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The Scottish Origins of "Farewell to Nova Scotia"

Since Helen Creighton discovered "The Nova Scotia Song" in the nineteen thirties its origin has been unknown.¹ Better known now as "Farewell to Nova Scotia", the song has always seemed to be "so typical of the seaman's love of home and pull toward the sea"² that it has, not unnaturally, been thought of as a sailor's song, and it has become, over the past forty years, something of a Nova Scotia anthem. It is, in fact, derived from "The Soldier's Adieu", attributed to the Scottish weaver-poet, Robert Tannahill (1774-1810). There is abundant evidence of this derivation in the similarities between the two songs, but it is fortunate that there is also an early example of a similar adaptation of "The Soldier's Adieu" in the form of a chapbook ballad entitled "I'm Grieved to Leave My Comrades All".³ Itself of great interest to the student of chapbook printers and collectors, this song may have had some influence on the development of "Farewell to Nova Scotia" and is therefore a necessary part of any discussion of that song's origins.

"The Soldier's Adieu" has a rather complicated history of its own since the first printing, in a Glasgow newspaper of September, 1808, has apparently been lost and there are slight but significant variations in the editions which are available.⁴ Alexander Whitelaw, who was given the song by the poet's brother, believed that he had printed it for the first time in his 1843 edition of *The Book of Scottish Song*, but David Semple, in his 1876 edition of Tannahill's works, provided a slightly different text, along with the information that he had seen the 1808 printing. Semple pointed out that the first stanza of the song also appeared in A.P. Ramsay's 1838 edition of Tannahill's works.⁵ Keeping in mind that there are variations in these editions, it is possible (for most of this discussion) to use the earliest complete text, that of Alexander Whitelaw, for comparison with the Nova Scotia song which, as I will show later, bears traces of more than one edition.

"The Soldier's Adieu" is a pleasant, neatly-finished piece of work in eight-line stanzas rhyming abab cdcd, a form which invites the major change which occurs in both the chapbook version and "Farewell to Nova Scotia" where each of these stanzas is divided in two. Each version, according to the taste of the adaptor, has a different stanza as the chorus: the chapbook version uses the stanza beginning "I'm grieved to leave my comrades all," (hence the title) while the Nova Scotia song uses the four lines beginning with "Adieu, dear Scotia's sea-beat coast," which has become "Farewell to Nova Scotia, the sea-bound coast". Along with this change in structure there are other modifications which consist of abridgments and variations of diction which generally preserve the sense of the original.

The first stanza, which is usually the most accurately transmitted stanza in any folk song, is a good example of the type of change which takes place between the literary song and its folk adaptation. Thus,

The weary sun's gane doun the west,
 The birds sit nodding on the tree,
 All Nature now inclines for rest
 But rest allow'd there's nane for me,⁶

becomes awkward and loses its graceful meter in the chapbook version:

The sun was wading in the west
 The bird sat chattering on ilka tree
 All nature seem'd to be at rest
 But their [sic] no rest provided for me.

Comparing this to the same lines in "Farewell to Nova Scotia" it is easy to see that the people who made this version were thinking of a rhythm similar to that of the chapbook version—a rhythm most evident in the words "was setting" (compare the chapbook's "was wading") and "on ev'ry tree" (compare "on ilka tree"):

The sun was setting in the west,
 The birds were singing on ev'ry tree,
 All nature seems inclined for rest,
 But still there was no rest for me.

Similarly, the opening lines of the second stanza of "The Soldier's Adieu"

I grieve to leave my comrades dear,
 I mourn to leave my native shore,
 To leave my aged parents here,
 And the bonnie lass whom I adore

lend themselves to the repetitive

I'm grieved to leave my comrades all,
 I'm grieved to leave my native shore
 My aged parents whom I loved so dear
 And the bonny lass that I adore

of the chapbook version, and in "Farewell to Nova Scotia" become

I grieve to leave my native land
 I grieve to leave my comrades all,
 And my aged parents whom I always held so dear.
 And the bonny, bonny lass that I do adore.

As with all folk songs, there are several versions of the Nova Scotia song, but the first two stanzas have suffered the least change from the form of "The Soldier's Adieu", and therefore the versions which Helen Creighton collected show the greatest agreement with each other here. The inversion of the first two lines of the second stanza, which is the most significant difference from the Scottish original, is found in all versions where this stanza appears. There is only (as far as I know) the one example of the last two lines being lengthened to fit the melody, but no important words have been added in this case. Not unexpectedly, there are more versions of the following stanza, partly because they were less easily remembered (coming later in the song), and partly because they had to be adapted to suit the Nova Scotia setting, but fortunately there are none which depart significantly from the model of "The Soldier's Adieu".⁷

Returning to "The Soldiers Adieu" we find that the last four lines of the first stanza,

The trumpet sounds to war's alarms
 The drums they beat, the fifes they play—
 Come, Mary, cheer me wi' thy charms,
 For the morn I will be far away,

are echoed by the closing quatrain of the following stanza:

But tender thoughts maun now be hushed,
 When danger calls I must obey,
 The transport waits us on the coast,
 And the morn I will be far away.

