Revisiting the sea shanty I

**Collecting the sea shanty: British maritime identity and Atlantic musical cultures in the early twentieth century**

**Abstract**

This paper explores an important phase in the survival of the sea shanty as a collected, recorded and documented musical form. The final demise of the sailing ship as an economic mode of transport in the early twentieth century inspired a plethora of books and memoirs celebrating the age of sail, and many authors focused on the sea shanty. Collectors debated the accuracy of written versions, the sanitisation of lyrics and the likely origins of particular songs, trying to establish both the ‘authentic’ shanty, and their own varied maritime qualifications for writing about it. The shanty also became important to wider debates about national identity, with its multicultural origins sitting awkwardly with the mainstream folk movement’s search for an English musical tradition.

**Keywords**

Sea shanty; folk song; identity; nationalism; race

For all its apparent antiquity, the sea shanty as we know it is the product of two rather short periods of history. Shantying was only in widespread use as an oral, working culture from about the 1840s to the 1880s, as the deep-water sailing-ship industry expanded to its maximum global reach, before declining sharply with the rise of steam. Then, collectors in the decade before the Great War created a published canon of shanties, which in turn became the core point of reference for subsequent revivals throughout the twentieth century. The modern shanty therefore emerged from perhaps three or four decades of use, and then one or two more of active collecting and committal to writing and print. As such, it offers some valuable evidence for the construction, preservation and transmission of musical forms; for the wider meanings attributed to them; and in particular for the role of a maritime folkway in forming wider popular culture.

This article begins by locating the work of those early-twentieth century shanty collectors in the wider folk-song movement of the period, and also in the context of changing maritime technologies and working conditions. It then has two major sections. The first explores ideas of authenticity and authentication, as shanty collectors sought to demonstrate both their own maritime credentials and the validity of their chosen songs. The second considers the complicated ways in which shanties came to represent an important form of Britishness, filtered through wider insecurities and prejudices about the influence of African, European and American musical forms on British culture. Both approaches cast light on the collectors as well as the musical culture they studied, and suggest that the making of the sea shanty is worth exploring further at the intersection of maritime, musical and cultural histories. Doing that requires establishing the core source base from the published and archive materials of the collectors themselves, but also gathering more scattered evidence from authors who commented on shanties in the course of travel narratives or maritime memoirs. Important as they are in themselves, the published canonical shanty collections have even more to reveal when placed in their wider contemporary frame.

**Collecting folk, collecting the shanty**

Shanty collecting in the 1900s needs to be understood in a number of inter-connected contexts. It was part of the wider folk-song revival of that era, itself an element in broader questioning of modernity, urbanisation, industrialisation and technology that harkened back to an imagined agricultural past. Although prominent in the recent historiography of ‘Englishness’, the importance of this disparate coalition of backward-looking interests is ultimately debatable. Mandler, for instance, discusses various anti-modern elements, including the folk-song revivers, and argues that such thinking was never common beyond ‘highly articulate but fairly marginal artistic groups’.[[1]](#footnote-1) In nautical terms, shanty collecting was also part of a wider literature that included memoirs, histories, novels and travelogues celebrating Britain’s seafaring heritage, in a period when the demise of the sailing ship was disrupting long-standing assumptions about maritime character and culture.[[2]](#footnote-2) So whatever doubts there are about the place of peasant ruralism in British identity, the maritime aspect of that national culture offers another set of evidence to test against the motives and experiences of the shanty collectors and their landward folk-music counterparts.

There is now a substantial literature about the early twentieth-century folk-song revival, much of it assessing the work of key figures like Cecil Sharp, Lucy Broadwood, Frank Kidson and Ralph Vaughan Williams. Sharp was (and remains) a particularly divisive figure, represented variously as a dynamic visionary shaking up a moribund antiquarian field, or a self-promoting careerist exploiting his research informants for his own political and financial ends. Although the debates have sometimes been bad-tempered, they have encouraged continuing research into the early collectors and their informants.[[3]](#footnote-3) Recent scholarship recognises the achievements of these collectors in rescuing evidence that would certainly have been lost, while also exploring the undoubted prejudices—particularly relating to class, gender and literacy—through which they approached their work. This has generated a rich literature on the social and cultural forces that created both the folk song movement and the material it gathered and interpreted.[[4]](#footnote-4)

