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The aim of this project was to explore the different ways birds are used in folk song, to understand more about the shared cultural knowledge which is inherent within many of these songs and between singers. I have presented this project as an album of largely traditional songs – please have a listen! I have divided up the research into focusing on the subject of each song, while at the same time comparing between a huge range of different traditional songs. I also compared folklore and myths behind specific birds, to find links to the song themselves.

Track 11: The Gentle Bird

This lovely song is one learnt from page 40 of the same book as track seven; unfortunately, as already noted, the source for this has been lost. The Welsh text is listed as traditional, and the English lyrics by Talhaiarn. This song fits into the Welsh tradition of people talking directly to birds, which of course is present in other traditions as well. In the English text, the lyrics reflect common themes of birds in folksong, and associations with birds. The first verse talks about the natural world and the sense of wonder associated with that. The second verse draws on long held associations with birds and divinity. Yapp notes that a dove 'dove has come to represent the soul of a righteous man, and is shown leaving his mouth or nostrils in death, or being carried up to heaven by angels', and Green points out that birds in flight in the Celtic world may well represent the souls of the dead freed from the body.

The tune which breaks up the English and the Welsh verses is called the Mockin' Bird Hill Waltz. It is beyond the scope of the research undertaken here to look any further into tunes named after birds. However, I believe are large unexplored area investigating tunes both traditional and contemporary named after birds, their mimetic similarities to bird song (see my notes from track 1 related to Tuulikki's work), and parallels in classical music related to birds.

Track 10: In the Motley Feather'd Race

A quaint and humorous ditty from Charles Dibdin, the same writer as track three. Similar to the other poem, in none of the published versions is there any more information about this piece, nor is there any published music; however one must assume that there originally was some music from the text being published under the heading of *The Songs of Charles Dibdin*. This poem plays on all the stereotypes of birds – doves as lovers, magpies as thieves, peacocks as vain – as well as an entertaining view on the characters that make up everyday society.

Track 9: The Twa Sisters

This song is part of a family of songs all comprised of the same general plot, with some variations – a similar idea to that of track six, with song *The Three Ravens*. The core of them there are two sisters. The very idea of the two sisters ties into the theme of duality that has run through all of culture, the two warring brothers, good and evil, God and Satan, night and day, death and life – as Bob Stewart puts it, 'these two brothers have fought their way through human consciousness during the entire history of man's existence'. In the various versions of this song, the two sisters walk down towards the river together – occasionally, as here, one will invite the other to come, implying premeditation – and one pushes the other in to drown. Sometimes the motives are made clear – the younger is jealous over a lover who has given the older sister a knife as a gift, for example – other times it is not explained. The drowned maiden then floats down the stream, to be stopped by the miller's dam. In one version, she is still alive at the point but is pushed back in by the miller as she has no gold to reward him. At this point, either it ends here with the death of the sister, or as the body is fished out of the millpond, in the more gruesome versions a fiddle player makes a fiddle or sometimes a harp out of the dead girl's body. In this case, the fiddle normally is cursed to only play one song, and frequently when played in the presence of her murderers, exposes them to face justice. The refrain of the song varies, as does the tune. Often 'oh the dreadful wind and rain', other variants exist such as 'with a hy downe downe a downe', 'by the bonny mill dams of Binnorie', 'at the bonnie bows of London town', and 'I'll be true to my love, and my love'll be true to me'. Some variants situate the song geographically, some pick up on the jealousy of love that caused the murder. This version has the chorus 'and the swan it swims sae bonnie', reflecting the whiteness of the drowned maid floating down the stream, but also picking up on themes of transformation which are commonly linked to swans. Although swans are not the only creatures associated with transformation – 'Not all swan maidens are swans [...] Seal maidens abound in Scottish and Scandinavian tales' – they do form a large part of transformation myths, such as the myth of Oenghus and Caer, or the myth of the three spinning swan maidens. It is interesting from a feminist viewpoint the links between the passivity of the swan maiden myth, the irony that 'the swan maiden is not ordinarily held to be the main character in her own story', and the 'dead girl trope' of this song, in which the older sister is merely there to be pushed into the water and then avenged at a later time. The swan is also associated with royalty which is perhaps why this version of the song, in which the two sisters are actually the princesses, utilises this chorus. There is also the obvious striking visual similarity of the dead girl's pale body floating downstream and the serene white swans gliding over the water.

