Correspondence

Prudishness in the 19th Century
Mr. Leslie Shepard writes:

It may seem ungrateful to question Miss Dean-Smith’s sympathetic review of the Rollins An Analytical Index to the Ballad-Entries, but I must take issue on the single point of prudishness in the late 19th century.

Whilst it is novel to imply that there might have been an unrecorded Golden Age of permissiveness, it will take more than a quotation from Gordon S. Haight’s biography of George Eliot to validate such a view. The literary evidence—in its widest sense of fiction and non-fiction, historical records, religious doctrine, medical data, educational curricula, newspapers, and even broadsides—supports the testimony of tradition that the period was a prudish one in which heresies like “radicalism, free-thought, evolution and Ibsenism” were exceptions rather than the rule, and it was many decades before such minority movements could be considered typical. Against the successful advance of such movements as women’s suffrage, for example, one must set the everyday status of fashions, etiquette, marriage and sexual mores—certainly excessively prudish by today’s standards. Of course there were exceptions and private nonconformities, but public figures risked serious disgrace by sexual peccadilloes which today would hardly earn the censure of the Sunday press. It was an age when the firmly entrenched conservatism of the literary world (as arbiter of taste and reflection of culture) was certainly well echoed in the announcements of such subscription bodies as the Ballad Society. Even a broadminded scholar like Dr. F. J. Furnivall was obliged to preface his reprint of Bishop Percy’s Folio Manuscript with the prudish disclaimer “Some of these songs the Editors would have been glad had it not fallen to their lot to put forth” (he transferred to the fourth volume of “Loose and Humorous Songs” eight items which even Percy had not marked as loose or humorous!).

Well into the 20th century, erotic sing-songs by peasants in pubs, or by the middle-class in smoking concerts and regimental dinners, were privileged occasions, and many country singers themselves apologised for erotic songs and were reluctant to sing them before ladies or folksong collectors. It cannot be too strongly emphasised that the bowdlerisations of collectors like Baring-Gould, Kidson, Cecil Sharp and others, were not individual idiosyncrasies but a reflection of the general mores of the times.

It is particularly significant that in the same issue of Folk Music Journal in which Miss Dean-Smith’s review appears, three contributors comment on the bowdlerisations of Alfred Williams, and Mr. Clissold mentions that Williams’s first prose work A Wiltshire Village (published 1912) was publicly burnt by the Vicar of South Marston as “too disgusting to read.”

Not a prudish period?