The equivalent literature on early maritime music collectors is much thinner. Important figures like Laura Smith, W. B. Whall and Frank Bullen were rarely controversial in their day, and have attracted little academic attention since. They might still be very obscure but for the efforts of Stan Hugill, whose 1960s shanty research combined a careful critique of the early shanty collectors with thoughtful reflections on his own experience. One of the very last working shantymen in the 1930s, Hugill had even tried to revive shantying when he worked on German sail-training ships in the 1950s. He reported that the shanty ‘did not have the glorious comeback we had all hoped for’, because those huge, mechanised vessels had so little in common with their predecessors of the previous century. Fortunately, however, this spurred him to produce his own series of books, pioneering modern shanty scholarship and bringing the original collectors’ work to the attention of a new generation.[[5]](#footnote-5) In the 1990s, Valerie Burton used sailors’ songs to open up new debates about life at sea and on the waterfront, and there is important research most recently on the musical and social histories surrounding particular shanties and other sea songs.[[6]](#footnote-6) There is also some work on James Carpenter, an important collector active in the 1920s, and on editing and transmitting shanties.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Most of the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century shanty collections were published by specialists, who usually came from a maritime rather than a musical or folklore background, and were therefore rather separate from the mainstream. There is evidence that shanty and general collectors were aware of each other’s work, but that the shanty collectors were not really part of the folk music networks. W. B. Whall, who published his *Ships, Sea Songs and Shanties* in 1910, subsequently corresponded with the folk-dance collector Mary Neal, and offered advice on how best to interpret the shanty ‘Shenandoah’. However, he had not heard of the long-established folk-song expert Frank Kidson until Neal mentioned him.[[8]](#footnote-8) Cecil Sharp was aware of Whall’s book, and also that of Frank Bullen, adding their page references to his own notes on shanties, but there is nothng to suggest that they were ever in direct contact.[[9]](#footnote-9) Mary Neal thought that Whall was ‘anti-Sharp’ because he was a cousin of the early music and dance revivalist Nellie Chaplin, but Whall’s view, or even knowledge, of this link is unknown.[[10]](#footnote-10)

The mainstream collectors were certainly not ignorant of sea shanties, and most gathered a large number in their course of their fieldwork. It is striking, however, that they usually compartmentalised shanties into small sections of larger works, and published few collections devoted specifically to shanties. Cecil Sharp’s best-known manifesto on folk-song was overwhelmingly rural in focus, with only a page on maritime music.[[11]](#footnote-11) When he did publish a book of sea shanties, he called it *English Folk-Chanteys*, a strange title that hardly advertised its contents when compared with the much more explicit titles of Whall and Bullen.[[12]](#footnote-12) Lucy Broadwood and Anne Gilchrist had considerable expertise in shanties, but their published shanty commentary was much smaller than their work on landward musical forms.[[13]](#footnote-13) Frank Kidson’s 1915 survey had only brief comments on ‘sea songs’ and included shanties in a broader section on ‘songs of labour’.[[14]](#footnote-14)

None of the major collectors on either side explained this separation, but it is possible to suggest some reasons. First, a key premise of the mainstream folk revival movement was that any surviving national folk culture would be found among the rural peasantry, and most collectors were so focused on countryside ‘survivals’ that they even neglected the musical cultures of older industrial districts, let alone those sung away at sea.[[15]](#footnote-15) In any case, the landward focus adopted by Sharp and his associates was far from unusual in popular and scholarly culture. In a paradox that remains under-researched, British commentators have long noted that their island nation seems strangely ignorant of life and work at sea. Frank Bullen, who came to shanty collecting after a longer career writing about maritime matters, complained in 1900 that the ‘astounding ignorance of maritime matters manifested by the British people generally makes one gasp in amazement’.[[16]](#footnote-16)

Another factor marginalising shanties in the work of mainstream folk collectors may have been their character as work-songs. Again, this relates to the problem of the rural model. Sharp assumed that farm labourers’ working songs had once been common but had died out long before, and could find little evidence of them. In addition, he argued that it was no surprise that ‘the labourer should find more recreation in songs of romance and adventure than in those which remind him of his toil’.[[17]](#footnote-17) This may also account for shanties having a lower profile even than other maritime songs, in particular those known as ‘forebitters’, which were sung in leisure hours at sea and in port.[[18]](#footnote-18) George Clark reported seamen singing ‘Ratcliffe Highway’, a song about sailors and prostitutes in London, alongside ‘Annie Laurie’, which had no maritime content at all, but had become popular as a sentimental song of attachment in the wake of the Crimean War.[[19]](#footnote-19) Forebitters were often fashionable songs by popular figures like Charles Dibden, Barry Cornwall and Allan Cunningham, and as such they were closer to the rural songs and ballads that feature most prominently in the work of the folk revivalists. Proper work songs were also hard to convey meaningfully in print, and were thought likely to confuse a popular audience that lacked knowledge of the rhythms and routines of the labour involved.[[20]](#footnote-20)

