

Hey Ho Raggedy-0

a study of the Billy Barlow Phenomenon

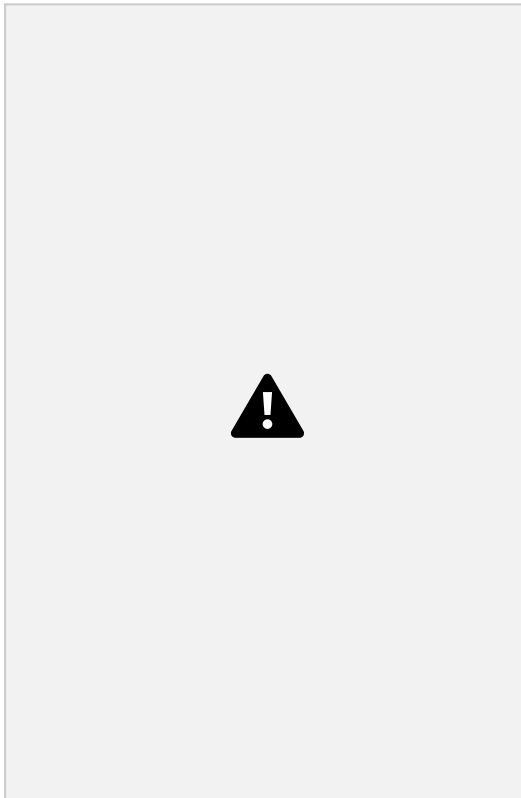
by Joy Hildebrand



CHAPTER 1:UP AND STARTS THE BILLY BLIN

Billy Barlow – Raggedy Clown. Hey Ho. The Possible Prototypes: English Fools, Woden, Belly Blind, Blind Barlow, Burlow Beanie, Billy Blin. The Billy Blin in Folksong. Thomas Percy and the Parlour Fire. Burlow Beanie Meets King Arthur.

BILLY BARLOW~ RAGGEDY CLOWN



Once upon a time there appeared in the affairs of men a funny little round man. His clothes were tattered and worn, although often he bore the mark of a gentleman who'd seen better days. Sometimes he wore one boot and one shoe. His

proclamations, often in song form, were sometimes pompous and grand, sometimes conversational, usually witty, and mostly topical. He poked fun at the world in general, and himself in particular, in an easy, friendly way. He did little dance-routines as part of his act. Sometimes he was a soldier playing a fife and drum, calling himself General Billy Barlow, and singing Follow the Drum. At other times he became, briefly – with a fast change of accessories – Paul Pry, or some other well-known character of the 19th century.

He could be seen in the taverns and the penny theatres of London, as well as on the street. In time he progressed into the bigger theatres and pleasure gardens, and became one of the first characters to perform in the newly-developed music-halls. Comic singer and actor Sam Cowell became the most famous manifestation of this clown, but many actors and singers played him. He was overall a sweet gentle clown, and the ordinary people of the London streets, the poor workers and their families, loved him. Later he was to be loved in higher places too. He was forever on the verge of making good, or had only just fallen from the better life, his present circumstances temporary.

His name was BILLY BARLOW. Like that. Aural capital letters. Loud and clear. All through his songs, so that there must be no doubt.

At the end of every verse: BILLY BARLOW !



HEY! HO! RAGGEDY-O

The refrain Hey Ho! Raggedy-O, or some close variant of it, was his trademark, and it travelled with him for close to a hundred years. Hey Ho! as part of a refrain occurs in the songs of Shakespeare's time and before. The character Clown in Twelfth Night sings it as – Hey Ho! the wind and rain.

The earliest Billy Barlow was a Londoner by nature, and I'm as certain as I can be that London is where he was born. He was popularised by two key actors: Sam Cowell and George Coppin, but they were by no means the only actors to portray him and they were not the first.

POSSIBLE PROTOTYPES

There is no clown called Billy Barlow among the fools of the English court, although his type is familiar there as the apparently simple-minded innocent who gives good advice – the wise Fool-servant. This type of servant is perhaps the ancestor of the comic English butler who comments on the behavior of his master and advises him.

There is no clown using the name Billy Barlow in any of Shakespeare's plays, either, even though he would fit comfortably there.

Fools are an important part of Folk Drama all over the world. They used to play important roles in everyday life as well as during ritual festivals. The European Fool came into his own in the Middle Ages, where he performed in the great courts. He was often attached to the courts, but sometimes he was a traveling performer. From the courts, the country fairs, and the street shows, the Fool stepped easily onto the stage.

In the British Isles the Fool had an important part in the performance of the Morris dances, mummers' plays, and sword dances, where sometimes he seems to have played the part of Sacrifice – killed to be instantly reborn. His fellow performers often blacked their faces with soot as a form of disguise..

[1]

The various characters of the ritual folk-play skipped in and out of formal theatre well into the 19th century. Maybe their archetypes, if not their names, are there still.

The costume of the British Fool is well known from paintings. He (and rarely she) wore outfits that shared many characteristics with Tricksters, wandering holy men, shamans, and other Fools of different cultures. His clothes were tattered and mismatched. The ragged look was formalised into brightly-coloured patches and odd stockings of different colours. Odd footwear was also seen. The custom of wearing odd-coloured stockings and shoes, or even one boot and one shoe, was common as a fashion in the 15th century for wealthy fops, and it can be seen in some of the paintings of the period. The English Fool may have acquired the look then. His familiar costume seems to be based on fashions of that time.

At least two of Hieronymus Bosch's paintings show men in one boot and one shoe. One is a gryllus – a strange little cricket-man with only a head and legs. The other is a beggar and is clearly not a fashion-conscious fop. Of course in the world that Bosch unveils for us, these two characters are among the more normal types.

[2]

Diddle diddle dumpling my son John
Went to bed with his trousers on,
One shoe off and one shoe on.
Diddle diddle dumpling my son John.
Nursery Rhyme. Anon.

There is a description from the American Civil War of General Sherman, as he appeared to his men on top of Pine Mountain, wearing one boot and one shoe.

[3]

It would seem that the wearing of one boot and one shoe signifies poverty (with opportunism in the gathering of footwear), eccentricity, or a disordered mind. Billy Barlow may have used all of these ideas, including a reference to the costume of fools, when he chose his footwear. Alternatively it may just be that "*one boot and one shoe*" rhymes nicely with "*how do you do*".

WODEN, BILLY BLIN, BLIND BARLOW, BELLY BLIND, and BURLOW BEANIE

Can the name Billy Barlow be linked to Billy Blin, an earlier supernatural household spirit ? If it can, then a tangled thread just might lead us into the distant past, to a time long before this spirit became domesticated, to the great Woden himself. We can see the remnants of the connecting fibers in old traditional songs. They are there, frayed as they may be, between the great god Woden and semi-supernatural spirits called Billy Blin, Belly Blind, Blind Barlow, or Burlow Beanie.

It's the nature of the folk-ballad to be vague about the difference between the dead and the living, the Faerie shape-changer and the human. Talking birds, ghosts, and supernatural beings of various types come and go without the need for explanation. There is one thing, though, that never seems to happen to an Otherworld being, and that's the permanent leap-of-no-return into human society.

It is just possible that Billy Barlow did make that leap, quietly and unnoticed. What seems certain, whether he sprang up new-born in the early part of the 19th century, or just reinvented himself then, is that he is no longer around in the form of Billy Barlow the raggedy clown. He has vanished like the Billy Blin before him. It may be, though, that before he went he founded a whole dynasty of ragged Tramp and Hobo clowns across the United States. We'll follow that trail later.

Woden has many names, but key ones relate his blindness, which was, more correctly, half-blindness. His older names, Blindi or Blinde Belien, became Billy Blin or Billy Blind in Scotland and England. His new first-name — Billy — was also in keeping with his function as a helpful servant-companion. In Scottish dialect the name Billie meant Companion, and was used as an all-purpose term for Friend, in much the same way as Jack was used in Cornwall. Under the names Billy Blin, Billy Blind, Belly Blind, or Blind Barlow, he appears in ancient alliterative poems and ballads of the Border Country, lurking there until fairly recent times.

Professor Francis James Child collected many hundreds of these ballads, publishing them with extensive background information as *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads*. Child gives a lot of space to the Billy Blin detailing his possible origins.

[4]

Billy Blin was so familiar as a helpful household-spirit that the references to him, within the ballads, are almost offhand:

Then out and spake the Billy Blind. He spake aye in a good time....

Or:

.....Oh it fell once upon a day
Burd Isobel fell asleep
And up and starts the Billy Blind
And stood at her bed-feet.....

Or later in the same ballad:

.....She set her milk-white foot on board
Cried, "Hail ye, Domine"
And the Billy Blind was the steerer o't
To row her o'er the sea
From Young Beichan (Child 53)

The above verses out of Young Beichan suggest another supernatural connection: one between the ballad ghost, Sweet William, and the Billy Blin. They both appear at the bed-foot and ask questions about the bed linen. That would take us wandering along uncharted pathways, following a Will-o'-the-Wisp (who may just be another manifestation of Woden himself).

Blind non-working servants were kept in wealthy households for their supposed gift of second sight, and it's here perhaps that we find the links between the wise and helpful blind Woden and his human manifestations. It is interesting that the Scottish name for the game of blindman's buff is "Billy Blin" or "Belly Blind".

[5]

The familiar Brownies of the British Isles may be relatives. Clad in ragged outfits, they attached themselves to households where they performed helpful, though mundane, tasks. They were unwilling to actually become part of the household, and they carried out their work at night, in secret. They seem minor figures, with weak connections to the human world.

Ah, but did Billy Blind make people laugh? In Professor Francis James Child's opinion the Billy Blind and a Cornish monster-genie, called Burlow Beanie, are one and the same, then yes, he was a Trickster and a shape-changer. More of Burlow Beanie later. Frustratingly, there is no sign, in any of the ballads collected by Child or anyone else, that this ancient character was preparing to pop up out of nowhere, early in the 19th century, as a funny little clown calling himself Billy Barlow.

It is unclear just when the old English name Barlow came into the picture, but it has connections with the growing of barley, so it may be that it tangles Billy's name up with the English plant-gods as well as the great god Woden.

There are other pathways, beyond the scope of this study, but very interesting nonetheless. Woden was also known as Carl Hood – literally, Hooded Man – or Old Carl Hood, or Auld Hoodie. Under these names (and also as Billy Blin) he slipped from Viking legends into Scottish Faerie lore. Sometimes in this role he was decidedly unhelpful, even malevolent. Later, as Robin Hood, he took up the cause of the Common Man, leaving civilization behind for a life of freedom in the Shining Wood.

Woden is an ancient Shaman/Trickster god of Germanic folklore. As Odin, in Norse mythology, he was still tricky and untrustworthy, but had become a war god as well. Woden has, as his companions, a pair of ravens: Hugin – thought, and Munin – memory, who fly around gathering information, to return faithfully each evening, to Woden’s shoulders. Here they whisper to him about what they have seen and heard.

Way down behind yon old turf-dyke
I see there lies a new-slain knight
There’s none that knows that he lies there
But his hawk, his hound and his lady fair
His hawk, his hound and his lady fair.

From: The Twa Corbies. (Child 26) as sung by Hildebrand.

[6]

In his quest for knowledge, Woden, accompanied by Hugin and Munin and two wolf companions, frequently sought out the company of the Dead, believing them to be experts in the ways of the Otherworld. These associations have, at times, been much misunderstood, and have tended to give Woden – and also birds of the Corvid family – a bad name.

Woden gave up one of his eyes in return for a sip of water from the Well of Knowledge, and from time to time he resorted to other bizarre feats of self-sacrifice, with a view to attaining true enlightenment. Depicted as the Eternal Wanderer, he wears a long, hooded cape, or a cape and floppy hat, and carries a long staff marked with magic symbols. His head-covering is pulled down over the empty eye-socket. He roams the world bestowing on chosen humans the gift of poetic inspiration, insight, and wisdom. As is usual with gifts from the Otherworld, Woden’s often come at a price, and the result may not be as the recipient expects.

It must always be remembered that Woden is the Great Wandering Trickster.

BURLOW BEANIE and KING ARTHUR

The Burlow Beanie deserves a substantial section all to himself because, in the only surviving story that mentions him by that name, he has a starring role. It also gives us a wonderful, if brief, description, of his appearance. The ballad is King Arthur and King Cornwall (Child 30). There is only one copy of this English ballad, and that copy is incomplete.

Thomas Percy, a clergyman and scholar, was visiting friends in Shropshire sometime in the early 1760s. He noticed that the maid was lighting the parlor fire with pages torn out of an old book of songs and poems that she kept under the dresser. He rescued what was left and recognized the book to be around one hundred years old. Percy painstakingly copied out some of the ballads. The writing was cramped and the ink faded, the pages torn and dog-eared. The bookbinder to whom Percy entrusted the precious collection added to the problem by cropping the pages. The new binding encroached even further on the first words of the lines. Percy was determined, though, and in 1765 he published *Reliques of English Poetry*, placing

some of the newly-found ballads in with more familiar ones from elsewhere. In this work is all that is left of King Arthur and King Cornwall, with big gaps in the story where the parlour fire had been kindled by a story about a fire-breathing monster who hides in what seems to be an early type of dresser.

King Arthur and King Cornwall is not a great piece of poetry, nor is it a particularly unusual story, but as a blokey adventure it has some good moments and some strong images. Its real value is that, as the story unfolds, it reveals the little gem that is the Burlow Beanie. The missing bits, as much as half of each page, can be filled in from a French poem about Charlemagne which has the same general storyline, or from several similar poems from the continent. In these poems the part of the Burlow Beanie is played by a boringly human servant who has no supernatural traits at all. He is merely the spy sent to eavesdrop, from inside a hollow stone wall, in a bedroom.

Child comments that, "...in view of the recklessness of the destroyer Time, (we) may take comfort; for there are few things in this kind that the Middle Ages have bequeathed which we could not better spare." He does go on to say that "...the losses from the English ballad are still very regrettable, since from what is in our hands we can see that the story was treated in an original way..."

A bit of an understatement, since what we have in King Arthur and King Cornwall, is the makings of a riotous overnight-farce with lots of action, magic, and suspense. The Western Michigan University published *Sir Gawain: Eleven Romances and Tales*, in 1995. It contained the tale: King Arthur and King Cornwall. In a form edited by Thomas Kahn this tale was published on the Internet. Kahn's explanatory note for Burlow Beanie contains the comment:

"... as a figure of the comic grotesque, Burlow Beanie might be compared to a character in the repertoire of Victorian street players, "Billy Barlow"; Henry Mayhew records the carnivalesque dress and the semi-improvisatory performance of this figure in his lengthy conversation with a Billy Barlow impersonator from the "street business"...."

Here is my version of King Arthur and King Cornwall based on the song as it was collected by Professor James Child and on comments made by Thomas Kahn.

We come upon the story at a point a little distance from the beginning – as before our eyes the flames burn up the title and the first scene.

Lady Guenevere is just remarking to King Arthur and Sir Gawain that she has heard about a fantastic round table, just like theirs, only much better. (Kahn notes that when Arthur thought of the idea of a round table, to prevent squabbling among the Knights, about who was the most important, he didn't foresee the possibility of an argument over the tables themselves.)

"Where is it?" says Arthur, "I can't possibly sleep till I see it!"

"Seek it yourself!" says Guenevere, "I will not tell. I will say, though, that not only is the furniture better, but the whole castle is much, much finer than ours, and worth more

too. In fact this castle, about which I speak, is worth more than all of Brittany.” (Brittany being Arthur’s realm!)

“Well then,” says Arthur, really fired up now, “Me and four other fearless knights, who have God and Our Lady on our side, will dress up as pilgrims and go on a quest.”

King Arthur, Sir Gawain, Sir Bredbeedle –aka The Greene Knight –, Sir Tristan, and Sir Marramiles set off to journey, East and West, through many a strange country. Over an unknown number of fire-eaten pages, they presumably have many adventures, probably involving fights. At last they reach the kingdom of Cornwall. (If Guenevere had only been more helpful, their trip would have been quite short: just an afternoon’s sail across the Channel.)

On arriving at a castle gate they discover, from the porter, that they are at King Cornwall’s place and that he is indeed very, very rich. Cleverly keeping up the disguise of poor palmers, the knights come before King Cornwall, who asks them tricky questions about themselves like,

“Have you ever heard of a grand king who lives in Brittany, who is called Arthur and is rich and handsome?”

“Don’t know him to speak to,” says Arthur slyly, “but I saw him once.”

“Well I knew him quite well,” says Cornwall, “but I knew his wife even better. I was living, rent-free, in their bower at the time. Seven years they fed and clothed me, and when I left I took with me a little present from Lady Guenevere. My beautiful daughter, who stands before you, is the fairest flower in all the land. Arthur doesn’t have a flower like this. He’s not up to it, I understand.”

King Cornwall goes on and on about his marvelous horse that has glistening eyes and is three times faster than Arthur’s.

“By gosh!” says Arthur meekly, “it’s fair, all right.” For an unknown number of missing pages King Cornwall continues in this vein until everyone else is yawning behind their hands.

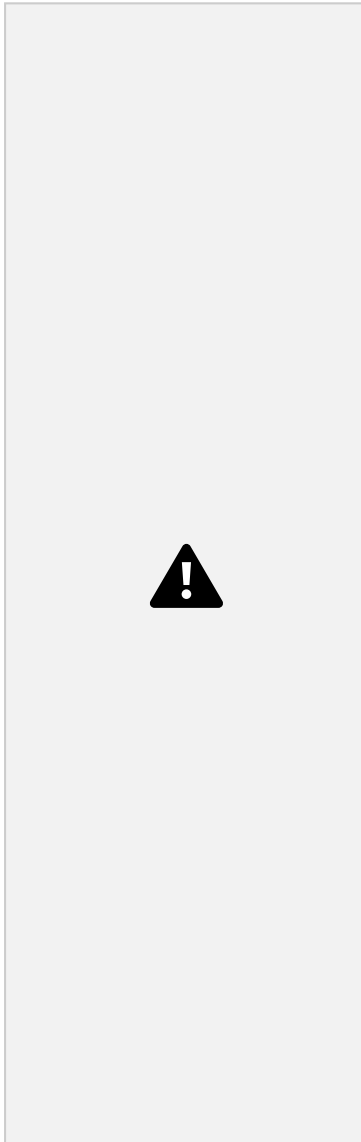
“Well, time for bed!” says the host at last, and Arthur and his friends retire to the guest room, muttering darkly.

Beside the bed is a thrubchandler. Many learned minds have puzzled over this piece of furniture, but it is thought to have been a large stoppered container, a type of early bedside cabinet. Cornwall has hidden a spy inside this container so that he and his family and staff can have a good laugh at Arthur’s expense when this spy reports back to him about the bedtime antics and conversations of his guests. The spy is none other than Burlow Beanie. As soon as the bedroom door closes, Arthur explodes in a tirade of abuse against Cornwall. He details all that he, with the help of his knights, is going to do to his tormentor. Sir Gawain –who is Cornwall’s nephew, by the way – points out that there are five of them and a whole army on the other side.

“Well,” says Arthur, “if you’re going to go all girlie on me you can just go home and drink wine!”

“Now, don’t be like that,” says Gawain, trying to look serious in his nightshirt, “I’ll match your vow and go one better. I will ravish the beautiful unnamed daughter and

carry her off home to Brittany where she belongs. We can sort out the blood ties later.”



Just when things are getting interesting, there is another gap in the story. Possibly, all the knights boasted about which treasure they would claim and what good account they would make of themselves in the coming battle. Maybe they told scary stories, had a pillow fight. In any case the Burlow Beanie is somehow discovered. One of the knights, we'll never know which one, is speaking as we take up the story."Well I'm not going to wrestle with it! #*@%!! I'd rather be drowned in the sea!"

Sir Bredbeedle is not afraid: in a former life he was a wizard of some sort himself. He is up to the task. He has his German sword, his Italian knife, and his Danish axe. At the first blow of the sword, the bung of the thrubchandler breaks apart and out pops the Burlow Beanie, like a monster genie. He has seven heads on a single body and he breathes fire that flies skyward. He is able to destroy Bredbeedle's weapons, after a glorious battle, but the brave knight has an ace up his sleeve in the form of a magic book. The book had been found some time before, washed up on the seashore. Somehow Bredbeedle, with the help of his magic book, persuades Burlow Beanie to

.... Then out and spake the Belly Blind;
He spake aye in a good time,
Ye doe (go) ye to the market place
And there ye buy a loaf o' wax
Ye shape in bairn, and bairnly-like
And in twa glassen een (glass eyes) ye pit; (put)
And bid her come to your boy's christening
Then notice weel what she shall do
And do you stand a little fore bye
And listen weel what she shall say

The plan works perfectly; the vile mother-in-law can't help herself when she views the fake baby. She helpfully lists the spells, all six of them:

...Who has loosed the nine witch knots
That was amo that ladie's locks
And who has taen out the combs of care
That hangs amo that ladie's hair
And who's taen down the bush o' woodbine
That hang atween her bower and mine
And wha has killed the master kid
That ran beneath that ladie's bed.
And wha has loose her left-foot shee (shoe)
And lotten (let) that ladie lighter be?

Willie hurries home and breaks all the spells, allowing the baby to be born immediately.



**We are left with many questions: Why was she in bed with her left-foot shoe on?
Was she wearing her right one? How did the goat under the bed go unnoticed?**

In the other ballads – Young Beichan (Child 53) and The Knight and the Shepherd's Daughter (Child 110) – Billy Blin's role is that of helpful adviser with just a hint of the magic of which he is capable. It is quite likely that he lurks within the stories of many other ballads – there are many gate-keepers and servants of whom advice is asked – but without the clear evidence of the mention of his name, we can't be sure.

It seems that 19th-century Billy Barlow left behind the old folk-elements that were part of his possible proto-life as Billy Blin and Blind Barlow to become completely civilized and wholly human. Actors and singers and writers of poems and songs, however, still called upon these old spirits of wilder times to tell their stories. The ghosts, the talking birds, the Shape-changers, the spirits with evil intent, and all the creatures of the Wildwood were only just below the surface in 1800. Some of them

still lurk in the dark recesses of our minds even now in the 21st century. We still recognize them when we meet them in pantomime or in old folksongs. They may have become smaller, tamer, more easily dismissed from our everyday lives, but we can still find them.

CHAPTER 2:LADIES AND GENTLEMEN HOW DO YOU DO

First Billy Barlow Clowns of the 19th Century – Henry Mayhew’s Billy Barlow – Clowns – Pantomime – Mother Goose – An Earlier Street-Clown Billy Barlow

Oh ladies and gentlemen how do you do?

I’ve come out before you with one boot and one shoe.

I don’t know how ’tis, but somehow ’tis so.

Oh! isn’t it hard upon Billy Barlow?

Henry Mayhew’s Billy Barlow & A Brief History of Clowns.

The street-clown Billy Barlow was well established by the time Henry Mayhew made his study of the poor “street-folk” of London. This study, with its detailed interviews, uncensored and faithfully recorded, was published in 1861 in four volumes under the title of *London Labour and the London Poor*. Within Mayhew’s work there are long lists of goods sold, descriptions of people and animals, and all the sounds, smells, and sights of Victorian London. The interviews are full of the weariness and pain of soul-destroying poverty, but also with glimpses of cheerful fun, love,



and loyalty among the street actors and singers. There is the whole script of the Punch and Judy Show, along with stock jokes and the routines of the many different types of street performer. Henry Mayhew’s scientific approach is similar to that of a botanist, except that his specimens still seem alive, fresh, and colourful, even after being pressed in the pages of his books for over a hundred years.

His actual interviews are not dated, but it was between 1840 and 1860 that he spent his days out on the street with his pen and paper, writing down the stories told to him by the poorest members of society. It was here that he met and interviewed a Billy Barlow street-clown. Mayhew places Billy Barlow, Jim Crow and others – as Clowns

under a sub-heading of *The Street Actors*. This sub-heading is itself placed under the main heading of *Street-Performers, Artists and Showmen*.

Mayhew saw his Billy performing on the street, and he describes the act as the singing of the songs, "*The Merry Month of May*, and *Billy Barlow* along with a few old conundrums and jokes and sometimes where the halfpence are plentiful a comic dance."

[1]

Other street-singers told Mayhew that they sang all the popular songs of the time, and many older ones. Thomas Haynes Bayly's macabre tragedy, *The Mistletoe Bough* was a great favourite, especially at Christmas time.

The mistletoe hung in the castle hall
The holly branch bright on the old oaken wall
The baron's retainers were bright and gay
Keeping the Christmas holiday.
Oh! The mistletoe bough! Oh! the mistletoe bough!

[Thomas Haynes Bayly]

Mayhew's Street-Billy wore an outfit that consisted of a soldier's jacket with a sash, white trousers tucked into Wellington boots, and a cocked-hat decorated with a red feather. He carried an old and broken ragged umbrella and a large tin eye-glass. His cheeks and nose were painted bright red with vermilion, which was the makeup of the poor clown. Another street-clown told Mayhew about the use of white-wash on the face to highlight the red vermilion, and it's possible that Billy used this too, although Mayhew doesn't tell us. The tin eye-glass was a prop for portraying the character Paul Pry who came out of a play popular in London from the 1820s. It's almost certain that Mayhew's Billy had put his own stamp on the character of Billy Barlow. That has come to be the way of the Clown. Each clown-face is distinct from every other clown-face. The differences may be as subtle as that between the exact curve of a spangled tear on one sad white face and another. As bold as a red grin that spreads from ear to ear compared with tiny rosebud lips. Costume changes are certain to have been made by this Billy. He said that he played the fife and drum before he took up his current role. The soldier's uniform may have been a carry-over from his former act. Most of the Billy Barlow songs have the "Oh dear raggedy Oh!" refrain suggesting that ragged clothes are his usual costume.

The ragged clown has been around at least since the formation of the *Commedia dell'Arte* in the 16th century in Italy. It was here that the stock characters of comedy were standardized, each actor keeping his chosen character for life. The dialogue and much of the action in the *Commedia dell'Arte* was improvised around a skeletal plot, and clowns added dance, acrobatics, and juggling, as well as comments on current affairs. The familiar Harlequin (*Arlecchino*) began here as a clown who'd seen better days, his outfit covered in multi-coloured patches. He later acquired a better fitting suit with neat triangles of red and yellow. The beautiful, sad, white-faced

Pierrot (Pedrolino) had his roots here before being adopted – and changed in – France. The bumbling, colourful Auguste began in Germany much later. The American Tramp and Hobo Clowns and Bag-Lady Clowns, later still. Alongside the well-known aristocratic clowns of the Commedia dell'Arte were the Zanni. They were a large group of clowns of varied appearance and with different dispositions. They were of the peasant class and played clever servants, quick with snide remarks, intrigue, and cunning but helpful to their masters if it suited them. Their costumes were often ragged, or well-patched, to suggest their humble origins.



Although there is no record of a Zanno called Billy Blin, Burlow Beanie, or Billy Barlow, it's here that he would style="padding: 5px; fit most comfortably.

The characters of the Commedia dell'Arte found their way into British theatre. Many of them, Scaramouche, Harlequin, Columbine, and others were stock characters of English comedy, turning up in Punch and Judy shows, in farce, and in burletta – the forerunner of pantomime –, on into the pantomime as it is known in Britain and Australia today. Clown was another English character with origins in the Commedia dell'Arte, and he proved to be the most enduring of all, probably because he was played by the greatest clown of recent times: Joseph Grimaldi. Clown commented on and made jokes centered around current events, as he performed his comic routines. The first Victorian Pantomime – the one that became the standard for the Christmas Pantomime – was written by Joseph Grimaldi and Tom Dibdin – one of two illegitimate sons of the prolific songwriter Charles Dibdin. This pantomime was called *Mother Goose*. In what would appear to be the earliest Billy Barlow songs, Billy's own account of his birth includes a comment by Mother Goose:

When I was born, says old Mother Goose,
He's a fine boy but he'll be of no use.

