NOTES AND QUERIES

The article "Sexual Folklore in Victorian England" by Lydia Fish leaves little to be desired, but it contains the root of one possible misconception which I would like to expose in the interest of clarity.¹

According to Ms. Fish,

In 1868 Frederick Furnivall published the final volume of the Percy Folio, Loose and Humorous Songs. His co-editors Child and Hales refused to allow the use of their names on this supplementary volume and it was privately printed. By modern standards it is pretty tame stuff, although there is a nice version of "The Sea Crab."²

In the first place, the earliest edition of the Loose and Humorous Songs which was published in 1867 bore the names of both Hales and Furnivall.³ Secondly, though Child was instrumental in getting the two men to edit the manuscript, he was not a co-editor of any of the volumes.⁴ Finally, and most importantly, the Loose and Humorous Songs cannot be considered Victorian folklore by any stretch of the imagination, as they were taken from a manuscript that was written about 1650. In any case, some of the songs are clearly literary, and therefore cannot be considered folklore of the 17th century, let alone of the 19th.⁵

Still, the introduction to the book does cast valuable light on the mores of Victorian England. Hales and Furnivall provide a perfect example of the Victorian gentleman's public reaction to "pornography," and show us how widely that term was applied. It is easy for us to laugh when the editors claim to stand by their material while they hold it up fearfully at arm's length:

Qui s'excuse, s'accuse; but we make no excuse for putting forth these Loose and Humorous Songs.⁶

Some of these songs the Editors would have been glad had it not fallen to their lot to put forth.⁷

Furnivall and Hales go on to admit that it is a bit ironic that Percy, who was an ordained Bishop in the 18th century, saw fit to print a greater number of the bawdy songs than these self-professed "liberal" scholars of a later, more enlightened age.⁸ And the editors let us share an insider's view of Victorian morals:

It is well for the student to see these sensual songs, that he may be under no illusion as to that time; as it will be right for the student of Victorian England, two or three hundred years hence, to see productions that we would not willingly circulate now. But still, let no one doubt that Professor Morley's words are true--that the spirit of our Early and Middle Times was noble and pure; that, notwithstanding the prurient novels and review-articles, and Holywell Street filth, our Victorian time is, in the main, noble and pure too.⁹
Thus, though none of the Loose and Humorous Songs are Victorian folksong texts, the introduction is a valuable social document, providing good background for any future study of Victorian sexual folklore. And this is, I believe, the reason Lydia Fish included it in her outline.

NOTES

1. Folklore Forum 8 (1975): 142-47.
2. Ibid., p. 144.
4. Ibid., vol. 1, p. iii. It is true that under the editors' names there appears "(Assisted by Prof. Child, . . . W. Chappell, . . . etc., etc.)" However, the edition is also dedicated to Child, and if Child were truly a co-editor, he would not have had the insolence to dedicate the collection to himself. And, since the editors added Child's name to their collection as a token of respect, it would be unlikely that they would extend him the dubious honor of placing his name at the head of such a controversial book.
6. Hales and Furnivall, p. iii.
7. Ibid., p. v.
8. Ibid., pp. iii-iv.
9. Ibid., pp. v-vi.

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A FOLK EUPHEMISM AND OTHER MATTERS

I. In his Hold Autumn in Your Hand, George Sessions Perry uses a folk euphemism and a folk-rhyme which are both indigenous to the rural America of mule- and horse-drawn farm implements as a metaphorical device to further the characterization of the novel's protagonist who is Sam Tucker, a Texas "tenant farmer" of the era of the Great Depression. When a mule which Sam is driving "breaks wind," Sam is reminded of an "old jingle":

But the general spirit in the wagon was still high, for its occupants were going somewhere, and the mules kept a strong pace and broke wind