

## 2.4 The Cherry Tree Carol / Joseph Was An Old Man/ Keresen

### Sources

#### *Archival (Manuscript / Sound)*

Davies Gilbert MSS pt 1, 1767 – 68, p. 22, *Joseph was an old man*

Sharp Mss Collection folk words no 2821: J Thomas at Camborne May 9<sup>th</sup> 1913. Lyrics with music.

Sharp Mss Collection Tune no 2843 (same page as Johnny Wurzey/ Whiskey):

Thomas Phillips (68) at Redruth May 10<sup>th</sup> 1913.

Sharp MSS 2821, Sent by Thomas Miners Camborne May 1913

Carpenter, J.M.Collection, Library of Congress (Ref AFC 1972/001, MS p. 11024):

From Harry Thomas circa 1933 (Authors Note – Substantial variant in tune – Lyrics - only one verse)

Carpenter, J.M.Collection, Library of Congress, Cylinder 069 (? - problem with labelling) circa 1933.

The Cherry-Tree Carol (cylinder recording), Harry Thomas St Just.

#### *Publications (Book / Album)*

Journal Of The Folk Song Society, Vol. II, No. 33 (1929), p. 111. Sung by S. Landry, Cornwall. 1924, JFSS V 1 no. 20 (1916), p. 321. Words noted by Miners in Jan 1916.

Dunstan, Ralph Lyver Canow Kernow /The Cornish Song Book ,Reid Bros, Ltd, London 1929, p. 85.

Sandys William, *Christmas Carols Ancient and Modern* Richard Beckley, London 1833.

Sandys William, *Christmas-tide, Its History, Festivities and Carols, With Their Music* (London, John Russell Smith, 1852), p. 241.

Bronson, Bertrand Harris *Traditional Tunes of the child Ballads* Vol II p4 . ( Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1959).

Racca 2, Calstock, 1997: Keresen - arranged as a waltz by Bill McColl.

Hymns and Carols of Christmas:

[http://hymnsandcarolsofchristmas.com/Hymns\\_and\\_Carols/Notes\\_On\\_Carols/cherry\\_t  
ree\\_carol-notes.htm](http://hymnsandcarolsofchristmas.com/Hymns_and_Carols/Notes_On_Carols/cherry_tree_carol-notes.htm) accessed 26<sup>th</sup> Nov 2006.

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### Observation

Jo Tagney / Kescanna perform this song (recorded on CD: Nadelik – 2000) miming the reactions of Joseph and Mary during the dialogue of the song – Mary's truculence and Joseph's indignation. -

### Notes

This is a composite carol and an example of the various permutations the folk process can provide but as a piece of "religious" music, its provenances are better documented than they might have been for the secular music of the general population.

*Sharp Journal of the Folk Song Society Vol IV p 14,*

Suggests that the

The musical tradition . . . does not begin to appear in the record until about the beginning of the 19th Century." " I have a large number of variants of this carol, but have never taken down so full a set of words as those which Mr. Thomas gave me. The carol usually finishes at the end of the eighth stanza (see English Folk Carols, Nos. 3 and 4), the remaining verses generally forming part of a separate song, entitled " Joseph was a-walking." I have never before heard anyone sing the ninth and tenth stanzas of Mr. Thomas's version.

*JFSS II no 33 (1929) p 111*

Sung by S Landry Cornwall 1924 JFSS V no 20 (1916), p. 321. Words noted by Miners in Jan 1916 Authors - words and tune differ more like St Day Carol).

*Douglas D. Anderson, Hymns and Carols of Christmas*

[http://hymnsandcarolsofchristmas.com/Hymns\\_and\\_Carols/Notes\\_On\\_Carols/cherry tree\\_carol-notes.htm](http://hymnsandcarolsofchristmas.com/Hymns_and_Carols/Notes_On_Carols/cherry_tree_carol-notes.htm) accessed 26<sup>th</sup> Nov 2006.

Anderson suggests a number of origins and variations for this carol:

William Studwell points out, however, there is not a single "Cherry Tree Carol." Rather, this is a combination of three separate folk carols which later merged. The first carol, based on the above quoted exchange, is "Joseph Was An Old Man." The second carol begins with the stanza "As Joseph Was A Walking" (also known as Joseph and the Angel). Finally, there is the Easter carol, "Mary's Question," which begins with the stanza "Then Mary took her young Son." Studwell writes "The truth of the matter is

that there are a number of "Cherry Tree" carols so that instead of the very misleading singular form a multiple designation such as "The Cherry Tree Carols," or even better, "The Cherry Tree Carol Series" should be substituted." Even among the three carols which comprise this series, there is considerable variation in the lyrics that are reproduced (as shown below). It has been noted the editors of *The New Oxford Book of Carols* that Cecil Sharp collected no fewer than 8 texts. Ian Bradley notes one version captured in Cornwall in 1916 mixes in verses from 'The holly and the ivy' with a refrain:

Then sing O the holy holy  
And sing O the holly  
And of all the trees that are in the wood  
It is the holly.

