucy Broadwood, and John Masfield are only a few of those who deferred to Gilchrist's expertise in British folk song.

Buchanan, in addition to doing the lion's share of the work of organizing the White Top Folk Festival in southwestern Virginia from 1931 to 1936, gathered together almost a thousand folk songs, tunes, and variants for the National Federation of Music Clubs' American Music Project. These items were donated to the Archive of Folk Music at the Library of Congress in the early 1960s. Buchanan is similar to Gilchrist in that much of her stature as a folklorist does not depend on published works, though she did have one book and several articles published during the active part of her career. The main influence Buchanan had,

however, was through her correspondence with other folklorists and through the contacts she made with classical musicians, folk musicians, composers, conductors, teachers, music club women, and publishers during the years of the White Top Folk Festival and the Virginia State Choral Festival. She was the catalyst for many a project in her efforts to bring together her two worlds—the worlds of folk music and classical music (Wolz 1983).

Annabel Morris Buchanan was a composer whose involvement with folk music transformed her career. While studying the work of English folklorist Cecil Sharp, she discovered that he had adapted his modal classification of Appalachian folk songs from a system developed by collector-scholar Ann Geddes Gilchrist. In the early 1930s, the two women commenced a long and productive correspondence.

Buchanan, the daughter of a minister, heard folk hymns as a child but soon began studying classical music. Specializing in piano and composition, she received a certificate from Landon Conservatory in Dallas, Texas, at the age of eighteen. The young woman married and moved to Marion, Virginia, where she became active in a variety of organizations, including gardening and music clubs. As a gardener, she transformed "three acres full of poison ivy and tin cans and wild black-berry vines" into a flower-filled paradise (Buchanan 1935, 13). As a musician, she quickly moved into positions of leadership in local, state, and regional branches of the American Federation of Music Clubs (Wolz 1983, 4).

It was as president of the Virginia federation that she first met Richmond pianist and composer John Powell. In a 1928 letter to Powell, Buchanan wrote, "I am working hard now on the state chorus and music in Virginia's rural schools. . . . P.S. I've written two new songs" (Powell Papers 12 October 1928). The combination of organizational and creative work is a constant theme in her letters.

At the time she met Powell, Buchanan was already a successful composer. Her songs had been published by G. Schirmer and Carl Fischer, and several had been performed by singers with national reputations (Wolz 1983, 2), but her style was based entirely on the European art song. Powell's interest in Anglo-American folk music introduced her to a new field of melodic sources as well as the study of folk rhythms and modes. The two became frequent correspondents and Buchanan often submitted songs or sketches to Powell for criticism. In an undated letter, Buchanan writes, "I let composition go absolutely for folk study, for months, and then only a little, in folk style as far as possible, and I don't believe I could ever write a poor tune again, after being so steeped in these things" (Powell Papers n.d.).

Meanwhile, a young woman of Scottish ancestry had grown up in

Lancashire, England. A 1935 interview with Margaret Dean-Smith describes Anne Gilchrist's childhood:

[She lived] . . . outside Lancaster in a spacious Victorian house high above the estuary of the Lune. Its windows looked westwards to the lakeland mountains, the sea, and the countryside where as a girl she had walked, sailed and fished, and exchanged plants with the future Regius Professor of Botany. . . (1957-58, 43).

Anne Gilchrist was a distant cousin of the Scottish minister Neil Livingstone, who was responsible for the reprint in 1864 of the *Great Scottish Psalter* of 1635 (Dean-Smith 1957-58, 43). Although she had classical music training, including a thorough exposure to the "obsolete ecclesiastical modes" (Dean-Smith 1957-58, 44), Gilchrist traced her interest in folk music to a much earlier time:

I might claim that my interest in folk-song began while I was still illiterate (which some collectors seem to think an advantage in a folk-singer). Our mother came of a musical family and sang often in the nursery, generally with the latest baby on her knee. . . . At the age of six I began to store folk tunes in my mind, beginning with singing-games learnt during Christmas revels in our grandfather's house in Cheshire. . . . Later, I became familiar with old Scotch traditional songs sung by my father and mother. One favourite of my father's had a fascinating refrain of "Sing yarrady airrum . . ." sung with a strong "burr." This was, I think, the first tune I ever noted from a singer. But by this time, having made the acquaintance of the modern major and minor modes, I lost for the time being my early innocence of ear, falling foul of the unsharpened seventh of my father's tune, and suggesting that the note should surely be sharp, not natural. "No, no, no," he replied, with a vigorous shake of the head, adhering with conviction to his "flattened" note. . . . So I conceded the "flat seventh," and learnt to note tunes as I heard them—"My version, right or wrong!" (Gilchrist 1942, 62).

