

E325L: ANGLO-AMERICAN FOLKSONG  
Spring 2010

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TTh 3:00-4:00 p.m.  
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**DESCRIPTION:** The word *folksong*, as used in this course, denotes a song (or, in the collective sense, a kind of song) commonly heard, learned, and sung by ordinary men, women, and children in the course of daily activities like work, play, ritual, or social interaction. In much of English-speaking Britain and North America, the informal, unpracticed, amateur singing of songs in the contexts of courting, child-rearing, performing household chores, making a living, celebrating convivial occasions, and other kinds of face-to-face communal activities was common up to the later years of the nineteenth century. By then, folksongs had begun to be superseded by professionally produced, packaged, and disseminated "pop" songs that were listened to avidly but seldom entered the repertoires of ordinary people for performance and participation on everyday occasions.

Beginning in the later eighteenth century in Britain, in the early twentieth in the U.S. and Canada, *folksong collectors* as they were called visited the homes, worksites, and community meeting places—pubs, for example—of mostly laboring people (migrant workers in Aberdeenshire and Fermanagh, gypsies in Somerset, lumbermen in Ontario, subsistence farmers in North Carolina, cowboys in New Mexico) to record the songs they actually sang in daily life. It is these collections of songs—made at first with paper and pencil, later with sound-recording machines—that constitute the data folksong scholars study today. Just like the song collectors, we too will be especially interested in a sub-set of Anglo-American folksongs, *ballads*, our name for songs that tell stories. We will look in depth at English-speaking Scottish, Irish, English, Canadian, and American ballads *from oral tradition* (another way of saying *folksongs*), examining them, not as music, but as social “literature” (i.e. as a generically stylized way of telling-a-story-in-sung-verse) and as social “behavior” (i.e. as meaningful, functional, shared discourse).

**WHAT I HOPE YOU WILL LEARN IN THIS CLASS:** Most obviously, I hope you will learn to take seriously a kind of culture you may be familiar with (think “On Top of Old Smokey”) but probably never consciously “thought about.” You almost certainly take art song seriously: you know about Mozart Mozart and can probably hum a phrase or two of the “Grand March” from Verdi’s *Aida*. You also take seriously popular song, having helped to make Michael Jackson a multi-millionaire by buying his albums and even knowing by heart the words of her best-known hits. But art song and pop song are only part of the picture: there is a third kind of song that in its natural context of occurrence was (is) stored chiefly in memory rather than on a printed page or on the grooves of a compact disc, was (is) encountered in face-to-face oral communication with significant others during everyday social events rather than from reading a

book, watching television, or attending a concert. This third kind of everyday, below-the-radar song includes what we call “folksong.”

Second, I hope you will learn that folksong has been and can be studied in disciplined and interesting ways. The best way to do this, in my opinion, is not just to have you read examples of folksongs and “discuss” them, but for you to become familiar with how professional folksong scholars have, over the years, gathered, categorized, and analyzed their materials. This information will be available to you in class lectures and in your course packet.

Third, I hope you will appreciate the importance of qualities in thinking and writing that will help you do a good job not just in this class but in *all* your endeavors: coherence, clarity, concreteness, accuracy, and thoroughness. I hope you will learn to value these qualities as observers, as practitioners, and as communicators.

**REQUIREMENTS:** Note that *faithful class attendance is required*. I take attendance first thing each class meeting; more than three absences for the term will adversely affect your grade, and you cannot pass the course with more than five absences. You should also be a thorough, accurate taker of class notes, since much of the information on which you’ll be examined is not in your course packet but available only in lectures. Finally, you should also be a competent writer, since all papers and exams require you to write discourse that is grammatical, coherent, concrete, clear, and convincing.

Writing requirements are as follows: (1) a 4-5 page prospectus for a research paper; (2) a first draft of the research paper itself, which should be at least 12 pages long and include a substantial bibliography of works consulted; (3) a final version of your research paper that takes into consideration your instructor’s comments on the content, grammar, and writing style of the first version.

Instructions for researching and writing the paper will be handed out on the second class day. Note that there are several examples of student research papers in the course packet, p. 426 to the end; all were done for this very course, following the same instructions as those you will receive, and all are good models for your own paper.

There will be a three-hour final exam at semester’s end.

**GRADES:** Final exam 35%, papers 65%, with this qualification: you must receive a passing grade (D or higher) *both* in the final exam *and* in the final version of your research paper in order to pass the course.

Please be realistic in your grade expectations: about half of you will probably get C’s (a measure of competence), about 40% B’s (a measure of

superiority) and A's (a measure of excellence), and about 10% D's and F's. But the grades are not "curved": your grade will reflect (1) your familiarity with and understanding of the course material and (2) how well you communicate that familiarity and understanding in written work.

**TEXTBOOKS:** (1) Course packet, available at Speedway Copying and Printing, Dobie Mall basement (**PLEASE BRING TO EVERY CLASS MEETING**); (2) a handbook for writers of expository English prose.

**SCHEDULE** (topics and their sequencing are fixed; dates are very approximate):

**Remember: Bring your Course Packet to every class meeting**

- I. Folksong in its natural context of occurrence (Jan. 20-27).
- II. Anglo/American folksong types (Jan. 29-Feb. 10).  
**Reading:** Course Packet pp. 1-21; 22-31; 32-39; 4-53; 54-65; 66-80; 81-96; 97-100; 101-105.
- III. Collecting, archiving, publishing, codifying: the Anglo/American ballad corpus and ballad reference works (Feb. 12-Feb. 26).  
**Reading:** Course Packet pp. 107-140; 141-157; 158-167; 168-181; 182-194.
- IV. Analyzing I: ballad poetics (March 3-March 24).  
**Reading:** Course Packet pp. 195-219; 220-224; 225-253.

**NOTE: Research Paper Prospectus due February 19**

- V. Analyzing II: ballad diffusion and variation (March 26-April 7).  
**Reading:** Course Packet, pp. 254-257; 258-286; 287-315.

**NOTE: Research Paper Draft due March 24**

- VI. Analyzing III: ballads in their cultural contexts (April 9-April 21).  
**Reading:** Course Packet, pp. 316-342; 343-351; 352-367; 368-377.
- VII. Analyzing IV: ballads and their human agents (April 23-May 7).  
**Reading:** Course Packet, pp. 378-385; 386-396; 397-404; 405-418; 419-425.

**NOTE: Final Research Paper due April 28**

**Final exam: May 17, 2:00-5:00 p.m.**