Is this a theatre in-joke? Is it a clue about the origins of 19th-century Billy Barlow? When Street-Billy arrived for his interview, Mayhew was surprised to see that he was so completely changed as to be unrecognisable. Cleanly and neatly dressed, he turned out to be a serious, thoughtful, and articulate man. The only thing that betrayed the clown-character was the expression of humour on his face. He was a

loving husband and father and a good provider. His father — a tailor by trade — and his uncle had both been performers at Covent Garden, and Billy himself acted from an early age, always preferring comic roles. He tried to settle into the trade of muffin-maker but his wanderlust and the lure of the stage called him away.

Have you seen the muffin-man
The muffin-man, the muffin-man
Have you seen the muffin-man
Who lives on Drury Lane?
English Nursery Rhyme.

[Anon]

When the London fog settled on the city, and the weather was cold and damp, Billy made sweetmeats, toffee, brandy balls, and Albert rock. He and his family lived in one rented room with no facilities to bake muffins. There was always a market among the street children for penny sweets, and Billy was a popular friend because of his clowning. Children always gathered around him when he performed, but they never parted with their precious pennies just to watch the show. It was singing, dancing, clowning in the sunshine, and sweet-selling in the rain that earned Billy just enough money to support his family.

This Billy Barlow told Mayhew that he took up the character, only two months before, when he noticed that there was a vacancy. He had been a street-performer for thirty years, playing various roles. The original Billy Barlow, he said, "*had taken his name from the song which was popular at the time...*" and developed the character. For ten years he had been a familiar Billy Barlow clown at the races, the fairs, and in the streets until he died, a drunkard, in the workhouse, seven years before the Mayhew interview. Following his death, several street performers took up the character until they too died in the workhouse. Mayhew's interview gives us the only record of Billy Barlow as a street-performer.

[2]

Undated London broadsides of Billy Barlow songs have been preserved at the Bodleian Library at Oxford University. Because the years of the publication of the broadsides by the various printers is known, they can be roughly dated. Most seem to come from the 1830s, 1840s and 1850s, but some, by the printer James Catnach, could be from any time after 1813.

There is a similar Billy Barlow broadside printed in America. It bears a woodcut of him that is crude but of slightly better quality than the London ones. It is also undated but could be as early as 1828. It is certainly at the latest from the early 1830s. Two other different Billy Barlow song-booklets, also from America, are dated 1834 and 1836.

It seems likely that the 19th-century character Billy Barlow was born sometime during the 1820s or the early 1830s.

His name cannot be linked to his possible proto-type the Billy Blin with certainty.

ADDITIONAL MATERIAL FOUND BY VALDA LOW IN 2008:

The inquest into the death of a Billy Barlow street singer is reported in National Trades' Journal in England and dated 21 December 1844. He was reported as being, "Benjamin Sarjeant aged 30, alias Billy Barlow, the well known street representative of the American Jim Crow of 53 Flower and Dean Street, Spitalfields." (see article below)

Because of the age of this Billy Barlow, because he had adopted the Jim Crow character, and because he didn't die in the workhouse, it would seem he is not the "original Billy Barlow" mentioned by Mayhew's Billy. He is however a small piece of the whole picture. The article gives us a sad glimpse into his world.

— Joy Hildebrand September 2008.

DEATH OF THE ECCENTRIC "BILLY BARLOW."—
DESTITUTION IN SPITALFIELDS. — On Thursday Mr. Baker held an inquest at the Queen's Head, Fashion-street, Spitalfields, on view of the body of Benjamin Sarjeant, alias "Billy Barlow," aged 30, the well-known street representative of the American "Jim Crow," who died in a miserable attic at No. 53, Flower and Dean-street, in the same parish, under the following circumstances of destitution:—It appeared from the evidence that for some years past the deceased had been earning a precarious livelihood by representing the character of Jim Crow in the streets, for which purpose he used to blacken his face. He was of the most harmless manners; but while playing the part of "Jump Jim Crow" he was frequently ill-used by the boys in that neighbourhood. He had been ill for some time past, but nothing serious occurred till Saturday night last, when, on his return home, he complained of severe internal pains. On Monday, as these got worse, a medical gentleman was sent for, upon application at the workhouse, who, upon seeing the deceased, found him in so weak a state as not to be fit to be removed to the workhouse. He was ordered wine and nourishing diet, but the deceased was unable to take them, and he died the following day. The deceased's landlord stated that he often came home with his face covered with mud and blood, from the stones thrown at him by the boys. The room he lived in was occupied by some other persons, men and women. Mr. Attrell said that there were many rooms in the same street which had in them six double beds for a man and his wife with their children, and that as many as twenty-four were huddled together in a room. The stench on going into these houses was dreadful. There was scarcely a house in the street which was not a lodging-house. This change had taken place since the removal of Essex-street, and the other streets for the new street at that part of town. Verdict—Natural Death, accelerated by exposure to the cold.

CHAPTER 3: A FINE BOY BUT HE'LL BE OF NO USE

The Earliest Songs of Billy Barlow. Billy's Relative ~ Jim Crow and His Occurrence in the Punch and Judy Show. A Short Discourse on The Minstrel Show. Stephen Foster. The Billy Barlow Broadside.

The First Billy Barlow Songs

According to Australian song-collector Hugh Anderson, the earliest dated copy of Billy Barlow, the song, appeared in a *Dublin Songster* in 1832. By this date, however, there were big publishing houses in England, Scotland, and Northern Ireland, as well as in the big cities of the East Coast of North America, so the Songster could have acquired *Billy Barlow* from any of these sources. Also two *Billy Barlow* broadsides, printed by T. Birt in London between 1828 and 1829, have come to light. One is titled *Billy Barlow's Wedding Miseries* and the other *Dicky Barlow – First Cousin to Billy Barlow*. They seem to indicate that Billy was already a well-known character in London by the late 1820s at least.



As mentioned in the previous chapter, there is an American Billy Barlow broadside song-sheet. It was printed by Leonard Deming "at the sign of the barber's pole, No. 61 Hanover Street, Boston and at Middlebury, Vt." (Vermont) Unfortunately, like its London counterparts this sheet is undated. It is stamped 103, but the implications of that are unclear. Leonard Deming began his publishing business in 1828, the same year that Thomas Dartmouth "Daddy" Rice created his character, Jim Crow. Deming published songs about Jim Crow that appear to come from the same time as the Billy Barlow song-sheet, but these too are undated. Jim Crow, Billy's close relative, is mentioned in the Billy Barlow song. Is there a link between these two characters? 1832, the year of the *Dublin Songster*, is significant as the year that Rice/Jim Crow arrived in New York. From here he set off on a tour of the British Isles, visiting Northern Ireland for the first time, riding on a huge wave of success born in his home country. He became instantly, and enormously, popular with the Irish.

Could Billy Barlow have visited Dublin at around this same time, overshadowed for the moment by his blackface cousin? If he did, nothing has turned up yet that might indicate who first took him there. Did the Deming song-sheet travel from Boston to Ireland, to be reprinted in a Dublin Songster? Or did it come from a London printer, or an English performer?

The Deming song has Billy as a newly-arrived immigrant in Boston. His country of origin is unstated – but presumably he is from somewhere in the British Isles. There is a temptation to assume that he is Boston-Irish but his mention of Mother Goose places him as Anglo-Irish if that is the case. Vagueness about a character's origins is a common device to allow for localisation of his/her songs and jokes when touring the character's "homeland". Many of the music-hall Billys were known to have done that when they toured. It is possible that without any evidence to the contrary, an American origin for the 19th-century Billy Barlow could be proposed. The indications however, if not the hard evidence, are that he was born in London.

A Diversion on the Subject of Jim Crow, The Minstrel Show, and Stephen Foster

Jim Crow, the character was, in all ways but one, just like other characters of the day. He sang and danced. His speech, manner, costume, and make-up were based on a caricature of a racial type. Like Billy Barlow, Jim Crow wore ragged, colourful clothes that had seen better days and like Billy, his songs and jokes poked fun at the establishment and were based on current events. The one difference was that Thomas "Daddy" Rice blacked his face, setting him apart from: Billy Barlow, The Gypsy Boy, The Cockney, The Irish Immigrant in America, The Italian Vegetable Seller, to become Jim Crow – The Plantation Slave. Rice was more surprised than anyone about his sudden success. His friend Emilie Cowell, wife of Sam Cowell – the best remembered of all the Billy Barlows –, said he was a gentle, thoughtful man, rather shy and retiring.

The little song and dance that started it all was said to have been taught to Rice by a Black slave. Several stories claim to be the true account of where and how Rice learned this song and dance. As theatre historian Maurice Willson Disher tells it, the slave was a porter on the quayside of the Ohio River. Rice met him as he was travelling to Louisville to perform. The porter put his burden down from time to time to perform the little song-and-dance that was to become so famous and so notorious. Rice paid the porter for the song-and-dance routine, and for the battered cap and ragged tail-coat he was wearing, and went on his way. Rice immediately began performing as Jim Crow, and the character was eagerly taken up by other performers in America. Rice left them to it and spent most of his life touring the British Isles and Europe.

Paris loved him.

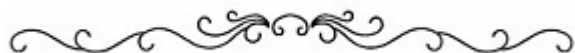
Je tourne, re-tourne, je caracole,
Je fais des sauts;
Chaque fois je fais le tour,
Je saute "Jim Crow".

Rice, like so many of his contemporaries in the entertainment world, died in poverty. His wife and children preceded him in death.

Jump Jim Crow is similar to songs and dances of the period, done by both black and white performers, on and off-stage. It is true, however, that no matter how well Rice's informant danced his dance and sang his song, he would not, in the 1830s, have been able to benefit from his talents. It's also likely that his talent for singing and dancing exceeded Rice's.

Thomas Rice was not the first performer to wear blackface in modern times, and the idea is an old one anyway, but he was certainly the most influential. He was not the first to sing "Negro songs" either. Joseph Cowell, father of performer Sam Cowell, was a friend of Rice, and he says that Tom Blakely was the first. Joseph Cowell, himself an actor, singer, and writer, was performing in America at the time of the birth of Jim Crow, and he also saw the birth of the Minstrel Show. English singer and songwriter Charles Dibdin is on record as performing as a "comic Negro" at Drury Lane in 1768. He wrote a "coon song" in 1788.

It is Jim Crow who went on to become a sort of two-faced god, founding on one hand a new and exciting American form of entertainment, the Minstrel Show, and on the other what came to be seen as a cruel stereotype based on slavery and oppression. Many factors need to be considered when looking at the sociological inferences of Jim Crow, but most are beyond the scope of this book. It is my opinion – while not for a moment excusing the practice of slavery and oppression, or belittling the terrible suffering that it caused – that it is pointless and unfair to blame Thomas "Daddy" Rice. I feel the need to treat this gentle singer with kindness.



When the Minstrel Show was about thirty years old, the Civil War focused audience attention on slavery. Actors and singers had always included the songs of the abolitionists and plays about the cruelty of slavery in their repertoires, but many, particularly within the Minstrel Show, had, during the 1830s and 1840s, also portrayed black slaves in a far less sympathetic way. After the Civil War the songs of the blackface minstrels were, in the main, the popular sentimental ones of the day. They were sung by men, including singers of African-American descent, who dressed in formal suits and called themselves Ethiopian Serenaders. It was the Minstrel Show of this later period that specialised in harmony singing.

Even before the Civil War, by the 1850s, songwriters, in particular the greatest of all of them, Stephen Foster, wrote their songs from a human perspective, using familiar themes of love, sorrow, marriage, family life, and home. Foster deliberately set out to

change the face of the Minstrel Show, instructing performers to treat their characters with dignity and understanding, avoiding the use of comic dialect. Early in his career he himself had used plantation dialect, but he came to understand its dehumanising effect, and his later songs never used it. One of the clues to the reason that the songs of this sensitive and compassionate man are now regarded with such ambivalence may be – as told by Maurice Willson Disher– that his songs were labeled “Confederate songs” and claimed by the South at the commencement of the Civil War.

Stephen Foster died in New York in 1864 at the age of thirty-seven. He had in his pocket a scrap of paper that bore the penciled words:

“Dear friends and gentle hearts.”

[1]



Punch, a street-performer interviewed by Henry Mayhew, took his name from the Punch-and-Judy show which he operated. He talked about the recent inclusion of Jim Crow in

“... the original drama of Punch, handed down to prosperity (sic) for 800 years.”

Punch recounted for Mayhew the inspiration for his puppet show which he called:



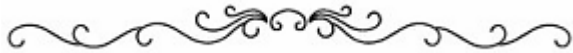
“The Dominion of Fancy or Punch’s Opera,”.

He talked about his love for the theatre and how it formed the basis of his own show.

” what took me uncommon were the funeral scenes of Juliet – It affects the heart, and brings us to our nat’ral feelings. I took my ghost from Romeau and Juliet; the ghost comes from the grave, and it’s beautiful. I used to like Kean, the principal performer. Oh, admirable! Most admirable he were, and especially in Otheller, for then he was like my Jim Crow here, and was always a great friend and supporter of his old friend Punch. Otheller murders his wife, ye know, like Punch does. Otheller kills her

'cause the green-eyed monster has got into his 'art, and he being so extremely fond of her...."

Punch went on to explain his version of the morality play he presented, with his hand-carved wooden puppets, where the killing of a wife and baby leads to hell. Once there, however, Mr. Punch kills the Devil, clearing the way for eternal love and peace. "That's moral." said Punch, the puppeteer, "It must be well worded, ye know, that's my beauty."



Billy Barlow was never as well known as Jim Crow but he was more enduring. Audiences might be thrilled by exotic one-dimensional characters, but they find it hard to relate to them in a personal way. Jim Crow was never an ordinary man. Never loved as kin. You were never expected to take too much notice of his comments. Billy was able to change with his audiences and with the times: one day an Irish immigrant in Boston, the next an English gold-digger off to Australia, and, when the time was right, a Billy Yank in the Civil War.

The Billy Barlow Broadside

In Britain between the 16th and the 20th centuries, the song-sheets known as the broadside ballads were sold on the streets for a penny or a half-penny each. They were printed on one side with the words of a song, usually a note about the tune to be used, and sometimes an illustration printed from a woodcut. The picture often had little to do with the song that accompanied it, which makes for some rather startling observations when you study the broadsides that still exist in collections. Rarely was the author of the words credited. During the 19th century some broadsides were printed with two or more songs so that the seller could sell them separately or as one sheet. Many old and beautiful ballads and many interesting topical songs survived because of the broadsides. Some took on, or continued, a life of their own, slipping in and out of oral tradition.

The songs of the broadsides were variable, producing or preserving the very worst doggerel and the very best of songs. Most of the broadsides were discarded and lost. Disher says, without regret, that unknown numbers were pulped during the paper shortage caused by the First World War. A small number survived in private collections, either in their broadside form, or in more prestigious songbooks designed for the wealthy and produced by the same broadside printers. Some collectors of ballads, notably Professor Francis James Child, shunned the broadsides as worthless drivel. He said of collections of them, " ... veritable dunghills, in which only after a great deal of sickening grubbing, one finds a very moderate jewel."

Child nonetheless includes in his collection, *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads*, many broadside versions of traditional ballads. A few very lovely broadside ballads escaped his notice, among them *Long A-growing*.

The trees they do grow high and the leaves they do grow green
And many are the days my love since you and I have been
For it's once I had a true love, but now he's dead and gone
He's a bonny lad but he's long, long a-growing.

From Long A-growing. As taught to Joy by Hildebrand

Among the many British publishers of broadsides, James Catnach, in the area of London known as Seven Dials, stands out as one of the most interesting. He became a master of the lurid murder-ballad and other sordid or scandalous tales, stories that are now the domain of the tabloid press. He perfected the "goodnight ballad". These were supposedly the last words – usually claimed to have been found on the floor of the cell – of a condemned man, written on the night before his execution. They gave an account of his life from his innocent childhood to his fall into a sinful life, ending either with a plea for forgiveness, or a defiant and unrepentant farewell. By careful planning, these broadsides could be printed and ready for sale from the very foot of the gallows tree on the day of the hanging.

And when I'm dead, going to my grave
A fine and flashy funeral let me have.
Get six bold highwaymen to carry me.
Give them broad swords, give them broad swords and sweet liberty.
Get six pretty maidens to carry my pall.
Give them white gloves, aye, and ribbons all.
And when I'm gone, you may tell the truth:
He was a bold young man, he was a bold young man, and a wicked youth.
From *Newlyn Town* as sung by Hildebrand.



James Catnach along with other British printers, many of them also with addresses in the Seven Dials, produced the Billy Barlow broadsides that now reside at the Bodleian Library at Oxford. Many of them are the Billy Barlow song that begins:

When I was born says old Mother Goose,
"He is a fine boy but he'll be of no use."
My father he said that to church I should go,
And there had me christened Billy Barlow.
O dear lackaday O. &c.

The Catnach broadside of this Billy Barlow song has a picture of a Medieval jester at the top, probably just because the second verse is about Billy being labeled a fool when he goes to school, or maybe it's just a random choice of woodcut. Tantalizing though, when Billy Barlow – or his direct ancestor – could so easily have spent some time as a court fool. There is no date on this, or any of the broadsides, and all that can be said about its age is that Catnach began his printing business in 1813

and continued it until 1838. This same version of Billy Barlow was printed by other printers, but the earliest of all except one of these could not have been printed before 1840. The one copy of this version, for which the date is completely unknown, is by a printer called J. Kiernan of Manchester.

Seven Dials printer T. Birt published three Billy Barlow songs between 1828 and 1829. They are:

Billy Barlow's Wedding

Billy Barlow's Wedding Miseries

Dicky Barlow – First Cousin to Billy Barlow.

They are all pretty awful, but their value lies in the fact that they indicate that Billy Barlow was already a well-known character before 1830. If Birt printed the “Mother Goose” version of Billy Barlow, it has been lost or is in hiding.

Catnach also printed *Billy Barlow's Wedding Miseries*. He illustrated it, for no reason that can be ascertained by reading the text, with a woodcut of a man in a field beating(?) a donkey.

Billy Barlow's Brother was in *The Highland Songster*, published by J. Pitts of Seven Dials, sometime between 1819 and 1844. It is unremarkable except that Billy was popular enough to be given a brother. Teddy Barlow vanished quickly, it seems.

The other Bodleian broadsides that are not of the “Mother Goose” type introduce Billy as an adult without mentioning his childhood. One, from an unknown printer, gives forty-five verses of actor Sam Cowell's Billy Barlow. It begins:

Ladies and gentlemen how do you do!

I come here, you see, with one boot and one shoe;

Don't know how it is but somehow 'tis so –

Now isn't it hard upon Billy Barlow?

Oh , dear, raggedy, O!

Now isn't it hard on poor Billy Barlow?

After the first eight verses there is a heading: Encore Verses. These are mostly topical, and were just some of the verses sung by Cowell at various times. Billy's refrain is now, “Oh dear raggedy O!” The song shows the mark of a superior songsmith, although like all of Sam Cowell's songs it depended on this actor's extraordinary talent as a performer, and on contemporary knowledge of prominent people, as well as of poems and plays popular at the time. Few of anybody's comic songs of the 19th century really work today. In the middle of this Billy Barlow song Billy describes a performance of the opera *Sonnambula*, which starred, at the time, the Irish-born Catherine Hayes. Cowell uses a pun and a simile of the types that colourfully pepper all of his songs:

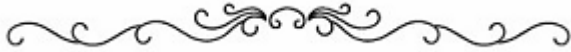
....Catherine Hayes (sang) *Sonnambula* so well

That tears down my nose like great kidney beans fell.

[2]

Catherine Hayes is known to have shared the stage with tenor John Simms Reeves on occasion. He sang *Billy Barlow* as part of his popular repertoire, raising the

possibility that Catherine Hayes may have met Billy Barlow. She may also have met him several times when he was played by Sam Cowell, George Coppin and other contemporary singers. She most likely didn't sing the Billy Barlow song herself, more's the pity.



Another broadside from the London printer E Hodges, from sometime between the years of 1855 and 1861, is also probably Cowell's. Undated Sheet music, held in the National Library of Australia, of a Billy Barlow song by Sam Cowell has many verses in common with the Hodges broadside. The first verse of the Hodges version differs slightly, in that it begins: 'Oh! London gen'lmen how do you do?' The second half of the song as printed by Hodges, and also by the London printer of the sheet-music now in the National Library of Australia, has verses that are about Kossuth, a Hungarian patriot living in exile in England between 1849 and 1859. Kossuth was very popular in England. In the Hodges version the song gradually lapses into comic Hungarian dialect, a typical Cowell device. Note also the pun in the last line.

Verse 6:

For a trip to Southampton I went t'other day
When a crowd gather'd round & I heard a chap say
Why that's Kossuth, incog. and I'd have you to know
They set the bells ringing for Billy Parlow

Oh dear! — Oh Raggedy, Oh!

'Cause a Hung'ry young hero was Pilly Parlow.

The next verse refers to the Great Exhibition of London, held in The Crystal Palace in 1851. The Crystal Palace was a huge metal-framed glass edifice, built in Hyde Park for the exhibition, and later dismantled. It survived, rebuilt in Sydenham as a glittering fairy-tale castle, until 1936, when it burned down. Many of the Billy Barlow songs contain references to it. These references, along with a certain similarity in style, raise the possibility that a large proportion of the Billy Barlow songs after about 1851 might well be fragments of Sam Cowell's songs.

I paid sixpence t'other day and odd it did seem
To see lots of chickens a-hatching by steam;
So I said to the man who conducted the show —
Can you hatch me a chicken like Pilly Parlow?

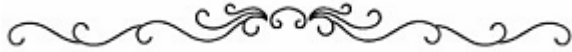
Oh dear &c.

He's a rather rare bird, is Billy Barlow.

Now London gen'lmen, I'll bid you goodbye
I'll get a new suit when clothes ain't so high;
My hat's shocking bad, that all of you know
But it looks well on the head of Pilly Parlow.

Oh dear &c.

Except for the comic Hungarian corruption of Billy's name, these verses are identical to the Sam Cowell song in the Australian Library. The Hodges broadside is embellished with a woodcut of a black dancer dressed in knee-breeches, vest, and bandanna. There is no apparent connection with either the Billy Barlow song or with the other song that shares the page.



Another Bodleian ballad that presents Billy as a grown man was printed in Belfast by James Moore. The Bodleian library gives the date as between 1846 and 1852, but as there are verses about the taking of Sebastopol, it must date from after 1855. The song is well-crafted and contains references to events that occur in Cowell's Billy Barlow songs. The wording and style are different, however, so that it may have been the work of a different writer. There is a slightly naughty verse, uncharacteristic for Billy, about monkeys at the Royal Pleasure gardens playing their "water-pipes" on him. The woodcut that appears with the song is of a grinning man in a wide-brimmed hat.

Billy Barlow's Trip to Paris is a broadside that was clearly composed by a clever songwriter. In fact it may well be the best of all the Billy Barlow songs. Sam Cowell's talents were equal to the task, and the use of classical references, puns, and funny foreign words were his trademark, but there is no specific indication of its authorship. There are no direct references to other Billy Barlow songs, although clearly it is one of them, except for the "O, dear! Raggedy oh!" (or ho!) refrain that occurs in only some of the verses. It is undated, and the printer is not named. It can't be from earlier than 1852, and was probably printed well before 1861, when Prince Albert died.

(Oh, dear mys-ter-y Oh!)

Ladies and Gentlemen, how do you do?

My appearance in print, you will say is quite new;

But the fact is, I should have been there long ago;

The world wants a few writers like Billy Barlow.

Oh, dear! Raggedy, ho!

There was Dickens, Carlyle — now there's Billy Barlow.

The Emperor Napoleon remark'd t'other day,

"My Great Exhibition here, somehow don't pay.

How the deuce shall I manage to make it a go?"

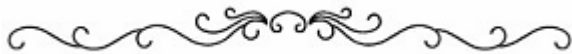
Says the Empress, "send over for Billy Barlow."

Oh, dear. Raggedy, ho!

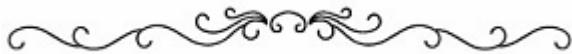
"Here the telegraph — quick! for young Billy Barlow."

There are twelve more cleverly-written verses that tell the story of Billy's trip to Paris, which is a wild and delirious fantasy or possibly a dream. Through the song he refers to himself variously as:

Young Billy Barlow,
a statesman,
a seaman called Lieutenant Barlow,
a young Long Tom Coffin, –(The hero in James Fenimore Cooper’s first novel,
The Pilot, published in 1823. Tom is an elderly American Sailor.)
Mounseer Guillaume (French form of William) Barlow,
Ulysses Barlow –” ‘gainst Syrens quite proof”,
William Barlow,
Mounsigneur Barlow,
the first of Queen Victoria’s subjects,
Lord William Barlow,
and the Emperor’s visitor: Mr. Barlow.
Billy makes wonderful speeches, is toasted and treated like royalty. Everyone cheers
him, and a fireworks display is given in honor of “Victoria, Albert, and Billy Barlow.”
Finally it happens that he can’t find lodgings that are expensive enough for him:
Soon I dropp’d off to sleep ‘neath a popular (sic) tree,
But was roused by the words “On ne dort pas ici”
‘Twas a rough man in blue, who ‘twould seem, didn’t know
What was due to the person of Billy Barlow!
Oh, dear! Raggedy, oh!
They have just called the case on of Billy Barlow!



A printer by the name of Taylor c1834 produced a song called *Billy Barlow’s Breeches*, but this is a case of a maverick song where a well-known story has had the name of a popular character slotted into it. There is no attempt to turn it into a Billy Barlow song, no refrain, and the hero has none of Billy’s characteristics. The tune is given as *Hodge & His Leather Breeches*, the author as John Morgan.



So far only one songsheet that takes the form of a broadside has turned up in American collections. It is the Leonard Deming publication from Boston, that looks like a cousin to the London broadsides. It has twenty-two verses, beginning with:
LADIES and Gentlemen, how do you do?
I appear before you with one boot and one shoe;
I cannot get any more, I’m sorry it is so,
Now is it not hard for BILLY BARLOW.
O dear, raggeddy ho, is it not hard, &c.
O, when I was born, says old mother Goose,
He is a fine boy, but he’ll be of no use;

My father he said that to church I should go,
And there he had me christened, William Barlow.

O dear, raggeddy ho, and there, &c

There follow two more verses about Billy's childhood, before he goes on to his adventures as an immigrant in Boston. He is cheeky and brash and, by his own account, handsome. He mixes with the swells, and flirts with the ladies, at all the fashionable places from the Gallery of Fine Arts to the Long Island Race Track. Rum-and-molasses is very much to his liking and causes him to get "...lost in going to the National 'tother day..." He is always hungry and tired, but nothing can keep down his buoyant spirit. There is one verse that was carried over into the next two American-published Billy Barlow songs, which refers to a travelling menagerie. This kind of show was a novelty in America at the time. The images in this verse are strong and interesting

I'm told there's a show coming into the town,
Red lions and monkeys, a porcupine's crown;
But if they're to be seen, I shall beat them, I know,
For they've never a varmint like Billy Barlow.

Oh dear, raggeddy ho, for they've, &c.

The porcupine lost his crown, becoming merely brown in the later versions of the song, which is a great pity.

Right down to the twenty-first verse, Billy is young and hopeful, singing for his modest living, which, however, never involves having a home of his own. Suddenly, startlingly, at the very end of the song he is old and ill and feeble – forced into drawing a cart for a living before ending up in the workhouse. Here he picks oakum – that is, he teases out old pieces of rope to be used as caulking on ships. This is the very last step before his death.

