

Francis Jekyll (1882-1965)

Forgotten Hero of the First Folk Song Revival¹

Compiled by Lewis Jones²

When you hear, or play through, a beautiful folk song or melody, are you ever curious to know more about where it came from? Recently, much good work has been done in documenting the lives of source singers. The same is not true, however, of many of the collectors. Among these, Francis Jekyll (1882-1965) is largely forgotten. Yet, but for his benign interventions, a number of our most beautiful folk songs and variants would have been lost.

I first came across Francis Jekyll (pronounced 'Jeekyl') in the Penguin Book of Folk Songs as the collector of a fine Hampshire version of "The Young Girl Cut Down in Her Prime."³ I then learned from the Preface to George Butterworth's Folk Songs from Sussex (1912) that Jekyll had noted four of those eleven songs, and was thanked "for his enthusiastic co-operation." A search of Steve Roud's electronic database at the Vaughan Williams Memorial Library threw up 34 items from printed (i.e. non-manuscript) sources that were wholly or partly collected by Francis Jekyll. Most of these were published in the early editions of the Journal of the Folk Song Society, and some are among the best songs in the tradition.

So who then was this forgotten hero? When I looked in the Vaughan Williams Memorial Library's Biographical Index I found no mention of him, and even Vic Gammon's "Folk Song Collecting in Sussex and Surrey 1843-1914"⁴ made only passing reference.

Michael Dawney's article on "George Butterworth's Folk Music Manuscripts"⁵ shed a little light. There I learned that Jekyll was born in 1882, that he went to Eton (1895) and to Oxford (1901)⁶, and that he worked at the British Museum (1906-14). Dawney also records that Jekyll joined the Folk-Song Society in 1907 and the English Folk-Dance Society in 1911. He was, Dawney tells us, "solely or jointly responsible for the collecting of fifty-seven songs," as well as folk dances from County Limerick.⁷ After Butterworth died on the Somme in 1916 Jekyll wrote: "Some of my happiest days were those we spent together, tramping the Sussex Downs and collecting songs."

There is a brief glimpse of Jekyll's early life in the Eton Register for 1893 to 1899. This tells us that he arrived in September 1895 and left in December 1900. In 1897 he was in Fifth Form Upper Division B3 VIII, and in 1899 in Fifth Form A12 II. He was Newcastle Scholar in 1900. (Butterworth went to Eton in 1899 and left in 1904.)

In Lucy Broadwood's manuscript diaries, which are now lodged in the Surrey County Record Office, there are other snippets of information. Jekyll had tea with Lucy Broadwood on 6 September 1899, and again on 30 October 1905. On 11 February 1906 he took supper with her. On 19 October 1906, he "came to tea and [to] play ...his Hereford tunes." On 12 November 1906 he called again. On 28 May 1907, with 52 others, he attended a musical party at Lucy Broadwood's flat. On 21 November 1907 he "came after tea to show me folk-tunes etc.," and he was one of 29 guests at a tea party on 14 April 1908. On 12 December 1908, Lucy Broadwood records: "Mr. Francis Jekyll called, had a long F(olk) S(ong) S(ociety) talk, stopped to dinner, and listened to phonograph-songs."

So much for Jekyll's early life, but what happened after that? The Balliol College Register tells us that he worked for the Ministry of Information from 1917 to 1920. But, for several years, my desultory researches festered, and the rest was silence.

Then I had a breakthrough. I learnt from Sally Festing's biography of Gertrude Jekyll that Francis (known to family and friends as 'Timmy') was the nephew of the famous lady gardener, and that he inherited her estate, Munstead Wood, after her death in 1932. (He also wrote a memoir of his aunt,⁸ but this, unfortunately, makes no mention of folk song.) Sally Festing adds that under Timmy's stewardship the famous garden was not maintained, and that soon supplies to customers from the nursery were fitful. She quotes two local librarians who "remember the elderly Timmy Jekyll as a quiet, self-contained, rather dour man who made evening visits to borrow books and sometimes fell asleep in one of the chairs."⁹

A letter to Sally Festing elicited a swift and courteous response which put me in touch with Mrs. Primrose Arnander, Gertrude Jekyll's great niece. After consulting with her father, David McKenna, Mrs. Arnander wrote to me on 3 June 1999.¹⁰ This letter contains new and important information about Francis Jekyll. Here are the relevant sections from it:

Francis Jekyll ...was an Assistant in the Printed Books Department of the British Museum from 1906-1914. He worked under Barclay Squire (1885-1920) in the Printed Music Section, and after two years service was recommended by Fortescue, the then Keeper, to the Trustees as a possible successor to Barclay Squire. In Fortescue's words he had 'excellent abilities' and was 'a student of musical literature and bibliography.' He went on to say: 'It is desirable that there should be at least one Assistant capable, in the course of time, of succeeding Mr. Squire's duties, and in this respect Mr. Fortescue hopes that Mr. Jekyll may at some future date be of special service to the Library.' In 1911 Francis Jekyll helped Squire with the removal of the King's Music from Buckingham Palace, and made a rough catalogue of it which is still extant.

The above information comes from a letter to my father written in March 1978 by Alec Hyatt King who was engaged at that time in writing a history of the Printed Music in the British Museum which he hoped to have published.¹¹ ...Mr. Hyatt King also wondered why, after such a promising start, Francis Jekyll should have resigned in 1914 and thereafter sunk into obscurity.