That specialised purpose of the shanty certainly encouraged the assumption that it had to be treated separately. Shanties existed to help the hard physical labour of hauling ropes and turning capstans on sailing ships. One member of the crew, the shantyman, would sing the short lines that carried the narrative of the song and set its pace. In between, the crew would sing the even shorter chorus, which was stressed on particular sounds as everyone pulled or heaved in unison. By all accounts this provided encouragement and lightened the work. The two main types of shanty mapped onto the pushing motion needed for turning capstans, and the hauling actions for handling ropes and sails, but at its height the repertoire had songs for many particular ship-board functions. So, by way of example, Frank Bullen’s version of a well-known hauling shanty ran as follows, with emphasis on the points where the crew would be pulling the ropes:

Shantyman: Boney was a warrior

Crew: Way ay ya

Shantyman: Boney was a warrior

Crew: John France-wa[[21]](#footnote-21)

This co-ordinated, manual working culture declined as steamships took an ever-greater share of maritime trade in the later decades of the nineteenth century. Work on steamers was still hard and dangerous, but there was no longer a need for teams of men to haul and heave sails. Indeed, shanties even became less relevant to the last generation of sailing ships, because powered winches and other labour-saving devices changed their working practices too. In the early 1880s, there were voices bemoaning the extinction of the sailing-ship mariner and his music, and a complicated sense of nostalgia and mythology clearly surrounded the shanty even while it was still a working form, let alone afterwards.[[22]](#footnote-22)

There are ironies in this separation of shanties from the mainstream folk-song revival, and in the idea that it was a marginal form of only specialist interest. Many of the arguments made by collectors like Cecil Sharp about tradition, oral transmission and national identity could have been greatly strengthened by a more detailed knowledge of shanties, which in some ways offer better evidence than the supposedly rural canon that he favoured. The sections that follow address those points in more detail, starting with the complex question of authenticity in shanty collecting.

**Measures of authenticity**

Music scholars see authenticity as a fundamental and controversial issue in folk culture and collecting. Brocken, for example, considers the search for authenticity a ‘recipe for musical parochialism’. Almost inevitably, he notes, collectors seeking the ‘pure’ form of a song have ignored not only the myriad social and cultural influences that changed and adapted songs over time, but also their own prejudices and interpretations, which added another layer of mediation and editing to whatever they finally committed to print.[[23]](#footnote-23) Another long-standing thread is the desire to establish authenticity issues within and between social science disciplines. Sociological and historical aspects of authenticity may not always agree with more psychological or literary attributes, because the study of folk music requires a sense of the social groups that compose, perform and transmit it, as well as considerations of the ideals and impacts of the music itself on the performers and listeners.[[24]](#footnote-24)

The early shanty collectors cast some useful light on authenticity, and specifically on the extent to which specialised musical forms can be claimed by those who had some personal experience of their performance. Already aware that they could never recapture the working context of sea shanties, collectors tried to establish their own credentials as well as claiming authenticity for the songs they recorded. From our perspective, collectors were active participants in an ‘authenticity flow’, which ran from the seafarers who had sung the songs in the mid-late nineteenth century, through themselves as informed intermediaries (sometimes also performers in their youth) and onward to the public and posterity.[[25]](#footnote-25) As will become clear, the shanty offers evidence of a particularly complicated authenticity flow that was far from linear. Shanties were constantly modified by the seafarers who used them, selectively collected and published, and then argued over by competing authorities. More recently, successive revivals have added further forks and loops in the flow, not least because they draw upon, and in turn adapt, the work of 1900s and 1960s collectors alike.

Shanty collectors’ experiences at sea differentiated them from the mainstream folk revival authors of the era, who were rarely products of the rural culture that they favoured in their researches. Revealingly, when Cecil Sharp published his book of shanties in 1914, he stressed that his work focused on ‘aesthetic’ rather than ‘technical’ matters, suggesting that direct knowledge of the music’s working context was somehow more important to a maritime collector than to a rural folklorist. Sharp nonetheless made clear that he had collected his shanties from former seamen, most notably John Short of Watchet, Somerset, who had spent fifty years at sea.[[26]](#footnote-26) Even among seafarers, there was some debate over whose experiences were more likely to generate authentic shanty collections. Frank Bullen had worked on many different sailing ships in the West Indies and US trades in the 1870s, and had actually been a shantyman. He subsequently qualified as a mate and joined the officers. This career seemed to him more authentic than those of previous authors of shanty books, who had been at sea in what he called ‘pleasant’ circumstances. Bullen also thought that his lack of musical qualifications was an asset in ‘preserving original natural music’: a collection of shanties could only be valuable if it was taken from ‘the lips of one accustomed to sing them, one with a good memory, a good ear, but no academic musical training whatsoever’.[[27]](#footnote-27)