Just as startlingly, though, the last verse jolts the listener out of the depths of misery. Billy is not old and sick after all. He'll be back again tomorrow, young and fit and happy, just like Mr. Punch, Mrs. Punch, and Baby Punch, of the Punch and Judy Show.

Ladies and Gentlemen, I bid you good bye,
I'll get a new suit when clothes are not so high;
My hat it does look shocking bad you know,
But it sets well on the head of young Billy Barlow.

Oh dear, raggeddy ho, but it sets, &c.

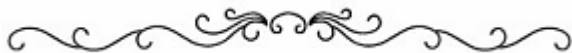
It may or may not be significant that this American variant of the widespread "Mother Goose" Billy Barlow, has the – "Oh, dear Ragged(d)y ho" refrain and not – "Oh, dear lackaday Oh!" of all of the English broadsides of this version.

There are many parallels in this version of the Billy Barlow song with the real life of the London character that Mayhew's Billy describes as the man who "originally" played Billy Barlow. They both entertained at the race track. They are both seduced by drink. Both are reduced to living in the workhouse, to finally face death there. The

dates don't quite fit, however, and Mayhew was told that this "original Billy Barlow" took his name from the song.

Billys within Billys, within Billys!
Who came first – Billy Barlow or Billy Barlow?
This way leads to madness.
Time to move on.

At the top of the Deming songsheet, there is a crude drawing of what seems to be the real Billy Barlow. It is the only picture of him on a broadside that accurately depicts the character described in the song. He looks like an early version of the American Hobo clown, with a battered top-hat, waistcoat, and ragged pants. He is slim and short. It is, of course in black and white, but it's obvious that his large nose is meant to be red. He carries what looks like a news-sheet that is headed: LOAFER. Behind him is the window of a bottle-shop. The costumes worn by Fred Astaire and Judy Garland in the movie *Easter Parade*, for the routine, *Just a Couple of Swells*, look very similar. In the 1850s Sam Cowell, in one of his versions of Billy Barlow, was said to have worn a hat with the top loose and flapping like a three-quarters-opened soup-can – like Judy Garland's hat a century later. The surviving pictures of Cowell as Billy Barlow give the impression of a London derelict or a scarecrow, rather than a fallen swell, but some references indicate that he changed his image over the years. I have not been able to pin down the model for this early picture of Billy Barlow. It is too early to have been Cowell or Coppin. The English broadsides show woodcut pictures obviously chosen hastily and at random, and none of them look like the Billy of the song. Could it be that the Billy Barlow songs came before any of the flesh-and-blood Billy Barlows? The oldest of the other American Billy Barlow songs, printed as song-booklets and not broadsides, seem to be fragments of earlier songs. Two have, on their covers, detailed lithographs of Billy that may have been produced from photographs of Billy Barlow performers.



With the exception of the aberrant *Billy Barlow's Breeches*, the tune is not indicated on any of the Billy Barlow broadsides. This suggests that the tune called Billy Barlow was already well-known and firmly attached well before the earliest of the still-existing *Billy Barlow* broadsides. That is, before 1828 or 1829. The tune is notated on American sheet music dated 1834. Billy's tune sounds Irish to modern ears, but it could just as well be English or Scottish, or have its roots in any of several European countries. It's in jig-time so that you can march to it, following a fife-and-drum band. If you slow it right down you can do a stately old court-dance to it. It's a very versatile and appealing little tune, easily whistled or hummed.

When Boston police chief Francis O'Neill made his collection of Irish tunes, early in the 20th century, he found several names, as well as Billy Barlow, for this tune. The titles he gives are unrelated, indicating, probably, just that it was a popular melody well-suited to the attachment of sung words. There is a Gaelic title among the others, but there is no information about when the tune acquired this title. It is more than likely that this tune was already quite old by the beginning of the 19th century, and it seems that it was known as *Billy Barlow* at least by the 1820s.

CHAPTER 4: THE LITTLE FAT GENTLEMAN

The First of the American Billy Barlow Sheet-Music Booklets – The Forgotten Mr. Wills – The Old Adelphi Theatre and John Reeve, Charles Matthews, Robert Keeley, and Joe Cowell – An Elephant-Actress Acquitted of a Murder Charge – Billy Barlow and Some of His Friends of the 1830s and 1840s.

Who's that little fat gentleman,
does anyone know?
Yes, says a young lady.
That's William Barlow!

American Billy Barlow Song-booklets

On the 28th of May 1834, an American song was published with a cover page that read :

BILLY BARLOW
A Celebrated Comic Song
as sung by
HIMSELF
With rapturous applause

This sheet-music comes from J G Osbourn's Music Saloon in Philadelphia. It is more like modern sheet-music in that it is really a booklet rather than just a single page. There is a drawing of Billy on the cover, showing much more detail than the crude picture published by Deming. Billy is shown wearing one boot and one shoe. He appears round and chubby, bulging out of his waistcoat.

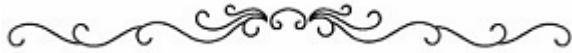
The lithograph is the work of "Lehman & Duval Lithry. ; T. Barincou." The back cover has advertisements for other J G Osbourne publications.

Some of the verses are the same as those of the Deming song. Some are slightly changed. There are several new, topical verses, and several of the older ones have been omitted. The meter is somewhat changed, so the tune – "Arranged for the PIANO FORTE by P F Fallon" – doesn't fit all that well.

There is no mention of Billy's origins, except that he is sure he was born, but where, he can't tell. He just appears. The travelling-menagerie owner, with his now-undescribed lions, monkeys, and porcupines, tries to buy him as part of the show, but

the lions snap at him, the monkeys get jealous, and a hyena growls and looks at him. Billy decides to decline the offer.

A popular minstrel song of the period, Long Tail Blue, is mentioned where the Deming song refers to Jim Crow. Other characters, Dinah Ross and Canker the clown, are there too. Billy doesn't grow old and never becomes destitute.



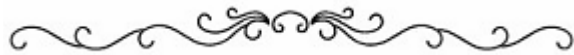
Another American song-booklet from this period, with the title Billy Barlow, comes from New York, from the printer George Endicott. It is dated 1836. Endicott was a lithographer whose delicately-drawn and beautifully-coloured pictures survive on many song sheets of the 19th century. The cover shows a quite different Billy from the Deming and the Osbourne ones. He still wears the tattered frock-coat that he wears on the Osbourne cover, but now it is tied with cord and is in a far more ragged state. His hat is low-crowned and narrow-brimmed, with a drooping feather stuck out behind. He still wears one boot and one shoe. There is the interesting effect of a second image of him, a view of his back, further into the picture, as if he is turning away from a mirror. The whole effect appears to us, viewing it one hundred and fifty years later, like a picture of a proud frontiersman in a torn and ragged fringed jacket gazing thoughtfully across an empty plain. To us there is no hint of the fallen city-swell that he is meant to be. Billy is still solidly built, but not "the little fat gentleman". He is quite handsome, with big dark eyes. The background colour of the picture is a soft pink wash.

The song words show no major changes from the Osbourne copy, but the meter now fits well with the tune used for all but one of the surviving Billy Barlow songs, as indeed it fits with the earlier broadsides. There are fewer verses than before, and no mention, even in passing, of Billy's origins or early life. The menagerie is mentioned briefly. There are no local or topical references at all except for the naming of Astor's, where he is refused a bed. Billy doesn't age, and the song concludes with him hoping to buy a new suit when times aren't so hard. He is still well-satisfied with his hat, "shocking bad" as it is, because it "sits well on" his head.

The cover of this sheet music reads:

BILLY BARLOW
A FAVOURITE
COMIC SONG

SUNG BY
MR. WILLS,
AT THE NEW ORLEANS THEATRES
NEW YORK.



Mr. Wills and Billy Barlow

Mr. Wills seems to have slipped into obscurity along with many Billy Barlows of the eighteen-thirties. Mr. Wills did appear at the Tremont Theatre in Boston in 1838, singing a song about a man who gets around a law preventing the sale of alcohol without entertainment, by exhibiting a striped pig. The song had its name used for a political party with a brief existence that named itself, "The Striped Pig Party". The sheet-music for this forgettable song proclaims that it is the only "correct one published" and it is as Mr. Wills sang it with great applause.

That there were even worse versions of this stupefyingly awful song is a fascinating idea.

John Reeve ~ The Earliest Named Actor to Play Billy Barlow

The Billy Barlow sheet-music with Mr. Wills on the cover tells us that he sings Billy Barlow "as sung by Jack Reeve". Jack Reeve is also named as the singer on a copy of the song *All Around My Hat*, a song that was rediscovered in the 1960s and accepted at that time as "traditional". It does have what appear to be old folk-elements within it, so it's possible that it's one of those songs that once was sung in some form in English folk-communities. The way it was written down from the singing of Jack Reeve and others in the 19th century, and sold as a broadside, shows the signs of a composed comic song. It is in Cockney dialect. Another song-booklet of a song called *The Man Wot Sweeps a Crossing* shows a drawing on the front cover that is probably meant to be Reeve. He is young, with a handsome face and very plump figure. Is the fact that he wears one boot and one shoe significant?

Englishman John Reeve, sometimes called Jack, was a contemporary of the poet Keats and the botanist John Joseph Bennett. They spent their early school years together with Reeve exchanging his skills as a fighter for help from Bennett with arithmetic. Bennett was born in 1801, so Reeve may have still been in his teens when he joined the Adelphi Theatre Company in London in 1819.

The Adelphi, called originally The Sans Pareil, was in the heart of London on The Strand. A rebuilt Adelphi still stands there. Little theatres like The Adelphi were given a lower rating than the "legitimate" theatres like Drury Lane and Covent Garden, and had restrictions placed on them as to the type of entertainment they were allowed to offer. There had to be a large percentage of musical content. This led to some interesting dramaturgical experiences, like *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and *Frankenstein* as musicals. Many hundreds of pathetic melodramas were presented with intermitting songs which didn't always have anything to do with the story. Animal performers

–teams of trained terriers and horses – filled out the bill alongside magicians, tumblers, dwarfs, and giants.

It was in this world that Billy Barlow danced and sang. We know this by the many actors who played in these smaller theatres who mentioned, usually just in passing, that they “did” Billy Barlow. His name is not mentioned in the records from the Adelphi, which have been carefully copied and preserved.

[1]

None of the names of characters are there unless they are part of a play’s cast-list, but it is certain that at least by 1836 John Reeve included Billy Barlow among his many characters. He must have worked up the Billy character some time before his American tour. There is the possibility that it was Reeve who was the first Billy Barlow actor.

The Adelphi’s audience was made up of all classes of people, right up to Queen Victoria and Prince Albert, but the humour was aimed at the working class. At one point The Strand was widened to permit the royal carriage to pass through to the Adelphi. “Bertie” was known to prefer the farces and “low humour” of the “illegitimate theatre” but it is not clear whether or not the Queen was amused.

It gives me no end of amusement and pleasure to contemplate
the possibility that Queen Victoria met Billy Barlow.



Reeve spent most of his acting life in this little theatre, although he also appeared at The Haymarket and Drury Lane, and in 1835-1836 toured America. He specialized in

comic characters, although he played many parts, usually including a leading role, in most of the plays that were performed at the Adelphi from 1819 until his death in 1838, except for the above-mentioned year of his American tour.

In addition, he usually had his own solo act on each program, where he did impersonations of prominent people of the time, especially actors, and sang comic songs. He was also a dancer – as were all of the comedian-singers and the Sailors' Hornpipe and clog-dancing were a necessary part of his routine. Was he one of those graceful plump dancers who appear to be light on their feet? Audiences loved Reeve, and admired the way he was able to give them many characters in quick succession in his one-man shows. It is noted that for one season he performed a whole play alone. The play has a cast-list of ten characters, including men and women of various ages, a school boy, and "an unchristened child in cradle". He was a master of improvisation, but there is ample evidence that he was unable to learn lines. This mattered only when he had a tight script to follow, which was not usually the case. At that time it was the custom, in theatres like The Adelphi, as also in street-theatre, to provide actors of melodrama, farce, and pantomime with a bare outline of the play and the type of character they were to perform, and leave them to it. It was also common for stock characters like Harlequin, Columbine, and Clown to appear in the most unlikely plays, and their parts were well-known. Reeve could work up a character in this way with a high degree of skill, but when he had lines to memorize, the critics had much to say about his lack of talent.

Memory was not a problem with a fellow-performer in 1829. The Adelphi always fitted their animal actors into their plays if they could, leaving us with the intriguing images of men shipwrecked on islands with teams of faithful hounds and the like. When *The Elephant of Siam and the Fire Fiend* was presented, the stars were John Reeve as the male lead, and Mademoiselle d'Gelk as his female counterpart.

Mademoiselle was a real elephant. She played her part perfectly and was much praised by the critics, unlike Reeve, who was given scathing reviews.

The audience didn't care, and Reeve and Mademoiselle played to full houses for the season. Shortly afterwards Mademoiselle, true to her kind, remembered an incident long forgotten by her human friends, when she had been stabbed with a pitch-fork by one of her handlers. She took her revenge and killed the handler, having waited two years for her chance. Best not to ask how Mademoiselle conducted her defense without speech but perhaps she used mime. The coroner fined her five shillings, which she could well afford on her substantial wages, and the show went on.



Other Actors at London's Adelphi Theatre.

There were other actors associated with The Adelphi in the 1820s and 1830s who may have sung Billy Barlow songs in character. There is no hard evidence, but the acts they are known to have specialized in, characters involving “low comedy”, would seem to make it a possibility.

One was Charles Matthews, a brilliant fast-talking comic actor and superb mimic, who became the theatre manager of The Adelphi, briefly outshining John Reeve until he moved on. Matthews’ son, also named Charles Matthews, was another possibility. He married Madame Vestris, who was a colourful actress remembered for “breeches parts” – male roles that allowed women to show feminine figures and shapely legs. Far from being passive decorative parts, these roles often allowed women to give strong performances as lead characters. Anyone familiar with the Christmas Pantomime knows that the Principal Boy, played by a woman, is the leading part. American Charlotte Cushman went a step further, and played straight male roles in classical theatre. She had a slim boyish figure and a husky voice. With her sister as Juliet she played Romeo, redressing the gender imbalance of tradition. Madam Vestris and Charles Matthews managed several theatres including one in America. Another actor tenuously linked to Billy Barlow was Robert Keeley. Keeley shared the stage with Reeve at The Adelphi when *Tom and Jerry or Life in London* was performed there. Keeley played Jemmy Green, a friend of Jerry Hawthorn, the main character who was played by Reeve. This play became so popular that the names of several of the characters and their quotes slipped into common speech. Names like Jemmy Green, Tom and Jerry, Bob Logic, and Dusty Bob were known to everybody. Many of the characters like Dusty Bob belong to English ritual theatre, and a study of their histories is fascinating, although further removed from Billy Barlow than I care to go at this time.

There were derivative plays like *Jemmy Green in Paris*, and this one particularly is significant when we look at Billy Barlow in Australia. Keeley played the same London street-characters as Reeve, and sang their songs. As with all the characters done as part of solo acts, there is no record of their names. Keeley was responsible for the persona of the nervous, terrified servant who crept around the set in the first dramatization of *Frankenstein*.

Elements of Keeley’s performance stayed with the play when it was made as a film. The play version had been a musical, and the Creature’s love of music also went on into film. In the film *Bride of Frankenstein* he is enraptured by the sad sweet music played by an old blind man. Significantly, maybe, in the musical the Creature had no voice, and therefore no songs of his own. In 1850 Keeley took over the management of The Princess Theatre with Charles Kean, the second son of Actor Edmund Kean, where they presented revivals of Shakespearean plays on a grand scale. Keeley’s wife and children carried on in popular theatre after his death in 1869.

One more actor briefly associated with the Adelphi who also played comic characters of the Billy Barlow type was Joseph Cowell, father of the best-known of all the Billy Barlows: Sam Cowell. Joe Cowell played at the Adelphi from 1819 until

1821, just before leaving for America, where he was to live for the next thirty years. Joe Cowell was a writer and his memoirs are full of interesting encounters with fellow actors and singers, Mississippi-riverboat gamblers, writers like Mark Twain, and Americans of all types.

[2]

He tells us very little about the characters he himself played on stage or the songs he sang. From the little evidence that does exist, it seems he played characters of the Billy Barlow type, but it's impossible to know for sure whether he ever actually played Billy. While he was at the Adelphi his little daughter died. He apologized to his audience, and like John Reeve whose wife died a few years later, took just three weeks off. Cowell sat beside his child's death-bed for the three weeks and then, when she died, returned to work.

On the mantle the clock it was ticking the hours as they passed by
By a cradle a mother was bending and praying her child might not die
But far away at the theatre the thousands who came to the play
Were silent though many were weeping, as sadly the singer did say:
Ring down the curtain I can't sing tonight
My heart is breaking amid all this light
My little one's dying, my pride and delight
So ring down the curtain I cant sing tonight.

From Ring Down the Curtain I Can't Sing Tonight
-by Robert H. Brennen.

As for John Reeve, he died on the 24th of January 1838. He can't have been more than thirty-eight years old. The Adelphi's manager called him one of the theatre's "brightest ornaments".

John Reeve was indeed a bright, early star of the London stage.

There is a strong possibility that he may have been the very first Billy Barlow.

By the end of the 1830s, Billy Barlow was poised, ready to explode like a supernova. It's as if he were gathering strength before spreading his star-shine all over the English-speaking world. He was about to sail to the new colony of Australia with the immigrants, and later the gold-diggers, by way of the shipping lanes. He was to criss-cross the oceans between England, Ireland, America, and Australia, following the restless wanderings of the seekers of a better life.

Everywhere he went, he left behind little pieces of himself – sometimes just his name.

Some of the human actors whose bodies he inhabited are well-known and remembered.

Hundreds have been forgotten.

Many sang his song with "unbounded" or "rapturous" applause.

From this point it is a matter of telling more of the stories of the many Billy Barlows who seem to have taken their name, and sometimes their persona, from Billy Barlow the song-character. This will inevitably eliminate some Billys who perhaps deserve to be mentioned, and will include some who don't. That's what happens when you are dealing with a legendary figure. In any case there is not one of them that doesn't have a fascinating story attached to him, worthy of the telling.

CHAPTER 5: I'LL START ON MY TRAVELS, SAYS BILLY BARLOW

George Coppin and Billy Barlow – Coppin and Billy in Ireland – Billy Barlow in New South Wales, Australia – The Song – Billy Barlow in Australia – Coppin on Tour – James Tucker the Convict Writer and Jemmy Green – Dusty Bob – The Australian Ghost of Billy Barlow

In 1819 and in 1820 two key players in the spread and popularity of Billy Barlow – the character – were born in England: George Selth Coppin and Samuel Houghton Cowell, respectively. They were to become the main disseminators of the various versions of the song as well: Coppin in England, Northern Ireland, Australia, and, to a lesser degree, America; Cowell in England, Scotland, Northern Ireland, and especially in America, where he lived from the time he was two years of age until he was twenty. Neither one was the first Billy Barlow in any of these countries, (except possibly in the case of Australia where the first Billy Barlow may have been Coppin) and they were certainly not the only ones at any one time. They were, however, the most well-known, and I believe that the information left to us about the 19th-century character, Billy Barlow, springs mostly from them.

In 1819, also in England, Robert Barlow was born. He took the name Billy Barlow and at least for a time sang *Billy Barlow* – the song. He became a well-known and popular entertainer, particularly in Australia where he settled, and he helped to make Billy's name a household word here. It seems though, that he did not identify with Billy Barlow – the character, in quite the same way as did Coppin and Cowell, although he certainly had the tendency to bob back up from adversity in much the same way. Strangely, this unsinkable quality can be seen in most, if not all, of the Billy Barlows.

George Selth Coppin

George Coppin was born in England, into an acting family, and taken on stage to begin his acting career while still a baby. When he was ten years old, in 1829, he and his family stayed for a time, between tours, with members of their extended family at the King's Lynn Lunatic Asylum. The family owned and ran the asylum, and the young George studied the inmates keenly.

Coppin claimed that it was here that he found the real-life Billy Barlow, who was to become the basis for Coppin's own character of that name. Did Coppin actually study the street clown referred to by Mayhew's Billy as the "original Billy Barlow (?)He was a great drunkard, and spent all he got in gin. He died seven years ago – where most of the street performers ends their days – in the workhouse."

[1 – click]

By another account this was the Whitechapel Workhouse.

[2 – click]

This Billy almost certainly spent some time in poorhouses around the country on-and-off throughout his life. Coppin refers to the Billy he met at the asylum as, "...the simpleton, Billy Barlow, an apparently daft but shrewd commentator upon the idiosyncrasies of the sane"

[3 – click]

This could well describe the "original Billy" at any point during his sad decline, drink having reduced him to the state described by Coppin.

When Coppin struck out on his own he was seventeen. His only assets were his fiddle and his already formidable talent as an actor, singer, and dancer. He had no money at all. He walked the lonely, dusty roads, busking with his fiddle for his food and shelter. By the age of eighteen, however, he was already a theatre manager as well as manager of his own acting career. It cannot be said that he never looked back – he was to earn and lose many fortunes, but his buoyant spirit, his talents and his trusty fiddle never failed him.

CHAPTER 6: THE SPIDER OF BILLY BARLOW

George Coppin in Melbourne, Victoria – Victoria’s Gold Rush – American Entrepreneurs – Entertainers on the Central Victorian Goldfields – Gustavus Vaughan Brooke’s Last Farewell – The Spider of Lola Montez – Coppin on Tour – The Artful Dodger – The Lovely Billie Barlow – Death of George Coppin.

More About George Coppin

George Coppin returned to Australia, from his successful first tour of America, to settle first in Adelaide, South Australia, and then in Melbourne, Victoria. Melbourne, unlike Sydney, had not been founded as a penal colony, and from the start had considered herself far less brash and wild than her tarty sister. Sydney, of course has always considered Melbourne dowdy and dull.

Oh me name it is Macarty and I’m a rorty party
I’m rough and tough as an old man kangaroo.
Some people say I’m crazy, I don’t work because I’m lazy
And I move along with that boozing throng the push from Woolloomooloo

The Woolloomooloo Lair: Author unknown. Early Sydney song

Gimme old Melbourne, an’ gimme a tart;
An’ then I am simply orlright.
Can any bloke point to a better old joint,
Than Bourke Street on Saturday night
When me and me Maudie is strolling along
Me cobbers orl try to be smart
“Git out of ther way, that’s Billo,” they say
Walkin’ out with ‘is fair dinkum tart.”

Bourke Street on Saturday Night : Melbourne song by P.C. Cole and Fred Hall, 1918
Gold-Fever in Victoria

The discovery of gold in central Victoria changed the immigration pattern to Australia just as it changed forever the pristine bushland of the area. Would-be gold-diggers arrived by the shipload from the British Isles and from all over Europe and America, as well as from China. Poor miners from Wales and – in huge numbers – from Cornwall, with a head-start in the skills needed for gold-digging, left their homes forever and sailed, in conditions only slightly better than those on convict ships, the long journey into an unknown future. Maps of the seas had, not too long before, carried warnings like, “Here be Mermaids and Sea Monsters.”

Shades of ev’ning close not o’er us, leave our lonely bark awhile.
Morn alas! will not restore us yonder dark and distant isle;
Still my fancy can discover sunny spots where friends may dwell.
Darker shadows round us hover, isle of beauty, fare thee well.

Isle of Beauty Fare Thee Well, by Thomas Haynes Bayly

Melbourne, Victoria's capital city, woke from her genteel slumbers to find herself a bustling, busy assembly point for the diggers preparing to make the journey inland to the new gold-towns. For a time she was to produce drunken, delinquent larrikins of her own who were easily as dangerous as those in Sydney. Ships lay idle in Port Philip Bay, their captains unable to find sailors willing to man them, while in the tent-cities of Bendigo and Ballarat more and more places were being given names like Sailor's Gully, Sailor's Creek, and Sailor's Flat.

Hundreds of families and single men simply walked inland from Melbourne, or from the nearby port at Geelong, but there was soon a thriving coach-service, for those who could afford it, set up by the American, Freeman Cobb, and his American partners. Cobb initially brought everything from America: his coaches, his drivers, his horse-handlers, even his horse-feed. Cobb & Co became a familiar name all over Australia, surviving even the coming of the railways, to be finally put out of business, after the First World War, by the motorcar.

Americans were conspicuous from the start, for their entrepreneurial skills. The only warehouse where diggers could get their supplies and top-grade mining tools was begun by an American. Here you had a choice of either red or blue shirts. All the stock was imported from America, where the earlier goldrush had produced high-quality tools, and slaves harvested the cotton for the mills that made the shirts. The finest hotel boasted an American owner, American bartenders, and the main coach-station for Cobb & Co.

[1 – click]

The fast Yankee clipper-ships, sailing around Cape Horn, bringing supplies and immigrants, easily outran heavy English sailing ships taking the long route around Africa.

As you wallop around Cape Horn
Heave away Haul away.
You'll wish to God you'd never been born
Bound for South Australia.

American Capstan Shanty. Traditional.

The entertainers came along with the rush, sometimes deciding that they were actually gold-diggers, and staying on. British and American music-hall/vaudeville stars, theatre companies, singers, and actors of comedy and tragedy, and of course the Minstrel troupes (from both England and America) arrived in Melbourne to set up tours of the goldfields. The few women who appeared on stage in the gold-towns were showered, not with flowers, but with gold nuggets, as were many of the men. The performers carried with them the tools of their trade: banjos, fiddles, flutes, fifes, drums, bones, triangles, tambourines, makeup bags with burnt cork and pearl dust, and trunks of costumes.



Lola Montez, Billy Barlow, the Tarantula and the Tarantella

The years 1855-56 also saw the tour, in Australia, of the beautiful, notorious Lola Montez – born Maria Dolores Eliza Gilbert in the same year, in the same country, as Gustavus Brooke. The beautiful Lola performed in Melbourne's Theatre Royal, at the

time trying to compete, without much success, with Coppin's theatre, where Brooke was playing to crowded houses.



Lola's career had begun after she had spent a short time studying Spanish dancing, and decided that she was really hot-bloodedly Spanish at heart, and not Irish. She romped all over Europe, cracking a whip as a form of crowd control, dancing her highly idiosyncratic interpretive dances. Between dances she treated her audiences to dramatic readings from Shakespeare and others.

By the time of her Australian tour she had worked up her famous Spider Dance. Folk-legend in Australia tells us that this dance involved twirling and frantic stamping while the lovely Lola searched for a tarantula hiding in her clothing. The removal of several layers of costume was, she insisted, part of a tasteful and beautiful piece. Sometimes she added more spiders as the mood took her. George Coppin tells it differently. His biographer, Alec Bagot, in a mixture of direct quotes and his own paraphrasing, said that:

"The dance, as it originated, represented the reactions of a young woman bitten by a poisonous spider.... As the poison spread through her system, the victim lolled listlessly and stupidly. Aroused by the strains of music she began to dance. When the music became more lively, she jumped about with great velocity. The violent exercise brought on perspiration which invariably cured the disorder."