Likewise, there are a multitude of tunes to which the carol has been set. *The Oxford Book of Carols* captures four different tunes (Carol 66); separate tunes are given by Sandys, Husk, and Bramley and Stainer. The note in *The New Oxford Book of Carols* states: Centuries of use have woven a tangled web of variant texts, all of them marred by the vagaries and omissions of memory, by singers' mishearings and their replacement of idioms no longer understood, by their clipping or expansion of lines to fit different tunes, and by editorial inventions. They also note that the version given by Hone was "eclectic, having been assembled 'from various copies of it printed at different times.'" In addition, Studwell notes, there "are at least five distinct American songs with the cherry tree motif." He notes that in the United States there are two carols titled "Joseph and Mary" -- unrelated to the English carol of the same name -- plus single carols titled "The Cherry Tree," "When Joseph Was an Old Man," and "Oh, Joseph Took Mary Up on His Right Knee." Husk noted that Joseph's advanced age is mentioned in many places in the Apocryphal New Testament; as in the Gospel of the birth of Mary, where he is called "a person very advanced in years," and in the Protevangelion, where he is represented as saying, "I am an old man."

Bradley notes that multiple theories exist concerning the symbolism of the carol. He writes, "Some folklorists point to the widespread use in folklore of the gift of a cherry, or similar fruit carrying its own seed, as a divine

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authentication of human fertility." He also notes the relationship between the eating of the fruit by Eve in the Garden of Eden, and the eating of cherries by Mary whose son would erase the transgression. He adds that some versions have Mary and Joseph walking through a garden, rather than an orchard, reinforcing the motif of the Garden of Eden.

It has also been noted that the apocryphal Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew, Chapter 20, has a story that during their flight into Egypt, Mary sits beneath a palm tree and desires its dates, but is unable to reach them. Joseph is unable to climb the tree, but when Jesus intervenes, the tree bows down to give Mary the fruit.

Most versions likewise follow this pattern: when Joseph refuses to retrieve the fruit of the tree for Mary, Jesus intervenes from the womb and the tree bows down to deliver the fruit to the Virgin Mary. There are two notable exceptions. In one version of it is Joseph who commands the tree to bow to Mary (and it does!). More astonishingly, in *Joseph Were A Young Man*, it is the Lord Himself who issues the command. You can be certain of the result.

### **Lyrics**

William Sandys, *Christmas Carols ancient and Modern*, (London Richard Beckley, 1833).

1. Joseph was an old man,  
    And an old man was he,  
When he wedded Mary  
    In the land of Galilee.
2. Joseph and Mary walked  
    Through an orchard good,  
Where was cherries and berries  
    So red as any blood.
3. Joseph and Mary walked  
    Through an orchard green,  
Where was berries and cherries  
    As thick as might be seen.

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4. O then bespoke Mary,  
    So meek and so mild,  
Pluck me one cherry, Joseph,  
    For I am with child.
5. O then bespoke Joseph  
    With words most unkind,  
Let him pluck thee a cherry  
    That brought thee with child.
6. O then bespoke the Babe  
    Within his Mother's womb --  
Bow down then the tallest tree  
    For my Mother to have some.
7. Then bowed down the highest tree  
    Unto his Mother's hand;  
Then she cried, See, Joseph,  
    I have cherries at command!
8. O then bespake Joseph,  
    I have done Mary wrong,  
But cheer up, my dearest,  
    And be not cast down.
9. Then Mary plucked a cherry  
    As red as the blood;  
Then Mary went home  
    With her heavy load.
10. Then Mary took her Babe  
    And sat him on her knee,  
Saying, My dear Son, tell me  
    What this world will be.
11. O, I shall be as dead, Mother,  
    As the stones in the wall;  
O, the stones in the streets, Mother,  
    Shall mourn for me all.
12. Upon Easter-day, Mother,  
    My uprising shall be;  
O, the sun and the moon, Mother,  
    Shall both rise with me.

*Dunstan, Ralph The Cornish Song Book (London: Reid Bros. Ltd, 1929), p. 85.*

1. When Joseph was an old man, an old man was he;  
He married sweet Mary of fair Galilee;  
And as they went a walking in the garden so free,  
Fair Mary spied cherries upon a tall tree.

2. "O get those cherries, Joseph, which there I can see,  
O get those sweet cherries and give them to me."  
But Joseph spake unkindly, and thus answer'd he:  
"I'll not pluck those cherries to give unto thee."

3. Then Mary said to Cherry-tree, "Bow down to my knee,  
That I may pluck cherries, by one, two and three."  
The highest branch, obedient, bowed down to her knee:  
"Thus may you see, Joseph, those cherries are for me."