W. B. Whall, a retired sea captain who was presumably one of Bullen’s implicit targets, made rather different claims to authenticity. He went to sea after receiving some musical education—his family had originally intended him to be a clergyman—and kept notes of the shanties sung on his ships in the 1860s. He stopped collecting in the 1870s when he believed that shanties had all but died out. Whall had robust and revealing views about competing collections, and he or his publisher evidently had some qualms about his bluntness, because he dropped these criticisms from the introduction to his second edition.[[28]](#footnote-28) Younger seafarers, claimed Whall, were unreliable collectors because they could not have heard shanties in proper use; one such author (un-named, but probably Frederick Davies) compounded that failing by turning the shanties into an art form rather than trying to present them as sung at sea.[[29]](#footnote-29) Anne Gilchrist thought that Whall’s ‘practical knowledge of chanties is better than his theoretical knowledge’.[[30]](#footnote-30) Whall would probably have taken that as a compliment, and was in turn critical of volumes that owed more to the British Museum reading room than to life on board ship.

Whall particularly doubted that women could be effective shanty collectors, because sailors, allegedly ‘shy with ladies’, would never sing an authentic shanty when approached in their boarding houses by a female collector. Whall’s most likely target was Laura Alexandrine Smith, who published a pioneering volume in 1888.[[31]](#footnote-31) Smith could not claim direct seafaring experience, but she had her own case for authenticity. Her father was the Russian vice-consul in Newcastle upon Tyne, giving her maritime contacts across northern Europe. She interviewed seafarers who were recommended to her by consuls and by the officials of Sailors’ Homes. Unusually, Smith tried to uncover shanty traditions from other European nations, and found wide variations. Scandinavian and Dutch seamen were reported as singing general songs about the sea, and songs shared with working-class culture on shore, rather than specialised songs to accompany ship-board tasks. Russians had working shanties, but also favoured their imperial anthem. It would have been hard for such methods to capture the actual working use of songs at sea, but Smith’s work set some standards for international data-collection and investigation.

By the 1920s, it was inevitably becoming harder for new authors to claim personal experience of working shanties, but they tried nonetheless. Richard Terry approved of Whall’s book, hailing his mix of musical training and seafaring experience, which was analogous to Terry’s own. A leading figure in the recovery and revival of liturgical music, Terry modestly described himself as a church organist. Still, he took care to set out his maritime qualifications. He had grown up with shanties, he explained, and when collecting them in later life had been able to compare those versions with the shanties sung to him by ‘sailor uncles and grand uncles’ (the shipowning Runciman family) in the 1860s and 1870s.[[32]](#footnote-32) He also claimed as a credential the fact that he had spent time in Antigua, giving him knowledge of Atlantic musical cultures. Later still, David Bone believed that his own seafaring experience—working on sailing ships in the 1890s followed by three decades as an officer on steamships—gave him the necessary authority to write about shanties. Revealingly, his concern was not that shanties were being forgotten, but that they were being wrongly remembered. By the time he was writing in the early 1930s, shanties were even featuring on popular radio. Bone argued, however, that they were being sanitised in the process: he claimed that it was important to explain what they meant ‘before they pass out of sailor hands’.[[33]](#footnote-33)

Whether or not they could claim personal knowledge, collectors were keen to demonstrate the authenticity of their work through explaining the actual use of shanties. The close allocation of particular songs to specific tasks was intended to give some collections and commentaries a greater weight of authority. Patterson, for example, writing in 1900, structured his account of shanties according to the chronology of a typical voyage, linking different shanties to raising anchors, setting sails and so on through to dropping anchor at the ship’s destination.[[34]](#footnote-34) Connecting songs to work practices also encouraged collectors to assess the sociological circumstances necessary for the development of a collective musical culture. Hutchison, an American folklore and literature scholar, discussed different shipboard tasks as a driver of variation, invention and composition in the music and lyrics. Over time, he thought, seafarers had sought more interesting songs than just the basic ‘yo-heave-ho’ that would technically have sufficed for most activities. Shanties, believed Hutchison, met the requirements of ‘communal composition’. They needed a group of people sufficiently homogenous to have common knowledge, but also an individual who could lead the others in performance, and also adapt the form to changing circumstances.[[35]](#footnote-35)

Authentic as this mechanism of composition might have been in one sense, it inevitably clashed with collectors’ other concerns, such as the desire to establish a definitive set of lyrics. The idea that the words of shanties were improvised and constantly changing seems to have been widespread, even among people who had only a tangential link to shanty collecting. The novelist Arthur Morrison, for example, told Ralph Vaughan Williams that ‘the words of the chanteys, as you know, were nearly always horribly muddled, largely impromptu, and of doubtful traditional derivation’.[[36]](#footnote-36) How Morrison came by his knowledge of shanties is unclear: growing up in Poplar with a father who worked in the docks probably brought him into contact with seafarers, but there is no firm evidence. It seems intriguing, however, that a decade before the major shanty collections were published, there was already a common assumption that the form did not lend itself to a fixed lyrical canon.