This is a close description of a tarantella. Tarantism, a strange malady, supposed to be the result of having been spider-bitten, overcame large numbers of people in the Sicilian town of Taranto during the 15th and 16th centuries. The only cure, the harmless nature of the local wolf-spider notwithstanding, was to dance frantically and wildly. A folk-dance, called the tarantella, based on the antics of the sufferers of tarantism, was later developed and became all the rage in 18th-century Europe. The

dance, the tarantula spider, and the disease were all named for the town of Taranto. The history of Lola's dance was of no concern to the diggers of the Victorian goldfields, who turned out in droves to see her. She ignored the cries of, "Take it *all* off!" while carefully removing quite a lot, but never all, of her costume. Gold nuggets covered the stage at the end of her act. She publicly horse-whipped the editor of the Ballarat Times, who displeased her by giving her an unfavourable report. The Ballarat Star carried a much more fitting tribute :

".....This dance, (The Spider Dance) on which malic (sic) and envy have endeavoured to fix the stain of immorality, has been given in the other Colonies to houses packed from floor to ceiling with rank and fashion and beauty."



Back in Melbourne, Coppin's Billy Barlow, always ready with a topical routine, danced his own version of the Spider Dance. In a tiny skirt, he twirled and flung himself about the stage. The finale was a spider-chase across the stage, in pursuit of a huge, furry, multi-legged beast that he had produced from beneath his costume.

Billy Barlow sang:

When famed Lola Montez for spiders did look
I took a leaf out of her very blue book
The first night she danced she something did show
Not at all like the spider of Billy Barlow.

– George Coppin, 1856



Coppin continued to bring actors, musicians, and singers out on tour. As well as performing in his theatres, they covered the lucrative goldfield-circuit, first by coach and later by train. By 1862, the line linking Melbourne, Geelong, Bendigo, Ballarat, and Castlemaine was finished. Tours of the whole East Coast of Australia, taking in particularly the goldfields of Victoria, New South Wales, and Queensland, were possible, using a combination of horse-drawn coach, train, and coastal ship. Coppin toured America in 1864, beginning on the West Coast, from San Francisco to Oregon, and back down to Panama, across to the East Coast, and right on up into

Canada. He was with his friend and fellow-actor Edwin Booth when Booth's brother, John Wilkes Booth, shot and killed President Abraham Lincoln.

In 1865, Coppin's Billy Barlow said goodbye to New York, and returned home to Melbourne, Australia. Billy Barlow had been a familiar character in America since at least 1832 and, since Sam Cowell's tour there just before the Civil War, he had travelled beyond the cities of the East Coast with the soldiers of the Union Army.

The Dodger Song

A song connected not with Billy, but with another Coppin character, The Artful Dodge, is a song called, *We're All Dodging/ We're All Cheating/ The Dodger Song*. The Artful Dodge(r) was of course not Coppin's alone, and is better known as the character in the Dickens story, *Oliver Twist*. Many comic singers of this time, including Sam Cowell, did "Dodger" routines with singing.

Coppin performed a song said to have been of his own composition, in Melbourne in the 1850s, called, *We're all Dodging*. He may have been using the song well before this. "The Artful Dodge" was an early character of Coppin's, but he was also a character of Sam Cowell's. Both men sang a song about him. No dated, credited copy of the song Coppin sang has so far turned up in either Australia or America, but a song called *We're all Cheating* has wide currency in Australia, and songs bearing the titles *We're All Dodging* or *The Dodger Song* are well-known in America.

The American songs date from a period after Sam Cowell's and George Coppin's American tours in the early 1860s. They are usually credited to Oklahoma farmers. It cannot be said with certainty who wrote *We're All Dodging* but it is possible that it was George Coppin. I don't believe it was Oklahoma farmers.

Billie Barlow

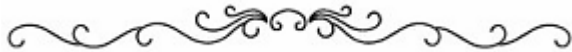


In 1895 Coppin chose the beautiful and talented operetta singer and actress, Billie Barlow, as his "Principal Boy" for the Christmas pantomime, *The House That Jack Built*, that he was presenting in Melbourne. Billie is the only female Billy Barlow on record who was a professional entertainer. She was born Florence Wilton or, by another account, Minnie Barlow. On the advice of W S Gilbert, partner of Arthur Sullivan, she adopted the stage name Billie Barlow. Billie was not quite sixteen in 1878, when she began her career with the London company, Opera Comique, in the chorus of *H.M.S. Pinafore*. The next year, using the new stage-name Billie Barlow, she played Isabel in a New York production of *The Pirates of Penzance*.

By 1888, following great success as an operetta star, Billie switched direction and became a music-hall and variety performer. There is no apparent evidence that she identified with Billy Barlow the "low comedian" in any way, except to use his name, but her path led her to the very same audiences. She is remembered most for this part of her career and for her performances in "breeches" parts, particularly in pantomime. Her popular songs were, *It's English, Quite English, You Know and See me Dance the Polka*. Billie toured and performed in her home country of England as well as in America, South Africa, and Australia.

Cigarette cards collected from America show her in various cute or demure poses in her colourful costumes. There is no picture of her in a raggedy outfit, which would have been an interesting idea. Her voice can be heard on several early recordings.

Billie Barlow died in 1927.



Over the sixty-three years George Coppin lived in Australia, he founded, in Adelaide and then in Melbourne, many organizations, and established theatres, actually building one theatre. In Melbourne he bought and developed a grand pleasure garden and menagerie, which he named Cremorne Gardens. It was from here that he organized the first balloon-flight in Australia, importing two balloons from England for the purpose. After amazing Melbournians with this wonder, he sent the balloons, and their crew of two, to Sydney for the first flight there. Later he sold Cremorne Gardens and it became Melbourne's "Lunatic Asylum" – a name still current in the 1950s, when I was a child growing up in Melbourne.

Coppin named and developed the seaside town of Sorrento, where he built his country home. He also named a beautiful little inlet on Victoria's West coast, *Apollo Bay*, after his ship, *The Apollo*. It was Coppin who brought to Australia: the first shipment of ice, the first roller-skates, the first equestrian show, and the first camels.

[5 – click]

He entered – and became active in – politics where he championed the cause of the common man, and always proudly gave his occupation as "comedian". He made and lost several fortunes. All the while, Billy Barlow was with him, making comments on current events, satirizing the attitudes of the pompous toffs of the establishment, and sympathizing with the workers and ordinary people. On one occasion in Melbourne the *Billy Barlow* tune was played in Coppin's honour by a brass band, with a special arrangement for solo trombone.

George Coppin never did really say goodbye to his loveable alter-ego Billy Barlow. He was forever giving farewell performances of him, which the public refused to accept as final. They were always ready and eager to join him in a chorus of:

Hey Ho Raggedy Oh!

You've got to keep going with Billy Barlow.

– George Coppin

According to Coppin's biographer, Billy's last official appearance within the body of George Coppin was in 1881. Here Coppin gave out autographed photographs of himself in his various costumes. It's said that these photographs turn up from time to time as rare items in collections of memorabilia.

I live in hope!

There was another public performance by Coppin in 1901.

[4 – click]

It is not noted whether this included an appearance of Billy Barlow, but there is a good chance that it did.

It's certain that in 1906, in Melbourne, Australia, this manifestation of Billy Barlow died along with the great George Selth Coppin.

CHAPTER 7: AN ABUNDANCE OF COMICALITIES

Robert Billy Barlow – The Song called The Blue-tail'd Fly – The Thomas Family's Billy Barlow – S.S. Billy Barlow – The Author's Memories of Showboats, Banjos, and Minstrels.

This chapter has been revised in September 2008 because of new information available about Robert "Billy" Barlow. Valda Low has been a clever sleuth as well as a wonderful playmate during the rewriting of this chapter.

Robert Billy Barlow ~ The Inimitable Blue-tail'd Fly

It appears that no one has yet told the story of this man who, I believe, deserves a place in Australia's history, and who fits into the story of the Billy Barlow phenomenon. With increasing access to newspaper articles and advertisements it is possible to follow the career of this talented and interesting man. There are, however, still some gaps in his story, and so far no picture of him has turned up. His life was full of adventure, of music and song, of fortunes won and lost on at least three goldfields. Above all, he had a tenacity and an unsinkable quality that seem to have typified many of the Billy Barlows of the 19th century.



a typical minstrel

From the obituaries of Robert Barlow and his wife Jane, and from a newspaper article about their diamond wedding celebration, there are accounts of their life together, spanning fifty-two years. As well, there are the many news items and advertisements from England, China, Australia, and New Zealand. Almost certainly, there will be items in newspapers, not yet available, from America, Canada, and South Africa. It's a matter of putting the pieces together. Sam Cowell's wife Emilie

left us a diary. A wonderful diary. I suppose it's unfair to wish that Jane had written one too. Or Barlow himself. Their life must have been chaotic and unsettled.

I have found out very little about Jane, and very little about the Barlow's only child, Jane Margaret. Robert Barlow married Jane Matthews early in the 1840s, and Jane Margaret Drummond Barlow was born in 1850. In Jane's obituary we read how she shared her husband's stage-life and was beside him through all his wanderings and adventures. Jane was sometimes his only accompanist. She also assisted with make-up and costumes. Daughter Jane Margaret gave her occupation as "vocalist" on her marriage certificate, but neither she nor her mother appear on any programs available so far. Except for Jane Margaret's marriage, and the articles already mentioned, there is no mention of them in newspapers either.

Robert Barlow was born in England in 1819. He was on stage from childhood, and performed, in Dublin, his first solo "Entertainment" at the age of eighteen.

He used the name Billy Barlow on stage and often in private life as well. After the 1840s he was also known as The Blue Tail'd Fly.

From that first solo show in Dublin, in 1837, which, it should be noted, preceded George Coppin's first appearance there in 1841, Barlow was hailed as one of the greatest monologists in the world. His obituary notes that,

"... for some years he was the rage in London and the provincial towns of England, where 'Billy' Barlow and the Blue-Tail Fly were known from one end of England to divthe other."

It appears that, although he took the name, the character of Billy Barlow was part of his repertoire only occasionally. The song Billy Barlow is rarely noted on programs and in news items relating to Barlow. The one song with which he is constantly identified is The Blue Tail'd Fly. He was called by this name more than by any other, often with the cognomen "The Inimitable". In an age of superlatives this was his advertising niche. The song, The Blue Tail'd Fly was his signature song. "His master piece". More of that later.

In 1847 the first two of a series of songsters was advertised in the Theatrical Times of London.

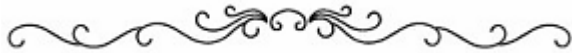
"... Barlow's Nigger Melodist. Each consisting of Fifty new and choice Darky Ballads, most of which are so spicy, that the Virginny Niggers can't sing 'em without sneezing." (The Virginia Minstrels/Virginia Serenaders were formed in 1843)

"American Barlow's being the only Copyrighted Series of the genuine Darky Chaunts published in England, they contain the Originals of which all other professed Nigger Song Books are but miserable imitations...."

The advertisement goes on to warn against infringement of copyright.

From 1847, for the next ten years, there are frequent references to Barlow as "The American Barlow". These come from English and Australian newspapers. The implication is that he toured in America between 1845 and 1847 and returned as a minstrel with a new act and a new popular song as his signature piece. Did he add the title, "American", in the sense that he was "American" by conquest? This idea

comes from classical times. Nineteenth-century audiences understood such references.



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In 1848 there are two news items mentioning Barlow’s performances. One is at the Star Assembly Room, Oxford, where, “Trenkly, Moody and Barlow, were the life of the party” at a concert given by a Mr Matthews, a local violinist. (Jane’s relative?). There is mention of Barlow’s “nigger effusions”. The other performance is at Tenby Theatre Royal where Barlow’s “clever eccentricities” were included in a program of plays. Appearing in London the same year, at Vauxhall Gardens was, “a new group of Ethiopian Serenaders, brought over by Pell, the celebrated ‘Bones’ of the St James Theatre...”.

Gilbert Pell (born Gilbert Ward Pelham) was the leader of a minstrel troupe that had great success in America and the British Isles. They played long seasons in London and Edinburgh during the 1840s and 1850s. Pell called his troupe The Ethiopian Serenaders. Barlow and Ledger are not among the five minstrels who usually formed this troupe, as we see them on many covers of sheet-music, but they briefly teamed up with Pell in 1857. This was during a tour of England that took place after the Barlows had settled in Australia. Gil Pell, a minstrel called Ledger, and Barlow were billed as, “The Original Ethiopian Serenaders”. This is a curious name. Could it be that Barlow was in fact an early member of Pell’s troupe? And Ledger too? Barlow was in the same places as Pell in England, Scotland, and America, during the 1840s.

In late 1852 until early 1853, Barlow appears on newspaper advertisements as a member of “Rowe’s American Circus”. That he has a contract of some sort with Rowe is implied by another advertisement where he appears at The Mechanics Institution in Melbourne. Here he is “the celebrated Ethiopian Singer, by kind permission of Mr J. A. Rowe”.

Barlow is playing the rock harmonicon and also singing a “popular ballad” with Rainer’s Ethiopian Serenaders. J. C Rainer, leader of this group, was to settle in Central Victoria as licensee of the Theatre Royal in Castlemaine. Barlow was to appear with Rainer on several occasions during the 1860s. Both men were accomplished singers and musicians.

It may have been the discovery of gold in Central Victoria that lured Robert Barlow there. He was to be among the first gold-seekers on at least three rushes. The pot of

gold always eluded him, however, and he made and lost several fortunes during his long life. In 1855 Barlow was appearing in theatres on the Victorian goldfields. He was still using the title "American Barlow".

By 1857 he had settled as a farmer in Central Victoria. Until 1865 he performed here and in Melbourne. The towns of Ballarat, Creswick, Clunes, Lamplough, Mamsbury, and Castlemaine are all mentioned in his advertisements, which he wrote himself. The Star Concert Hall in Ballarat, Rainer's Theatre Royal in Castlemaine, The Kangaroo Theatre and the Theatre Royal in Lamplough, Rosekilly's Lyceum Theater in Creswick, The Kent Hotel in Clunes, and The Albert Hotel in Castlemaine all featured him. As well, he performed in smaller venues all over Central Victoria.

An advertisement in the Mount Alexander Mail, on the 10th of February 1857, for a performance at Lamplough's Kangaroo Theatre, still calls him "The Inimitable American Barlow". The advertisement says he is a "Negro delineator" and that he plays American-style banjo. He is performing alone.



J.C. Rainer
[aka R Bishop Buckley]

In his book, *Some Yankies on the Central Goldfields*, Raymond Bradfield, in the entry for Robert Barlow, states that:

"...he (Robert Barlow) collaborated with William Rainer, a vocalist, who had a highly successful Nigger Minstrel group, whilst Rainer had the licence for the Theatre Royal, Castlemaine."

There is no date mentioned and no reference given. Barlow is presented as an American. "William Rainer" is probably J. C. Rainer. The author of this book did not have the current material available to him and it was a modest little publication. Bradfield must have used local newspapers in its preparation. I am indebted to him for starting me off on this whole journey into the world of all the Billy Barlows.

In May, 1857 Barlow returned to England via India and China. As already noted, in England he teamed up with the well-known Gilbert Pell for at least part of this tour. American-born Pell had settled in England. Barlow briefly toured in New Zealand

around the same time as this, leaving there the memory of a loved performer who was to be enthusiastically welcomed back several times.

In the early months of 1861 he performed in China with Lewis' Australian Hippodrome. The article tells us that Lewis' company had been there before, in December of 1859. Barlow may well have been with them on this occasion too. He was fascinated by exotic places, and he'd already toured there in 1857. During the tour of 1861, General Gordon gave the performers "safe passage to the front". Afterwards, there was a shipwreck. I have not been able to find an account of this tragedy. I know about it only from Jane's 1907 obituary in the Gympie Times. The article says that the Barlows lost "the whole of their valuable effects". There is no mention of a circus. Perhaps it's better that way. Tragedy enough that Robert and Jane lost everything. Perhaps they'd left the circus by then.

The dancing horses – perhaps they were safe.

After his tour in 1857, Barlow seems to have dropped the title, "American Barlow". Over the next decade he added more characters to his performances. Many were based on his observations as he travelled the world. He also added more songs, dances, and instrumental works on more instruments. More and more, he sang his own songs and played his own compositions. He began to perform what he called "Entertainments". These were short pieces involving monologues, anecdotes, songs, dances, and instrumental pieces. He changed costumes and makeup for each one. In 1861, several advertisements and articles about "Rainer and Barlow" were run in the Creswick and Clunes Advertiser with reference to Barlow having come out of his retirement as a farmer. One noted that he:

"... has evidently not neglected the culture of his musical talents, being much improved since his last visit here. Formerly he was chiefly known as an amusing delineator of negro life holiday, but in addition to this he not only performs ably on the following instruments vis. – piano, harmonium, violin, rock harmonicon, piccolo, melophone, banjo, and – shades of Apollo! – the bones, gridiron, and kitchen bellows – but also sings with taste and skill some of our finest ballads and songs...." Now he is described as a delineator of many nations, who plays twelve different instruments. His act has evolved from black-face minstrel to actor of many, many parts.



The rock harmonicon is a xylophone with keys of tuned stone. It was first exhibited in Edinburgh in 1842. Barlow, always one to take up new ideas, was playing one in Melbourne in 1852. He wrote musical pieces for it. He played it during his tour of England in 1857 and was still playing it in 1861 after the shipwreck out of China. How was this heavy instrument saved? Is the date for the shipwreck wrong? Maybe the shipwreck was during a later world tour. The melophone is a type of keyed fiddle, rather like a hurdy-gurdy. (There is an instrument like a French horn that has taken the name, but this was not invented until a later date.) The melophone played by Barlow was invented in 1859, making him one of its earliest players.

Although he was part of a minstrel troupe for a while, there is no evidence that Barlow ever acted with a theatre troupe or even played characters out of plays. This makes him unusual among the Billy Barlows of the 19th-century entertainment world. Sam Cowell and George Coppin, and most of the lesser-known Billys, at least began their careers as team-actors in plays, and/or used theatre characters in their acts. Even Mayhew's Street-Billy acted the play character Paul Pry. Barlow did join other entertainers for short periods, and late in his career he headed a minstrel troupe, but he usually performed as a soloist. He sometimes played piano accompaniment for other singers in their performances. Increasingly, as time went on, he performed alone in his own whole-night shows.

Frequently, in articles and advertisements in the *Creswick* and *Clunes Advertiser*, there are references to Barlow's clever musicianship, his dances, his original songs, his mimicry, and his collection of characters which were his own.

"...his unexampled Budget of Eccentricities."

His imitations of animals, birds, and insects are part of a long tradition of tricks of this kind played on the fiddle. I am privileged to count, among my friends, Greg O'Leary, a superb and imaginative fiddle player who is also articulate and perceptive. He says that it was the responsive nature of the fiddle that first attracted him, and that it just naturally falls into mimicry. He also says that all fiddle players, even the

most serious of classical violinists, use their instruments to imitate the sounds around them. It's just the way it is. Some players do it in secret but many use the art to advantage as part of their stage act. And it has always been so. O'Leary is sure that the fools and jesters and dance-tune fiddlers of the old European courts would have included mimicry in their performances. I am aware, as a singer, of the nature of fiddle music. I know that in the hands of someone like O'Leary this beautiful instrument can echo a singer's every phrase, or add pure and delicate harmonies that make your throat catch, and your eyes prickle. I also know, now that I come to think of it, that when I wish to be accompanied by a fiddle when I sing Listen to the Mocking Bird, I have to be very careful to choose an extremely tame and submissive fiddle-player. Even then it is hard for him or her to resist doing bird imitations. The people of Castlemaine were very impressed by Barlow's, "wonderful imitation of that stupendous machine The Locomotive Engine, or Railway Overture."

Barlow was one of the early players of American-style banjo in Australia. The Railway Overture was a popular instrumental piece at the time, and banjos – especially old ones in certain tunings – have real and interesting possibilities. An old-style banjo strung with gut strings and tuned in what is known as "graveyard tuning" (the four melody strings tuned to an open D major chord), can produce wonderfully dark and heavy locomotive sounds. Barlow's banjo may have been tuned even lower than this. Another friend of mine, Martin Forster, an imaginative artist-craftsman who plays a lovely old banjo, played me his train imitations, inspired, he said, by Doc Watson. Martin experimented with different tunings as we tried to reconstruct Barlow's banjo playing. The Railway Overture can still be seen on sheet-music, but it's given as a piano arrangement, and the effect is not at all the same. English banjo players learned the piece by ear in the 19th century, according to one of Henry Mayhew's informants, and it was largely improvised.

In July 1862 Barlow performed at the opening of George Coppin's Apollo Music Hall in Melbourne. Coppin promised only the best of performers for this venue and especially for his opening night. He must have considered Barlow suitable, the description of him by a reviewer from the newspaper Argus notwithstanding: "... Catering for other tastes, Mr Barlow, a popular minstrel-show singer, sang 'The Blue Tailed Fly'."

At the end of 1864, after his celebrated seasons in the theatres and music-halls of the Victorian goldfields, Barlow set out on another world tour. Jane and Jane Margaret would have been with him, but as usual there is no mention of them on any programs. From January to April of 1865 he performed at the Philharmonic in Islington. He is billed variously as "The Great Barlow", "Australian Barlow", "The Original Blue Tail'd Fly", and "The Inimitable Barlow"⁵.

They probably toured in many other countries during this time, and I'm hopeful of more information one day.

In 1866 the family settled in Dunedin, New Zealand. Here Barlow was welcomed,

remembered from a past visit. Gold had been discovered here in 1861, and probably that was an added attraction for Barlow. On the 10th of July 1866 a reporter for the Daily Southern Cross made a curious statement:

“Mr Barlow, the inimitable, and successor to the original “Billy,” made his first appearance before an Auckland audience at the Prince of Wales Theatre last evening...”

Is this simply a comment about Barlow’s own previous appearances in New Zealand? A reference to George Coppin, who toured New Zealand in the 1840s? Had Barlow said something about his father as an entertainer? We can only guess.

In the same paper three days later here is a detailed description of Barlow’s performance. It captures the moment so beautifully that it is worth quoting in full:

“Barlow’s drawing-room entertainment was repeated for the fourth time at The Prince of Wales Theatre last evening, and proved as successful as on the first evening. The entertainment, of its kind, is the best brought under the notice of the Auckland public, and comprises a versatility of talent rarely met with in an evening’s amusement. Mr Barlow’s name, however, is a sufficient guarantee of excellence; his many years’ experience in the profession, and extended fame, serving to ensure crowded houses wherever he goes. As a musician and delineator of character, we have never met his equal, and cannot speak too highly of his singing. He possesses a good voice, full of compass and rich in melody, which, of course, greatly enhances the pleasure of the entertainment. Full of wit and humour, and inimitable in his negro representations, he cannot fail to gain the hearts of his auditors, and is successful in keeping up the interest of the entertainment throughout.

The manner in which he acquits himself in every piece is at once convincing of his superior powers to amuse. He commences by singing a negro song, and accompanying himself on the banjo, concluding each verse with a dance. His incidents and songs are in good keeping, and exhibit the superiority of judgment. His “Blue-tailed Fly” is a masterpiece of mimicry, and includes a most natural representation of the buzzing and capture of that insect. The new sensation, “Have you seen the Ghost?” and the “Weepin’ Willer,” are very entertaining, and always elicit the utmost applause of the audience. His performance on the musical gridiron, which is of a peculiar description, was marked with a finish of execution and command over the instrument quite original. The burlesque solo on the kitchen bellows was equally amazing. In ballads and sentimental ditties of the most varied character, as well as the most whimsical of American melodies, Mr. Barlow is truly wonderful. His negro delineations are the most perfect, and the ease with which he discourses sweet music on the violin, piano, and banjo, and electrifies the audience by producing melody out of the most novel instruments, is something amazing. Nothing could be more enjoyable than an evening with Barlow, and those who hear him once must hear him again.”



George Coppin

Barlow, never one to stay in one place for long, was back in Victoria by the middle of 1867. He was as popular as ever on the goldfields there. At the end of this year news came to him of the discovery of gold in Queensland, at the place that is now the town of Gympie. Here, surely, in the “Land of Rainbows”, was his pot of gold. He arrived there, with his wife and daughter, when Gympie was still a tent city – as Melbourne had been when he first landed there. His ability to amass a small fortune with his musical talents, was matched as always by a complete lack of luck when it came to gold-mining. He would have done well to heed the advice given to would-be gold-diggers by Coppin’s Billy Barlow:

“...stick to the towns and pursue your own trade”.

Of course Coppin never heeded his own advice, if he found an opening somewhere that looked promising. And he did, very briefly, try his hand at gold-digging.

There might have been a surplus of gold-seekers in Gympie, but entertainers were few, and Barlow soon cornered that market. In September of 1868, ten months after the discovery of gold, he had built and opened –



Barlow’s Apollonian Philharmonic Music Hall Hotel

That covered the entertainment needs of the diggers. He named the spot, right in the heart of the goldfield, The Apollonian Vale. The building included a dwelling for the family. The hotel was fully stocked with wines and spirits, glassware, and kerosene lamps. There was a fully equipped kitchen, and there were bedrooms and sitting-rooms.



The concert hall seated three hundred people, and had a supply of scenery and props. Within its walls, Barlow gave elaborate entertainments of variety and music, and also held dances and balls. He was no longer dependant on a fickle press for his promotion, no longer concerned with competition. It was a dream fulfilled by the use of his musical talents. The pot of real gold at the end of the rainbow.

He performed in Brisbane during 1868 too. There is a program from Brisbane's School of Arts where he was presenting a three-part show.

A long sigh of contentment? A peaceful happy-ever-after ending for the wanderers? No indeed! Inexplicably, Barlow sold everything. The whole property, and all within it right down to the music-books, was hastily auctioned off on the 20th of March 1869, a short seven months after the opening. A resident of Gympie, who was a contemporary of Barlow's, said in her book:

"... His daughter (Barlow's) had married Adam Black who was then a man of substance and Barlow's social philosophy deemed it an indignity to his daughter for him to be a public entertainer in the same town...."

From A Woman Faces the Hardships, by Mrs. A. Cockburn.

Barlow and his wife Jane set off almost immediately on another tour. The new owner renamed the hotel and music hall Taylor's Apollonian Music Hall Hotel, and life in Gympie went on much as before. Taylor, and the next owner, Cox, may have been the entertainers who performed on some of the same programs as Barlow in New Zealand. Four days before the auction, the Barlows' only daughter was married to a young Scotsman called Adam Black. He had arrived in Gympie from New Zealand with three friends in 1868. Had the Barlows and Black known each other there? I believe it's quite likely. The four friends found gold soon after their arrival, became instantly very wealthy, and managed Gympie's most valuable mine for the next six years or so. Adam Black, according to the Gympie Times, "spent his money freely and generously being a man of most liberal disposition." When he died from cancer, in 1902, his long obituary made no mention at all of his wife Jane Margaret, who had died a year before him. Five sons and two daughters were referred to almost as a footnote, and are unnamed. Whatever the reason for Jane Margaret's sudden marriage, and Barlow's equally sudden sell-up and departure

from the palace of his dreams, it will remain as just another loose end in the Billy Barlow story.

The year of 1869 was when one resident of Castlemaine, Victoria, remembered Barlow and the old days, with a colourful nostalgia. She wrote an unsigned article for Castlemaine's Daily News:

"Forest street was a great promenade then. There was Uphill and Burnett's shop, the fashionable drapers; Goldsmith and Gale's, the general store, where 9d per lb. for potatoes and 1s. 6d. per lb. for onions was the current rate for a period. There was Albert Hotel, Collyn's store, Joshua's store, and Butterworth's store. Alas! where are they now? All that's bright must fade, and people can't expect to make a hundred and fifty per cent for ever. What crowds there were then! What motley costumes! What brilliant red and blue shirts! What tremendous boots! What wonderful Panama hats; what fearfully dirty cabbage-tree hats; the dirtier the better! And the few women there were; from whence did they procure the extraordinary dresses and bonnets they wore. Hats for the ladies were not in vogue then, and straw bonnets and cotton hoods were the head gear.

