

Legacies of Ewan MacColl

A review essay, by **Vic Gammon**, of a new book, *Legacies of Ewan MacColl: The Last Interview*, about singer, songwriter, dramatist and Marxist Ewan MacColl in the centenary year of his birth.

This collection of interviews and essays is an unusual book, but it is also rich and rewarding. The centrepiece, well over half the text, is a series of interviews with MacColl conducted by the (then) young Italian student, Giovanni Vacca, in 1987 and 1988, not long before MacColl's death in October 1989. The interviewee was old and experienced, the young interviewer was perhaps somewhat awestruck, certainly inexperienced, but intelligent and knowledgeable. Some might think this was a recipe for disaster, but this is absolutely not the case. If anything, because of what might seem a mismatch, MacColl reveals a great deal of himself. In that he has to respond to the questions of a young Italian, MacColl has to explain more than he might have done to an older interviewer who shared a common language and understanding.

In her passionate and fascinating preface, Peggy Seeger ends by saying that the book gives Ewan a chance to speak for himself. He always had that chance but did not seem to find a way to engage with people that could allow for respectful exchanges of ideas and disagreements. Giovanni Vacca found MacColl and Seeger welcoming and warm, and this was

certainly my impression of them from the few occasions I spent time with them in the 1980s. Yet some of the quotations from MacColl's 'Jack Speedwell' writings quoted in Laing's essay (page 161), as well as some passages within these interviews, show how vituperative he could be.

MacColl states 'we can never have too much information about the past if we are to understand it properly'

Liveliness of response I like, but there is a tone in his caricaturing of other performers, which constitutes point scoring and sarcasm rather than valid criticism. I cannot help feeling that his seeming inability to conduct engaged dialogue was a profound pity and the loss was both Ewan's and everyone else's.

I first saw and heard MacColl perform when I was 13. It was my first significant encounter with the kind of music he performed other than on radio programmes. As a teenager I found him

impressive, powerful, almost overwhelming, certainly exciting. I must credit him with helping stimulate an interest that has sustained me throughout my life, and that is no small thing.

MacColl spoke well but the lively interview text is a long way from the considered and polished prose of his autobiography. He exhibits the diverse range of his self-education as well as his downright prejudices; he reveals his intellectual debts as well as his proneness to exaggeration and rethinking history. We get insights into his core beliefs, his inconsistencies and his enthusiasms. This is the sort of testimony historians are always hopeful of finding yet which often simply does not survive.

Overstatement is never far below the surface of MacColl's exciting, engaging and sometimes breathless prose. It may be the case that the anti-Thatcher songs of the 1980s 'won us a big section of the fragmented working-class movement' (p.35), but my impression – from discussions about those songs at the time – was that this was not the case. How did MacColl gain that impression? Perhaps by talking to people who confirmed his own view? Was he right?

At one point MacColl states 'we can never have too much information about the past if we are to understand it properly' (p.68). Apart from the obvious point that quantity is not quality, MacColl's grasp of historical fact is sometimes rather shaky. Let one example suffice. On page 131 he states that large-scale collecting began in Scotland in 'the early 1700s'. 'Thomas Herd' MacColl states, made a collection in 1715, and 'was a schoolmaster and he went round on a penny farthing bicycle'. Now, *David Herd* was not born until 1732



Ewan MacColl in 1958

and his collection appeared in three editions in 1769, 1776 and 1791. The penny-farthing bicycle did not emerge until the last third of the nineteenth century and Herd was an accountant not a teacher! Most likely MacColl was, at least in part, winding up his interviewer. Or is it a transcription error (did he say 1750?). Or was his memory faulty? Or was he confusing Herd with Gavin Grieg, who collected in the early twentieth century?