There are many supernatural associations with swans, similar to ravens (see the notes for track 6). Green mentions Celtic legends of swans and the supernatural, and Swann mentions the belief of a swan's age: In Wynkyn de Worde's *Demand Joyous*, "an English version of an old French riddle-book, as cited by Mr Hartin ('Birds of Shakespeare'), we find the life of a man computed at 81 years, while "the life of a goose is three times that of a man; and the life of a swan is three times that of a goose; and the life of a swallow is three times that of a swan; and the life of an eagle is three times that of a swallow; and the life of a serpent is three times that of an eagle, and the life of a raven is three times that of a serpent; and the life of a hart is three times that of a raven; and an oak groweth 500 years, and fadeth 500 years." This last computation is not so far from the truth, but the others are obviously absurd.

Track 8: Meeting

This original poem by songwriter Stewart Simpson is based on the story of Saint Kevin and the blackbird. St Kevin of Glendalough (498 AD – 618 AD although I'm sceptical that he really was 120 years old) was the founder and first abbot of Glendalough in County Wicklow, Ireland. According to legend, he was austere and self-denying, with one tale relating that he drowned a woman who attempted to seduce him. Before founding the abbey, he lived as a hermit in a cave, a bronze age tomb now known as St Kevin's Bed. The story goes that as he was meditating one day, a blackbird flew into his outstretched hand and he stayed so still that she was able to build her nest and lay her eggs in his hand, while he remained unmoving until her chicks had fledged. In this poem, Simpson also refers to the legend of the blackbird and the dragon, which tells that the blackbird is coloured black from the flames of the dragon and the beak is gold from the stolen treasure that had been guarded by the dragon.

Perhaps unsurprisingly for its ubiquity in Britain, the blackbird features frequently in folk song. It is often a symbol of faithfulness and steadfastness, similar to the steadfastness of Saint Kevin in this story. They feature in a common floating verse: 'If I were a blackbird, I'd whistle and sing/I would follow the ship that my true love sails in/And in the dark rigging I'd there build my nest/And at night time would gaze on my bonny breast'. Looking at some other songs, this crops up as a frequent refrain. In 'I have vented my Grief', the lyrics say 'The blackbird in mourning sat by/And tears from the poplar did flow', with the loyal blackbird in mourning as a metaphor for the loss of one's true love. This is again the theme in 'The Soldier and his True Love', where the mention of blackbirds singing implies the loyalty and steadfastness of the two lovers: 'The soldier and his true love walked out one Summer's day/To view the flowers and the meadows so gay/While the blackbirds and the thrushes sang on every green spray/And the larks sang so melodious at the dawn of the day.' The loyalty of the blackbird can also be used to show the unfaithfulness of a false lover, as in 'As Musing I Rang'd': 'No linnet, no blackbird, nor sky lark said she/But one much more tuneful by far than all three/My sweet Senesine for whom I sweeter cry/Is sweeter than all the wing'd songsters that fly.'

Although Swann in his dictionary says 'strange to say, although one of the commonest of our birds, this species features very little in English folk-lore', he does mention two weather related beliefs, that 'when the Blackbird sings before Christmas she will cry before Candlemas' and 'when these birds are unusually shrill, or sing much in the morning, rain will follow'. The song of the blackbird is well known – Hudson complains that 'the song of the foreign bird is not fluty nor mellow nor placid like that of the blackbird', while Bell describes a moment of birdsong: 'the slow, rich, fluty notes of a very distant Blackbird'. There is some evidence of Celtic associations with this bird – for more detail on ritual sacrifice involving blackbirds, see Miranda Green.

Track 1: On the Moor

This song is a simple round that I learned from Jess Arrowsmith. It is a song of spring, one invoking the wild cries of the wading birds across the moor. Hudson refers to 'the inflected wild cry of the curlew', while Graham Bell describes their songs thus: 'The most stirring sound was the hauntingly beautiful and evocative call of a curlew, even extending briefly and incompletely into the rippling trill of the spring song'. A large part of this song is onomatopoeic, and the arrangement on this track echoes this. Like the dawn chorus, it starts with a single voice, and as more voices join it slowly becomes more chaotic, climaxing on the curlew's call of 'Pee-witt', before all voices cry out the plea for spring to return. In Iceland, the plover is believed to be able to foretell the weather, and its arrival is taken as the beginning of spring; Swann also reports it as being regarded as bad luck in Scotland. The name Plover is derived from the French *Pluvier*, probably from the Latin *Pluvialis*, meaning 'rain'. The curlew is a bad omen to sailors, who believe that their call indicates a storm is brewing. The use of these two birds reinforces the message in the song of waiting for spring time and a change in the bitter winter weather.

