POOR WHITES[1]

'POOR WHITES' is a convenient label, used indiscriminately to describe the white population of North America living in two quite distinct areas south of the Mason-Dixon line; the coastal area with its coloured people and cotton and tobacco plantations, and the mountain area of the Southern Appalachians. The material poverty that marks both groups has led the industrialized Northern States to lump them together under a common condemnation. Poverty is scarcely a virtue to men whose Calvinistic background once made material prosperity a manifest sign of divine favour. Hence the average New Englander, for example, bred in a highly acquisitive tradition had little regard for those whites of the South, who had been left far behind in the race for worldly possessions and still lived in circumstances not far removed from those of primitive pioneering days.

In the case of the Poor Whites proper, who live in the Tobacco and Cotton States, economic and climatic factors have been responsible for their depressed condition. Before and since Emancipation the coloured people have provided the labour in the plantations; they are better suited to heavy toil in a warm climate and cost less than white labour. Consequently the poorer whites have gained a reputation for shiftlessness and lack of enterprise. The coloured population generally refers to them as 'Poor White Trash,' and the name has spread all over the continent.

Apart from these there is a further group, known more correctly in the South as 'Mountain Whites,' but too often confused with the 'Poor Whites.' At a first glance their

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[1] The substance of a Paper read at the Aquinas Society, Leicester, May 8th, 1939.

living conditions seem to be as poor and primitive as those of the whites in the coastal area. With both there is the same lack of those material comforts that are the keynote of life in the Northern States, and are rendered necessary by the harsh climatic conditions. But here the resemblance ends. The 'Mountain Whites' live in a mountain area considerably larger than that of Great Britain and number about three million. The climate is by no means enervating. There is no competition with coloured labour, which would never stand the rigour of the mountain winter, and there are no great landowners. They are essentially a highland people dwelling in one of the most inaccessible areas of the United States, where the Southern Appalachians form a vast back-yard to the States on their eastern and western flanks; but unlike the usual back-yard they are heavily ridged and forested. The ridges mostly run north-east and south-west, and consist of a series of parallel ranges whose average height is about six thousand feet. They are intersected by very narrow valleys with steep, heavily wooded flanks, with little or no level ground beside the torrents which run through them. A man working in them will boast that he can stand erect to hoe his own corn-patch.

Geographical conditions have imposed upon the scattered inhabitants an isolation which has not only set them out of reach of the Atlantic seaboard, but has cut them off from one another. Their only means of communication run in tenuous threads along the torrent beds of the narrow creeks that dissect the mountain mass. The sides of the valleys are too steep and rocky to make road-making possible, except at the hands of skilled engineers equipped with mechanical drills and blasting powder. Mutual contact is maintained along the few rough tracks formed by the desultory passage of riders or pedestrians. At best transportation is mainly limited to what a horse or mule can carry beside its rider. The valleys themselves receive such significant names as Cutshin Creek, Hell-fer-Sartain,

Stinking, Greasy and Quicksand Creeks. One track runs from Kingdom-come, down Lost Creek and Troublesome, across the Upper Devil and Lower Devil to Hell Creek. Directions are always given by the Creek, and not by river, road or village. Without good roads there is no place for markets where a farmer can buy or sell surplus stock; for a market involves easy communications for those it serves. Families, therefore, remain economically independent, growing little or no surplus produce, since there are no means of disposing of it. In the more inaccessible areas the spinning wheel and the hand loom are still in regular use. Clay lamps in which grease is burned with a floating wick can still be met with, for it is no light matter to carry a lamp glass and supplies of paraffin safely over twenty miles of rough path on horse or muleback.

Isolation has also tended to preserve among these people a persistent racial type, through the exclusion of all intermixture which would dilute or modify their character. In this they stand in distinct contrast with other parts of the United States, where a continuous stream of emigration from Europe along the main traffic routes has produced a still plastic amalgam of Teutonic, Celtic, Latin, Slav and Judaic elements. The ' Mountain Whites ' have kept the purity of their original stock, and thereby their own language and cultural tradition. They are the direct descendants of settlers from England and Lowland Scotland, who left this country in the eighteenth century, not long before the Enclosure Acts had robbed us of our English peasantry. Landing on the coasts of Virginia and Carolina, and finding them already settled, they moved westward towards the mountain barrier, on the far side of which lay the fertile Blue Grass region of Kentucky. Weary of the constant struggle to push ahead over an endless series of steep and heavily wooded ridges, they settled down in the mountain area itself, where they found abundant game, and, here and there, creeks filled with good timber and sufficient soil to provide for their small needs.