I don't know the answer but I do not make this point for easy amusement, it is representative of what could be interpreted as a cavalier attitude to accuracy that pervades the interviews. We must heed Peggy Seeger's warning that MacColl was 'easy to criticize' but also attend to her statement that he was 'a voracious reader' and 'his familiarity with many subjects made him fascinating to listen to' – and he was authoritative and people believed him. But note, Peggy also writes his 'truth' was based on 'instinct rather than on book-learning'. All this is credible, but he appeals regularly in the interviews to 'book-learning'. We all make mistakes, but if your argument is based on more than just instinct, you need at least to try to minimise them.

There was a fixed (I almost wrote deeply conservative) quality to much of MacColl's thought. Here is an example: 'It's possible to destroy the repertoire by just changing too much or by introducing changes from another area of song activity. Just as if you sing a song, say "Barbara Allen", using a concert style, you destroy the song. The style, and the words and the tune are indissolubly connected, they're organically related to each other, or should be!' (p.114).

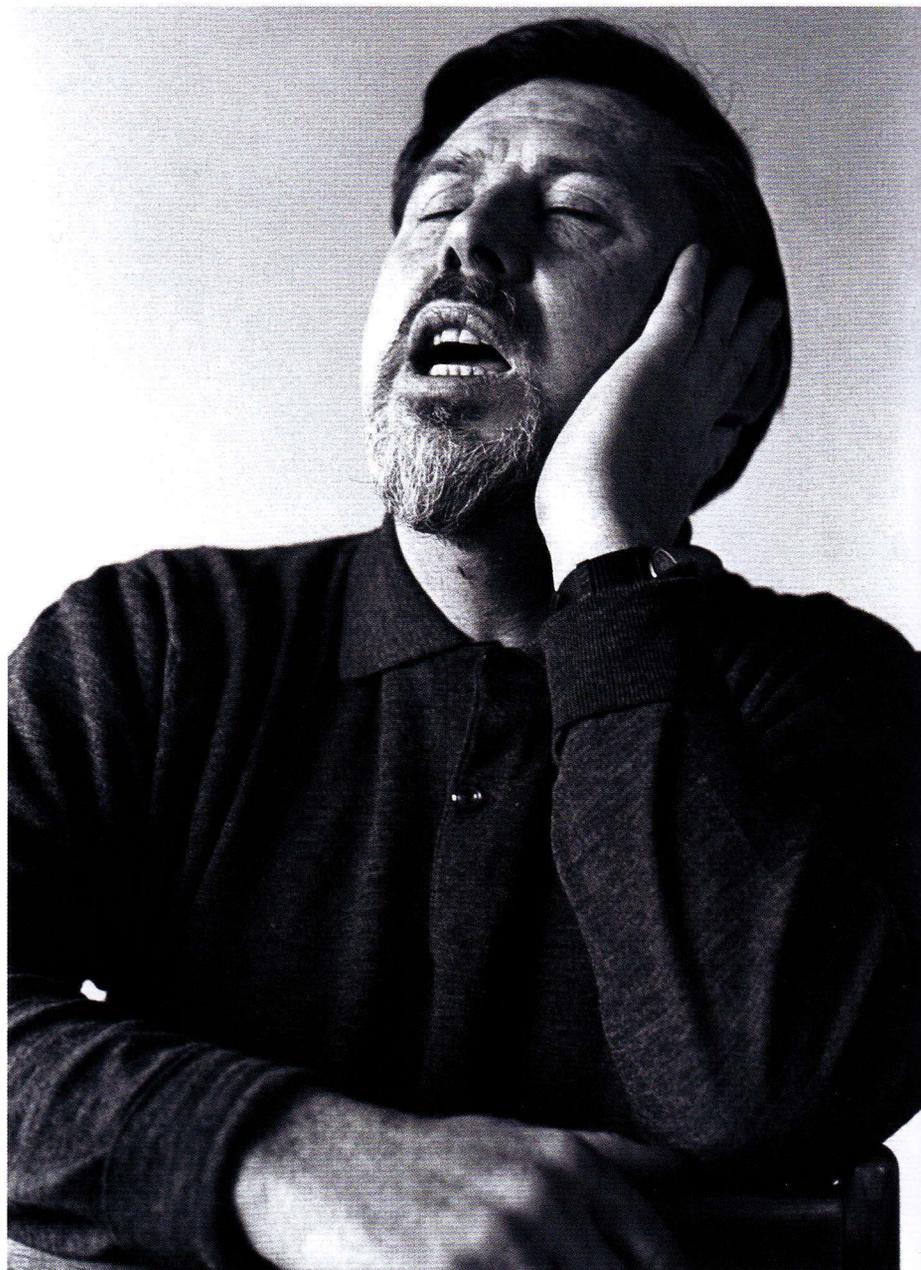
Elsewhere he speaks of 'a ballad which is meant to be sung "a cappella"' (p.120). This may be opinion, but it is not history. This particular ballad is a fascinating example; the first record we have of 'Barbara Allen' was of it being sung by a Restoration period stage actress. In the 1790s it was a hit song at the fashionable Vauxhall Gardens. In the nineteenth century, performed on concert stages, it drew tears from audiences. It has been recorded numerous times since the 1920s. It has a complex and variegated history of use and seems to have come through without being destroyed. Now, we might not like all the renditions, but it has been sung using a concert style as well as a folk style for centuries. Finally, there are a number of tunes associated with the song, so no indissoluble connection there. A number of Child ballads have their first recorded examples in educated people's songbooks. The quality 'Barbara Allen' has displayed is its adaptability to different musical and social situations. History is what happened not what you would have liked to have happened or imagined happened.