One of the fruitful products of the Buchanan-Gilchrist correspondence was a refinement of the system of modal scales used to transcribe folk tunes. Gilchrist, who collected extensively from native singers, observed a similarity between their "irregular" pitch patterns and the modes used in notating Medieval chant. She codified this transcription system (Gilchrist 1911) and Cecil Sharp made adaptations to it. While this whole approach to folk music may be perceived as Eurocentric, it enabled collectors to transcribe tunes into notation which could be performed by classically-trained musicians. Boyes objects that "songs

with tunes in the 'ancient church modes' were privileged and treated as representative rather than unusual forms," while more recent songs were rejected (Boyes 1993, 14), but both Buchanan and Gilchrist found many examples of modal tunes in their collecting. If they were guilty of being less than statistically fair to the non-modal variety, this is likely to be an example of a taste for the exotic rather than egregious flaunting of class privilege.

Buchanan, building on the work of Gilchrist and Sharp, developed her own system of analysis and presented it to the first International Congress of the American Musicological Society in New York in 1939. Called "A Neutral Mode," Buchanan's system acknowledged that certain tones in the melodies sung by native musicians did not fit even the church modes, but were "neutral" or halfway-between (for example) B-flat and B-natural (Buchanan 1944).

Buchanan found that one of the greatest changes the "folk work" made in her life was that it changed the way she composed original music. In *Folk Hymns of America* (1938), she collected fifty melodies—many of which she had learned from her parents—and published them with simple harmonizations. She also made more elaborate settings of folk tunes for mixed chorus and these works were sung by amateur and professional groups throughout the U.S. Lastly, she composed original works which utilized folk modes and rhythms.

Whisnant speaks critically of collectors who exploit folk tunes as raw material for original creative work (1983, 236). Buchanan, on the other hand, was quite clear that she was operating within a Western tradition in which Beethoven, Tchaikovsky, Bartok, and countless others had used *their* national folk heritage in the same way. In her opening statement as National Federation of Music Clubs chair of the American Music Project, she said, "Great composers of all nationalities have turned to their native folk music as the inspiration for some of their greatest works, being familiar with it from their cradles. Ours, which includes some of the most beautiful in the world, has been neglected. . . ." (Buchanan Papers). Rather than exploitative, Buchanan saw herself as atoning for the sins of omission of other American composers who showed insufficient respect for their own national heritage.

Boyes, Harker, and Whisnant all criticize folklorists for exploiting their informants rather than assisting their sometimes desperate financial conditions. All three authors find examples of the crassest insensitivity on the part of the leading collectors. Boyes, for example, says:

But proposing to fellow members of the Folk Song Society, in agreeable West End surroundings, that the only way to avoid racial catastrophe was to collect folksongs was one thing.

Actually journeying to rural areas to knock on unknown cottage doors with a request that the inhabitants sing to you, proved to hold fewer attractions (1993, 41).

Harker provides a much more damning example. In describing the comfortable "field work" of Sabine Baring-Gould, a vicar and country gentleman who invited the "peasants" to come to his house just long enough to sing a few songs, he quotes this story: "I had in old Hard. Then and there I obtained from him a further crop of ballads. That was the last reaping, for in the ensuing bitter frost the aged man was found dead, frozen on a heap of stones by the roadside" (Harker 1985, 159). Harker reacts in justifiable rage:

"I had in old Hard." It's as though the crippled ex-stone-breaker, living with his wife on four pounds a year, was rather like a dumb animal in Baring-Gould's eyes, or even the inanimate natural force, the "field," which that image of "reaping" a "crop" implies. What the tenant or landowner had to do, presumably was to extract all that was left of Hard's cultural property, and then let the forces of nature do their worst, while parsons and gentlefolk sat round their blazing fires, enjoying the "treasure" that had been preserved for their own kind (Harker 1985, 159).