Conditions were admittedly hard but by no means insuperable. If these ancestors of ours had been of poor physical or moral quality they would either have become extinct or would have drifted further west to an easier countryside which still remained undeveloped. Actually they stopped where they were in these isolated mountain valleys, where they set up a form of primitive subsistence farming which has remained practically unchanged for nearly two centuries. The size of their families has made up for the relative infertility of other resources. Ten or more children is the rule rather than the exception; but such prolific enterprise has tended to keep living conditions along the level of bare subsistence. Politically they rank as Americans and are proud of the fact. In every other respect they are Anglo-Saxons surviving from a world that had no knowledge of machinery, industrialism or popular education. There has been no class above them which feels it a bounden duty to try and 'improve' them. They have left far behind them the Squire and the Parson whose temporal and spiritual ministrations played so large a part in their lives in England. Village life with its traditional system of common land-holding was impossible in their new circumstances. They found themselves completely on their own and had sufficient character to adapt their lives to the climatic and geographical conditions in which their lives were set.

To the average city-bred American the 'Mountain Whites' remain definitely in the category of rather disreputable poor relations, notorious for an indecent fertility, squalor, illiteracy, blood-feuds, and the extensive but surreptitious distilling and consumption of 'moonshine' whisky. In fact, sophisticated American humour generally throws its brightest light upon one or other of these proclivities, and leaves unillumined their characteristic native culture and qualities. Such people admittedly live in primitive conditions. Most of them have never turned a tap or dreamed of modern systems of sanitation. News-

papers and periodicals are principally valued for papering the walls and ceilings of their cabins. The men carry a gun anywhere outside the front door. Their clothes are rough and shabby. They are as deliberate of speech as the old-fashioned English yokel. None of them is exactly 'slick,' and materially they are the antithesis of the city-bred American, lacking even the acquisitiveness of the proverbial 'hayseed' farmer of the Middle West. They have little ambition, little sense of curiosity, no idea of push and drive, and have never even heard of efficiency. They are contented to be left to themselves in their own rather backward and unsophisticated conditions of life.

Superficial knowledge, lack of sympathy, and ignorance of their background have served to hide from most of their fellow countrymen the native culture which these people still maintain, a culture remarkable for its organic identity with that of our English forefathers. Isolated American students had already begun to find that these unlettered folk possessed a great wealth of English ballads and poetry which they handed down orally, much in the same way as the Icelanders have handed down through the centuries word for word the great Norse Sagas. The literary value of these ballads had already been appreciated by many American students, but a bare handful of them had realized the beauty of the tunes to which they were traditionally sung. One observer had described the music of the ballads in 1901 as being in 'a weird minor key sung in a nasal tone.' This reference is interesting in view of what the most famous English collector of our own folk-songs was to discover there some sixteen years later.

Cecil Sharp,[2] during a long visit to the United States, had heard of the possible harvest to be reaped in the Southern Appalachians from Mrs. Olive Dame Campbell, a sympa-

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[2] I am indebted to *Cecil Sharp* by Fox Strangeways (Oxford University Press) for much of what follows, and have drawn freely from the Chapters contributed by Miss Maud Karpeles.

thetic and enlightened song collector, who had already made a start among the mountain people near her home at Asheville, North Carolina. At her invitation Cecil Sharp spent three successive summer holidays in the mountains between 1916 and 1918. He found there far more than he had thought possible. Here were people among whom Folksong, and to some extent Folkdance, was still alive and thriving vigorously in the straitened circumstances which mountain life imposed. Visits to about eighty small townships and settlements in the mountain area led to the collection of more than two thousand tunes.

No better man could have been found to carry out this work. His personal views of modern conditions, which had so nearly made song collecting in England fruitless, gave him an immediate insight into and sympathy with the lives of the 'Mountain Whites.' Although first and foremost a musician, he knew exactly what Folksong represented as the natural and spontaneous expression of human life lived in a secure and simple setting, untouched by nervous strain and the predominant motive of money making, familiar with us to-day. Such people do not need the stimulus of city-bred entertainment to give distraction from uncongenial work or to whip up a jaded interest. Their songs are formed of their own living tissue, and carry the peculiar stamp of their native inheritance with as much fidelity as any inherited characteristic of bodily feature.

The 'Mountain Whites' are English in origin and still sing the songs of an England we no longer possess. Cecil Sharp, therefore, found himself among people of his own kith and kin, who responded immediately to his request for songs and gave him of their best. They knew that he had not come to teach, but to learn; and so he found them unsuspicious, communicative, and as hospitable as their circumstances would allow. He described them as possessing the easy unaffected bearing and un-self-conscious manners of the well-bred. Their features, colouring and build were those of the best type that England produces.

