

November 30, 1994

Friends -

'Wanted you to see these sentences from Percy Dearmer's preface to the *Oxford Book of Carols*. There are some 25 pages of fascinating history, plus the 400-plus pages of tunes and texts, which make me long to move our Christmas program even further from the conventional lines.

Because the carol was based upon dance music, it did not appear until the close of the long puritan era which lasted through the Dark Ages and far into the Medieval period. (Note: not Puritan -- which was a sixteenth- and seventeenth-century ecclesiastical movement in England; but "puritanical," used, we must charge, anachronistically.) The word (carol) meant something Terpsichorean and evil in the seventh century: the people evidently wanted to dance on saint's days...; but David's example was ignored (II Samuel 6:14), and the dance reprobated under all three names -- *Gallatio*, *saltatio*, and *caraula* (from which our word carol comes)....

(Do you recall the old whiz-bang about why the Baptists frown upon sexual intercourse? -Because it might lead to dancing!)

By the fourteenth century, however, the word carol had changed its meaning, and though it retained its dancing associations, had become respectable. Dante, in the 24th canto of the *Paradiso*, could use it of the dancing band of the saints in glory: here *carola* means a choir, but it is a choir that dances....

Therefore the carol made its appearance late in Christian history -- not, indeed, until the modern spirit of humanism had dawned upon the Middle Ages.... There was a marked growth in the democratic spirit in the fourteenth century; and religious literature in the vernacular spread as a result of this and the activity of the preaching friars. ...English poetry developed from homiletic ("preachy") verse into metrical romance...and Chaucer arrived with his Italian humanism and his new demonstration of the possibilities of verse....

The carol continued to flourish through the sixteenth century, and until the recrudescence of puritanism (this time, with a capital "P") suppressed it in the seventeenth.... In 1647 the Puritan Parliament abolished Christmas...altogether. The new Puritan point of view is neatly expressed by Hezekiah Woodward who, in a tract of 1656 calls Christmas Day "the old Heathen's Feasting Day, in honour to Saturn, their Idol-God, the Papist's Massing Day, the Profane Man's Ranting Day, the Superstitious Man's Idol Day, the Multitude's Idle Day, Satan's Working Day.... No one thing more hindereth the Gospel work all the year long than doth the observation of that Idol Day once a year...."

Meanwhile the carols travelled underground and were preserved in folk-song, the people's memory of the texts kept alive by humble broadsheets of indifferent exactitude which appeared annually in various parts of the country....

The forgotten wealth of beauty was not restored by the pioneers of the Romantic Revival, nor even by that great re-discoverer of Christmas (and author of *A Christmas Carol*, which was magnificent but not a carol), Charles Dickens. Indeed, when Dickens was a boy the carol seemed to be on the verge of extinction.... The broadsheets, however, continued to preserve the tradition among the common people....

The only men who...might be able to effect (in the 19th century) a national revival were the clergy....

A very rare Swedish book had come into the possession of the editors of the *Hymnal Noted* of 1852...called *Piae Cantiones*, (it was) full of exquisite sixteenth century tunes.... The Rev. J.M. Neale and the Rev. T. Holmore translated some of the carols and hymns therein, and published *Twelve Carols*

for Christmastide, with music from the old book....

The second chapter in the revival in the nineteenth century opens in 1871 with the publication of (42) *Christmas Carols New and Old* by the Rev. H.R. Bramley and Dr. John Stainer (both of Magdalen College, Oxford)... (If) the traditional melodies lack some of their freshness and strength in inappropriate harmonies, and (if) the new words were but pietistic verse, it is nevertheless to (Bramley and Stainer) that we have the restoration of the carol; and if they obscured as well as restored, the age must be blamed rather than the editors. (That's the same Stainer whose *Crucifixion* gave us "God so loved the world!")

Don't the Great Know-It-All choose strange vessels?

You wanna know what blows my mind even more?

It is that these great musical treasures -- simple and rustic in birth -- come to us winnowed, rubbed and polished to incandescence by centuries and generations of "common people."

Do you suppose that two centuries from now *I'm Dreaming of a White Christmas* and *Rudolph, the Red-Nosed Reindeer* will be held as reverently as we hold today that first of historically traceable carols: *Lully, lullay, thou little tiny child*? Will the commercial musical excrescence which has appropriated the word "gospel" take the place of *Mary had a baby*, or *I wonder as I wander*?

Does it make any difference whether the act of creation -- group singing, for instance -- is undertaken for love or money?

Watchit!

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