This song's contents echo another project, which was part of the inspiration for this research. Hanna Tuulikki's groundbreaking work *Air falbh leis na h-éoin* / *Away with the Birds* has similar echoes of wildness in it. *Away with the Birds* is a project exploring 'the mimesis of birds in Gaelic song', which culminated in a performance on the Isle of Canna in the harbour. The work explored the liminal connections between the sea and the land, the interweaving of the bird song with traditional melodies, the crossover between voice and bird song. This round echoes her words on mimesis in song, and the way songs particularly in Gaelic culture actually mimic the bird song itself. It is an interesting aside on this particular song of the mimesis actually used in the words – in this version it is the curlew who calls 'pee-witt', despite this being the call of the plover.

Track 2: The Corncrake

This song evokes the same kind of wilderness that track 1 conjures, with the image of snow over the whinny knowes, or broom-covered hills. This is a traditional Scottish love song, with words "translated" into more standard English to suit my accent and the accent of the singer. The corncrake, or land rail as it is also called, is known for being a spring time bird, and like the cuckoo, is known more for its distinctive song – *crex, crex* – than its appearance. Additionally, Swann reports that the Corncrake is seen as a lucky bird on the Scottish borders, where the saying goes 'The Lark, the Corn Crake, or the Grouse/Will bring good luck to ilka house'. This is reflected in the hopeful nature of the song, which looks forward to the return of spring and the time past winter.

Track 3: Be Quiet That Blackbird

This is a ballad written by Charles Dibdin, an incredibly prolific singer-songwriter who lived from 1745-1813 and who is best known now as the writer of Tom Bowling. Not much information on this song can be found throughout the various books in which it is published, including any music that it may have been set to. However, the poem is under the heading of ballad, and appears in the section of Entertainments Sans Souci, which suggests he performed it from 1788 onwards as part of his solo shows, and perhaps even at the theatre he owned from 1795 called the Sans Souci Theatre.

Track 4: The Cuckoo

This song is a wonderful example of the fine British tradition of euphemistic songs. Other examples include *Butter and Cheese and all*, *Sheath and Knife*, *Game of Cards*, *the Two Magicians* and famously *the Bonny Black Hare*, which includes the unobvious lines 'Oh, me powder is wet and me bullets all spent/And me gun I can't fire, for it's choked at the vent/But I'll be back in the morning, and if you are still here/We'll both go together to hunt the bonny black hare'. In *Cuckoo's Nest*, the association is very clear.

The implications of the cuckoo are interesting in this song. Aside from the obvious euphemism, and that the cuckoo does not actually make a nest, the bird is also seen as a sign of spring and renewal. Owing to its migratory timetable, the cuckoo arrives in England in the spring time, and so its distinctive call from which it gets its onomatopoeic name heralds the beginning of spring. Swann writes 'There exist many rhyming allusions to the Cuckoo's time of arrival in country-side lore, as for instance: 'When the cuckoo comes to the bare thorn/Sell your cow and buy your corn/But if she sits of a green bough/Sell your corn and buy a cow!'. Along the same lines, De Kay mentions the "Cuckoo-penners" of Somerset, who believed they could prolong the summer by caging cuckoos, whilst in Wales their nickname 'Welsh Ambassador' is probably an allusion to the annual arrival of Welshmen in search of summer employment.