The majority he met were illiterate, but were good talkers, using an abundant vocabulary racily and picturesquely. With them singing was almost as common as speaking, and was so interwoven with the ordinary activities of everyday life that work and song were inseparable. They sang in the same straightforward, direct way as the English Folk-singers, without any conscious effort at expression, with an even tone and clear enunciation, and for the most part unaccompanied. Most of the tunes are in the gapped scale with only five, sometimes six, notes in the octave instead of the more customary seven; and like so much Folksong they are in the modes familiar with some of us in Plain-song.

For his songs the mountain singer draws on an inherited tradition, richly endowed with imaginative stories, that are best expressed in his ballads. Most of these are very long, and for the most part are the same as those of the English Folksingers. They are sung to tunes of great beauty, which are capable of standing alone apart from their texts. Such new ballads as have been composed are always fitted to the traditional tunes. The songs, as distinct from the ballads, are built on more elaborate lines, and emotionally are far more intense, the best of them being love songs. From the literary point of view they do not compare favourably with the ballads, some that were collected being unintelligible, others doggerel, and a small number intrinsically beautiful. In addition to the ballads Cecil Sharp found English Folkdances in several places. Of these by far the most important was the Running Set, which had disappeared in England. He knew it only by name, but had the joy of finding it as a living dance in at least two places in the mountains.

The letters that Cecil Sharp wrote from the mountains throw a vivid light on the lives and circumstances of the people from whom he gathered so rich a harvest of English Folksong. Of the mountain country itself he wrote:

It is a paradise. I don't think I have ever seen such lovely

trees, ferns and wild flowers. If I had not my own special axe to grind I should be collecting ferns or butterflies or something.

This is what he said of the people:

Although they are so English, they have their American quality in that they are freer than the English peasant. They own their own land and have done so for three or four generations, so that there is none of that servility which unhappily is one of the characteristics of the English peasant. With that praise I should say that they are just exactly what the English peasant was one hundred or more years ago.

'A case of arrested development?' Cecil Sharp replied to a facile critic, 'I should prefer to call it a case of arrested degeneration.'

I wish you could have seen us at a home far up Higgins Creek. There were fourteen people in the room at one time, mostly grandchildren and great-grandchildren of the old lady. I don't suppose any of them had any money at all—many of them have never seen any! . . . they barter a little but never sell for money. They really live almost entirely upon what they make and grow. All their clothes, blankets, etc., are made by them with the wool their sheep produce.

Yesterday we called at a cabin and found such a lovely, young, fair-haired, blue-eyed girl, fifteen years of age, with a buxom seven-months' old baby in her arms. I never saw a jollier, stronger, healthier baby or mother in my life, and she must have been married at fourteen, perhaps thirteen! So much for the Eugenic people!

Marriage at this age is common with the mountain people; and if the marriage is not a success the couple separate, usually without any ill-feeling.

Their intonation is not American, but English; and they use uncommon words and expressions, many of them old English. The pronoun 'it' is always aspirated as 'hit,' a habit of speech common in Queen Elizabeth's days. They say 'buss' for kiss, 'pack' for carry, and 'poke' for a small bag. Anglo-Saxon strong past tenses like 'holp,' and the syllabic plural of words ending in -st, like 'beasties,' are in current usage. Occasionally religious scruples stopped them

from singing, especially among the 'Holy Rollers,' who thought it wicked to sing love songs. Most of the people are Baptists, whose preachers' fame is proportioned to the carrying power of their voices in the open air. Their Pastors are chosen from among themselves, and have as little general education as most of their flocks; and their preaching has a strong tincture of Calvinism, decked out with a wealth of Bible stories. The rest of the Mountain people are mostly Presbyterians. Of missionary work Cecil Sharp wrote:

> Some of the women (missionaries) I have met are very nice and broad-minded. But I don't think any of them realize that the people they are here to improve are in many respects far more cultivated than their would-be instructors, even if they cannot read or write. Take music, for example. Their own is pure and lovely. The hymns that these missionaries teach them are musical and literary garbage . . . The problem, I know, is a difficult one. For my part I would leave them as they are and not meddle. They are happy, contented, and live simply and healthily, and I am not at all sure that any of us can introduce them to anything better than this. Something might be done to teach them better methods of farming, so as to lighten the burden of earning a living from their holdings; and they should certainly be taught to read and write . . . at any rate those who want to, ought to be able to. Beyond that I should not go.

In Harlan County, Kentucky, he found a school after his own heart at Pine Mountain:

> It is just a lovely place, fine buildings, beautiful situation, and wisely administered. Miss Pettit and Miss de Long are cultivated gentlefolk, who fully realize the fine innate qualities of the mountain children, and handle them accordingly. And the children, many of them little more than babies, are just fascinating, clean, bright, well-behaved little things, who come up, put their hands in yours, and behave like the children of gentlefolk—which is, of course, just what they are. The settlement is a model of what the mountain-schools should be.