"I'm Grieved to Leave My Comrades All" condenses these lines to that the two quatrains become one:

Hark the trumpet sounds the wars alarm;
 The trumpets sound we must obey;
 Our foes do appear on fair England's coast,
 And to-morrow from you I'll be far away,

and the same abridgment appears in the Nova Scotia song:

The drums they do beat and the wars do alarm,
 The captain calls, we must obey,
 So farewell, farewell to Nova Scotia's charms,
 For it's early in the morning I am far, far away.

In the same way the final stanza of "The Soldier's Adieu",

Adieu, dear Scotia's sea-beat coast!
 Though bleak and drear your mountains be,
 When on the heaving ocean tost
 I'll cast a wishful look to thee!
 And now, dear Mary, fare thee well,
 May Providence thy guardian be!
 Or in the camp, or on the field,
 I'll heave a sigh and think on thee,

is contracted by the chapbook writer who makes nonsense of it with his change of setting:

Adieu to England's seafaring boast
 Tho' dark and dismal thy mountains be
 But while on the dreary ocean I'm tost
 I'll give a sigh and a wish for thee.

Evidently only the first part of each stanza was remembered with any accuracy, as well as part of the last line which was combined with the others to give the new line, "I'll give a sigh and a wish for thee." The

Nova Scotia song not only makes the same contraction, using some of the same words in the last line, but makes a more successful change of setting:

Farewell to Nova Scotia, the sea-bound coast
 Let your mountains dark and dreary be,
 For when I am far away on the briny ocean tossed,
 Will you ever heave a sigh and a wish for me?

These structural similarities might suggest that the chapbook version of "The Soldier's Adieu" was the means by which the song came to Nova Scotia. The similarities in diction, especially in such phrases "give a sigh and a wish for" and "my agèd parents whom I always held so dear", certainly support this idea, but there are traces of diction which could not have come from the chapbook but only from one or another of the editions of "The Soldier's Adieu". For example, we must look to "Adieu, dear Scotia's sea-beat coast" rather than "Adieu to England's seafaring boast" for the opening of the Nova Scotia song's chorus, and, while the chapbook provides the word "seems" in "All nature seems inclined for rest", ("Farewell to Nova Scotia", 1.3) the word "inclined" appears to have come from the Ramsay edition of 1838, or from David Semple's 1876 edition. If the close proximity of the words "dark" and "dreary" in the chapbook is evidence that this is the source of the Nova Scotia song's line "Let your mountains dark and dreary be", so the line "Farewell, farewell to Nova Scotia's charms" seems to echo, not merely by accident, "Come, Mary, cheer me wi' thy charms" of the Whitelaw edition.

Any or all of these correspondences may be coincidental. Certainly the structural changes common to the chapbook version and the Nova Scotia song are not unusual. They are, indeed, just what one would expect to find in a folk adaption of a song with the structure of "The Soldier's Adieu". Nevertheless, it is probable that more than one version of the song, possibly including this chapbook version, was circulating in Canada in the nineteenth century, and that more than one version, including at least two of the formal editions, was involved in the development of "Farewell to Nova Scotia".

An interesting parallel to the Nova Scotia song can be seen in "On the Banks of Jeddore" which was found by Marius Barbeau in Beauce County, Quebec, in the nineteen forties.⁸ This song has long been recognized as a close relative of "Farewell to Nova Scotia" by its chorus,

I'm grieved to leave my native shore,
 I'm grieved to leave my parents all,
 My aged mother I adore,
 And the bonny wee lassie on the Banks of Jeddore,

which can now be seen as an adaptation of lines from "The Soldier's Adieu". Apart from these lines there are only three others which correspond to anything in either "Farewell to Nova Scotia" or its predecessors. The first line, "Nova Scotia is a free-born coast," has an obvious link with Nova Scotia's "sea-bound coast", and so suggests that "On the Banks of Jeddore" was influenced by the Nova Scotia song, but the first line of stanza three, "The waning sun has set in the west," is closer to "The weary sun's gane down the west," ("The Soldier's Adieu", 1876 ed.) than to the opening of "Farewell to Nova Scotia", "The sun was setting" Though "The signal beckons me away" (1.10) recalls "The captain calls, we must obey" and similar lines from the earlier versions, the correspondence is not close enough to be of much value. Evidently an interweaving of various traditions similar to that which led to "Farewell to Nova Scotia" has resulted in the quite different song, "On the Banks of Jeddore".

"On the Banks of Jeddore" marks the point at which "The Soldier's Adieu" exerts the least influence. Compared with it, the changes which appear in "Farewell to Nova Scotia" seems very slight. Nevertheless, they are important changes, and some of them are responsible for giving this song a poignancy not found in any other version. It is in the lines of the chorus and the simple "Farewell, farewell to Nova Scotia's charms" that we see the contribution of the Nova Scotian singer, for "Mary" of "The Soldier's Adieu" has almost disappeared and her place has been taken by the native land—by Nova Scotia herself.