Track 6: The Three Ravens

The version of the Three Ravens recorded in this collection is adapted from an arrangement published by Thomas Ravenscroft in 1606. The same words are found in Child Ballad number 26 and Roud Index 5. Ravens are a frequent feature in English folk-song, normally in a trope associated with this particular song, of which there are many variants. In some versions the knight's wife is pregnant, a particularly powerful and emotive image; in some versions she is simply his lover; in this version the dead knight's paramour is here as a fallow doe, 'as great with child as she might go'; the listener is left to infer that the doe is his pregnant mistress, which by association gives it the more supernatural implication of transformation. The transformation element also picks up on other themes of folklore – in his book *A Dictionary of English and Folk-names of British Birds*, Henry Swann reports 'a belief among the Cornish fishermen that King Arthur is still living in the form of a Raven, changed by magic into that shape, and that he will some day resume his own form'. In some versions the mistress curses the killer of her love, wishing 'I hope in heaven he'll never rest/Nor ever reaches that blessed peace'. Some versions, like this one, give the woman slightly more agency – in this version she buries the slain knight before dying herself – whereas in some variants she simply 'stretched herself down by his side/And for the love of him she's died'.

Ravens have long had an otherworldly connotation, surrounded by mysticism. Edgar Allen Poe's 'The Raven' and the great English epic 'Beowulf' are just two of many poems inspired by the bird. As Miranda Green puts it, 'a phenomenon associated with attitudes to a specific creature which, interestingly, spans space and time is the belief in the prophetic powers of ravens'. Hudson describes the bird thus in his book 'Birds and Man': 'When the Supreme Artist had fashioned it with bold, free lines out of the blue-black rock, he smote it with his mallet and bade it live and speak; and its voice when it spoke was in accord with its appearance and temper – the savage, human-like croak, and the loud, angry bark, as if a deep-chested man had barked like a blood-hound.'

Recent research has shown that ravens show individual characteristics in calls – this perhaps has contributed to the anthropomorphising of these birds and assignment of characters throughout history. Other studies, in looking at the intelligence of ravens, have found 'they can even distinguish one individual from another', adding that 'in that way, too, they are much like humans' – a logical choice for humans to identify with.

Ravens enjoyed a long and complex association with the Celts. They were used as a symbol of war, which is particularly shown by one discovery of a war helmet with a raven as a crest from the 3rd century BC, discovered at Ciamesti, Romania. This had articulated wings which would have flapped up and down as the owner ran into battle, adding an aura of fearsomeness. A similar raven-crested helmet is shown on a panel from the Gundestrop Cauldron, which also shows a man with a boar-crested helmet. This was heightened by the associations of ravens with the Celtic war goddesses, discussed more by Miranda Green. Recent research has unearthed a raven bone in Crimea from a long term occupational Neanderthal site which shows evidence of decorative nothing – the first case where 'a symbolic function can be argued on direct rather than circumstantial evidence'. The authors analyse the length, width and depth of the notches, as well as the distance between them. In the same study, the authors note recent discoveries of bird remains where claws and feathers have been deliberately removed, writing that 'removal of feathers and claws is interpreted as proof that these objects were used as personal ornaments by Neanderthals'.

There are other examples of Ravens in legends and traditions around the world too numerous to be discussed here – it is worth briefly mentioning the raven masks of the Pacific Indians, the prevalence of the trickster raven character in Northwest American and Northeast Asian myths, and its contrasting role in Inuit tradition, where it is regarded as the 'bringer of light'. It is also a familiar figure in Norse mythology; two Ravens, one black and one white, sit upon the shoulders of Woden and tell him all that passes in the world below. Unsurprising, then, that it is such a common character in British folksong, bringing with it a wealth of unsaid associations which give the listener an intuitive understanding of the symbolism in the song.

Track 7: The Rising of the Lark

This song was learnt from page 42 of a book of English, Scottish and Irish songs – the same book as track seven. The Welsh text is written by R. Glan Aled, and the English lyrics by J M E Dovaston. Unfortunately, this song was only passed to me via photocopied scraps, and the original book has since been lost – despite best efforts to track down the book online, I cannot seem to find the original source.

