“The Chantey” and “The Bush Poet”: James Cowan and Vernacular Song in New Zealand

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Abstract

Sea shanties and other kinds of vernacular song in New Zealand might be among historian James Cowan’s lesser known interests, but he wrote about them persuasively in two long articles in the Canterbury Times: “The Chantey” (1912) and “The Bush Poet” (1913). This essay discusses the background, sources and content of these articles, as well as their influence on later New Zealand music research. While providing some inspiration for local folksong collecting in the 1950s to 1970s period, these efforts ultimately trailed off and Cowan’s articles seem to have rarely been consulted since. I argue that Cowan’s work still offers some stimulating pathways into New Zealand music history, which could be further explored. An appendix listing articles and books by Cowan with references to the relevant kinds of songs is also included.

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How to Cite
Sea shanties and other kinds of vernacular song in New Zealand might be among historian James Cowan’s lesser known interests, but he wrote about them persuasively in two long articles in the Canterbury Times: “The Chantey” (1912) and “The Bush Poet” (1913). This essay discusses the background, sources and content of these articles, as well as their influence on later New Zealand music research. While providing some inspiration for local folksong collecting in the 1950s to 1970s period, these efforts ultimately trailed off and Cowan’s articles seem to have rarely been consulted since. I argue that a sea shanty, chantey, or chanty is a type of work song that was once commonly sung to accompany labor on board large merchant sailing vessels. The term shanty most accurately refers to a specific style of work song belonging to this historical repertoire. However, in recent, popular usage, the scope of its definition is sometimes expanded to admit a wider range of repertoire and characteristics, or to refer to a “maritime work song” in general. Modern discussions of New Zealand literature have not given much attention to the 19th century. Immigrant writers were Britishers abroad. Only those born in the “new” land could see it as New Zealanders; and even they, for most of the first 100 years of settlement (1820–1920), had to make conscious efforts to relocate the imagination and adapt the literary tradition to its new home. It seemed, from any perspective, that Mansfield remained a New Zealand writer whose best work was that in which she had re-created the country and family she had grown up in. Katherine Mansfield BBC Hulton Picture Library. Mansfield once wrote, “I want to make my own country leap in the eyes of the Old World”—and she did it.