4. As Joseph was a-walking, he heard Angels sing,  
"This night shall be born our Heavenly King.  
He shall not be born in house or hall,  
Nor in Heavenly mansion, but in an ox-stall.

5. "He shall not be clothed in purple or pall;  
But all in fair linen as wear babies all.  
He shall not be rocked in silver nor gold,  
But in a wooden cradle that rocks on the mould."

6. Then Mary took her Baby, she dress'd Him so sweet,  
She laid Him in a manger all there for to sleep.  
And as she stood o'er Him she heard Angels sing:  
"O bless our dear Saviour, our Heavenly King!"

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*J Thomas (Sharp mss no 2821)*

Cherry Tree Carol Sung by J. Thomas (65) at Camborne, Cornwall, 9 May 1913

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1/ When Joseph was an old man An old Man was he  
He wedded our Mary The Queen of Ga lilee -

2 / And when he had a-wedded her And at home had her brought,  
Mary proved with child, But Joseph knew her not.

3/ Then Joseph and Mary Was a-walking in the grove  
They saw cherries and berries As red as any rose.

4/ When Joseph and Mary Was in the garden green  
They saw cherries and berries, That was fitted to be seen.

5/ And Mary said to Joseph In words meek and mild:  
Pick me some cherries, Joseph, For I am with child.

6/Then Joseph spoke to Mary ,In words so unkind:  
Let him pluck thee cherries, Mary, who brought thee with child

7/ Then Jesus spoke unto the tree From within his mother's womb:  
Bow down, sweet Cherry tree, For my mother to have some.

8/Then the highest branches bent, s mother Mary's knee  
An she picked off the berries By one two and three

9/Then Mary had a young son, Which she dandled on her knee  
And she said to her fair child, What wjfl this world be

10/ This world he said is no other, Than the stones in the street  
but the sun moon and stars ,Shall sail under thy feet

11/ And I must not be rocked In silver or gold  
but in a wood cradle That rock ofl the ground

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*12/ And I must not be clothed In purple not poll  
But be clothed in fine linen This child is your own*

## Music Scores

### William Sandys' Version

JOSEPH WAS AN OLD MAN.

I. SANDYS' Carol, 1538.

Jo-seph was an old man, And an old man was he,  
When he wed-ded Ma-ry In the land of Gal-i-len.  
Re-barred:--

II. Hess's Songs of the Nativity.

Version from Mr S Landry / Tom Miners, JFDSS, Vol.II.No. 33 (1929), p.111.

1.—CHERRY, HOLLY AND IVY.  
[THE CHERRY TREE CAROL.]

Noted by T. MINERS and J. E. THOMAS. SUNG BY MR. S. LANDRY,  
June 11th, 1924.

Jo-seph and Ma-ry In the gar-den did walk, Where were  
cher-ries and ber-ries And all kinds of fruit, Then  
up be-spoke Ma-ry So meek and so mild, Pluck  
me some cher-ries, Jo-seph, For I am with child. Then sing  
O, the hol-ly, hol-ly O, And sing O, the hol-ly, But of  
all the trees that's in the wood, It is the hol-ly.

Collected by Sharp from J E Thomas

4.—THE CHERRY TREE CAROL.

Noted by Cecil J. Sharp. SUNG BY MR. J. THOMAS,  
CAMBORNE, CORNWALL, MAY 9TH, 1913.

When Jo - seph was an old man, An old man was he, He  
wed - ded our Ma - ry, The Queen of Ga - li - lee.

- 2 And when he had a-wedded her  
And at home had her brought,  
Mary proved to be with child ;  
But Joseph knew her not.
- 3 Then Joseph and Mary  
Was a-walking in the grove,  
They saw cherries and berries  
As red as any rose.
- 4 When Joseph and Mary  
Was in the garden grove,  
They saw cherries and berries  
That was fit to be seen.
- 5 And Mary said to Joseph,  
In words meek and mild :  
" Pick me some cherries, Joseph,  
For I am with child."
- 6 Then Joseph spoke to Mary,  
In words so unkind :  
" Let him pick thee cherries, Mary,  
Who brought thee with child."
- 7 Then Jesus spoke unto the tree  
From within his mother's womb :  
" Blow down, sweet cherry tree,  
For my mother to have some."
- 8 Then the highest branches bent as low  
As Mother Mary's knee ;  
And she picked of the cherries  
By one, two, and three.
- 9 Then Mary had a young son  
Which she dandled on her knee ;  
And she said to her fair child :  
" What will this world be ?"
- 10 " This world, he said, is no other  
Than the stones in the street ;  
But the sun, moon, and stars  
Shall sail under thy feet."
- 11 " And I must not be rocked  
In silver nor gold ;  
But in a wool cradle  
That rock on the ground.
- 12 " And I must not be clothed  
In purple nor gold ;  
But be clothed in fine linen,  
The child in your own."