

Weevils in the Flower - 15 September 2012

A short history of a song : Mark Gregory

WEEVILS IN THE FLOUR

Words: Dorothy Hewett

Music: Mike Leyden

The musical score is written in G major (one sharp) and 4/4 time. It consists of five staves of music with lyrics underneath. Chord symbols are placed above the notes. The lyrics are: "On an island in a river How that bitter river ran, I grew on scraps of charity in the best way that you can. On an island in a river Where I grew to be a man. For dole bread is bitter bread, Bitter bread & sour There's grief in the taste off it, There's wee—vils in the flour, There's wee—vils in the flour." The score ends with a double bar line.

And just across the river
stood the mighty B.H.P.,
Poured pollution on the waters,
poured the lead of misery
And its smoke was black as Hades
rolling hungry to the sea.

In those humpies by the river
where we lived on dole and stew,
while just across the river
those greedy smokestacks grew,
and the hunger of the many
filled the bellies of the few.

On an island in a river
how that bitter river ran
It broke the banks of charity
and it baked the bread of man
On an island in a river
where I grew to be a man.

last chorus:
For dole bread is bitter bread
There's a weevils in the flour
But men grow strong as iron upon
Black bread and sour,
Black bread and sour.

A 1970s recording of Declan Affley singing 'Weevils in the Flour' at a Sydney concert is one of many songs chosen for the Living Democracy exhibition which opened in July 2009 in the Museum of Australian Democracy, Old Parliament House.

The song has an interesting history bound up with the folk song movement, Australian literature and Australian industrial history since the 1930s depression. A history so interesting that the song has accreted a fair amount of folklore itself. Sometimes it is published as an anonymous song written in Newcastle in the 1930s. It was one many new Australian songs that a small gathering of Sydney folkies in Barbara Lysiak's home sang to Pete Seeger during his visit in 1963.



The first recording of it on a 1965 LP of Australian contemporary songs came under threat of legal action from Australia's most powerful mining and steel making company BHP, the 'Big Australian'. In the next 20 years its influence spread. It became a workers' anthem and had its title borrowed for a pioneering oral history of the depression. The phrase 'weevils in the flour' entered the Australian vernacular.

'Weevils in the Flour' began its journey to a song as a poem written by Dorothy Hewett with the title 'Where I Grew To Be a Man'. It was published in 1963 in 'What About The People!' Hewett's joint collection of 75 poems with her husband, Merv Lilley. The collection was published by the National Council of the Realist Writers Groups. Somewhere along its journey the poem also got known by another name 'Island in a River'.

Hewett wrote the poem in the 1950s based on depression experiences told to her by her friend Vera Deacon.

Folk singers in the 1960s were attracted enough to Hewett and Lilley's poems to set a number of them to music. Chris Kempster and Bill Berry both wrote tunes for Hewett's 'The Sailor Home From The Sea'. They also wrote tunes for Lilley's poems, Berry for 'The Birchgrove Park' and Kempster for 'Cane Killed Abel'. The Bush Music Club published Hewett's 'Ballad of Norman Brown' to the tune of an English mining song.

In 1963 Mike Leyden set four of Hewett's poems to music 'Atomic Lullaby', 'Sweet Song for Katie', 'Verwoerd, Verwoerd They Cry' and, most famously, 'Where I Grew To Be a Man' to which he gave the title 'Weevils in the Flour'.

Leyden and I along with Jeanie Lewis and John Laver were members of a singing group called the Radiation Quartette and we sang all of these songs especially Weevils in the Flour.

All of these new songs were published in the Sydney University Folk Music Society's 1965 songbook 'Songs of Our Time'. In the same year a number of Leyden's songs and settings were published in folk magazine 'Tradition'. The Fagans would later reset 'Ballad of Norman Brown' to a tune Hewett sang to them and later still Kempster would set Hewett's 'Clancy and Dooley and Don McLeod' to music. Even more recently Hewett's son Tom Flood has composed another setting for that ground-breaking poem.