Here is the reverse side of the picture. Of Hazard, a small township, he wrote:

> A noisome little place, new, crude, dirty, unkempt, insanitary,

a mass of people diligently dollar-hunting with no other ideas in their heads. These mountain places that get exploited by financial and business men because of the presence of oil and coal are as horrible as the unexploited places are beautiful.

When there is coal and good wages to be earned, the families soon drop their old-fashioned ways, and begin to ape town-manners, etc. And where the land is rich and the valleys broad, and it is easy to accumulate surplus wealth, the same thing follows.

In a district in West Virginia, which had a reputation for illicit stills and shootings, but held promise of good songs, a missionary revival was going on, and in the evening the residents crowded to 'preaching' in low-necked dresses, high heels and well powdered faces:

'The fact is,' he wrote, 'that the price of whisky has gone up so that "moonshining" has been exceedingly profitable, and the people are rolling in money.'

Mention in the letters quoted of the oil and coal discovered in the Appalachian highlands seems to foreshadow the kind of story we are familiar with in England. Commercial exploitation, with its essential corollary of improved communications, is making the last area, where English Folksong has flourished, accessible to twentieth century conditions of life. Its first effects are already noticeable in the change of mind that is already affecting these people. Were there no coal, copper, oil or other minerals under their holdings, it might be possible to maintain their traditional culture and form of life, tempered with such education as suits their needs. But commercial development must inevitably, it seems, introduce conditions and outlook, in the presence of which the kind of life that gives rise to spontaneous Folksong cannot survive. In face of this it may well be said: 'Well, let the Folksong and all that side of things go: the people will gain in so many other ways.' Nevertheless, granting many undeniable benefits of a material kind, we may still doubt whether those concerned will be ultimately happier for the change.

Spontaneous Folksong, such as these people have maintained as a vital element of their simple and unlettered culture, is not simply an isolated phenomenon. It stands as the sacrament of human contentment. It expresses an un-self-conscious joy in life which we ourselves seem to have forfeited; for, having lost the form of life which inspires Folksong and maintains it in healthy existence, we have to a great extent lost the understanding of and taste for the songs themselves. Some listeners may regard them as 'museum pieces'; others, including many musicians of standing, are captivated by their intrinsic beauty. Admittedly they are preserved for us, but when they are sung by us, however much joy they afford us, they are sung outside their natural setting, and are no longer part of a living oral tradition.

The immediate problem which concerns the future of the 'Mountain Whites' lies outside our reach; and it would be an impertinence on our part to volunteer any solution. First, it is a domestic problem that belongs to the United States, and it is therefore no business of ours, although the people concerned have maintained so tenaciously their racial kinship with us. Secondly, in our own case, we never realized the problem, until it was far too late to do anything but gather these half-forgotten songs from the lips of old men and women on the brink of death. Not long ago a friend made it possible for me to put the English Folkdance and Song Society in touch with an unlettered old ploughman over eighty years of age, living near Dorking, who recollected from his boyhood well over three hundred songs. As soon as possible Dr. Vaughan Williams went to visit him, but two days previously the old man had taken his songs with him to the grave.

The Folksongs of these old people were the last living traces of our own English peasantry which had been dispossessed of its lands and heritage by the Enclosure Acts. For us, therefore, the problem of maintaining their inherited culture no longer exists. If we ventured to suggest

any solution to the problem as it exists for the Americans, they could justifiably retort that we ourselves in England have set the example which they have every right to follow. A generation ago ninety-nine out of a hundred Englishmen would have fully agreed that modern ' progress ' can find no room for a backward and illiterate section of the people. There could be no social or economic justification for following one's sentiment and not one's reason. To-day the restoration of subsistence farming on a far-reaching scale is coming to be regarded as a vital factor of our national survival. Its economic aspect is overshadowed by the more pressing moral and social problem of rediscovering a form of life for ourselves that is productive, not of material wealth, but of human happiness and health, built up on the basic units of the family and the village. There are far stronger grounds than those of sentiment for urging the inclusion of a large peasant element in the body politic, living in simple conditions, in which the man is master both of himself—*causa sui*—and of his holding, and where the man, and not the machine, plays the dominant part in tilling the soil, and sings the songs of his craft.

We have no area comparable in size or character with the Southern Appalachians, where geographical and climatic factors have helped to maintain a self-subsistent peasantry happily and healthily; but many of us wait with interest and sympathy to see what will befall these kinsmen of ours, who still at their work sing their English songs from a spirit of simple contentment that we have so largely lost.

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