Shantymen testified that they adapted their verses according to their knowledge of the crew, ‘making up little rhymes which would fit in’, and sometimes composing the next line on the spot while the men were singing the chorus.[[37]](#footnote-37) The 1920s collector James Carpenter believed that shantymen were adept at sensing a crew’s need for support, encouragement or an outlet for ‘grousing’. To Carpenter, the shantyman’s process of composition was therefore a powerful form of collective folk music, created by a man responding in real time to his fellow workers, and the very antithesis of the composer ‘mediating in seclusion, infatuated with his own cleverness or intoxicated by his own emotions’—the shanty was always ‘a skein of many threads’.[[38]](#footnote-38) R. A. Fletcher reported that shantymen would sing verses targeted at individual officers or their actions, providing a safety-valve for crews in dispute with mates and captains.[[39]](#footnote-39) Because the verse was sung only by the shantyman for the benefit of the men working close to him, it could be sung relatively quietly in contrast to the bellowed choruses, and could therefore be subversive without directly confronting an officer. Sometimes, however, shanties allowed stronger messages to be sent. The song ‘Leave her, Johnny, leave her’, signalled crew discontent ‘almost tantamount to mutiny’ if it was sung during the voyage rather than at the very end.[[40]](#footnote-40)

For all this variation, there was a common assumption that a song would remain broadly identifiable over a long period, and that the story or point of the song would persist with little change to the chorus.[[41]](#footnote-41) Frank Bullen only included the tune, first verse and chorus in his collection, arguing that those elements were fixed while everything else was improvised.[[42]](#footnote-42) Stan Hugill’s research in the 1960s, using multiple earlier collections, found many variations and evolutions. A song used for work during departure or arrival might comment on the port in question, so would change with every voyage. Details in ‘The Liverpool Judies’, for example, changed depending on whether the ship was leaving San Francisco or New York, but it was always a song of shanghaiing, the process by which sailors were kidnapped and put on board vessels that were short of crew. Prominent streets and districts, such as London’s Ratcliffe Highway, Liverpool’s Paradise Street and San Francisco’s Barbary Coast, were interchangeable from one song to another. So were semi-historical sailortown characters like Maggie May the prostitute, Paddy Doyle the crooked boarding-house proprietor and Stormalong John the everyman sailor. Old songs were updated with new calling points on the long-distance trade routes. San Francisco acquired prominence in the aftermath of the Gold Rush in 1849, as did Valparaiso in Chile. Songs about British sweethearts away fighting Napoleon became songs about New Yorkers sailing round Cape Horn to California.[[43]](#footnote-43)

Of course, acknowledging that the shanty was a changing form throughout its working heyday posed a dilemma for early collectors, who had to claim authenticity for their versions while explaining away others. Whall insisted in correspondence that he was ‘the one and only person who really knows them’, and that ‘sailors used to improvise to any extent, though my words are the regulation words, as are all of the songs in the book’.[[44]](#footnote-44) Most collectors acknowledged regional differences, and that shanties used in the Far East trades (where Whall worked), would be different from those Bullen heard in the Atlantic. Collectors also had to concede that many shantymen used lyrics that were obscene and unprintable in their day. A passenger sailing from Australia to England in the 1850s enjoyed hearing the sailors sing, but did not recommend paying close attention to the verses: ‘The chorus has a charm for the ear, but the words of the song sometimes disgust it’.[[45]](#footnote-45) Bullen, writing on the eve of the Great War, recalled shanty lyrics as ‘lewd and filthy’.[[46]](#footnote-46) Even when they were clean, shanty lyrics could be simplified to the point of nonsense, with made-up words and repetitions filling in a line until the next chorus.[[47]](#footnote-47)

As well as the absence of an established canon of lyrics, collectors had to confront the problem that shanties did not seem to be very old. Shanty specialists noted the odd case of William Henry Dana’s famous *Two years before the mast*, published in 1840 and widely hailed for the rest of the century as a defining work of maritime writing. Dana had a good deal to say about the music of his fellow sailors, but few of his songs were recognisable to those writing about shanties in the 1860s, let alone the key later collectors. Most authors ritually noted the appearance of what seemed to be a shanty in a mid-sixteenth-century document called *The Complaynt of Scotland,* and agreed that ‘Haul the bowline’ was probably the oldest shanty still in use, albeit with an evolving purpose due to changing rigging and sail-handling methods.[[48]](#footnote-48) Other songs, though, seemed unlikely to pre-date the 1840s, and the long mid-century boom in world trade. Given the assumption in folk-song that authenticity improved with age, the relative youth of the shanties posed some dilemmas, and Frank Kidson identified this as a key problem confronting shanty scholars.[[49]](#footnote-49)