The Albert Hotel boasted a concert room, and here the inimitable Barlow had crowds to hear him – crowds who paid high prices too, and secured by the minimum of outlay in the shape of advertisement, a placard, announcing a performance outside the door, and the services of a bell-ringer, being sometimes all the notice given."

From The Daily News– Castlemaine –23rd. Feb. 1869

Barlow and Jane continued their wandering life. In Melbourne, in 1870, Barlow sang for the Duke of Edinburgh and lent "the finest pair of horses in the city" to him for his stay. In 1871 they again toured in New Zealand. Several articles refer to "Barlow's Troupe". Barlow must have formed a troupe for the New Zealand tour. Reviews of the shows this group gave claim Barlow to be the star of the show. Audiences enjoyed the performances of the other members, but it was Barlow they came to see, and Barlow's talent they admired. In August of that year, Barlow formally removed his name from the group. He dissolved partnership with Bromley, Buckley, and Holly. These three men were among the many performers in Melbourne and Central Victoria during the late 1860s. Whatever the reason, Barlow declared that his name was to be used, "... only by myself in my single handed Entertainments which it is my intention to resume heretofore".

After the break Barlow continued on alone. The other men stayed together and also continued to tour New Zealand. Barlow's tour of New Zealand was a small part of another world tour, about which nothing has so far become available.

Barlow was back performing in Brisbane in 1873. He still had his rock harmonicon, so the shipwreck before this date is unlikely. He had, by now, added two characters to his act based on clever puns. Chang the Giant had appeared in Melbourne and in New Zealand at the same time as Barlow. Barlow's new characters were Shang High, the Giant and Dwarf Little, Hong Kong. Shanghai and Little Hong Kong were cities

well known to everyone.

Castlemaine was to see Barlow again in 1876. Barlow again played at the Theatre Royal. An advertisement and an article in the Creswick and Clunes Advertiser gives us some details of this return visit. He was given top billing just above:

“Baby Osborne. The Infant Wonder, from the Theatre Royal Melbourne”.

Dorothy Daisy, Smiling Tom, and The Young Squire were some of his new characters. There is another earlier mention of a cross-gender character in his repertoire, when his make-up was pronounced excellent. Many of the minstrel troupes had quite beautifully presented female characters, played by men. The examples recorded of Barlow, as a woman, indicate that he used them as comic characters, convulsing the audience with laughter each time.

For the next four years Barlow made appearances in Melbourne and performed in Sydney during the Exhibition of 1877. In May 1880 he gave a farewell concert in Melbourne. Although he was now sixty-one years old he left for Capetown to start a new life as a farmer. It's no surprise that, whatever his original intentions, he soon returned to performing. He and Jane survived another war – known as “the Majuba Disaster” (because the Boers won). They had previously survived the Opium Wars in China.

Barlow performed in Perth, Western Australia, at the end of 1881 and was still performing there in April of 1882. As usual he played to crowded houses. 1882 saw them back in Gympie, Queensland, making it their home base. In 1886 Barlow performed on the same bill as Harry Rickards, in St George's Hall in Melbourne. The people of New Zealand followed the careers of Australian performers with the help of reprinted articles in their local newspapers. They were particularly fond of Barlow and there are several references to him when he was between tours there. In 1890 it was sadly reported that he was “stranded in Brisbane Hospital without friends or means”. At a distance of over a hundred years it's impossible to know how this could be. His daughter and son-in-law still lived nearby. Busy with their young family maybe?

Barlow seems to have completely recovered and from the end of 1891 until the end of 1893 Barlow took his last tour in New Zealand. There is mention of a recovery from illness. The reports are glowing. At seventy-three, it seems, Barlow's voice was as pure and strong as ever, his dancing as agile and sprightly, and his acting superb. There is a description of his act involving the dual characters of a soldier and a sailor. His entertainment called “Around the World” had a special mention.

“... nearly every nation under the sun was represented, not only in costume, but by songs and dances in illustration of them.”

As always, he sang *The Blue Tail'd Fly* – the song that had been with him for nearly fifty years.

There are several reviews of Barlow's performances at this time. Rarely do we get a better glimpse of him as an entertainer than the one given by an unknown reviewer writing for the Taranaki Herald. It is unclear where this reviewer is quoting another

source, and where he is using his own words, because of missing quote marks. That doesn't matter now. Here it is as it was written in 1892:

MR BARLOW, who for many years has been engaged in entertaining the public, will give a performance in Alexandra Hall on Monday evening, when, no doubt, he will be well patronised. Ever since Barlow has been Barlow, Barlow has been inimitable. As a Melbourne paper says "Inimitable in his versatility of talent, in his mirth-provoking qualities, and in his power to touch the best feelings of our nature, with the natural pathos of his more quiet melodies. The queer quaintness (sic) of some of the appliances of his entertainment, the thorough mastery of the various instruments, and the entire abandon with which he threw himself into the spirit of whatever he took in hand, all contribute to fix on him the characteristic. Time adds to his excellence too, and good as he was dozens of years ago when "Sal Valentine" rang with laughter at his lively sallies, or became subdued when he appealed to those other feelings he know so well how to appeal to, he is better now, and so the audience at the theatre last night evidently thought, for their applause was hearty, sincere, and continuous. Where excellency so abounds, it is difficult to particularise, and those who failed to avail themselves of the privilege afforded last night will have another opportunity of so doing. Mr Barlow has been round the world more than once, and wherever he has been his entertainments have proved extremely popular; and we expect he will command a good house in New Plymouth.

From Taranaki Herald, 16 June 1892.

In 1894, Barlow was performing at the Alhambra in Melbourne. That's the last public performance I've found, but it wouldn't be surprising to find other later performances. In February 1905, a New Zealand paper reported that Barlow and his wife were "living in straitened circumstances in Gympie". The same report again appeared in a New Zealand newspaper over a year later with the added, "...he and his wife are very infirm."

This was the year the Barlows celebrated the sixtieth anniversary of their wedding. Barlow, then aged eighty-six,

"... entertained his guests with great spirit, playing the banjo and singing some of his favourite songs."

On the twelfth of February, on a Saturday morning in 1907, the Inimitable Barlow died. He lies in an unmarked grave in the Gympie cemetery beside Jane, who died three years later.

The Australian magazine Theatre carried a small obituary:

" Poor old Billy Barlow the "Blue-tailed fly" of days of yore, died recently at Gympie, Queensland at a ripe old age."



The Song ~ The Blue Tail'd Fly

My father, the descendant of a Cornish miller-farmer, taught me the song in 1949. He was a singer of 19th-century songs, and a man who never said anything that he wasn't absolutely sure of. He told me that Jimmy was the olden-days name for the Crow, and that the chorus was about Jimmy (or Jim) the Crow cracking and eating the corn. He said that the word corn is an old word for any grain. Parrots cracking-open seeds in wattle trees are a familiar sight in Australia even for a city kid, far from the ancestral farm. I can't remember a time when I didn't know what the chorus of this song was about, but these days there is much conjecture about the phrase, "Jimmy crack corn".



It happened that my father was born in the same part of Victoria where Robert "Billy" Barlow first settled. Our family had been there from the 1850s – roughly as long as him. In fact my great-great grandfather drove Cobb and Co coaches there, at the time of Barlow's many coach-trips to venues in the area. His name, coincidentally, was also Robert. Did they meet? Were they friends? Robert Hook and Robert "Billy" Barlow.

The version of The Blue Tail'd Fly that I learned in 1948 was made popular by Burl Ives, and was from an American collection. His recording of it, in the 1930s, obliterated, from most minds, all other variants that were still extant in the English-speaking world. My father was a builder of radios, and there was always one going in his workshop. Although most of the songs we sang together in the evenings were from a pre-radio past, The Blue Tail'd Fly had been recently revived, and it would not have been surprising if Dad had updated his version of it.

There is a song collected in Australia, by song-collector Rob Willis – The Bloke from Forbes – that is to the tune of Early in the Morning. It shares verses with The Blue Tail'd Fly. The singers – Anina Brice, Maysie Tucker, and Gwen Negus – call the song Early in the Morning. The tunes of both songs are polkas and are very similar. Both have come to be thought of as children's songs, and both would have been used as dance tunes. The ladies have a repertoire of songs, learned from their grandparents, that predates the recordings of Burl Ives.

Early in the morning
Early in the morning
Early in the Morning
About the break of day.

In America, a song which seems to be on a parallel path with The Blue Tail'd Fly, uses the chorus and the tune of that song but is about birds in the cornfield. The last line of the chorus is phrased slightly differently, accentuating the polka rhythm. It begins with a verse well-appreciated by a Lark married to an Owl:

Big old owl with eyes so bright
On many a dark and starry night
Often heard my True-love say,
Sing all night and sleep all day.

Chorus:

Jimmy crack corn – I don't care!
Jimmy crack corn – I don't care!
Jimmy crack corn – I don't care
Master's gone away.

Said the corn-crake to the crow
Down to the cornfield let us go
For the corn has been our trade
Ever since Adam and Eve was made.

Said the sheldrick to the crane,
When do you think we'll get some rain?
The creek's so muddy and the farm's so dry
If it wasn't for the tadpoles we'd all die

(It finishes with the first verse of the more familiar song)

When I was young I used to wait
Upon the master and bring the plate
Pass him the bottle when he got dry
And brush away the blue-tail fly

From the singing of Peggy and Mike Seeger

I can't help mentioning that collector Vance Randolph found a rather naughty version of this song in the Ozarks. It suggests, in earthy language, a more active pursuit for the owl's night-life.

The many early references to the song *The Blue Tail'd Fly* would seem to indicate that this popular song, in many forms, with many different sets of words, had wide currency in the British Isles, America, and Australia during the 19th-century.



The Old Crow-scaring Songs



For centuries British children worked at various tasks around family farms, and often their first job was that of shooing birds away from the crops. The custom was continued there and in America up until the 20th century. There has been some collecting of the songs these little workers sang. Reference is often made to the use of clackers as accompaniment. A connection with Mr. Bones of the minstrel line-up? From collections, we know that many of these songs refer to the fact that “Master” will be cross if he comes home to find his crops eaten.

Eat, birds, eat, and make no waste,
I lie here and make no haste;
If my master chance to come
You must fly and I must run.

In 1616 Ben Jonson wrote a small poem that began: “Buzz quoth the Blue Fly”, which goes on to describe a bee and the fly getting into an ear and a nose. I mention it just to point out that Blue Flies were known, in poetry, for their provocative behaviour.

I can't help wondering if – a simple crow-scaring song, about a worker and a master, without a story, but with a catchy chorus, from the singing of rural children in the

British Isles, somehow found its way out of the folk-community and into the repertoire of singers in London. Barlow, while still developing his act as a blackface minstrel, could have written a song around a familiar chorus using the new “plantation dialect.” In any case, regardless of the author of this song, the chorus may well have its roots in a crow-scaring song. A theory. Just speculation. The earliest printed copies of *The Blue Tail'd Fly* are dated 1846, well after Barlow began his career as a song-writer and performer.



Aboriginal Billy Barlow

There is a story, told by Bill Thomas, that may relate to Barlow. Mark Thomas has helped with the publishing of his father's story on-line. Bill's story is beautifully told, bringing to life one family's true tales of tears and laughter, of hardship and adventure. It takes in, as well, part of the tragic story of the impact of white settlement on the Aboriginal Australians.

Bill takes us to the wild, remote Atherton Tablelands of Northern Queensland, in the 1880s, with his Grandparents Annie and James Thomas. It was here that they settled soon after arriving in Australia. Along with all of their possessions they brought with them their two little girls, babies still, who travelled in kerosene-can panniers on a mule. The settlement of this area was marked by fear and hostility displayed by both Black and White communities, and by skirmishes and murders. It was a retaliatory attack, carried out by white settlers, that brought Billy Barlow into the Thomas family, after the killing of his mother. James Thomas passed down the story in all its horror, although much later, readers of Billy Barlow's obituary were to be given a sanitized account.

James brought back home from the raid a tiny Aboriginal baby, safely cocooned in a mia mia. His wife Annie named the boy Billy Barlow, and raised him along with her own children. Billy lived all his life in the White community as part of the Thomas family, and was well-known and liked on the Tableland. When he died over seventy years later it was noted that he was one of the last of his tribe.

Bill's grandmother did not mention where she got the name Billy Barlow – or if she did, it has been forgotten amid other more interesting stories, but it's almost certain that Robert “Billy” Barlow, the blackface singer, was known all over Queensland. Whatever her reasons, Annie Thomas could not have bestowed on her adopted son a better name. Billy Barlow in all his manifestations was one of life's winners. How lucky you are Bill and Mark to have a Billy Barlow in your family.



The Showboat Billy Barlow

Before leaving the Australian story of Billy Barlow there is a little showboat that deserves a mention. The SS Billy Barlow was one of two paddle-steamers built at the Davis family shipyard at Nambucca Heads, New South Wales. Edward Davis established the company here on the beautiful bay in the Nambucca Valley in 1880. This bay is well-placed to serve the towns dotted up and down the whole long Northeast Coast from Sydney to the towns of Far-North Queensland. The Davis family ran three sailing-ships and two paddle-steamers up and down this coast, carrying passengers, and supplies of everything from food and wool to coal and timber. Other ships of theirs were used on the coasts of New Zealand, and between Tasmania and mainland Australia. Their two steamers were designed along the lines of the grand Mississippi paddle-steamers, with shallow hulls that rode high in the water, so as to be more able to clear sandbars. One of the Davis steamers was SS Trilby and the other SS Billy Barlow. Trilby was the familiar heroine of the play of the same name, written in 1894.

The paddle-steamers of the Mississippi, as well as transporting goods, were at times floating theatres, and the ring of banjos and the rattle of bones from the minstrel troupes could be heard from the banks of the mighty river.

Ring, ring the banjo! I like that good old song

Come again my true love, oh where you been so long?

Ring Ring the Banjo : Stephen Foster

In time these ships came to be called showboats. Occasionally calliopes – because of the musical steam whistles. They were used to a lesser extent in Australia on the larger rivers, as well as along the shallow coastline of the east coast. I don't know if the SS Billy Barlow ever carried a minstrel troupe – or if the SS Trilby ever hosted a travelling theatre-company performing melodrama. I'd like to think that sometimes they did.

The Author's Memories of Minstrels and Showboats



Joy [the author] - 1950

My own memories of the great era of the showboats is of playing a banjo-mandolin (not a good substitute for a real banjo, but more affordable at the time) along with a hundred or so other little girls and boys on the river Yarra in Melbourne. We were members of the Victorian Banjo Club, an organization that sold cheap but durable instruments and gave lessons to working-class kids on how to play them. You can still pick a now-ageing former member of the club by the way their right hands can still do a mean tremolo on a mandolin.

We sat in rows on the deck of a beautiful fairy-light-studded showboat. Our outfits were pure white with red trimmings. Ribbons of red, white, and blue fluttered from the tuning pegs of our banjos, and from the girls' hair. As we chugged downstream, the crowd on the banks, that surely included the ghost of my Dad, clapped and cheered. On that cool clear night in 1955, I think we were the last brave echo of an era already gone, when the songs of the Minstrel Show found their way into the hearts of the people of Australia.

Poster's peelin' underneath

Last summer's morning glory vine

Old white hat and stump of cigar

Empty bottle of wine

Chorus:

Lay me down, Carolina, lay me down.

Don't want to wake up in the morning no more

Sing me one slow sad song, for this one last old time

Before they close the Minstrel Show.

Banjo's got a busted string.

Don't expect I'll get to fix it now

Ain't got no more songs to sing

I'm rusty anyhow.

From – *The Last Minstrel Show*: by Bob Coltman.



NOTES PERTAINING TO CHAPTER 7

Newspapers:

The Gympie Times was researched at the Gympie Library.

New Zealand papers from the website – *PapersPast*

Port Phillip Herald from the website – *Paper of Record*

Creswick and Clunes Advertiser and the Mount Alexander Mail were researched at the Melbourne Library.

Other Australian Newspapers from – National Library of Australia

The Thomas Family History, by Bill Thomas was published on the internet by Mark Thomas in 2003.

The information about the SS Billy Barlow comes from The Nambucca District Historical Society, ~ Woolgoolga: The History of a Village, NSW, 1994, p78. Some Yankies on the Central Goldfields, Raymond Bradfield (Vaughan, Vic., 1988?)

The information about Crow-scaring songs from – Iona and Peter Opie, ed. ~ The Oxford Dictionary of Nursery Rhymes, Oxford, 1995, p83-84

Barlow's after-image lived on within the body of an artist in Rockhampton by the name of Tom Bevis. Rockhampton is a Queensland city several hundred kilometers north of Gympie. Bevis was brought to Australia, from England, as a child in 1862. He became a sign-writer and scene-painter for the local theatre, and for the travelling companies that passed through the town. He owned and managed a rowdy music-hall and had his own routines which he performed on stage himself, singing old songs. He included the song made popular by Barlow, The Blue Tail'd Fly, and for some time was known as Billy Barlow. Bevis died in 1955 at the age of ninety-one years and six months.

While scanning the Creswick and Clunes Advertiser for articles about Barlow, it was impossible not to let my eye wander to other news articles.

In October of 1861 it was reported that:

"The regulations that exist in Otago to prevent the carrying of sheep and passengers together in ships bound for Dunedin have been lately stringently enforced. On the 16th of October, Captain M'Alpine of the Natal barque, was before the Dunedin Police Court, charged with having carried passengers and sheep together in his vessel. He was found guilty, and ordered to pay a fine of 150/-. In default of payment, he was sentenced to five months' hard labour on the roads."

Hot on the heels of this news item was a paragraph telling me that no fewer than 23,000 persons were involved in the photographic industry in Paris.

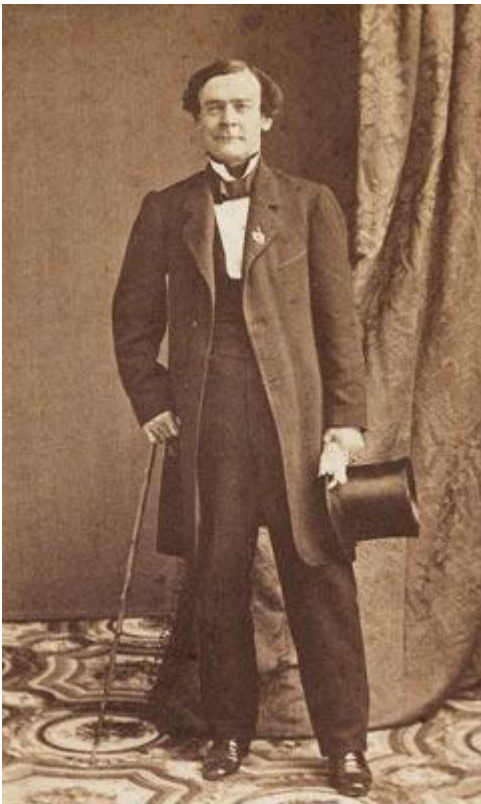
CHAPTER 8: IN AND OUT THE EAGLE

Billy Barlow in British Cider Cellars, Taverns, and Music Halls – A Little About Sam Cowell -John Simms Reeves – W G Ross and His Famous Sam Hall – W C West. Benjamin Oliver Conquest – John Lawrence Toole – Some English Low Comedians Who May Have Played Billy Barlow – Toole's Thoughts on Comedians and Tragedians.

Robert Billy Barlow ~ The Inimitable Blue-tail'd Fly

In the years between his birth, sometime before 1829 and the turn of another century, Billy Barlow had his heyday. Never before, and never since, has such a well-defined character appeared in only very slightly modified guises, played by so many different people. Most popular characters die along with the actors who play them, so that they die once. Maybe if several performers played them they might die a dozen or so deaths. Billy Barlow may have died a hundred times.

Sam Cowell ~ A Little About Him



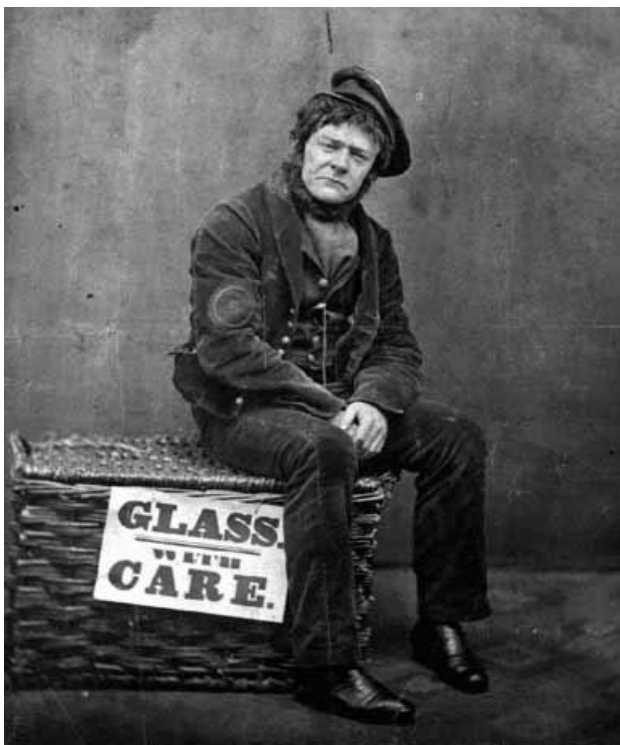
Sam Cowell

Sam Cowell was born in England, but he was brought up in America from the age of two, and his early influences were the people, black and white, of the pre-Civil-War South. Cowell, over his tragically short life, had an enormous effect as a solo comic performer on people of all classes in both America and the British Isles. He became known as the ultimate Billy Barlow on both sides of the Atlantic. George Coppin

might have contested the throne, or taken it over after Cowell's death, had he not migrated to Australia. As it was, Coppin found himself a vast new kingdom there where he became known as Australia's main Billy Barlow. I will look again at Sam Cowell further on.

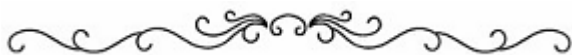
There is a quite impressive list of 19th-century comic and serio-comic entertainers who are known to have at least occasionally played Billy, and sung his song, but these are – more than likely – just a few of many. Billy Barlow almost certainly appeared in most of the English taverns at one time or another. The 1850s saw the birth of the music-hall as we think of it today, developing out of these taverns. Billy Barlow was right there in the places where it was all happening. He also appeared in the "legitimate" theatres and on the street, some actors moving between street-theatre and tavern, and some performing in small theatre, tavern, music hall, and "legitimate" theatre.

Billy Barlow was certainly an important character at Evans's Music and Supper Rooms where Sam Cowell became the most popular and most highly paid entertainer. Evans's had a sign above the door that said "Late Joys". The place had once been called *Joy's* so this was one of the many possible puns on the name *Joy*. Through the 1840s this was the meeting place of writers, actors, painters, and poets. Charles Dickens was a regular visitor. Ideas were discussed over ale and chops, and characters were born or reborn in the minds of creative men. Some of these characters moved around through literature, poetry, song, and stage routine until it was impossible to trace their origins. Many of them had been around in some form or another for as long as storytellers had existed.



Cowell played other famous music-venues in London in the 1840s and 1850s, The Coal Hole and The Cyder Cellars among them. Like a few of the top performers of his time he also appeared in the “legitimate” theatres like Dury Lane, Covent Garden, and Canterbury Hall. In fact, his talents were such that he actually stepped straight into roles in the top theatres when he first came to the British Isles from America, before deciding on a career as a solo performer. The Coal Hole was famous as much for its drunken parties – led by actor Edmund Kean – as for its fine collection of silver drinking-vessels and its clientele of London’s celebrities. For six years until his death in 1827, William Blake had lived just down the road, dreaming about his “mansion elsewhere” and illustrating Dante’s Divine Comedy and *The Book of Job*. I wonder if he was present at tavern gatherings.

At Canterbury Hall in 1854, Sam Cowell was receiving payment of eighty pounds a week at a time when the going rate for singers in song-and-supper rooms was three half-crowns per night and two hot drinks. Payment for the services of Sam Cowell was money well-spent. He was an amazingly energetic performer, with the movements of a dancer and the vocal agility of an American auctioneer. He had the voice of an opera singer and could make himself heard in the largest of theatres. He was a superb actor of comedy and tragedy, and marvelous at the two in combination – the type of actor who was later termed a serio-comic. Above all, he had the aura around him that today would be inadequately described as Presence. Sam Cowell drove himself hard, his wife describing how he would be in a state of collapse when he came off stage, drenched in sweat and pale as death, his cheeks wet with tears. No matter how exhausted he seemed, however, the shouts of “encore!” and the cheers and applause of the audience always drew him back for another curtain call.



Some of the British Singers of Billy Barlow Songs

Many British singers and actors at least at some time in their careers sang Billy Barlow’s songs. Many of them performed in character as Billy. John Reeve, and the little that is known about Mr. Wills, have been discussed in Chapter three. Some of the others known to have sung Billy’s songs were:

John Sims Reeves

There was the famous tenor John Sims Reeves, who was classically trained in Paris and Milan and was at one time professor of singing at the Guildhall School of Music. He was known to have sung *Billy Barlow* and other popular songs in the theatres and music halls. *Come into the Garden Maud* was his specialty.

Come into the garden, Maud
For the black bat, Night, has flown,
Come into the garden, Maud,

I am here at the gate alone;
And the woodbine spices are wafted abroad,
And the musk of the rose is blown.

Come Into the Garden Maud by Alfred Lord Tennyson.

Music by J D C Parker.

Did he really dress up as Billy Barlow, this serious singer of serious songs who was to become known as Britain's Premier Tenor? Probably not, there are no pictures of him as Billy, but he did sing Billy Barlow. Reeves toured extensively all his life, and performed on tour in South Africa, in 1860, when he was seventy-eight.

W G Ross

Other singers of popular song included *Billy Barlow* in their repertoires. One was W G Ross, who was better known for his wild eye-rolling performances of *Sam Hall*, the grim story-song of a chimney-sweep condemned to the gallows.

Then I 'it 'im on the head
With a damned great lump of lead
And I left 'im there for dead
Damn his eyes.

From *Sam Hall* as sung by W G Ross

Ross came to the theatre from a worker's background. He terrified audiences at the Coal Hole for years with *Sam Hall*. Straddling a backwards-facing chair, he would lean on the chair-back and fix his gaze on his victims, his sad grimy face, under its workman's cap, frightening to behold. There was always stunned silence as he told his wholly believable tale.

"On 10 March 1848 Percival Leigh noted the following account of an evening's entertainment in an early Music Hall: 'After that, to supper at the Cider Cellars in Maiden Lane, where in was much Company, great and small, and did call for Kidneys and Stout, then a small glass of Aqua-vitae and water, and thereto a Cigar. While we supped, the Singers did entertain us with Glees and comical Ditties; but oh, to hear with how little wit the young sparks about town were tickled! But the thing that did most take me was to see and hear one Ross sing the song of Sam Hall the chimney-sweep, going to be hanged: for he had begrimed his muzzle to look unshaven, and in rusty black clothes, with a battered old Hat on his crown and a short Pipe in his mouth, did sit upon the platform, leaning over the back of a chair: so making believe that he was on his way to Tyburn. And then he did sing to a dismal Psalm-tune, how that his name was Sam Hall and that he had been a great Thief, and was now about to pay for all with his life; and thereupon he swore an Oath, which did make me somewhat shiver, though divers laughed at it. Then, in so many verses, how his Master had badly taught him and now he must hang for it: how he should ride up Holborn Hill in a Cart, and the Sheriffs would come and preach to him, and after them would come the Hangman; and at the end of each verse he did repeat his Oath. Last

of all, how that he should go up to the Gallows; and desired the Prayers of his Audience, and ended by cursing them all round. Methinks it had been a Sermon to a Rogue to hear him, and I wish it may have done good to some of the Company. Yet was his cursing very horrible, albeit to not a few it seemed a high Joke; but I do doubt that they understood the song.' "

From *The Voice of the People* – Song Notes

W C West

Another singer of Billy Barlow songs was W C West. He went to America and founded West's Minstrels. He is known to have sung Billy Barlow, but it is not known whether this song was a usual part of his act or, if it was, for how long. Billy Barlow may have joined the Minstrel Show along with West.