The lark is a bird which has always been associated with its song, inspiring many poets and musicians (as the lyrics here mention). Swann describes the lark 'one of the most cherished of British birds'. In the first verse, the lyrics pick up on the theme of daybreak, of which that lark has traditionally been a symbol in literature and mythology – in Chaucer's 'The Knight's Tale' it turns up as 'the busy lark, messenger of day', in the Shakespearean sonnet 29 'the lark at break of day arising/ from sullen earth sings hymns at heaven's gate', and can even be found in Tolkien, who associates the elf Luthien with the lark, 'the singer at daybreak, and so he expands the power of Luthien's song over both day and night'. This is reflected in the songs the lark is featured in – many of these the association with the bird and daybreak is explicitly stated in the lyrics, for example in *The Lady and the Soldier*. 'And the larks sang so melodious at the dawn of the day' and 'Sweet to the morning traveller/The sky-lark's early song', whereas in others it is a clear but less pointed link, thus 'The morning awakes me to health and to labour/The lark points to heav'n, as first to be prais'd' and 'The lark's early song does to labor invite'.

Part of the larks distinctiveness in song comes from its singular behaviour of high song flights, in which males both show off to the females and territorially broadcast their presence to other males. In Welsh, the lark is known as 'Ehedydd', literally 'a fier'. Swann writes that it 'is a popular belief that if larks fly high and sing long, fine weather may be expected'. Unsurprisingly then Shakespeare's song from *Cymbeline* runs 'Hark, hark! the lark at heaven's gate sings/And Phoebus 'gins arise', making the link between the bird and the heavens clear. One of the quirks of traditional songs are the pairs of birds which become close bed mates. Thus, we often sing of the blackbird and the thrush in one breath, and even more frequently do the lark and the linnet sing together, if the songs are to be believed. There appears to be no clear indication as to why this is the case past the basic alliteration and the fact they are both small, sweet singers and similar in appearance. Examples of this pairing abound through traditional songs: 'her voice was as sweet as a lark or a linnet', 'the linnets, larks and thrushes/With music, delight the ear', 'Ye larks, ye linnets, cease your strains', 'No linnet, no blackbird, nor sky lark said she/But one much more tuneful by far than all three', and 'With the lovely larks and linnets shall be witness to our tale of love'. On a related note, it is far rarer to find a linnet mentioned without at least one other bird attached to it, usually the lark.

Track 5: The Sweet Nightingale

This traditional song features one of the most frequently mentioned birds in folk song. Bell writes 'In Europe at least, this is the bird which has probably inspired more poetry than any other bird. The Nightingale itself is rather plain, but it is perhaps the contrast between its ordinary plumage and its extraordinary song, delivered by night as well as day, that has attracted so much admiration and interest.' Although bird does not appear much in medieval illuminations, something Brunndon Yapp speculates is due to it being 'hard to distinguish from other little brown birds', in the Sloane manuscript there is an image on folio 30 of a small nightingale singing to three men, reflecting its reputation for singing.

One of the interesting things about the nightingale is the duality of associations that the bird has had throughout history. The bird has been associated with Philomel from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, book VI, fable six. Swann describes the legend thus: 'Philomela, finding herself deceived by Tereus, had her tongue cut out by him to hinder her from revealing the truth; being finally turned by the gods into a Nightingale, whence the name of Philomela and the poetic allusion to her supposed sad recapitulation of her wrongs'. The bird was also thought to sing with its breast dramatically impaled upon a thorn, which is alluded to by Shakespeare amongst others, and came with allusions of melancholy and unhappiness. However, around the 17th century there was a shift in perception, and it became more associated with joyfulness and joie de vivre; Coleridge saw the nightingale as a voice of nature in his conversation poem 'The Nightingale', in which he challenged the tradition view of melancholy.

Knowing this, it is interesting to compare the use of nightingales in folk songs. In *Johnny and Phillis*, it mentions 'And the nightingale too is in tune' with the harmonious happiness of love, and in *Bower Of Roses*, the nightingale is a sweet and happy reflection on the bower of roses. In contrast, there are several songs where the use of the nightingale is clearly meant to imply the sadder meaning. For example, in *The Lady and the Soldier*, a number of different texts end with a stanza warning young girls not to trust soldiers, who will 'leave you to rock the cradle while the nightingale sings', and in *The Maid's Lament* the singer overhears 'I heard the cuckoo talking and the nightingale did say/ I shall see my love no more for he's gone far away'.

Incidentally, this track, like track 4, can be included in the wonderful repertory of euphemistic songs – "to hear the nightingale sing" is a metaphor for love making, which perhaps explains rather more why the young lady of this song agreed to get married quite so quickly!



BIRDS IN BRITISH FOLK SONG

Oh sing again my little bird

Penny Kempson