Closely related to age was the issue of oral and print transmission, and the contested definitions of popular forms. The mainstream folk-song collectors privileged oral tradition and rejected songs that had been ‘contaminated’ by appearing in print, although it is now clear that they often claimed authenticity for songs that were widely available in printed broadsides.[[50]](#footnote-50) Scholars have debated whether the print/oral divide was ever really a firm line, and the importance of multiple forms of transmission is an issue for continuing analysis rather than arbitrary definition.[[51]](#footnote-51) Maritime collectors too suspected that some of their songs might have crossed from the shore to the sea repertoires, and possibly more than once, but these were usually forebitters rather than shanties proper. There was a particular concern about songs that had been sung by the Christy Minstrels in the 1850s and 1860s, which subsequently appeared in adapted form at sea. Even here, though, Terry argued that the direction of transmission was unclear, and that the Minstrels may have adopted sea songs rather than the other way around.[[52]](#footnote-52)

Shanties do not seem to have been available in printed form prior to the late-nineteenth century collections, and there is no maritime equivalent of the song and ballad broadsheets that were so widely distributed and sold on land. Ironically, therefore, while shanties may not have been very old, they were probably a better example than rural songs of a musical form that developed overwhelmingly through oral transmission. Had the collectors pushed further, they would also have noted that it did not take a shanty long to pass through many ‘generations’ of singers. The sailing-ship sector was a dangerous industry with a high-turnover of crews, largely composed of young men who rarely stayed on the same ship for more than one voyage.[[53]](#footnote-53) Even in the few decades of its peak, therefore, the shanty may have evolved much faster than other musical forms. If the shanty collectors, with their knowledge of working conditions had sea, had been more integrated with the folk-song movement, they might between them have recognised that this really did represent the product of a traditional working environment, and one in which composition and adaptation by many ‘unlettered’ individuals and groups was then passed on through far-reaching oral transmission.

**Race, nationality and identity**

Although sometimes frustrated by public ignorance of maritime affairs, shanty collectors had no doubt that their work was an important contribution to preserving part of British national identity. They were even able to enlist the support of leading popular authors, such as the novelists R. M. Ballantyne and Arthur Conan Doyle, who wrote forewords for collections in 1888 and 1914 respectively. Both hailed the volumes’ contributions to Britain’s nautical heritage, and Doyle thought that Frank Bullen had ‘done real national work’.[[54]](#footnote-54) The Britishness of shanties went hand-in-hand with the Britishness of seafaring, and in principle at least, discussion of national identity could have given the early shanty collectors common ground with the wider folk music revival and its efforts to uncover, preserve and restore an older agrarian English character.[[55]](#footnote-55)

Even that short summary raises a confusion between Englishness and Britishness that needs further investigation, not least because the mainstream folk collectors had disturbing questions about the Britishness of sea shanties. Early volumes of the *Journal of the Folk Song Society* had a collaborative format, in which contributors commented on the articles, and these offer some important insights into the development of the field. For example, one 1908 article that touched on shanties attracted comments from Anne Gilchrist and Frank Kidson. Gilchrist focused on the African origins or influence evident in many shanties, while Kidson posed still wider issues. Why, he wondered, were so many clearly American, and why was there such a preponderance of Central American place-names?[[56]](#footnote-56)

Early shanty collectors addressed ethnicity and national identity in two related ways that have echoes in the wider folk-song movement. The first focused on the influence of African and African-descended musical forms. This was partly about the direct involvement of black seafarers in shanty singing, but mostly a broader sense that encounters with West Indian and African-American musical cultures had done much to shape the development of the shanty repertoire. The second thread was about the large number of continental Europeans who served on British sailing ships as the nineteenth century progressed, and who were seen as replacing the traditional Jack Tar and his shanties. Although not always articulated explicitly, such concerns had clear parallels with the fear that British traditional music was being overwhelmed by American (specifically African-American) influences, and also with growing anti-German sentiment in early twentieth-century Britain.