Benjamin Oliver Conquest

Music-hall manager Benjamin Oliver Conquest once sang Billy Barlow for twenty-eight weeks in succession in the Pavilion Theatre in London before he took over *The Eagle* in 1851.

Up and down the City Road,
In and out the Eagle,
That's the way the money goes –
Pop! goes the weasel.

From the singing of Dorothy Barnham. (Author's mother)

It is not recorded whether Conquest went on singing Billy Barlow, although he continued to sing as part of his running of the Eagle Tavern. Conquest's son George became a music hall manager later in the 19th century, but by then Billy Barlow seems to have been less popular in England, and it's unlikely that George ever echoed his father's Billy Barlow song.

John Lawrence Toole

To please you still further, my best I will try –
Don't look at me ladies, you make me feel shy –
You'd all like to have me; – but alas it's no go!
You can't all be married to Billy Barlow.
Oh, dear, raggedy, oh!
Just one at a time best suits Billy Barlow.

From John Lawrence Toole's *Billy Barlow*

John Lawrence Toole was not born into the theatre. He was a wine merchant when he joined the Histrionic Club in London in 1850, at the age of thirty. It was Charles Dickens, among other friends, who persuaded Toole to take up acting as a profession. Toole made his debut at the Queen's Theatre in Dublin, at the age of

thirty-two. This was the theatre where Coppin had played Billy Barlow for the first time, back in 1841. Robert-Billy had performed there even earlier in 1838. From here Toole went to Edinburgh, where Sam Cowell had performed, for the first time outside America, in 1840. Toole became a comedy favourite in Edinburgh, as he did everywhere he went. Everybody loved the cheerful, kindly actor who was capable of serious as well as comic roles. He performed at many of London's theatres, including the Adelphi, where he played for nineteen years.



In 1877 he opened the first of his own theatres in London. Throughout a career that spanned forty years he toured the British Isles and America. He visited Australia and New Zealand in 1890, when he may have been managed by George Coppin. He was so loved in Australia that no one seemed to be able to do enough for him. He was given presents everywhere he went, including a kangaroo, which he sent home to his life-long friend Henry Irving. The kangaroo subsequently lived out its life happily in the London zoo. An Australian magpie travelled home with Toole and for years afterwards roamed free in his London garden, where it made rude remarks to visitors.

A music-booklet of Toole's Billy Barlow song still exists in the National Library of Australia, giving us a look at Toole's Billy. The picture on the cover, probably a drawing from a photograph, shows Toole in his Billy Barlow costume. He is wearing a heavy ragged overcoat, pants torn off at the knee, striped stockings, and one boot and one shoe. His hair sticks out in tufts from under a battered top-hat. His nose is

painted and his face appears clown-like. Over all, although based on one of Cowell's versions of Billy, this appears to be the most clown-like Billy Barlow picture of all. Toole, remembered with great affection by his many friends as warm-hearted and congenial, always avoided the drinking parties in the green-rooms of the theatres. He never succumbed to the lure of alcohol as did so many actors and singers of his time. He was of the opinion that time off for gardening in a quiet little plot was the solution to most of life's problems, and that more people should do it. His modest home in London was a sanctuary for him and his family, as well as for his jaded friends – many of them well-known poets, writers, painters, and actors. He and his friends, Charles Dickens and Henry Irving, frequently roamed London's East End searching out colourful characters and listening carefully to the conversations around them.

Toole died in 1906 at the age of seventy-six, having retired from the stage in 1895, when he became paralysed and bedridden. This cheerful, loving actor endured much sadness. His adored wife died in 1889, the year after the death of their young daughter, Florence. Their only other child, Frank, had died in 1879 while in his early twenties.

There is no record of when John Lawrence Toole last performed as Billy Barlow, but the fact that Australia has a copy of his Billy Barlow song suggests that he performed there as Billy in 1890, leaving behind sheet-music sold during the tour.

Other British Actors Who May Have Played Billy Barlow

Records show that from the early 1800s there were many actors of characters of the Billy Barlow type performing in the British Isles. Many of them toured America and elsewhere. There is the possibility, although no confirmation, that any number of the following British actors at sometime played Billy Barlow:

Robert Keeley, Charles Matthews, or his son, Charles James Matthews. Frederick Robson a master of serio-comic roles who suffered from almost crippling stage-fright. His most famous photograph shows him as a sad little tramp dressed in a ragged suit. James Munyard and William Henry Liston. Edward Wright who made Queen Victoria laugh. John B. Buckstone – who specialized in lovable clowns – and who still walks the corridors of the Haymarket Theater as a grey-suited ghost. John Pritt Harley who played wise-cracking servants and clerks. Billy Rogers. William Evans Burton who greatly admired John Reeve and who was born to play comic roles while secretly longing to be a tragedian.

On the subject of comedians and tragedians, John Lawrence Toole said,

"I have often thought that the tragedian scores against the low comedian when there is a bad house. For instance, in Hamlet, if the melancholy Dane sees that there is a bad house it rather helps than injures his acting. The melancholy Dane becomes all the more melancholy when he sees a miserable account of empty boxes, and that is all the better for his acting, his melancholy is all the more natural; but the low comedian who has to make the audience laugh, it is very hard for him; he finds no

assistance in the bad house; it lowers his spirits, and he lets off his jokes as if they were camp fireworks, and he knew they would fizzle, and that's just what they do."

CHAPTER 9:TAIL-BONE MINE, SAYS BILLY BARLOW

American Audiences in the Early 19th Century – The Special Singers of the Isolated Appalachian Mountains – Shakespeare and the Possum – The Great Sam Cowell – Speculation on the Origins of the American Hobo Clown – Billy Barlow, the Rat-catcher and the Possible Link with The Cutty Wren – Billy Barlow the Viper.

Theatre in 19th Century America

In 19th-century North America, in almost every household across the whole of the continent, from the cities of the Eastern Seaboard to the frontier settlements of the West, in the mountains and lowlands of the South, there were Bibles and at least a few other books. More often than not, the works of William Shakespeare had a special place in the smallest library. The poems and songs of Thomas Moore and other poets and songwriters from the British Isles were well known to almost everyone. Publishing companies printed sheet-music that was collected by both men and women, and carefully assembled into songbooks along with hand-written poems and pictures.



People from all walks of life and of all ages memorized long tracts from the Bible, from literary works like *Pilgrim's Progress*, from the plays of Shakespeare, and from speeches and narrative poems. With printing presses springing up all over the country, turning out cheap copies of books, newspapers, and sheet-music, America soon became a nation of literate, articulate, self-opinionated people. All of them were potential actors, preachers, grand orators, singers, musicians, or dancers. The early

evangelical religious movements that swept the frontier, culminating in the camp meetings of the 19th century, encouraged spontaneous public speechifying and ecstatic outburst as the Spirit touched individuals.

At least at first touring English performers found themselves welcomed, the characters they played already-known and loved. As Americans began to produce more of their own home-grown actors, the enthusiasm for imported entertainment diminished.

American audiences were known for their inclination to get very involved in the plays they watched. To a fair degree this was a characteristic of 19th-century audiences everywhere, and some stories similar to the ones that follow, also come out of the British Isles and Australia. From America come many accounts of how Hamlet, King Lear, Othello, and Romeo, among many others, were given advice or chastised by patrons; or of the times when sizable numbers of the male audience leaped up on the stage to form a ring around combatants, so as to ensure a fair fight. Judging from accounts of entertainment in Shakespeare's own time, these American stories of the presentation of his plays and the way they were received may well have seemed very familiar to the great bard, and he might have felt strangely at home in 19th-century America.

At least one example of similar audience participation in Australia, during a production of *Hamlet*, comes from the Victorian goldfields. During the grave-scene, Poor Yorick was quite forgotten when a group of Eaglehawk miners got into a detailed discussion with the actor/grave-digger and Hamlet about the depth of the sinking and the equipment he planned to use. There are stories about incidents like these from England as well, but many more of them come from America.

There is a possibility that these stories are linked somehow as "Yokel" tales, tales about "others" or stories about the funny things children say. All of these are of course also the basis for so many jokes and comic songs that range from gentle self-mockery to nasty, vicious, and cruel humour. They may also be compared to occupation anecdotes – in this case, the acting trade – as examples of silly things audiences say and do.

There was the supposed incident in Kentucky where the poor melodrama-wife of a melodrama-gambler was given money, by a frontiersman in the audience, to keep her and her children from starvation. The mother was advised, "not to let her husband know about it or he would spend it all on faro".

[1]

Satire was especially popular during the 19th century, where the tragedies of Shakespeare were parodied, often on the same program as the straight version of the same play. Other popular stories and plays were treated in the same way. Even during a serious performance there were musical acts interspersed with the play. In England it was required in the smaller "illegitimate theatres". The top actors of the period were seemingly good-natured about this, and the others had no choice. Often even the stars played both comic and straight roles, and sang and danced as well.

Most actors began as clog-dancers as well as singers. There are accounts of actors, male and female, being able to juggle and perform acrobatics, ride horses – or elephants –, and do magic tricks as a matter of course.

An incident as early as 1822, before the parodies of the Minstrel Shows, is quoted from a number of sources. It is probably either completely fabricated or at most very loosely based on truth, being as it is a comic's routine. English actor Charles Mathews Senior visited New York's "Nigger's Theatre" to see an all-black production of *Hamlet*. At Hamlet's line, " ... whether it is nobler in the mind to suffer, or take up arms against a sea of trouble, and by opposing end them...." there was a general cry from the audience for the well-known song,

" Opossum! Opossum! Opossum up a Gum Tree!" Mathews went home to develop a one-man show that he performed in blackface, based on his experiences in America. He included the scene that he said he had witnessed in this show. Later, following the sudden rise to stardom of Daddy Rice as Jim Crow, an actor, whose name is not recorded, blended Hamlet's lines with those of a Blackface Minstrel:

Oh! 'tis consummation devoutly to be wished
To end your heart-ache by a sleep
When likely to be dished.
Shuffle off your mortal coil, do just so,
Wheel about and turn about, and jump Jim Crow.



The Old Ballads and the Singers in the Appalachians

The isolated people of the Southern Appalachian Mountains were a special case. It was here that the poorest English and Scots-Irish immigrants settled in the late 18th century. The Scots-Irish had been in Ireland less than a century – moved from their Scottish homeland into Northern Ireland by the English – when poverty spurred many of them to migrate to North America. The old ballads, many of them from the border country between England and Scotland, travelled into the American mountains with the settlers, to be preserved like precious gems. These beautiful songs lived on in oral tradition long after they had been lost, or changed into urban songs in their home country.

There was little contact by these mountain singers, even into the 20th century, with the popular music of the cities. The "song-catcher" collectors of the 20th century were to find the old songs and marvel at their beauty, at the strange sorrowful sound of the old modal tunes, and at the simple way in which they were sung. Sadly, though, the supernatural beings within these old ballads often failed to make the crossing of the Atlantic. They are sometimes there in disguised form, but usually they became mere mortals, some good, some evil. It is no surprise that Billy Barlow in his 19th-century form does not seem to be found in the more isolated parts of America.

He was a city-dweller, and he arrived too late. His possible ancestor, the Billy Blin, who is known to have frequented the Border Country, may be lurking in the mountains somewhere, but if he is, he remains elusive.

Sam Cowell and Billy Barlow

Sam Cowell was born in London England, into a family of actors, on April 5th, 1820. At the age of two he was taken to America, where he lived until he was twenty. From his earliest days he learned the songs of the black slaves, imitating their style and accent.

Hey get along, get along Josey;
Hey get along, Jim along Joe.

From *Jim Along Josey*. American Traditional.

He claimed to have written *Sandy Holler*, a version of *Old Zip Coon*, but it's more likely that he adapted it, as he did with so many of the songs that became "his". The English, Scottish, and Anglo-American songs of his family and friends also influenced him, along with their acting. At the age of nine the young performer appeared with his actor father, Joe Cowell, at a Boston theatre. This happened in spite of his father's reluctance to allow any of his children onto the stage. Joe Cowell had, "...long experience of the consequences in afterlife of forcing precocious talent".



While Joe Cowell was playing the theatres of Boston, his long-time friend and fellow-actor Junius Brutus Booth was visiting the Cowell home. Booth was being

entertained by the Cowell children and he accidentally discovered that the young Sam was word-perfect in the part of Crack in the play, *The Turnpike Gate*, which his father was acting at the time. He was able to sing all the songs and play the part in an exact imitation of his father. It was found that Sam had also memorised most of his father's other stock characters. At Booth's insistence, Sam was allowed to begin his acting career, performing at irregular intervals as he desired. Sam's strong presence on stage was apparent from the start, and his voice was to later get him a place in The London Opera Company. By the time he was twenty he was a veteran of the American stage, performing in both comic and tragic roles, and also becoming known as a singer. He was referred to as "The American Roscius".

In 1840, when he was twenty, Cowell sailed for the British Isles. He appeared on stage at the Edinburgh Adelphi, a theater owned and managed by his uncle. From the start, he upstaged all of the other actors in any play in which he had a part, including on one occasion Grimaldi's student, the clown Tom Matthews. Cowell met his future wife, Emilie, in Edinburgh and married her in 1842, the same year that the polka was first danced in Scotland.

Cowell went on to become a successful opera-singer and actor in London, but changed direction again in the mid-1840s to return to his first passion — singing comic songs in character in his own one-man act. This seems to be what he was born to do. Through the early days of British music-hall, and on until his death, Sam Cowell was the highest-paid performer in the British Isles.

He came to be remembered for his characterization of the little battler called Billy Barlow, who appeared dressed in patched trousers and a ragged overcoat tied with rope. It doesn't seem to be noted anywhere just when Cowell played Billy for the first time. Cowell's last appearances in America before going to Edinburgh were at the Theatre St Charles in New Orleans. Part of his childhood had been spent in this city. The forgotten Mr. Wills and the almost-forgotten John (Jack) Reeve were playing Billy Barlow in the theatres of Eastern America in 1836. Did the young Sam Cowell see Billy Barlow as performed by Mr. Wills? By Jack Reeve? Did Sam's father ever perform as Billy Barlow? At any rate, it's quite likely that Sam saw Billy Barlow many times. Did he work up his own version of Billy before he left America?

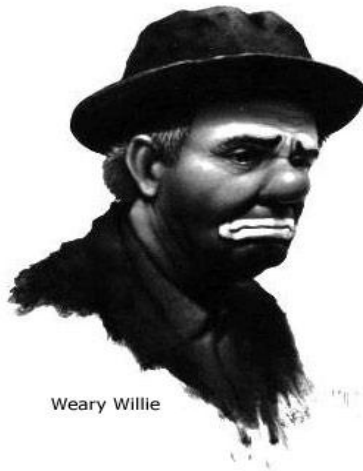
Sam Cowell wrote, adapted, borrowed, and appropriated hundreds of parodies based on well-known songs and folktales of the past, and city-born songs of his time. His songs were delivered in a highly dramatic style, with parts spoken and other parts sung. He also specialized in comic and dramatic Shakespearean scenes, and excerpts from topical melodrama.

The drawings and photographs of Cowell show him in various costumes: the serious actor's neat well-cut black suit and waistcoat; the velvet suit with a cap that was his Railway Porter's costume; tailcoat, cravat, and tall top-hat for Lord Lovell; and the raggedy outfits that belonged to his version of Billy Barlow. He began his Billy Barlow songs with:

Oh! Ladies and gentlemen how do you do?

I've come here before you with one boot and one shoe ...

These first lines appear in all three of the early Billy Barlow songs that came out of the American publishing houses of Deming in Boston, Osbourne in Philadelphia, and Endicott in New York, and are also the first lines in some of the British broadsides. Cowell was about twelve years old when the first of these was published, but he claimed these lines as his own, or maybe others claimed them for him.



Weary Willie

Billy was only one of Cowell's characters but, as with George Coppin, Billy was the big favourite with audiences. Cowell's Billy Barlow must have looked very different from Coppin's. Sam Cowell had a small, delicate-looking body. His face appears fine-featured, except for his eyes, which are big and soulful. He never seems to be smiling, in the pictures that are available; his expression is either wistful and reflective, or downright miserable, the perfect depiction of the ultimate sad clown. Contemporary accounts of his demeanor off stage and on, however, tell us that he seemed effervescent and gregarious, sometimes to the point of mania. In public he was everybody's favourite friend. He kept the horrors of alcoholic depression strictly private until the very end.

When you place pictures of Sam Cowell as the sad, ragged clown, or as the poor rat-catcher, beside photographs of modern Hobo Clowns or Tramp Clowns, the similarity is so striking that you wonder where Sam Cowell and Billy Barlow fit into the family tree of these American clown types. Cowell's flip-lidded, battered top-hat, that he wears as the rat-catcher and – according to author Hugh Anderson – wore as Billy, turns up on many of the 20th-century Hobo or Tramp Clowns, along with the patched suit that has seen better days. How close is the connection between Cowell's Clown and Emmett Kelly's Weary Willie, or Red Skelton's Freddie the Freeloader, or Charlie Chaplin's Little Tramp?

Was Woden the wandering Shaman/Trickster still in our midst right up until the turn of another century? Did he ride the rails with the hoboes, probing their minds and asking questions? Did he take his character on out of the disappearing music-halls

and into the movies? Where is he now ? What name is he using in this, the 21st century?

Sam Cowell may have sung many of his songs in the character of Billy Barlow. The evidence about exactly which ones is circumstantial, but when you look at the occurrences of Billy, in America especially, it appears that a number of them may be linked with Cowell's songs. It was certainly true that whenever Cowell performed, in whatever guise, his audience shouted for "Billy Barlow!" He must have had to switch characters quickly at times to accommodate their wishes.



Cowell from
Ratcatcher's Daughter

A good example of a character song that would have fitted with Cowell's Billy Barlow is *The Rat-catcher's Daughter*. There is a picture on a music-booklet that shows Cowell as the rat-catcher. He is not wearing the overcoat of his Billy Barlow but the outfit is ragged and patched, and his top-hat is battered. He could well have passed for an overcoatless Billy. A quick change of characters from the rat-catcher to Billy would have been easy.

The tune and the words of this nasty little ditty were written by Cowell. It was sung in Cockney dialect and tells the story of a rat-catcher's "Cupid-netted" daughter, who sells sprats. Her lover is a lily-white sand-seller with a donkey who is presumably smart enough to understand the funny words. The lovers, in their besotted states, mix up their sellers'-cries, and she offers sand while carrying sprats on her head, and he tries to sell rat-catchers' daughters. The bystanders are puzzled and the donkey laughs. The love-sick couple agree to marry but she has a dream that she is about to die and she does, falling into the water like an early *Darlin' Clementine*. He cuts his own throat and stabs the poor little donkey.

The humour has not aged well, but for many years this song was very popular in England and in America. Some singers still perform it, for its quaint Victorian awfulness.

The Cutty Wren and Billy Barlow

The real fascination of The Rat-Catcher's Daughter lies in the possibility that it might connect two much more interesting songs:

One is old, its written history dating from 1776, when it appeared in David Herd's Scots Songs. Here it has no title, but it is now called *The Cutty (little) Wren*. The other is a song called, at first, *Let's Go A-Hunting*, and now called *Billy Barlow*.

This song is very different from all of Billy Barlow's other songs. It appears to be either an authentic American folksong or a very clever imitation. The Cutty Wren comes to us in an ancient form. It is sung as a dialogue song. It has the form of Anglo-Saxon poetry in the alliteration seen in the first two lines of each verse, but it also rhymes the second and third line, in a newer style.

Where are you going? says Milder to Malder.

Oh we may not tell you says, Festle to Foze.

We're off to the woods, says John the Red Nose.

We're off to the woods, says John the Red Nose.

Oh what will you do there? says Milder to Malder.

Oh we may not tell you, says Festle to Foze.

We'll hunt the Cutty Wren, says John the Red Nose.

We'll hunt the Cutty Wren, says John the Red Nose.

Oh how will you kill her? says Milder to Malder.

Oh we may not tell you, says Festle to Foze.

With bows and with arrows, says John the Red Nose.

With bows and with arrows, says John the Red Nose.

Oh that will not do, says Milder to Malder.

Oh what will do then? says Festle to Foze

Big guns and big cannons, says John the Red Nose.

Big guns and big cannons, says John the Red Nose.

How shall we haul her? says Milder to Malder.

Oh we may not tell you, says Festle to Foze.

On four strong men's shoulders, said John the Red Nose.

On four strong men's shoulders, said John the Red Nose.

Oh that will not do, says Milder to Malder.

Oh what will do then, says Festle to Foze.

Great carts and great wagons, says John the Red Nose.

Great carts and great wagons, says John the Red Nose.

How shall we divide her? says Milder to Malder.

Oh we may not tell you, says Festle to Foze.

With knives and with forks, says John the Red Nose.
With knives and with forks, says John the Red Nose.
Oh that will not do, says Milder to Malder.
Oh what will do then? says Festle to Foze.
Great hatchets and cleavers, says John the Red Nose.
Great hatchets and cleavers, says John the Red Nose.
How shall we cook her? says Milder to Malder.
In pots and in kettles, says Festle to Foze.
Great pans and large cauldrons, says John the Red Nose.
Great pans and large cauldrons, says John the Red Nose.
Who'll get the spare ribs? says Milder to Malder.
Oh we may not tell you, says Festle to Foze.
We'll give them to the poor, says John the Red Nose.
We'll give them to the poor, says John the Red Nose.
[Memorised, by the author, from the singing of Danny Spooner and Gordon MacIntyre
at Frank Trayner's Coffee House in Melbourne during 1960s]

This, apparently traditional, song is in itself of some interest to folklorists. Wren-hunting songs appear in many forms, with and without question-and-answer dialogue. It is said to be about the custom of Hunting the Wren on Saint Stephen's Day – the 26th of December, but it has the feel of a pagan rite with a Christian overlay. Young men caught and killed a wren and bore it, on a stick, around the village. They all wore decorations of green and red, and used a stick hung with greenery to carry their small victim, who was treated with the utmost dignity. As practised now, the custom has local variants, and can be seen, although maybe as a revival, in Suffolk, The Isle of Man, in Northern Ireland, and in the Northeastern United States. The song has been used as a Wassail song and as a protest song. A. L. Lloyd thought it was a sarcastic poaching song, with exaggeration of the size of the prize. The oldest extant printed version of The Cutty Wren seems to date from 1776, when it was collected and published by David Herd in his book Scots Songs. He gives no title and no explanation. The hunters are Fozie Mozie, Johnie (sic) Foslin' ene, Brother, and Kin. The wren is given as: the WREN. In this, as in all of the dialogue versions, and to some degree in all versions, the story seems to be a parody of a ritual sacrifice, with exaggeration as part of the joke. Does the song that Herd collected have connections with a Winter Solstice rite, maybe with John the Red Nose playing the part of Jack Frost? Do the wren-hunting songs belong with songs like The Darby Ram? It's impossible to hear the Cutty Wren and not feel the magic of ancient archetypal images, regardless of where its origins lie. If Billy Barlow fits somehow with the wren-hunt, and I think he does, his connection seems a fairly straightforward one.

Straightforward, that is, unless Woden's sacrifice of himself, on a tree, in pursuit of knowledge, is somehow echoed here. That would tangle things nicely.

Let's go hunting, says Risky Rob
Let's go hunting, says Robin to Bob
Let's go hunting, says Dan'l to Joe
Let's go hunting, says Billy Barlow.
What shall we hunt? says Risky Rob
What shall we hunt? says Robin to Bob
What shall we hunt? says Dan'l to Joe
What shall we hunt? says Billy Barlow.
Let's hunt coons, says Risky Rob.
Possum for me, says Robin to Bob.
Let's catch rabbits, says Dan'l and Joe
I'm huntin' rats, says Billy Barlow.
How shall we divide him? says Risky Rob
How shall we divide him? says Robin to Bob
How shall we divide him? says Dan'l to Joe
How shall we divide him? says Billy Barlow.
I'll take shoulder, says Risky Rob
I'll take thigh, says Robbin to Bob
I'll take back, says Dan'l to Joe
Tail-bone mine, says Billy Barlow.
How shall we cook him? says Risky Rob
How shall we cook him? says Robin to Bob
How shall we cook him? says Dan'l to Joe
How shall we cook him? says Billy Barlow.
I'll fry mine, says Risky Rob
I'll broil thigh, says Robin to Bob
I'll take back, says Dan'l to Joe
Tail bone raw! says Billy Barlow.

From *The Folk Songs of North America*. Alan Lomax, 1960.

In the 1940s song-collector John Lomax found this song, which he named Let's Go A-Huntin', in Fort Spunky, Texas. Alan Lomax, son of John, included the song in his collection, *The Folk Songs of North America*, published in 1960. In his notes about *Let's Go A-Huntin'* he claims that: "In New York State the wren song was once sung on St Stephen's Day, but in most American versions a squirrel, a rat, or some other little animal takes its place, and the song becomes a nonsense piece for children." He gives no explanation of how the song may have migrated to Texas, and no information about how widespread or well-known it was.

The song *Let's Go A-Huntin'/Billy Barlow* as it is sung today comes from the singing of Alan Lomax, from Peggy Seeger, Pete Seeger, and from many others. The verse about possums, coons, and rabbits is omitted, and several verses about different aspects of the hunt have been included. These added verses reflect back to *The Cutty Wren* as if there has always been a folk-memory of how the song should go. How shall we kill him? with the answer from Billy, Borrow a shotgun.
and How shall I haul him? with Billy's, Go borrow a wagon.

Among the many English versions of wren-hunting songs that seem to derive from *The Cutty Wren*, there is one that uses the names Robin and Bobbin, and another that has Dandrum Dart. Could these be variants that form the bridges from the British Isles to America?

How did Billy Barlow get into an American parody of an old Scottish song? Well, there are some tantalizing stories surrounding Billy Barlow the rat-hunter. In the 1840s Sam Cowell was singing the enormously popular, previously mentioned, *Rat-Catcher's Daughter*. When he toured America in the early 1860s he sang it there. This song was just as big a hit in America as it was in Britain. It was published in Boston by Oliver Ditson. On the front cover of Ditson's music-booklet is a lithograph by a young apprentice by the name of Winslow Homer. It depicts Sam Cowell, as a rat-catcher, dressed in a ragged outfit. There is no date on the sheet-music, but Winslow Homer began his career as an artist working for a lithographic company in 1855. He left Boston in 1859 and subsequently marched out of New York with the Northern troops during the Civil War, armed with his paints and canvases, to record the scenes of camp-life and battle.

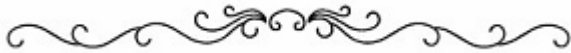
Is there a connection between the song about a rat catcher, sung by raggedy-dressed Cowell, and *Let's Go A-Huntin'*? Did Cowell write the song as a parody on *The Cutty Wren*? *Let's Go A-Huntin'* is not listed by that title in his repertoire, but it could have been just another one of his many Billy Barlow songs. *Let's Go A-Huntin'* has not turned up in print before Alan Lomax's publication of it, but so many composed songs of the 19th century have been lost, or buried in private collections, that this is not unusual.

The tune used for *Let's Go A-Huntin'/Billy Barlow* may provide another clue, or it may lead into another dead end. Interestingly this tune, in a simplified form, is the first part of the Scottish song, *The Campbells are Coming*. This rallying song of Clan Campbell dates from 1715. The Campbells migrated to Pennsylvania in the early part of the 19th century, bringing with them their song, by now translated from Gaelic into English.