Once again, Gilchrist and Buchanan provide examples to counter these accusations. Both journeyed into the countryside, relishing a chance to experience a sense of adventure which was seldom available to women in their societies. In a letter written to Gilchrist on 4 September 1936, Buchanan described her feelings:

I am enchanted at the opportunity this summer and fall to run around some in the mountains, having grown fond of the joys of "hitch-hiking"! I have had a MARVELOUS time gypsying and vagabonding through the summer in three states, maybe sleeping in some mountain cabin or the car. It was such an adventure, I shall never forget it. And I collected such splendid material (Buchanan Papers).

Gilchrist loved to tell of "[an] old sailor at Southport, from whom I took down shanties and sea songs in a dark little cave of a shop . . . encrusted with dog-collars and tools and gadgets of all kinds . . . always ready to search his memory for songs" (Gilchrist 1942, 62).

Gilchrist described herself as being "on friendly terms with all my singers," and she told of her own failure to get a song she badly wanted from a man who was said to sing it frequently to his wife. Although the wife and Gilchrist tried valiantly to persuade him to sing, "he sat as mute as an oyster, though not without an 'I-could-an-I-would' twinkle in

his eye" (Gilchrist 1942, 63).

Buchanan invited folk musicians to her home and established warm, caring relationships with them. On one occasion, she wrote to John Powell that a child named Virginia Russell (the daughter of one of Buchanan's informants) had died; the doll Buchanan had given her at Christmas was in her arms. "It seems so strange that I started out as a collector, and am gradually finding myself adopted as an intimate family friend by first one, then another of these folk musician families" (Powell Papers 9 January 1932). She often went on intuition to find her informants: ". . . a man just came to the door to sell blackberries. I sized him up instantly, and carried on my maidenly advances toward him, with the result that he's coming tomorrow with four gallons of berries, a guitar, and some folk songs" (Powell Papers 6 August 1931).<sup>1</sup>

Buchanan argued vehemently with other White Top organizers that the musicians deserved better pay and better working conditions, and she often employed or found employment for folk musicians. One of her favorites was a singer named Council Cruise. On 5 January 1932, she wrote to John Powell that Council Cruise was in jail, and several other "folk" were ill and in trouble. In February, Cruise was released, and Buchanan tried to find suitable work for him. "How could he settle down in a factory after running a still? And personally, I'd lots rather he'd run his still. . . . We can't make him over" (Powell Papers 7 February 1932).

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In an article published in *Better Homes & Gardens* in 1935, Buchanan describes the earlier failures and later successes of her gardening ventures that culminates in a vision of Eden:

A wild garden and rock garden have been planted at the rear, with myrtle-carpeted stepping-stones along a woodland trail in the "Forest of Arden," thru hemlock, rhododendron, dogwood, redbuds, ferns, and many plants and trees brought in from the mountains. . . . Here may birds sing and children play and elders read and dream (1935, 15).

Intervention, yes; destruction, no. Plants may be taken from the forest and continue to grow in *both* forest and city. So may songs. In several ways, Buchanan and Gilchrist stand in strong contrast to the exploiters whom Whisnant, Boyes, and Harker criticize: they did not make large personal profits from their "folk work," they got to know and appreciate their informants as individual human beings, and they grew up in households which honored the oral transmission of old songs. To complete the analogy: while large-scale, for-profit farming can represent a very destructive intervention in nature, few would criticize the efforts of those whose flower gardens preserve little havens of beauty for family

and community. Let us not fail to appreciate those whose collections of old songs preserve a treasure which can be enjoyed by all.

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### Note

<sup>1</sup>It is interesting that the humorous "seduction" depicted here represents a reversal of the gendered convention described by Debora Kodish. In the Kodish encounter, a male folklorist depicts himself as the fairy-tale hero who awakens the silent female informant to song (Kodish, 1993, 43).

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