This fixity of idea relates to another aspect of MacColl's thought: he sees things in a very clear-cut way. Consider: '... it's a characteristic, in every culture, that the smiths are pariahs' (p.97). Is it? How do we know? Confounding process and value judgment, MacColl compares English and Scots versions of ballads: 'in the English repertory they are somewhat watered down' (p.93). Much more ballad collecting went on in Scotland from a much earlier period; it is not surprising that some Scots ballads exhibit exemplary qualities. Similarly 'folk music has always been the product of the most exploited section of society' (p.61). This seems to be defining the field before investigating it. Finally, the idea that MacColl was simply applying 'the techniques of folk creation' (p.47) assumes that those techniques can be learnt and that they are knowable in an analytic way. The ethnomusicologist Bruno Nettl concluded that we know very little about processes of creativity in traditional music making. We have to conclude that

MacColl had fixed ideas, which he stated as truths, which appear to have little foundation.

MacColl was very critical of older traditions of folk song scholarship: 'The nineteenth-century folklorists and composers wanted to improve the traditional music. And they made such a balls of it... they ruined so much, destroyed so much' (p.120).

They may well have misrepresented traditional music, but that is not ruination and destruction. There is vagueness about who is meant here, but when you read him closely MacColl does not see his own indebtedness and similarity to older generations of collectors and scholars. He uncritically accepts Cecil Sharp's problematic definition of what constitutes folk music as bundled into the 1955 Sao Paulo definition (p.85). He accepts and uses Child's notions of what constitutes a ballad, although Child's selection processes and conceptualisation had been thoroughly criticised before MacColl



Ewan MacColl in 1965

became an active singer. He also accepts Child's estimation of the broadside ballad as a genre, misquoting him in the process (p.108). He accepts that folk music is a purely melodic music and not structured harmonically (p.146) – a cliché of the Victorian and Edwardian collectors that does not bear much critical scrutiny. He sounds like some of those collectors when he says '...melodies die hard, they really die hard, they've got tremendous muscular powers, powers of resistance, of survival' (p.146, I agree with him, but he is knowingly or unknowingly echoing Kidson's ideas on 'vital melody'). Yet at other times he seems to shake off the shackles of earlier thinking when he recognises the role that print can play in sustaining a song tradition (p.115).