By the time Sam Cowell's songs, and with them his Billy Barlow songs, were being sung in the cities of the Northern Seaboard, Clan Campbell was well established not too far away.

Place together in the melting-pot that was Northeast America in the 19th century: a raggedy rat-catcher; another raggedy character called Billy Barlow, who may have

had Scottish ancestors; an old comic hunting-song in its Scottish form; and a good Scottish tune. Mix well, and maybe you get an interesting new song.



The supernatural element has quite gone from *Let's Go A-Huntin'*. Billy and his friends are rural Americans who could be from New England, where tall-tales abound, or from the wild mountain settlements of the South.



Whatever its origins, it is the only Billy Barlow song that is firmly rooted in rural America. This isn't to say that it might not have been originally composed for the stage. Its form is even more clever than Herd's Cutty Wren. It has kept the old alliteration in the first two lines of each verse, and added the alliterative name, Billy Barlow, in the fourth line. The verses are now composed of two rhyming couplets. Of all the Billy Barlow songs, and whatever its origins, this is the one that appears to have escaped most successfully from the formal area of the stage – if in fact it was ever there – to dwell in oral tradition.

In the 1960s, when folk music briefly became part of popular culture, *Let's Go A-Huntin'* – always called, by now, *Billy Barlow* – was part of many a folk-singer's repertoire. By this time, the Lomaxes had collected another quite different song using the title *Let's Go Huntin'*, and this may have necessitated the name change. Hildebrand, singer of traditional songs around Boston at this time, co-wrote and sang this parody, a 1960s update of a topical Billy Barlow song. Hildebrand was born and raised in the Midwest in a singing family, but he had never come across Billy Barlow during his childhood.

He first heard it in Boston in 1961, sung by Robert L Jones. Risky Rob?.

Billy Barlow the Viper

The teevee got broken, says Risky Rob.

And also it's raining, says Robin to Bob

What shall we do? says Dan'l to Joe

Let's turn on! says Billy Barlow.

Where shall we get it? says Risky Rob
Where shall we get it? says Robin to Bob
Where shall we get it? says Dan'l to Joe
Club *** says Billy Barlow.
How shall we smoke it? says Risky Rob
How shall we smoke it? says Robin to Bob
How shall we smoke it? says Dan'l to Joe
We'll borry a hookah! says Billy Barlow.
I'm gettin' dizzy, says Risky Rob
I'm walking on jelly, says Robin to Bob
Time's standing still, says Dan'l to Joe
YOU'RE ALL UNDER ARREST!
Says Billy Barlow.
By Hildebrand and Jeff Gerber, Boston, c. 1962.
*Name of Club deleted.

CHAPTER 10: WHERE WILL-O-THE-WISPS AND GLOW-WORMS SHINE

Great Dismal Swamp Cindy's Great Grandfather – Thomas Moore and Uncle Tony – The Legend of the Lake of Dismal Swamp – The Barlow Knife – Cindy's Great Grandfather Again – The Will-o-the-Wisp, Min-Min Lights and Sweet William's Ghost
The link between Billy Barlow and The Great Dismal Swamp is tenuous but intriguing. It is a never-to-be proven but colourful connection between Sam Cowell's Billy Barlow and a modern-day American lady, called Cindy, who is studying her family history. Cindy's great-grandfather was known as "Billy Barlow", although Barlow is not one of the family's names. It is likely that we will never find out for sure about this connection that has been lost in a time-mist as impenetrable as the mist of Dismal Swamp itself. Cindy's great-grandfather was born at the end of the Civil War, in an area that saw a great deal of the action, and where the name Billy Barlow was a very familiar and well-loved one. This may mean that there is a double link to his nickname.

Thomas Moore and Great Dismal Swamp

Dismal Swamp once spread across two-thousand or more square miles of Southeastern Virginia and northeastern North Carolina. The swamp was first surveyed in 1763 by a company of men led by George Washington. The plan to drain the area was carried out during the next fifty years, and now Dismal Swamp covers only six-hundred square miles. It is still a place of tangled undergrowth, tall strange cypress trees that stand on tiptoe with their exposed roots extended high up out of the water, wild creatures with eerie calls, and a green glow that is never penetrated by direct sunlight. In the one-hundred years after the discovery – by Europeans – of Dismal Swamp, public imagination was stirred by a number of stories, songs, and poems set within its ghost-friendly habitat. Some were ghost stories, some focused on the runaway slaves who hid there, and some were related to the Civil War. Lake Drummond, a moss-green tarn that lies in the very

centre, was the location for the first and most enduring of the European style folk-legends that oozed out the swamp.



Irish poet Thomas Moore visited the swamp in 1803, before the drainage canal into Chesapeake Bay was completed. He wrote his poem, *A Ballad – The Lake of Dismal Swamp*, spreading a supposed local legend throughout the English-speaking world. Moore heard the story, or said he did, in Norfolk, Virginia, and wrote his famous poem there in a tavern which still stands in Norfolk's main street. It's interesting to note that the local black guide, whom Moore hired for a day's boating on Lake Drummond, had never heard the legend. Recounting the story almost twenty years later, this guide, now known as Uncle Tony, as a mark of respect for his age, remembered the day of the excursion well. He remembered Moore as a "nice-looking man who talked pretty". As they set out, Moore poured Irish whiskey, lovingly brought from home in a silver bottle, into a little silver cup, and shared it with his new friend and guide. Moore told his guide about the legend.

"De har 'gin to rise on my hed an' I ax him ef dat was a fac'," was how Uncle Tony remembered it. Reassured by Moore, his uisge beatha, a picnic lunch, and the generous payment of a pound, Tony steered the skiff onto Lake Drummond, and Moore spent the day writing furiously in his notebook.

They made her grave too cold and damp
For a soul so warm and true
And she's gone to the Lake of Dismal Swamp
Where all night long by a firefly lamp
She paddles her white canoe.

This is just the first verse. From here Moore takes us on through a story that is both macabre gothic horror and overwrought Victorian love-tragedy. His poem came at a time when these two styles met at the turning of a century. He had seen for himself

.....where the deadly vine doth weep,
Its venomous tear and nightly steep,
The flesh with blistering dew....."

and being young, impressionable, and of a poetic disposition, Moore showed no restraint in the telling of this creepy story. There is not much story to tell really, but the poem is vividly coloured by a young poet's imagination. It is all atmosphere and expert craftsmanship.

The old legend, as Moore says he heard it in Norfolk, Virginia, tells of a young man whose true love dies. Maddened by grief, he becomes convinced that she is not dead, but lost in Dismal Swamp. He goes searching for her — or so his friends suppose — sure that she paddles around on the lake in a white birch-bark canoe, her way lit by a firefly lamp. He plans to hide his true love in a cypress tree where Death can't find her. He is never seen again in the flesh. Thomas Moore takes up the tale at the point where the legend trails off.

Away to Dismal Swamp he speeds;
His path was rugged and sore;
Through tangled juniper beds of reeds,
Through many a fen where serpent feeds,
And man never trod before.

Exhausted, he falls asleep among the reeds, with a she-wolf stirring nearby and a copper(head) snake breathing in his ear. Waking from a dream, he cries out an anguished plea for help. A meteor lights up the lake he has been seeking and

....the dim shore echoed for many a night
the name of the death-cold maid.

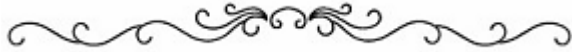
He makes himself his very own white birch-bark canoe and paddles off across the lake, following the meteor, never to return.

But oft from the Indian hunter camp,
The lover and maid so true,
Are seen at the hour of midnight damp,
To cross the lake by firefly lamp,
And paddle their white canoe.

Reciting Moore's poem by candlelight with your eyes wide and your face pale with horror, it seems sufficient unto itself. The effect on you is as he intended. But ponder on it, pull it apart, and you are left with questions like:

Who was she? Who was he? What were their names? Was she perhaps a product of his imagination, and was only he real? Were they, neither of them, real? Tell us about the dream. When did it start and finish? What part did the snake play? What did it tell him? Could you really hide from Death in a cypress tree? Maybe the only questions that need answers are: What, and how much, were Moore and his new friends drinking that day in the tavern in Norfolk, Virginia? Was the legend already in existence before then? How prone were the locals to the telling of tall-tales to impressionable tourists?

Moore stayed at an Indian camp before returning to Norfolk, but he says nothing at all about Native American stories that must have still been remembered in the area at the time. The faint echo of the customs of older Swamp-dwellers remains in the use of a birch-bark canoe and a firefly lamp.



Sam Cowell, always on the lookout for a good legend to parody in his act, seized on *The Lake of Dismal Swamp*. Or possibly he used an intermediate poem or song that has been forgotten and lost. His parody named the couple for us, calling them Reuben Wright and Phoebe Brown. His choice of the name Phoebe Brown, given that Cowell was a clever and well-read man, may be significant. A small brown bird, of the fly-catcher family, called a Phoebe, is common in the area of Dismal Swamp. The bird has an eerie call that sounds like, "Fee beee". This is, of course, Cowell's name for the "death-cold maid". (The swamp maid was later renamed Chloe in the song of that name written in 1927.)

The Cowell song, *Reuben Wright and Phoebe Brown* is cleverly, if loosely, connected to *The Lake of Dismal Swamp*. It has only one overt reference to the name of the Swamp:

Sung: So Reuben Wright and Phoebe Brown determined they would marry.
Three weeks ago last Tuesday night

Spoke they started for old Parson down the Registry, determined to enter the Dismal
n: Swamp of Matrimony although it was tremendously dark and it

Sung: rained like Old – Harry.

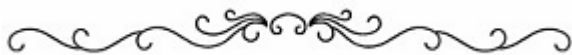
but there are possibly other more oblique connections. The story is set in Manchester – presumably in America. The song is American in content and feel, and the sheet-music was published there, probably to be sold during Cowell's tour of America. There are a pair of lovers parted by the death of the girl, with ensuing madness of the boy. The whole story ends up being just a lurid dream experienced by Reuben after he has overindulged in hot buckwheat cakes at a tea-party, so that the boy's dream is still there in changed form. Cowell has inserted – gleefully, it appears – two murders, one by accidental gunshot, and the other by stabbing with "a tremendous jack-knife two and a half feet long".



It is interesting, though probably coincidental, that in America the Barlow knife, a type of jack-knife, was often referred to as a “Billy Barlow”. The Barlow knife was invented and first manufactured in England, in the late 18th century, for export to America. It was soon the most popular knife of its type and it remained so for over one hundred years. Its creator was an Englishman called Barlow, but just which Barlow is a matter of conjecture.

There are no Williams in the line-up of possibilities. The knives were soon manufactured in America. They are usually referred to as Barlow Knives, but there are several references to the use of the name Billy Barlows for them. These references all post-date Sam Cowell’s American tour of 1860 to 1861. Cowell himself, at least in the sheet music for Rueben Wright and Phoebe Brown that was printed at the time of his tour, calls the knife a jack-knife.

Rueben Wright and Phoebe Brown was performed by Cowell in the style for which he was famous: half-recited in the way of a grand tragedian, and half-sung. The sheet-music faithfully records the way this was done, and in 1960 Hamilton Lobdell of Wisconsin sang and recited this song exactly as it appears in print. The song was collected from Lobdell as a “folksong of Wisconsin”, its origins long forgotten.



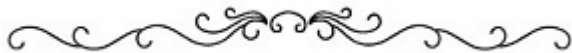
Back to Cindy’s great-grandfather. Cindy lives not far from the place where her great-great-grandmother, Phoebe Helmick, lived in 1863.

Phoebe lived in Pendleton County, West Virginia, although this state was part of Virginia until the same year that she gave birth to her son. She named him William D Raines (or Rains), but he was known, at least for part of his life – and maybe always – as Billy Barlow. So far, the child’s father has not been found by Cindy, so it may be that Phoebe’s child was born out of wedlock.

The time of his conception was a sad and troubled time. The Civil War raged all around Phoebe's mountain home. Although Virginia was technically part of the South, the people of the mountains had nothing in common with the rich plantation-owners, and many sided with the Union or refused to get involved with the conflict at all. So little Billy's father could have been a soldier from either army, or a man not connected with either side. Was he called William Raines? Billy Raines? What happened to him?

Billy Barlow was a name well-known to people from all over the East Coast of America, following Sam Cowell's tour there in 1861, but did this child have a more than usual reason to be called Billy Barlow? Was this reason the fact that his mother bore the name Phoebe, the name used by Sam Cowell for his heroine of the not-to-distant Great Dismal Swamp? Of all the characters that Sam Cowell played, Billy Barlow was the favourite with audiences. It would seem that any number of Cowell's songs could have been associated with him.

The place where William Raines fits in the overall picture remains uncertain, but he is certainly an interesting part of the whole Billy Barlow phenomenon.



The Will-o-the-Wisp and Sweet Williams Ghost.

As a point of interest before leaving Great Dismal Swamp, brief mention will be made of the Will-o'-the-Wisp. The ghostly form that marsh-gas takes, as it rises up from decaying vegetation in swamps, was long thought to have a supernatural explanation. This phenomenon also occurs in graveyards, where its source is decaying flesh. It may be what Australian Aborigines call the Min-Min lights.

In collections of folksongs from the British Isles, on at least one British broadside, and in oral collections from the Appalachian Mountains in America, there are several variants of a song about a ghost who comes back from the grave to claim his beloved. When he is given a name, it is almost always William, Sweet William, or Willie. This probably means that many, if not all, of the songs come from one popular source, which itself may not have been the first.

[Here we go 'round the mulberry bush!]

There was such a song – a broadside called *The Suffolk Miracle* printed in the 19th century. Anyway, is Willie the Ghost related to Will-o'-the-Wisp? Are either of them related in any way to the old Billy Blin?

And she cried, Willie! Oh my dearest Willie!

Where is that colour you'd sometime ago?

Oh Molly, darling, the clay has changed me

I'm but the ghost of your Willie-o.

Lover's Ghost – from the singing of Hildebrand

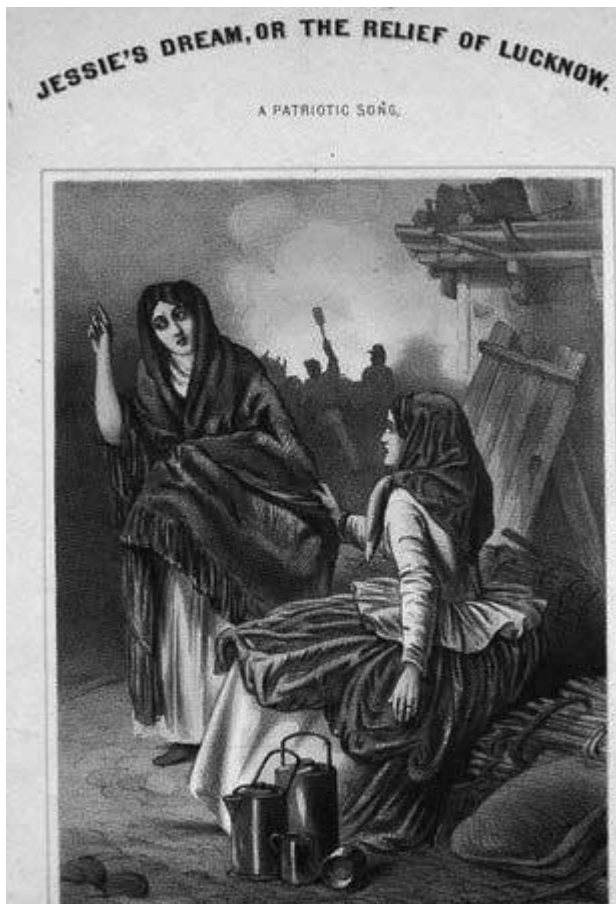
CHAPTER 11:THREE CHEERS AND A TIGER FOR BILLY BARLOW

More about Sam Cowell – One Recorded Occurrence of Billy in India – Fanciful Musing on the Possibility of Billy’s Tune Being Heard at The Relief of Lucknow. Billy Barlow in the Crimea – Sam Cowell’s American tour – Blondin and His Team of Little Ducks -The Burning of Billy’s Costume.

At a time when his popularity was at its height, Sam Cowell decided on a trip back to America. It was 1860, and he had been away from his childhood home for twenty years. The tour, for various reasons, was financially disastrous, even though he was just as popular in America as he was in England. For Billy Barlow, Cowell’s tour was a crucial step in his journey through history. Before discussing Sam Cowell’s American tour a small divergence is worth while.



Billy Barlow in India



In 1859, during the Indian Mutiny, a Mr. Rolls toured India performing for the English army. The army bands, as was the custom of the time, fought as ordinary soldiers, entertaining their comrades when lulls in the fighting permitted. At one of these eye-of-the-storm concerts the band of the King’s Shropshire Light Infantry, 53rd

battalion, accompanied the entertainer, recorded only as Mr. Rolls, while he sang *Billy Barlow* and *Reuben Wright*.

These two songs out of Sam Cowell's repertoire would have been familiar, and were well received. The fact that the battalion band provided the accompaniment is actually an assumption, but it is based on the diary of Lance Sergeant M Devery, who notes that Mr. Rolls gave him a bottle of Burgundy when he left a week later. Devery later became bandmaster of the 3rd Dragoon Guards, so it would seem that he was in charge of the music on the day that *Billy Barlow* was sung on the battlefield in India.

Paying musicians with alcohol is an established and widespread custom. Back in England it frequently proved to be the downfall of many great and many lesser stars. Devery noted that a few days after Mr. Rolls's visit, the band had a drinking spree and beat their drums madly in a wild all-night session.

A legend, that became a play and a song, called *Jessie's Dream*, tells us that at the Siege of Lucknow during this same Indian rebellion, a young Scotswoman lay dying on the ground. There was seemingly no hope for her and her companions when she raised herself up and cried,

"Dinna ye hear it? The pipes of Havelock sound!"

They were playing:

The Campbells are coming, O-ho! Oh-ho!

The Campbells are coming, Oh-ho!

The Campbells are coming to bonnie Loch Leven,

The Campbells are coming, Oh-ho!

From – The Campbells are Coming words and air Anon

As already noted, this song, in both its phrasing and in its tune, is very much like:

Let's go a-huntin' says Risky Rob

Let's go a-huntin says Robin to Bob

Let's go a-huntin' says Dan'l to Joe

Let's go a-huntin' says Billy Barlow.

Could it be that the poor girl heard Mr. Rolls, far away over the hills singing this less familiar version of *Billy Barlow*? Surely not ! The usual version was probably the one he sang. I don't know the actual dates of Mr. Rolls's tour – only the date of that one recorded performance which was not the same as the date of the relief of Lucknow. Also I have no proof that Sam Cowell produced this *Billy Barlow* song – just the nagging thought that he could have, that a rat-catcher *Billy Barlow* would have been a natural progression for Cowell.

We do know that Mr. Rolls had at least two Sam Cowell songs in his repertoire. Anyway, the Scotswoman and her friends were rescued and that should be enough of a miracle for anybody.

Billy Barlow at the Crimean War

Billy Barlow had been to a scene of conflict already, and as a soldier. A Billy Barlow song dating from 1855 has him at Sebastopol serving as advisor at the Crimean War. He is apparently American and he travels by way of England, where he is welcomed by Queen Victoria, to the consternation of Albert, who got "confoundly jealous". Arriving at the battle, he is welcomed by all sides before settling in to a peacemaking role, working with the British.

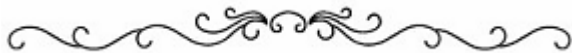
Then I went to the army at Sebastopol,
To see Russians and Turks, the French and John Bull,
And when I got there they all sang out, hallo!
Three cheers and a tiger for Billy Barlow!
Oh dear I'm Ragged I know
Three cheers and a tiger for Billy Barlow.
Then Raglan and Canrobert sent, sirs, to me,
And a council of war was held by us three
Said they, we've fought well, but so far 'tis no go,
How shall we proceed now, dear Mr. Barlow?
Oh dear you're ragged we know,
Do give your advice to us, Mr. Barlow.
Says I, I was with Scott all through Mexico,
And your movements here seem to me precious and slow,
If you had but a few Yankee leaders, I know,
You'd soon take the Fort, said poor Billy Barlow.
Oh dear I'm ragged I know,
They should have given the command to Billy Barlow.

Billy is called home to America by President Pierce, who fiercely reminds him that the American policy is "non-intervention". The President had to be fierce on account of the rhyme, but America did remain neutral in this affair. It is interesting to note that Billy is already a veteran soldier, having been to the Mexican War in 1846. There is no author given for this Billy Barlow song, although it shares many verses with one of Sam Cowell's. George Coppin was also known to have sung Billy Barlow songs about the Crimean War, but the fact that Billy is American points to Cowell, who thought of himself as American.



The salute “Three Cheers and a Tiger ” comes from 19th-century America. It is interesting to note that a song credited to an Edward Clifford, set during the Civil War, and dated 1865, seems to be an adapted version of the same song. These wars and uprisings were to prove mere training grounds for Billy, skirmishes where he could hone his skills as a chameleon, changing colours, switching sides, marching along with one band of men or another, and all the time reporting on all he sees. Long ago in ancient times, Woden is said to have studied the battles of Men in his quest for all knowledge.

Barely had the drunken tattoo of the band of the King’s Shropshire Light Infantry faded away, than back in America the terrible Civil War was looming. Billy was about to *Follow the Drum* as once, on the streets of London, he had sung about it.



Sam Cowell’s American Tour

Sam Cowell, his wife Emilie, and their daughter Sidney, set out for a tour of America in 1860. Many English performers toured successfully there, but the timing of this tour was not to be good. For Cowell it was a home-coming, and no amount of persuasion, with the lure of top pay and conditions in London, could change his mind. Emilie Cowell kept a diary of the tour, and it is a wonderful glimpse of America, both North and South, in the year before the commencement of the Civil War and of the first months of the conflict.

Often when the Cowells arrived in a town, and especially when Sam was to sing in one of the big cities, a newspaper advertisement would appear in the local paper. It would be an invitation to the good citizens of the place to attend a series of lectures by the famous “William Barlow esq.” Before his shows, Cowell made a point of meeting the important and best-known members of the community, so that Billy Barlow could include references to them in his songs. He also quickly studied up on local topical events for the same reason. George Coppin used all of these same ideas.

Emilie mentions Billy Barlow only occasionally. She had learned to accept him along with her husband’s other low-comedy characters, but she probably never actually liked him very much. For one thing, Billy and his like took “her boy” out of the theatres and into the drinking establishments, where alcohol flowed freely, along with the music. Her generous and gregarious man could not resist either.

Cowell was never aggressive; he was sweet and gentle in his manner, but he could be loud and boisterous, if amiable, when he was in his cups. Emilie never faltered in her support of, and absolute faith in, the genius who was her man. She would have preferred him to stay with the legitimate theatre, but she was there for him in the lowest of establishments in America, where the tobacco-juice spittle from the floor stained the hems of her home-made crinolines.

The whole American tour was a round of pawning family watches and jewellery to pay the debts, collecting pay – usually far less than promised –, redeeming pawned possessions, and moving on to start over in another town. There was always some other big function going on that kept large numbers of Cowell's potential audience away. An annual Firemen's Ball, or a flower show, and, by the end of the tour, marches and balls held to farewell the soldiers leaving for the battlefields of the Civil War. It was said, however, that at that particular time in America, Sam Cowell was the only entertainer who could be guaranteed an audience at all. In the big cities the audiences still numbered in the hundreds, and the Cowells' lack of income there was more due to swindling by some of the tour-managers. Also, Sam was always very generous with money when he did have any.

If the tour was a disaster financially, it had other benefits. Everywhere he went, Cowell was admired, even adored. Americans loved his Billy Barlow especially, and insisted on Billy being part of every show.

In New York, Billy shared the stage with Blondin the tight-rope walker, remembered for his balancing acts on a rope stretched terrifyingly high over Niagara Falls. Blondin re-enacted his walks on stage, with a painted backdrop of the Falls behind him.

Emilie doesn't give us the whole Billy Barlow song sung that night, but she notes that the " 'Billy Barlow' verses were received 'with roars'." She gives us four lines that refer to Sam's father, Joe Cowell.

And since I've come back I'm happy to add,
You've been kind to the man as you were to the lad,
And across the Atlantic the news it shall go
How you've welcomed the efforts of Billy Barlow.
Oh, dear ; Raggedy oh!
'twill cheer up the heart of the veteran, old Joe.

Blondin and His Ducks

Blondin's stage act must have been hard to follow, even though it was tame compared to the feats he performed over the actual Niagara Falls. A woodcut from a Paris newspaper shows how it was presented on stage. The backdrop is a painted scene of the falls and the surrounding forest of pines. At the bottom, where the water falls away over a precipice, you can just make out a little group of splashing ducks.



Towards the front of the stage, a dancing girl in high-heeled sandals demurely kicks up her skirts to reveal full frilly petticoats. She wears a bodice buttoned to the neck and a long-sleeved peasant blouse. On either side of her are two groups of similarly dressed dancers. They all seem completely unaware of the drama being enacted above and slightly behind their heads. There, above the head of the lone dancer, is Blondin, balanced on a thin tightrope, wearing only soft shoes and a skimpy pair of acrobat's shorts. Each hand holds a flag high in the air. Miraculously, each flag is blowing in a different direction. Perhaps he is waving them. Ten flying water-birds are about to drop a halo-wreath over his head. The wreath is much too big and will surely fall down around his ankles, throwing him off-balance and sending him into the arms of the dancing-girls. Then, to my mind the most wonderful touch of all, there are six little ducks walking along the rope with Blondin. Three are following duck-like behind him, and three face him, approaching from the opposite direction. The leader of the contrary ducks is standing rampant, his wings waving. Who will give in and turn around? Blondin and his three followers or the maverick troop?

Billy Barlow and the Fire

It was also in New York that a terrible catastrophe occurred. The grand theatre, Canterbury Hall, where Cowell was performing, burned down. It happened in the early hours of the morning, so that it was empty of people, and nobody was hurt. The Cowell family were sleeping next door, and by a miracle their hotel escaped damage. The real tragedy was that all of Sam's costumes and music and most of the studio photographs that he had had taken during the tour were lost. The tour was almost over, and these photographs were never to be replaced.

Also lost to the flames was his Billy Barlow costume.

Emilie put it this way:

"All Sam's music and cloths (clothes) at the Hall are burned. — 'Billy Barlow's' was priceless to him. All his beautiful pictures except three, are also burned...."

Originals of these three photographs are preserved today at the University of Texas. One is Sam as Lord Lovell, another as The Railway Porter and the other is Sam as Billy Barlow. It should be noted that it was from Texas that the Billy Barlow song, *Let's go a-hunting*, and also the song, *Lord Lovell* were collected in the 20th century. *The Railway Porter* would have had less relevance in America, and is mainly known today – if it's remembered at all – in its Scottish form, rewritten with Cowell's permission by the comic singer Arthur Lloyd.

Cowell's audiences refused to let Billy Barlow die, and a few nights later, Billy and Sam's other characters were back on stage, their outfits now makeshift costumes borrowed from friends and improvised by Emilie, their makeup drawn on with India ink and pencil from daughter Sidney's drawing equipment. Emilie wrote out the music for the accompaniment of all of Sam's songs, and the shows went on. The tour lasted another three months, so, presumably, new outfits were acquired somehow.

CHAPTER 12: VICTORY WAS OURS, SAYS BILLY BARLOW

The End of Sam Cowell's American Tour – Billy Barlow Signs up with the Zouaves – General Billy Barlow – Winslow Homer Meets Billy Barlow–Twice – Billy Barlow at the Battles of Gettysburg and Lookout Mountain – Other Occurrences of Billy Barlow During the Civil War – Death of the Great Sam Cowell

And the young women there gave vent to such woe
You'd ha' thought they were parting from Billy Barlow.