Collectors disagreed over the importance of black workers to the development and delivery of shanties in the age of sail. William Alden, who wrote an early assessment of shanties in 1882, thought that many shanties were ‘the reminiscences of melodies sung by negroes stowing cotton in the holds of ships in Southern ports’.[[57]](#footnote-57) Laura Smith, while making the point that British and American shanties were so intertwined as to be inseparable, observed that ‘coloured men’ could be credited with many shanties.[[58]](#footnote-58) Patterson noted that black seafarers frequently became shantymen.[[59]](#footnote-59) Frank Bullen was probably the most emphatic advocate of African-American influence on an Atlantic shanty culture, arguing in 1914 that the ‘majority of shanties were negroid in origin’.[[60]](#footnote-60) Bullen’s views are important, because he had sailed to the West Indies and the southern United States, where the mixing of maritime musical cultures was at its most fluid, and where the value of the songs used by black workers in seaports and on ships was most immediately apparent to other seafarers. James Carpenter, who was probably the most active transatlantic collector in the 1920s, had no doubt that many shanties were adaptations of black labourers’ songs. The new and intimidating scale of American clipper ships in the 1850s, with their huge areas of canvas, had demanded the most effective work songs. These came, he concluded, from the men working pile-drivers in the Southern US ports and sugar presses in Havana.[[61]](#footnote-61)

Others were less convinced. Cecil Sharp addressed what he called ‘the vexed question of negro influence’ by taking (for him) an unusually conciliatory stance that may stem from his more general unease about the specialised subject of shanties. Reluctant to go as far as Bullen in ascribing origins, he nonetheless agreed that many shanties had been modified over the years by mixing with African musical forms.[[62]](#footnote-62) Attitudes seemed to harden further in the 1920s, moving beyond musical commentary into racist bigotry. One pseudonymous author in 1926 complained about what he called ‘the shanty craze’ in general, but in particular the use in schools of ‘those with a text in Nigger broken English’.[[63]](#footnote-63) Cicely Fox Smith accused Frank Bullen of having ‘nigger on the brain’, and objected to the idea that ‘the whole great mercantile marine of England learned to sing out on a rope from a gang of niggers in Antigua’.[[64]](#footnote-64) Perhaps the most conflicted view is that of L. G. Carr Loughton, who argued that the great expansion in trade between the Caribbean and the wider Atlantic rim from the 1840s onwards created a new repertoire of shanties, and ‘of the shanties used in the later days of sail a very high proportion were negro’. Oddly, though, Loughton concluded his essay with a strange comment that is worth having in full

Whatever the case may have been latterly, there is no doubt that some sixty years ago seamen took a proper pride in their shantying. The resistance offered at that period to the rising tide of negro melody is evidence of this. The negro songs indeed prevailed for a time; but the shanties which are today remembered with pleasure are almost exclusively of white origin, and constitute a not-unimportant branch of folk-song.[[65]](#footnote-65)

The article offers no evidence for that conclusion, and indeed contradicts it quite plainly. It does however fit with a wider pattern of rejecting black musical influences in this period, with authors being so keen to reject the influence of rag-time and American music more generally that they slipped into a condemnation of all music associated with black people.[[66]](#footnote-66)

When Stan Hugill revived shanty scholarship in the 1960s, he demonstrated the crucial role of the West Indies and the southern United States in developing the form. Hugill described the Gulf of Mexico ports as the ‘Shanty Marts, the exchange bureaux of the work song’.[[67]](#footnote-67) He identified patterns of seasonal mobility in the Atlantic world that brought seafarers of all nations into contact with one another, and also, crucially, with those who worked America’s great continental river systems. Sailors and waterfront workers headed south as the Canadian timber ports froze in the winter, seeking work and also the beachcombing leisure of older seafaring traditions. Many worked on the wharves in southern US ports stowing bales of cotton or baulks of timber onto ships, alongside a diverse workforce based in those ports all year round, and a mobile population of river navigators from far inland. There was also a substantial Irish population that initially arrived in the southern states to build canals and levees, and then stayed on in other work. Such patterns created an annual remixing of musical influences from roots in Irish, African, Scots, French and new American urban cultures. Historians of other musical forms have begun to explore this region in more detail, tracing its influence on the origins of ‘blackface’ minstrelsy in very much the same period as the formative shanty era in the 1830s and 1840s.[[68]](#footnote-68)

The other aspect of national and ethnic identity that concerned early shanty collectors stemmed from the increasing proportion of Scandinavian, German and other continental European seamen on British sailing ships as the nineteenth century went on. The idea that British seamen were moving to steamships and leaving the shrinking sail sector to be crewed by foreigners is a forgotten part of the transition from sail to steam, although hugely controversial in its day.[[69]](#footnote-69) Several authors claimed this was an issue in the decline of shanties, although Whall was the most blunt: ‘it is absurd to suppose that Dutchmen or Dagos, who chiefly man our sailing ships now, can in any way truly appreciate our ancient, wild hooraw choruses’.[[70]](#footnote-70) Whall’s terminology was revealing in itself: ‘Dutchmen and Dagos’ was a long-standing maritime label for continental European seafarers, encompassing all northerners and southerners respectively.[[71]](#footnote-71) John Masefield, on the other hand, praised the beauty of shanties sung by Norwegian, Greek and Russian crews, and described a continuing shanty culture on board Atlantic sailing ships in the 1890s. He also recommended the unusually cosmopolitan collection of Laura Smith, who would of course be one of Whall’s targets for criticism a few years later.[[72]](#footnote-72)