"Mary" remains, a shadowy figure—the "bonny, bonny lass that I do adore"—but she is just one, among parents and comrades, that the sailor leaves behind in Nova Scotia. All these are implied in the farewell to "Nova Scotia's charms", but it is in the last line of the chorus, "Will you ever heave a sigh and a wish for me?" that this mysterious blending of sweetheart and native land becomes most apparent and most effective.

Though the question may be addressed to the "bonny lass", its context suggests that it is addressed to Nova Scotia's "sea-bound coast", and to the "dark and dreary" mountains. Even the work "let" is ambiguous. "Let your mountains dark and dreary be" can mean "Though your mountains . . ." as in "The Soldier's Adieu", but it can also mean

that the speaker expects or wishes the mountains to be dark and dreary with sorrow at his absence. This second reading of the chorus reinforces the image of a personified Nova Scotia sighing for her exiled son—an image undercut by the knowledge that mountains never will heave a sigh and a wish for him.

"Farewell to Nova Scotia" achieves an intensity which is completely absent from "The Soldier's Adieu", partly as a result of the compression and simplification of the song in its transmission through the media of folk memory such as the 1825 chapbook, and partly through such changes as the ones I have described which are the result of the song's transfer from Scotland to Canada in the hands of skilled folk artists. In this transfer it has received a fine ballad conclusion which is not found in any other version of "The Soldier's Adieu":

I have three brothers and they are at rest,
Their hands are folded on their breast,
But a poor simple sailor just like me
Must be tossed and driven on the dark blue sea.

Unlike the stanzas which are derived from "The Soldier's Adieu" and which are relatively standardized, this stanza, which identifies the speaker as a sailor, is the finest example of a number of versions which vary considerably in quality. In putting this stanza at the end of her composite version of "Farewell to Nova Scotia" Helen Creighton demonstrated her feeling for the original song, since this restored the stanzas almost to their original order and set the only stanza which does not belong to "The Soldier's Adieu" on its own.

Wherever it comes from, this concluding stanza mutes the martial glamour of "The drums they do beat, and the wars do alarm" in the melancholy recognition that, in war or in peace, it is the sailor's fate to be driven from home, "on the briny ocean tossed", and that, in some way, his exile is permanent. This fatalism is quite different from the mood of either of the antecedent songs I have been considering, and it alters the tone so that, in spite of its undoubted debt to Robert Tannahill's "The Soldier's Adieu", it is, essentially, a new song.

NOTES

1. Helen Creighton, *Traditional Songs from Nova Scotia* (Toronto: Ryerson, 1950), p. 264.
2. Letter received from Dr. Helen Creighton, January 13, 1978.
3. Edwin and Emma; to which are added, *The Meeting of the Waters. I'm grieved to leave my comrades all, I Hae' a Wife o' my Ain* (Stirling: Printed by W. MacNie, 1825), with sixty-eight other chapbooks in a privately-bound volume in the University Library, St. Andrews, Scotland.

4. This research has raised some questions about Tannahill's authorship and the original text of "The Soldier's Adieu" which I hope to take up in a future publication.
5. Alexander Whitelaw, *The Book of Scottish Song* (London: 1843), p. 15; David Semple, ed., *Poems and Songs and Correspondence* [of Tannahill] (Paisley: 1876), p. 249; P.A. Ramsay, ed., *The Works of Robert Tannahill* (London and Edinburgh: [1879?], p. 98. Another edition which has the same first stanza as Ramsay and Semple is *The Songs of Robert Tannahill Complete*. (Glasgow: George Cameron, 1859), p. 64.
6. Semple, 1876.
7. The other variants are of interest, particularly in relation to "The Soldier's Adieu", and I hope to discuss them in a future publication.
8. Marius Barbeau, et. al., *Come A-singing! Canadian Folk Songs*, Anthropological Series No. 26 (Ottawa: National Museum of Canada Bulletin No. 107, 1947).

"The Soldier's Adieu"

(Whitelaw, 1843)

The evening sun's gane down the west,
 The birds sit nodding on the tree;
 All nature now prepares for rest,
 But rest prepared ther's none for me.
 The trumpet sounds to war's alarms,
 The drums they beat, the fifes they play,—
 Come, Mary, cheer me wi' thy charms,
 For the morn I will be far away.

Good night and joy, good night and joy,
 Good night and joy be wi' you a':
 For since it's so that I must go,
 Good night and joy be wi' you a'!

I grieve to leave my comrades dear,
 I mourn to leave my native shore,—
 To leave my aged parents here,
 And the bonnie lass whom I adore.
 But tender thoughts maun now be hush'd,
 When danger calls I must obey,—
 The transport waits us on the coast,
 And the morn I will be far away.
 Good night and joy, etc.

Adieu, dear Scotia's sea-beat coast!
 Though bleak and drear thy mountains be,
 When on the heaving ocean tost,
 I'll cast a wishful look to thee!