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The Maritime “Folksongs” of Edward Harrigan

BY DAN MILNER

Edward Green “Ned” Harrigan was born October 26, 1844, in the Corlear’s Hook section of Manhattan. His father was a native of Carbonear, Newfoundland, a former first mate on the New York–Liverpool packet ship run; his paternal grandfather was a fisherman in County Cork, Ireland. His mother’s line was likewise well connected to the sea. Harrigan’s maternal grandfather was a gunner, fatally wounded aboard the *Chesapeake* in her celebrated 1813 battle with the *Shannon*, and his grandmother ran a boardinghouse for sailors. Corlear’s Hook was a largely Irish neighborhood, home to New York’s shipbuilding industry during much of the 19th century. Harrigan’s father worked in the yards at Corlear’s Hook, and found his son a job there as a caulker. Working long hours, tediously pounding tarry hemp between the planks of leaky ships, Ned Harrigan labored for four years, but he wanted more... a life on the stage.

Ned took to the sea as a teenager, first to Gulf Coast ports, later to California, where he found work as a caulker in San Francisco Bay shipyards by day, moonlighting as a singer, accompanying himself with the banjo. Eventually, and with strong support from many maritime trades workers there, he became a full-time entertainer. Back in New York as a well-established performer, Harrigan began to stretch vaudeville skits into full-length plays. They were anything but static pieces. He refined, added to, and reintroduced them frequently. When he expanded a skit, *Old Lavender’s Water*, to make a one-hour play and it didn’t achieve the success he had envisioned, Harrigan lengthened the comedy again in 1885, adding, among other elements, “Get Up, Jack, John, Sit Down.” The play was one of his finest, and “Get Up, Jack, John Sit Down” remains one of his most successful songs—but only a handful of the many people who sing it today know its origin.

Oh, ships will come and ships will go as long
as waves do roll;
Each sailor lad, like his dad, will love the flow-
ing bowl.
Afloat, ashore they do adore a lass that’s plump
an roun’;
When the money’s gone ‘tis the same old song,
Get up, Jack, John, sit down.

*Heigh laddie, ho laddie. Swing the capstan roun’;
When the money’s gone ‘tis the same old song, get up,
Jack, John sit down.*

An old sheathknife and souwester are staunch
old friends at night;
A glass o’ grog in rain or fog, will steer a sailor
right.
From old Brasil to Bunker Hill we scatter dol-
lars roun’;
When the money’s gone ‘tis the same old song,
Get up, Jack, John, sit down.

Go take a cruise on men o’ war to China or
Japan;
In Asia there the maidens fair, all love a sailor
man;
While Tom and Joe palaver oh, and buy the
girls a gown;
When the money’s gone ‘tis the same old song,
Get up, Jack, John, sit down.

When Jack’s ashore, oh, then he’ll steer to some
old boarding house,
He’s welcomed in with rum and gin, and fed on
pork and souse;
He’ll spend and lend, and never offend, and lay
drunk on the groun’;
When the money’s gone ‘tis the same old song,
Get up, Jack, John, sit down.

When Jack is old and weather beat, too weak
to roust about,
In some rum shop they let him stop, at eight
bells he’s turned out;
He cries, he cries up to the skies, I’ll soon be
homeward boun’;
For my money’s gone ‘tis the same old song,
Get up, Jack, John, sit down.

A second maritime song attributed to Har-
rigan is “Roll the Wood-Pile Down,” presum-
ably taken up by sailors on their shore visits to
New York City and turned into a shanty at sea.
Here’s a sample:

The red cow brushing the old blue fly.
Way down in Florida.
The white man laughs when the black goes by.
Now haul the wood-pile down.
Travelin’, travelin’ as long as the moon is round.
That black girl o’ mine’s on the Georgia line. Now
haul the wood-pile down.

The steamboat’s ready to burn that pine.
The grapes are ripe on the old black vine.

The muskrat hides in the old burnt log
The chipmunk laughs at the old house dog.

Another presumed “folksong” attributed
to Harrigan is “Buffalo.” Harrigan’s theatre

company toured tirelessly, and the lyricist may
have found the song’s seed while barnstorming
in upstate New York. For many years, most
New York State students were taught a version
of this song. One wonders whether it’s still in
the syllabus?

From Buffalo I’ve just come down
On the good boat Danger;
A long, long trip on the Erie, boys,
I feel just like a stranger.
We’d heavy fogs, [and windy] storms,
Forget ‘em I never shall;
I’m every inch a sailor boy,
On the E-ri-a Canal.

*For the Erie is a rising,
And the gin is getting low;
I hardly think you’ll get a drink,
Till we get back to Buffalo.*

We were loaded down with barley,
When we bid good-bye;
When a pirate bore upon us,
With an awful wicked eye.
I saw him through the spy-glass,
I put up a flag of [truce];
I found it was the Three Sisters,
Four days from Syracuse.

Three days out we struck a rock,
Of Lackawanna Coal;
It gave the boat an awful shock,
And stove in quite a hole.
I halloed to the driver,
On the tow-path’s treaden dirt;
He came aboard and stopped the leak,
With his flannel undershirt.

Precisely how each of these songs came to
the lips of older generation New York singers
we do not know; but those singers learned songs
they loved without undue regard to provenance.
That enthusiastic, unstuffy attitude isn’t a bad
one to emulate. Keep singing and keep learn-
ing songs. ▼

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rytelling in Song at NYU
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nominations in 2009.



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