

The Forgotten Songs of the Upper Thames: Folk Songs from the Alfred Williams Collection. Martin Graebe, ed. The Ballad Partners in Association with the Traditional Song Forum 2021. 313 pp. Paperback £15.00 (only available through website, <https://www.theBalladPartners.co.uk/> [ISBN 978-1-916424-3-5])

Between 1914 and 1916, perhaps as early as 1913, Wiltshire man Alfred Williams started collecting folk songs from people living in the Thames Valley and Cotswolds, cycling over 13,000 miles and hearing more than 800 renditions. Williams was self-educated, leaving school aged 11 to work on a farm and then at the Great Western Railway Works in Swindon. In 1914, he left the GWR works due to ill health and eked out a living as a market gardener and writer. From October 1915 to September 1916 the *Wiltshire and Gloucestershire Standard* published 439 of the songs he collected in a 44-part series. Of these, 234 were included in his book *Folk Songs of the Upper Thames* (1923). *The Forgotten Songs of the Upper Thames* is a companion volume, publishing the 205 songs in the *Wiltshire and Gloucestershire Standard* series that were not used in the 1923 book.

Regrettably, in the world of folk music and song, Williams' folk songs have been somewhat overlooked because he did not collect the tunes. Martin Graebe addresses this in his preface which outlines the background to Williams' collecting activity. Here, Graebe also states what he has not covered: Williams' rationale with regard to editing songs, and a detailed biography of the man. This is mitigated by the inclusion of sources that provide further information on these topics and one wonders whether this is perchance a pointer to a future volume.

The preface is followed by a brief chapter on the singers, identifying those who gave Williams six or more songs, and noting totals for each of the counties explored: Berkshire, Gloucestershire, Oxfordshire, and Wiltshire. Details of four principal singers – David Sawyer, Elijah Iles, Henry Harvey and Charles Tanner – give insights into their working and sometimes turbulent domestic lives.

The core of the book comprises the 205 songs, reproduced in full, and preceded by Alfred Williams' original introduction to his series in the *Wiltshire and Gloucestershire Standard*. Songs are presented, in date order, as published in the newspaper, and include Williams' accompanying comments. Graebe adds his well referenced notes to each song. Citing broadsides and chap books, other collectors and performers, he analyses texts and syntax, both supporting and sometimes correcting Williams' conclusions. Songs are classified using Roud numbers and Bathe-Clifford references (catalogues enabling the rapid tracing of particular songs).

Folksong collectors are renowned for filtering what they heard, gathering only what they deemed to be authentic folk songs. Williams' methodology eschews this, as he was interested in "songs sung from memory". These include "rough songs", lewd and explicit songs unrecorded by his contemporaries. It is striking to note how many of the songs he collected are not found in other sources. This fact alone makes this an important publication for anyone interested in the English folk song culture of the early 20th century.

The final chapter reproduces Alfred Williams' *Conclusion* to the *Wiltshire and Gloucestershire Standard* series published on 2 October 1916. This is followed by two appendices. Appendix A reproduces in full a series of letters published in the newspaper concerned with the spat, public and private, between Williams and fellow collector Frank Kidson, a well-known authority on folk song. The topic is, "what qualifies as a folk song?" Same old chestnut. Alongside the intellectual discourse, the letters provide a useful insight into Williams' approach to his collecting, and in one he states: "I shall accordingly not attempt to deal exclusively with the purely Folk Song, but shall include any piece I think worthy of note, provided it ranked with the Folk Song, and stood in relation to the life

of the people". Appendix B is the article Williams wrote for *Word-Lore*, Vol.1, No 1, (January-February 1926), 12-16, describing his journey into the field of folk song collecting. It also provides details, context and observations on local singing culture.

In his 1916 *Conclusion* Williams notes, "The work of collecting the songs is laborious and tedious, though it is also highly interesting and pleasurable". Highly interesting and pleasurable is a sentiment I would apply to *The Forgotten Songs of the Upper Thames*. It is a welcome addition to folk song research and will be of interest to social and local historians, folk enthusiasts and those interested in the idiom of the people. Singers will also find much here to contextualise their repertoire, and to complete their library of Williams' Wiltshire songs. The book is nicely produced and edited and very reasonably priced at £15, making it affordable and accessible. I think Alfred Williams would have approved.

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