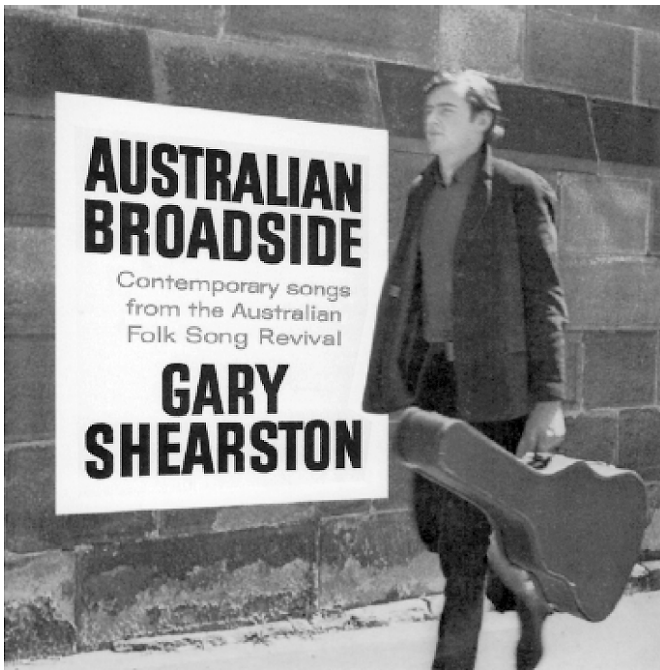
Perhaps that fact that so many of the poems gained a tune should not surprise us.

In the book Hewett wrote 'A poem is a SONG that comes from the people to be given back to the people. Work ... joy ... pain ... struggle ... achievement ... from these come the poems that are SONGS.' She also wrote: 'This is the folklore of the twentieth century.' and 'We live in an industrialised country. The old, slow, rollocking rhythm of horse and intinerent worker has given way the a harsh, staccato, jazzy beat of jackhammer, train, plane, dock and mechanised mine ... a great mass of mechanised, organised labour.'

Can literature borrow from folk song? There is plenty of evidence that it can. Can folk song grow out of literature? Folklorists have argued the case back and forth for generations. I think 'Weevils in the Flour' is a handy example for those who argue the case for industrial folk song, folk song in the age of mass literacy, folk song whose boundaries includes urban lives and the concerns of the industrial era and become reports from a changing society.

'Weevils in the Flour' deals with mass unemployment, the 'dole and stew', the greed and charity, the heavy metal pollution and ends with the determination of industrial workers to change the way they've been treated, these are people who came through the depression and 'grew hard as iron on that black bread and sour'. The argument is made for a social arrangement that no longer accepts that 'the bellies of the few' should be filled at the expense of 'the hunger of the many'.

'Weevils in the Flour' was first recorded by Gary Shearston on his influential LP 'Australian Broadside: Contemporary Songs from the Australian Folk Revival' for the CBS label in 1965. Shearston was forced to change a line in the song because BHP threatened to sue. Where originally the song had the phrase 'Stood the mighty BHP' Shearston sang 'Stood a mighty factory'.



The 1965 release of Shearston's LP of contemporary Australian songs made a big impression on a young Canberra student Bob Fagan who added many of the songs including 'Weevils in the Flour' in his growing repertory.

Years later he would find out more about the song from Hewett herself as he explained when introducing the song at a National Folk Festival workshop:

'Dorothy said that a young man had picked her up to take her the University of Newcastle where she was going to be a Writer in Residence for a while, and as they were driving past the four stacks of the BHP steelworks there the young man said 'You know there was a poem

written there on Kooragang Island by some unknown industrial worker in the 1930s.' and Dorothy said 'I didn't know whether to say I'm actually that unknown industrial worker and I wrote it on my kitchen table in the 1950s' but I think she did tell him.'

Maybe we should accept this as evidence of a song accreting industrial folklore, literature evolving into folk song.

'Weevils in the Flour' became a favorite for folk singers and union choirs, a political anthem of sorts you would hear in workers pubs like the Criterion or the Sussex in Sydney's Sussex Street before they were demolished. Later it was sung by the workers occupying the Cockatoo Island Docks in Sydney Harbour before its closure in 1992.

In 2003 Merv Lilley told me:

'I don't know whether I should tell stories about Dorothy's writing or not. I saw her write Island in a River. She had said something she'd written to Tribune and Rex Chiplin had sent it back he said it wasn't political enough. So she says 'I'll give them something political!' and she wrote Island in a River.'

The song is still being recorded - In 2010 Martyn Wyndham-Read included it on his CD 'Back to You' undoubtedly expanding its geographical reach from its origins in Newcastle NSW. Margaret Walters has recorded it even more recently for a CD titled 'We Made the Steel' due for release October 2012. It seems to me that as well as having many stories attached to it the song is doing fine and that is great tribute to the poem that Dorothy wrote so long ago.

The song came from oral history and it is still being sung. A couple of weeks ago I heard Miguel Heatwole sing it and he had put back a couple of the verses from the original poem that Leyden left out of the song.

One last thing, when Wendy Lowenstein was writing her oral history of the depression she chose 'Weevils in the Flour' as the title because of this song.