In any case, the collectors’ ideas of Britishness in the early twentieth century probably did not correspond very closely to the beliefs of seafarers in the heyday of sail. Thoughtful commentators noticed a radical streak in the British sailor, exhibited in shanties like ‘Boney was a warrior’. Walter Runciman, a shipowner and memoirist, believed that the song expressed the sympathies of the common sailor for a man ‘kidnapped into exile and death by a murderous section of the British aristocracy’.[[73]](#footnote-73) Back in the 1850s, the journalist Henry Mayhew had encountered many British sailors who told him they would not fight for Britain against America in the event of another transatlantic war, because that would be to fight against freedom and the rights of working men.[[74]](#footnote-74) The sailing-ship mariner appears in the Victorian press as a heroic symbol of national masculinity, but also as a dangerous, transient drunk, and there is no shortage of testimony to support both perceptions. However authentic their own experiences at sea might have been, the shanty collectors were themselves products of half a century during which the British sailor was endlessly re-imagined for one purpose after another.

The issue of national identity raises the apparent irony of how one of the world’s most cosmopolitan musical forms was appropriated as a symbol of British maritime pride. In fact, much British writing about shanties in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries fits well with the view that Britishness was a construction encompassing many peoples, working to a greater or lesser degree within common assumptions of government, economy and culture, and perfectly capable of sustaining different layers of identity.[[75]](#footnote-75) By no accident, this was also a key time for the ‘invention of tradition’, as elites tried to build new social and cultural ties in the face of ethnic and class tensions.[[76]](#footnote-76) Trying to make sense of their place in the early twentieth century, maritime collectors could accept a heritage in which shanties emerged and flourished from a mixing of British, Irish, African and American seafarers, so long as they worked on British ships led by British officers. It also fitted their prejudices to argue that the shanty tradition did not command the same loyalty from continental Europeans, when those men took over much of the work in the declining age of sail.

Still, this was a rather different process of national identification from the rural Englishness pursued by the mainstream folk music collectors of the same period. Cecil Sharp and his associates were equally suspicious of continental influences, and in particular of German popular song.[[77]](#footnote-77) Mythologised seafarers and peasants had much in common, and the shanty could have been an even more prominent weapon in Sharp’s arguments about reviving the English folk and their orally-transmitted musical cultures. It would, however, have sent some very mixed messages about cosmopolitanism. There are many tensions and ironies here, summed up effectively by James Carpenter in 1931:

It has been found that folk literature develops most readily among comparatively homogenous groups, isolated from the rest of the community by social or natural barriers, such as mountains, rivers, or seas. But the chanteys arose, not from an integral race with common ideals and background, shut in by accommodatingly stationary mountains and seas, but from the sons of Cain, bounded by the ever-shifting walls of the forecastle.[[78]](#footnote-78)

The result was what Carpenter called the ‘queer, cosmopolitan nature of the chanteys’, which could be clearly English while also sounding like bagpipes and banjos.[[79]](#footnote-79) Such complications would have badly muddled the arguments of the folk revivalists. Sharp’s need to recreate a peasant Englishness in folk music came through even more strongly in his later work in Appalachia. There, the logic of attempting to trace English origins in local music, seeking a pure inheritance from the seventeenth and eighteenth century settlers of the region, led him to ignore the extraordinary range of ethnic and national musical cultures of the region. That work did much to define American folk-song as ‘white’ for a generation.[[80]](#footnote-80) It is revealing, then, that Sharp also passed up his earlier opportunity to consider the racial and national complexities of the sea shanty.

**Conclusion**

This article has focused on two broad issues of contrast and overlap between the work of specialist shanty collectors and mainstream folk song revivalists in the early twentieth century, but there are many other potential lines of research. Even broadening the context of shanty study this far has shown the benefit of rejecting the land/sea division that the early collectors imposed on themselves. A more explicit comparison of work songs on land and at sea would put the older shanty scholarship in another context, while a proper international study moving shanty scholarship beyond the English-language texts would also be revealing. The shanty historiography has yet to produce detailed comparisons of published texts with manuscript collections, which would reveal the motives and methods of early shanty collectors in a similar way to work done on Cecil Sharp and his associates. In addition, given the relatively short time-frame within which the shanty canon was developed and disseminated through the global sailing-ship industry, it seems likely that there is still much more to learn from a detailed transatlantic study of the origins of the shanties in the first half of the nineteenth century. A musical form that can serve so many purposes, from making work possible in the teeth of a hurricane to constructing national identities, ought to be more widely studied.

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