The more I think about it, the more I see a great deal of similarity between Cecil Sharp and MacColl. Both were enormously committed and energetic people, who used materials drawn from traditional song and repackaged them in a way that they felt suitable for their particular time and place; both thought the material they were working with was of special value; both projected a strong aura of self-belief; both were strong in their condemnation of what they felt were wrong ways of approaching the material, but equally both felt justified in changing and adapting traditional material into forms that suited their inclinations and preferences; both tended to divide people into those who were supporters and those who opposed them.

'The job of a revival singer is very different from that of a traditional singer', MacColl remarks (p.161). How could it be otherwise? All performance of folk music in the modern world is re-contextualised music, even the performance of those described as 'traditional singers'. In that recontextualisation, all sorts of elements of the performance are changed – and we are not always clear what the original elements of performance were. In drawing on the conventions of traditional performance to inform our own practice, we are making aesthetic choices; but equally we can choose not to draw on those conventions. MacColl's static notion of the way things should be, and his attempt to ground those on sometimes imagined notions of historical precedent, contrasts with many people's inclinations that put a high value on choice and informed artistic freedom.

In the book, Allan Moore breaks some very interesting ground in his essay on 'MacColl Singing'. His analysis is interesting and I am sure going in the right direction, but ultimately it is rather tentative. MacColl remarked, 'It struck me that there really was no basic difference between singing a ballad and acting a role. At least no difference in the approach to the two things' (p.138). (Note the qualification: the similarity is in the



Ewan MacColl and Peggy Seeger at Cecil Sharp House in October 1987 when they received EFDSS Gold Badges.

approach). Ballad singing is always a form of reportage whereas drama is a form of representation. The problem could be that in preparing like a 'method' actor, the result would be singing like a 'method' actor.

I see a great deal of similarity between Cecil Sharp and MacColl

It has been a common criticism of MacColl that he was more of an actor who sang songs than someone who had drawn deeply from traditional styles of singing. The dominant style of singing in the Scots and English traditions is a rather undemonstrative one that sets an overall emotional tone for a song (and I have to resort to metaphor here) but then lets the story tell itself with the singer not dramatising the text overmuch. (More Brechtian than Stanislavskian some would say, reportage rather than enactment). MacColl's focus on Stanislavski and the use of emotional memory in performance is interesting and may well have helped some singers engage with and keep their performances fresh. Perhaps it does not matter too much how you get there if the end result is an effective performance, but after hearing a significant number of traditional performers, many people grew to dislike the degree of contrivance that they heard in MacColl's performance and what was perceived as the over-intellectualisation of the act of singing.

MacColl's interviews are patiently and intelligently footnoted by Matthew Ord, who does a good job in illuminating some of the inconsistencies and oddities of the text. Vacca offers a chapter which introduces the interviews and a post-interview chapter on 'Form and Content: The Irreconcilable Contradiction in the Song-writing of Ewan MacColl'. This is

relatively hard going but worth the effort. I think there is definitely something in his notion that MacColl was striving to mediate between modernist aesthetics and traditional forms, though I am not convinced this was an 'irreconcilable contradiction' rather than a creative tension. Dave Laing gives a good short account of MacColl's career, which disappointingly ends as a catalogue of recordings and offers no evaluation. Franco Fabbri gives some interesting insights into MacColl's activities and influence in Italy.

When the criticisms of Ewan MacColl are made, we have also to think of his significant achievements. From a deprived and unpromising start in the slums of Salford, he made a creative life and connected with thousands of people. This book gets us closer to MacColl's thought than anything else easily available; in that it is greatly valuable.

Vic Gammon was, until retirement, Senior Lecturer in Folk and Traditional Music at Newcastle University. He is a writer, broadcaster and performer.

Further information



Legacies of Ewan MacColl: The Last Interview, Allan F. Moore, Giovanni Vacca. Ashgate, 978-1-40942-430-7. Price: £65.

Ashgate is offering a **50% discount** on this book for readers of *English Dance & Song* until 30 June 2015. Visit www.ashgate.com/isbn/978-1-40942-430-7 and use the discount code **A15JFM50** at the checkout stage in order to receive the discount. Any problems with ordering, please contact snoble@ashgate.com