I am sure that there was an initial nervous breakdown which must have led to recurring clinical depression, an illness well understood, accepted and treated nowadays but little understood then...

In 1932 Francis Jekyll inherited his Aunt Gertrude's house and garden and all the contents. He did not live there for very long, but tried to keep her nursery garden going and was still fulfilling orders up to the war time. ...In 1937 his mother Dame Agnes Jekyll died and around 1939 he moved into the Hut, a smaller house in the grounds, and Munstead Wood was let and finally sold. There was a sale of all the contents in 1948, and Timmy lived on in the Hut with a housekeeper until his death in 1965. He was a sad and rather lonely figure at the end and was never really able to shake free of his debilitating depression. He attended concerts and festivals of music, but never returned to an active role in the field. In 1948 he must have sold all his music and books for the contents of the sale included books, scores and periodicals which showed an interest in music that would have been far beyond Gertrude Jekyll.¹²

Further information concerning Francis Jekyll's death is to be found at the Family Records Centre: Jekyll, F.W., aged 82, died in Surrey S.W. registration district in the first quarter of 1965, ref. SG1155. The death certificate contains the final, sad Requiem. Francis Walter Jekyll died on 27 March 1965 at Munstead Wood Hut, Busbridge, in the Sub-District of Haslemere. A number of causes of death were cited, including senile myocardial degeneration. According to the obituary in the Guildford Times & News¹³ Francis Jekyll was a "member of a well-known West Surrey family, ...the son of the late Sir Herbert and Lady Jekyll, ...a bachelor and a scholar" who "had travelled extensively." The funeral at Busbridge Church, on 1 April 1965, was followed by a cremation at Woking.

These, then, are the facts of the case as far as I have been able to ascertain them. Many of the details are obscure or missing, but the evidence is completely consistent with the interpretation of Francis Jekyll's great-niece, Mrs. Arnander. We start with an enthusiastic youth, energetically trudging over the Sussex Downs to harvest folk songs of great beauty. We end with a sad, lonely, elderly gentleman, his life for many years torn apart by violent fits of depression. Indeed, for the last 17 years of his life, our hero, once a powerful and effective champion of folk song, did not even have his music books to console him.

How can we ever know the full reasons for this sad transformation? Was Francis Jekyll's depression triggered by the Great War of 1914 to 1918, which carried off so many of his friends and coadjutors including his collaborator George Butterworth? Or were there other, more private, triggers for his personal tragedy? Perhaps, 118 years after Francis Jekyll's birth, these questions no longer matter. All we can do now is to honour his name, and to keep alive and celebrate the music which he bequeathed to us.

Here is one of the songs which Francis Jekyll contributed to Butterworth's Folk Songs from Sussex. It was sung to him by that great source singer, Mrs. Verrall. The song is a classic. It comes from the downtrodden, the oppressed and the marginal, and it celebrates youth, beauty and bravery, not wealth, status and power. Is it any wonder, then, that the young lady loves the gallant sailor lad, and spurns the wealthy farmer? The tune is Dorian.

¹ This article first appeared in English Dance and Song in June 2000.

² Very little of this article is my own work. I am indebted to CJ Bearman, who did all of the research into the Broadwood diaries and at the Family Records Centre. He also consulted the Eton Register and the Balliol College Register for me, and told me about Sally Festing's book. The Obituary from the Guidford Times & News was dug out by George E Frampton, who also gave me copies of printed and manuscript music collected by Francis Jekyll. Particular debts of gratitude, as recorded below, are also due to Sally Festing and, especially, to Mrs. Primrose Arnander.

³ Williams RV and AL Lloyd (1959): 108.

⁴ History Workshop 10 (Autumn 1980): 61-89.

⁵ Folk Music Journal Vol 3 No 2 (1976): 99-113. There is a paragraph about Jekyll on p. 100.

⁶ His college was Balliol.

⁷ These folk dances, Dawney tells us, are in the Butterworth manuscripts held at the Vaughan Williams Memorial Library.

⁸ Jekyll, Francis, Gertrude Jekyll: A Memoir (Cape 1934).

⁹ Festing, Sally Gertrude Jekyll (Penguin Books 1993): 306. The book was first published by Viking in 1991.

¹⁰ Thanks are also due to Mrs. Arnander for giving me another valuable source of information about Timmy Jekyll and his family. This is: Tooley, Michael and Primrose Arnander [eds] (Michaelmas Books 1995) Gertrude Jekyll: Essays on the Life of a Working Amateur. This book reproduces a painting of Timmy as a young boy by the famous artist and family friend Edward Burne-Jones (1833-1898).

¹¹ King, Alec Hyatt (1979) Printed Music in the British Museum: An Account of the Collections, The Catalogues and Their Formation up to 1920.

¹² Mrs. Arnander appended details of some of the Sales Lots. Among these are back copies of the Journal of the Folk Song Society (1899-1921) and of the Journal of the English Folk Dance and Song Society (1932-1947). These and other items indicate that the collection that was sold off did, indeed, as Mrs. Arnander states, contain Francis Jekyll's music books.

¹³ 2 April 1965.