Oh dear raggedy oh!

You'd 'ha thought they were parting from Billy Barlow.

From one of Sam Cowell's Billy Barlow songs.

Sung by him in New York, during the early part of the Civil War.

The End of Sam Cowell's Last Tour

Sam Cowell sang Billy Barlow songs in America during the months just before the Civil War. He continued to sing them in the early days of the conflict too, but as was usually the case with most of Billy's songs, they were of a transient nature, new-born each night and not noted down.

Cowell's Billy, during one of his concerts, announced his intention to sign up with a Zouave regiment. Even among the many colourful and highly eccentric uniforms of the various Northern regiments, the Zouaves stood out. They were dressed in baggy bright red or blue pantaloons, richly embroidered Moroccan vests, and jackets of dark blue or grey. Turbans or little gaily-trimmed hats were worn on their heads. Billy Barlow, the clown, would have felt quite at home among them. The regiment he promised to join – Colonel Wilson's Zouave regiment – wore light blue pants, and scanty close-fitting jackets trimmed with scarlet braid and binding. They each were armed with a rifle, a revolver, a Bowie knife, and a slingshot.

In the theatres of New York, Sam Cowell sang his songs, and nightly proclaimed his own and Billy Barlow's support for the Union, his Union badge proudly pinned to his coat.

After the show, Cowell joined his friends in the taverns, and led the singing of *The Star-Spangled Banner* and other patriotic songs over and over into the night. By day, he and Emilie watched from their apartment window, as the many regiments marched off to war. The spirit of Billy Barlow marched off with them.

Billy was one of the last characters the Union recruits saw and heard in the theatres and other places of entertainment, before they left for the War. Cowell, while based in New York in the final months of his American tour, also revisited the other cities in the Northeast. He left behind him versions of his Billy Barlow.



Sam Cowell knew more about Southerners, both black and white, than most members of his audiences in the Northern cities. His childhood had been spent learning his first songs not only from his father, but also from the black slaves, whose music he greatly

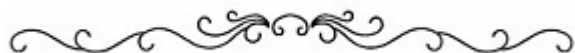
admired. When he toured the South just before the outbreak of war, he was welcomed back as a native son. He met friends of his father, Joe, who had been a well-loved entertainer and writer there for over twenty years before he returned to England, where he now cared for his grandchildren, Sam's and Emilie's younger offspring. Both Sam and Emilie had American cousins and other relatives living in the South.

During the time that bloodlust was running hot, a Union sympathiser in the South had good reason to fear for his or her life. Emilie noted in her diary in early 1861 that her cousin, Caroline Richings, performing in her home State of Virginia, (bravely ? foolishly ?) stood up on stage, holding a United States flag, to sing *The Star-Spangled Banner*. When she heard the threatening hisses from the audience, she sang instead *The Southern Marseillaise*, and trampled the Union Flag under her feet, as the cheers rang out around her. Entertainers and musicians have to be versatile at times like these. A few months later, Caroline was being nightly featured as the Goddess of Liberty in a patriotic allegory at Niblo's Garden in New York. The singing of *The Star-Spangled Banner* was part of the act. How did she run the gauntlet to make her escape?

At about the same time, Emilie quoted from the *New York Daily News*:

"Report of a meeting of a 'few friends of the seventh regiment, the pride of the Empire City', concerning the statement made by Mr. Wm. Donaldson, 'well-known as a self-styled negro delineator,' that it was 'his wish and desire that not one of the regiment would ever return to the city alive'. Committee appointed to command him to leave the city immediately without excuse or hesitation. IV Paragraph: 'Mr. Wm. Donaldson desires us to say that he has not been waited upon by a vigilance committee and ordered to leave the city for saying that he hoped every member of the 7th Regiment would be cut to pieces. He says that the remark about the Regiment was made in a hasty moment under circumstances of peculiar provocation, as he found that he could not get his orders filled by either bootmaker or tailor, because they had so much work to do for the Seventh Regiment.'"

Emilie doesn't tell us the outcome of this incident.



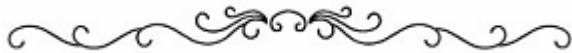
In June 1862, Sam, Emilie, and daughter Sidney toured Canada briefly, and then sailed home. Emilie made her last entries in her diary, commenting that " ... happy days have preponderated over the sad ones; and our lot has been one to be very grateful for." She was looking towards a bright future with her adored husband. Poor Emilie! The days ahead were to be sadder and more hopeless than she could have possibly imagined, and at the end, in less than two years, Death took her "Dear Boy" away.

Billy Barlow in the Civil War

The fact that Union soldiers were called Billy Yank, (as Southerners were called Johnny Reb), may have reinforced the idea that this other Billy – Billy Barlow, was one of them. There is a hint that at least one soldier, in a letter to his sweetheart, was using the name Billy Barlow as a generic term, possibly to refer to himself.

Walter Gater served in a volunteer regiment from Iowa, that spent a great deal of its time guarding supply routes and carrying out other mundane, if important, tasks. They did see some action, and in the battle of Champion's Hill, Walter was injured. He wrote letters home to his future wife, Susy, from his hospital bed in St Louis. In one of these letters, where he is colourfully and sarcastically describing the "joys" of a peace-time rural life, he talks about the "....beautiful sloughs where Billy Barlow will sometimes get stuck in the mud...." He and his fellow soldiers had probably been stuck in the mud often enough.

[1 – click]



From the diary of a telegrapher, Drummond, who was captured by the Confederate army in the Shenandoah Valley in 1862, we know that one of Sam Cowell's other songs was well known. Drummond and his fellow prisoners of war had been marching for four days along roads deep in mud. They were in a miserable state, hot and thirsty by day, cold and wet by night. Their rations, except for the officers who could pay for their food at hotels along the way, had consisted of just four hard-tack crackers each, on the second day of their captivity. On the fourth night, this is Drummond's diary entry:

" June 3. Marched 16 miles. Officers camped in a dirty barn. Very hot. No rations. To keep up morale, I sang the Bacon and Greens Song very loudly. "Oh there's a charm in this dish rightly taken That from custards and jellies an epicure weans, Stick your fork in the fat, wrap your greens round the bacon, And you'll find there's no dish like (good) bacon and greens." From Bacon and Greens. Sam Cowell Cries of "Gag him!" and etc. greeted my rendition."

By the end of the next day's march Drummond casually remarked that he had been able to buy some rations to "share with others."

[2 – click]

'Tis the song, the sigh of the hungry:
"Hard tack, hard tack, come again no more."
Many days you have lingered upon our stomachs sore.
O, hard tack, come again no more!
From Hard Tack Come Again no More.
Anonymous Civil War parody of Stephen Foster's Hard Times Come Again no More.

General Francis Channing Barlow



There is a quite famous Billy Barlow who served in the Union army. He was Francis Channing Barlow, a young New York lawyer who was well known for being eccentric in manner of dress and in some of his practices. He was given the nick-name almost certainly because of his family name, but maybe also, when he was in command, as an attempt to make light of the situation in which his men found themselves. As an officer, Francis C. Barlow was a strict disciplinarian.

There was probably never a Billy Barlow less like a raggedy happy-go-lucky clown. Barlow enlisted as a private in New York's 12th regiment of the National Guard, at the first call to arms. He had graduated at the head of his Harvard class, and, at twenty-seven, had just begun his career as a Manhattan lawyer. He had no military experience, but seems to have been a born warrior. Extremely intelligent, absolutely fearless in battle, and utterly ruthless in achieving his goals, he quickly rose to the rank of colonel.

By an interesting coincidence, Emilie and Sam Cowell watched as the newly-formed New York regiment, in which the then Private Francis C Barlow had just enlisted, paraded below the window of their Broadway hotel. The older, well-established Billy Barlow had a prime spot to view one of his future namesakes. Emilie doesn't give the names of the marches played that day, but the Billy Barlow tune was used by the Union army all through the War, and it's as likely as not that the soon-to-be General Billy Barlow stepped smartly along to a drum-and-fife rendition of it. When Francis C Barlow left New York for this first taste of action, he left behind him his bride of one day, so anxious was he to join the fight.

Francis C Barlow was rangy and slim, with a boyishly handsome face that bore a thoughtful and deceptively mild expression. Among the mostly mustached and bearded officers of the time, Barlow stood out with his clean-shaven face. Stage-Billy

Barlow, it may be noted, although sometimes showing a bit of stubble, never had a beard.

Emilie Cowell tells the story of how once during their tour of the South, her Sam sat in a barber's chair next to Abraham Lincoln. Sam overheard the then-future president tell the barber not to shave his whiskers, but to "Give them a chance to grow."

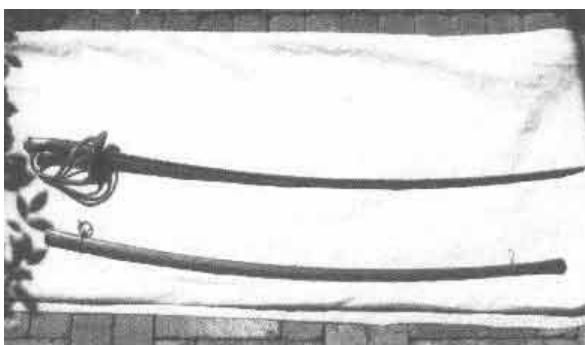
As soon as Francis Barlow became an officer, he wore his own version of military uniform: checked lumberjack-shirt with an unbuttoned uniform-coat over it, and, as seen in the various drawings, paintings and photographs of him, several different hats on different occasions. In 1864, Staff Officer Theodore Lyman said about Barlow:

"As we stood there under a big tree, a strange figure approached. He looked like a highly independent mounted newsboy. He was attired in a flannel checked shirt, a threadbare pair of trousers, and an old blue kepi.

From his waist hung a big cavalry sabre. His features wore a familiar sarcastic smile. It was General Barlow, commanding the 1st division of the 2nd corps, a division that for fine fighting cannot be exceeded in the army."

The large cavalry sabre worn in place of the usual standard-issue officers' sword was used by this mild-seeming general to good effect – on his own men. It was for whacking stragglers – using the flat edge, so as to cause great pain, but not lasting incapacitating injury. That this long, and very heavy sabre was nick-named "Old Wristbreaker" says something about its inefficiency as a battle-weapon.

[3 – click]



The problem of stragglers on the march had become an obsession with this brave and fearless leader, who seems to have been completely mystified by any man who did not share his love of battle. In what looks like the ultimate in compulsive behavior, Barlow finally had a company of men bring up the rear with bayonets fixed and orders to drive the division forward. He wasn't reckless with the lives of his men, (although possibly he was with his own,) training them to find hiding places among bushes and rocks to save themselves until he gave the command to follow him into

the fray, but he certainly seems to have been indifferent to a soldier's everyday suffering. He was regarded by at least one of his men as a "petty tyrant". This same soldier thought that, "With Barlow banished to the Antipodes," (no doubt the farthest distance this man could contemplate) "our happiness would have been complete..... As taskmaster he had no equal. The prospect of speedy deliverance from the odious yoke of Billy Barlow filled every heart with joy."

[4 – click]

Captain Charles Francis Adams wrote however, "I am more disposed to regard Barlow as a military genius than any man I have yet seen."

Francis Channing Barlow was a distant cousin and close friend of Winslow Homer, who was one of America's greatest 19th-century artists, and one of a small number of artists and photographers who recorded in picture form the scenes from the Civil War. Barlow and Homer's brother had been classmates at Harvard. When Barlow's regiment set off from New York at the beginning of the War, Winslow Homer went with them as an artist. His paintings in the main depict scenes of camp life subtly reflecting the loneliness and misery around him.

It is suspected that Barlow is in Homer's *Skirmish in the Wilderness* but it is hard to be sure. *Prisoners on the Front* however, features Barlow as the main character. The occasion was the capture, by Barlow, of several thousand Southern troops at Spotsylvania, Virginia. The painting depicts General Barlow standing handsome, arrogant, and haughty before a small group of Southern captives. One of these prisoners faces Barlow, echoing his arrogant stance in obvious defiance. One stands meekly with his hands clasped, resigned to his fate. He is an older man, well in control of his feelings. A third soldier behind him is a very young country boy, who seems bemused. He is bent over slightly, making him appear shorter than he actually is. His uniform is ill-fitting, as if he has grown out of it, along with his recent childhood. Barlow's uniform is immaculate, coat correctly buttoned, and long riding boots polished and shining.

The obvious departures from regulation issue are the long heavy sword hanging at his side and the strange little coachman's low-crowned small-brimmed hat that is perched on his head. Winslow Homer, by one of those strange little coincidences that surround Billy Barlow, was the same artist who produced the lithograph of Sam Cowell, in what appears to be his Billy Barlow character, that features on the cover of the song, *The Rat-Catcher's Daughter*. This means that Winslow Homer had the privilege of drawing two very different Billy Barlows.

The Barlow/ Gordon Incident

One of the most romantic stories to come out of the Civil War concerns General Barlow. It is questionable in some of its details, unfortunately in the more colourful parts, but it is still worth the telling, especially in its overwrought form. The basic facts are that General Francis Channing Barlow led his troops into the battle of

Gettysburg on the 1st of July 1863 with the usual enthusiastic but cool efficiency for which he is remembered. On the first day of this three-day battle, Barlow positioned his men on a little hillock (now named for him as Barlow's Knoll) well forward of the rest of the Union army, and in the midst of enemy territory. To be fair, it seems that he was misinformed about just how vulnerable this position was.



General Barlow

During the afternoon, the Southern army advanced in an unstoppable wave, and Barlow was left valiantly trying to rally his fleeing men. Within minutes, he was shot from his horse. His main wound was so serious – a ball through his side that passed close enough to his spinal cord to paralyse him – that he was left, apparently dying, in the very midst of the battlefield. Through either respect for his bravery, his rank, or just through good luck, he was helped or carried to the shade of trees by enemy soldiers. Union soldiers who had tried to carry him to safety had to be ordered by Barlow to leave him and save themselves.

After being taken to a farm house, he was treated by Confederate Army surgeons, but was left for dead, or, by one account, exchanged, by the retreating Southern army on the 4th of July. He was transported to a military hospital by his own side and, miraculously, eventually recovered, and survived the War, although sadly his wife Arabella didn't. She died of typhus (or typhoid) in 1864 at the military hospital where she worked as a nurse.

On the 7th of July, from his hospital bed, Barlow wrote a letter to his mother, dispassionately, and in great detail, describing his escape from death, and naming the enemy officer who helped him.

" Finally the enemy came up and were very kind, Major Pitzera, Staff officer of Gen. Early had me carried into the woods and placed on a bed of leaves. They put some water by me and then went on to the front again."

An exaggerated and delightfully Victorian version of the tale comes from John B Gordon, who wrote it into his book, *Reminiscences of the Civil War*. It is noteworthy

that the story in this form did not appear until well after the event. It was printed in abbreviated form in the *Dublin Post*, Dublin, Georgia (not the Irish Dublin) on March the 19th 1879. It appears, mostly, in Gordon's own words. At the battle of Gettysburg, John Gordon was a General in the Confederate Army. He was of the same rank as Barlow, and had also been a lawyer before enlisting.



General Gordon

After the War, he became a Senator and a keen promoter of reunification of the country. The ornately decorated language of which he was very fond, and the embellishment of his stories, became his trademarks. He went on lecture tours discoursing on his favourite themes of Brotherhood and Unity, using the incident at the Battle of Gettysburg as a prime example. His story was not fully developed as a lecture until after Barlow's death in 1896.

As John B Gordon tells the story of the "Barlow/Gordon Incident", he, Gordon, dismounted amidst the hail of bullets, and lifted the paralyzed and apparently dying enemy general up in his arms, and gave him a drink of water from his canteen. Like a helpful, if unlikely, denizen of the World of Faerie, Gordon asked Barlow if he had any last wishes. (Uncharacteristically, I would have thought,) the pale and beautiful dying youth said,

"I shall probably live but a short time. Please take from my breast pocket the packet of my wife's letters and read one of them to me."

This the good General Gordon did. No mean feat on the battlefield. Barlow then, for some reason — did he worry that his men might think him soft? — asked that all the letters be destroyed. Gordon tore them up on the spot, and then, true to the tradition of Faerie, he offered to grant the third and final wish. Barlow chose to have his wife Arabella sent for. In some of Gordon's versions of the tale, Barlow, sure of his appointment with the Death Angel, asked merely that Arabella be told that he died bravely, giving his life for his country and thinking of her.

Barlow was then taken by Gordon's orders to the shade of the woods. Gordon continued with the battle, pausing briefly to send word to Arabella, and to arrange for her safe conduct through enemy lines. This was achieved, and she was able to nurse her dear husband back to full recovery. It is not recalled how she felt about her tender, naughty(?) declarations of love being sent to the four winds amid the smoke of the battlefield of Gettysburg.



Many years later, while attending a dinner in New York, the two former enemy generals met again. Gordon had always assumed that Barlow was dead, and Barlow supposedly had heard about the death of Gordon's cousin – who was also J. B. Gordon – and thought the deceased was his old adversary from Gettysburg. So delighted and amazed were the two men, that they remained closely bonded until the actual death of Barlow parted them, this time forever.

Of the first telling of the story the *Dublin Post* (in Georgia) said:

“The hearty greeting which followed the touching story, as related to the interested guests by General Barlow, and the thrilling effect upon the company can better be imagined than described.”

And so say all of us !

Aside from the fact that General “Billy” Barlow never made any comment whatsoever, as far as anyone knows, about his Gettysburg meeting with Gordon, or about the subsequent reunion, there are other problems with the Barlow/Gordon tale: Arabella's part in it all is under suspicion, for example, mainly because it seems strange that Barlow did not mention her in his very detailed letter to his mother, written on the 7th

of July. Some confederate soldiers helpfully recalled seeing a lady travel past them at about the right time, in a carriage carrying a white flag.

One David Skelly said he saw a lady he understood to be Arabella on horseback passing through the enemy lines on the 3rd of July, but no conclusive official information has come to light about her movements at around the date of the Battle of Gettysburg.

None of the facts interfere, however, with the enjoyment of this touching story taken as an embroidered anecdote based on fact.

There's a little Rosewood casket
Resting on a marble stand.
There's a package of love-letters
Written by my True-love's hand.

From *Little Rosewood Casket* by Louis Goullaud and C A White.



There is no evidence that Francis C Barlow took his Billy Barlow nick-name on into civilian life, where he became one of America's most prominent lawyers. There is no evidence that he ever accepted or welcomed the famous name of Billy Barlow at all. It's more than likely that he didn't. If he had a sense of humour, it didn't show in his official record, unless you count his treatment of stragglers on the march, which has more than a hint of black comedy. Nevertheless, as even a reluctant Billy Barlow, he earns a place in my book for his interesting exploits under the Billy Barlow name.

More Civil War Billys

Billy Barlow, the name – and, evidently, the character – was well known also in the South during the Civil War. The well-known song surviving from this period, however, along with a song written at the close of the War, are listed in collections of Northern songs, espousing, as they do, the Union cause. There is no mention of the *Billy Barlow* song, or tune, among the songs listed as being sung by both sides.

It is known that there was a great deal of sharing of tunes, with words of songs adapted or completely changed to suit whichever army was singing them. There is evidence that the *Billy Barlow* song with the familiar *Hey Ho Raggedy Oh!* refrain was widespread across the country at least as far as Kansas by the 1900s, and it's likely that the Civil War had more than a small part to play in its spread.

At the beginning of the War, Sam Cowell had just completed his tour of his old homeland, performing his Billy Barlow to appreciative audiences across the South, down to New Orleans and back. Before the stirrings of unrest in America, Billy Barlow had been content to comment on topical subjects without confining himself to a political view, so that, as always, he could fit in anywhere.

There is a brief reference to a Southern Billy (written as Billie) Barlow in the memoirs of Private Samuel Mitchell, a Tennessee soldier who survived the War after many hardships and adventures. His recollections were written some twenty years after the War. After having spent some time in a Union prison camp, he and his fellow soldiers were part of a prisoner exchange and they returned to fight in Tennessee. Mitchell's colourful tale includes at this point his meeting with Billy.

"Col. Walker tried to get up a drum and fife band, and the rattle of the drum and scream of the fife was heard every time we went into camp, and as for music it was a perfect burlesque and we were terribly tortured with the horrible noise.

So one night while the heroic band were snoozing some of the boys who were real friends of suffering humanity cut the heads out of the drums, and so ended the last band the 3rd ever had. Purse Anderson with his bugle furnished all the music we had after this. While in camp at Grenada, we had a recruit join our company. He was a substitute for the celebrated Billie Barlow. He was clad in a new suit of brown jeans, and being something near seven feet high and with body and feet in proportion, he was a real show. He had more wool in his suit than was on the backs of all the remainder of our company. We took Billie in and treated him kindly."

Billie is not mentioned again, so his fate is not known. Mitchell died before finishing his memoirs, although his story continues for some time after this quote. It would seem from Billie's appearance, and from the fact that his arrival in the narrative comes after a musical story, that the "celebrated Billie Barlow" was Billy the clown, and not General Billy Barlow.

[5 – click]



Billy Barlow Songs From the Civil War

The two Billy Barlow songs about his exploits during the Civil War are based on the familiar formula with the same phrasing. They both have a two-line refrain at the end

of each four-line verse. One uses:

Oh! Yes, I'm rough, I well know, (This line differs in each verse, but finishes with:) Billy Barlow.

And the other:

Oh! dear. I'm ragged you all know,
But I'm an old soldier says Billy Barlow.

The earliest Billy Barlow Civil War song is credited to Edward Clifford and dated 1863. It begins with a parody of the version of Billy Barlow at the Crimean War, which is given at the beginning of this chapter. In place of the visit to Queen Victoria, where Billy makes Albert jealous, there is a visit to Richmond, Virginia, where Billy is smiled upon by Mrs. Davis, making "Old Jeff" the jealous husband. There are several verses about army life, and the courting of a Southern girl who is anxious to "stand by the Union with Billy Barlow." The sixth verse is interesting in that Billy says,

It was down in Virginia at a place called Bull Run
Where first our brave soldiers their fighting begun.
It's true they got routed but then you all know
It was on account of the absence of Billy Barlow.

Francis Channing "Billy" Barlow, well-known and notorious from early in his military career, missed the battle of Bull Run, although he was in the area at the time. This song could well be, in part, or even entirely, the work of Sam Cowell. The fact that the date it bears is after Cowell's return to England, and that it is claimed to be by Edward Clifford, may not be significant. Cowell had many imitators, who mimicked his every gesture and every comment. It is difficult to be sure about the authorship of many songs of this period. Frequently, not only singers but also publishers falsely claimed to have written songs.

The second Civil War song about Billy Barlow was written by a soldier in Company C of the 109th Pennsylvania Volunteers. He was John M Valleau, and he wrote a short song about Billy's involvement in the Battle of Lookout Mountain – poetically termed "The Battle Above the Clouds". The tune suggested for this song, which is in the form of a manuscript, is *Billy Barlow in Tennessee*, or *White Star*. I have not been able to find this tune, (the title *White Star* was used for many songs that all seem to post-date the Civil War), but the usual Billy Barlow tune fits quite well, except for the worrying word "all" in the second line of the refrain, which alters the metre.

There is no date on the manuscript, but the Battle of Lookout Mountain was in 1863, the same year as the publication of the Clifford song. Billy has joined the Veterans, and is an "old soldier", so this could put the date of the composition at any time after the end of the War. The actual battle that saw the Union forces take this granite outcrop that overlooks Chattanooga in Tennessee, was a quite minor affair in the midst of a short series of attacks in the area, that were all won by the North. Lookout Mountain is often shrouded in fog, and on the day of the romantically named battle, in November 1863, the damp mists mingled with the cannon smoke to eerie effect.

In what is surely one of the silliest mistakes in modern warfare, the well placed Rebels on the high ridges were unable to turn their cannons to an acute-enough angle to reach the enemy as they swarmed up the slopes. Billy Barlow doesn't mention the details of the battle, and his song is extremely vague about the action, but he does name his "gallant Commander, John W. Geary" whose name gave Valleau lots of good possibilities for a rhyme.

Pity he only used one of them :

~ beery, bleary, cheery, deary, eerie, feary, jeery, leery, neary, peery, query, reary, sneery, teary, veery

Good evening kind friends, it's how do you do,
It's a very long time since I bid you adieu,
I have been to the wars, I suppose you all know,
And I need no introduction, I'm Billy Barlow.
Chorus – Oh! dear I'm ragged you all know,
But I am an old soldier, says Billy Barlow.
In Wauhatchie Valley on a moonlight night,
The rebels attacked us, we showed them a fight;
They tried to surround us, but it was no go,
For we made them skedadle, says Billy Barlow.
Lookout Mountain we next did take,
With the point of bayonet made Johnny Rebs break
Our boys gave a yell, and away they did go,
They drove them to Dalton, says Billy Barlow.
We came back to camp, where we were before,
And I put my name down in the Veteran Corps,
The White Star Boys they haven't been slow,
They have all joined the Vets, says Billy Barlow.
I think I will finish, for I'm getting weary,
Our gallant Commander is John W Geary.
He led us from Lookout to Ringgold you know,
And Victory was ours, says Billy Barlow.

Lookout Mountain. John M Valleau.

In 1865 the Civil War ended and all the American Billy Barlow soldiers slipped back into civilian life.

CHAPTER 13: I'LL BID YOU GOODNIGHT, SAYS BILLY BARLOW

Death of the Great Sam Cowell – Many Billy Barlows in Name. Billy Barlow – The Song – After 1865. Billy Barlow – The Character – After 1865 – Some Conclusions – Some Answers – April Fools' Day – The End of One Story

The Death Sam Cowell

Well before the end of the American Civil War, one of the greatest of all the Billy Barlows was dead.

Sam Cowell died in England in 1864, just a year after his return from his American tour. Alcoholism and consumption caused the death of this brilliant performer, the first and one of the greatest of the music-hall stars.



Until the end, he was drawn, as he had always been, to the stage, adapting his characters to his ravaged body. His makeup became more and more bizarre as he accentuated the dark shadows under his eyes and the hollows in his cheeks. As a poor and dying beggar, his act became a sinister Dance of Death, his audiences witnessing all but the very last deadly embrace. He should have died on stage. He should have had one last thunderous standing ovation, but that's not how it happened. Sam Cowell died in a lodging house at Blanford. Thankfully, at least he was not alone in his room, but in the parlour, with a few loyal friends and his devoted wife, Emilie. He had been carried downstairs in an armchair, away from the fiends that threatened him when he was alone and closed in. The demons of alcoholism were familiar enemies.

His last words were, "Safe! Safe!"

A benefit was held for his destitute wife and family – in honour of the man who had been at one time the most highly-paid performer in the British Isles. Many old friends came to sing their favourite pieces. The Billy Barlow song is not listed among the offerings, although at least two other singers of Billy Barlow songs, John Lawrence Toole and John Sims Reeves, were there. Reeves sang *Come into the Garden Maud*, and Toole performed *An 'orrible Tale*, a piece for which both he and Cowell are remembered.

[1 -click]

If anyone sang *Billy Barlow* as a tribute to Sam Cowell it was not noted.

In America, maybe in part because of the timing of his tour, Cowell's Billy Barlow did not die along with his creator. The tour came at a time when a character like the innocent and cheerful Billy easily found his way into the hearts of fearful men. He did begin to slowly fade, however, as though his spirit lived on in more and more translucent form, until now nobody remembers the raggedy clown, although they may say, as they do also in Australia, "Billy Barlow? I've heard that name."

If I'm right about the origin of the American Hobo Clown – if he really did begin life as Sam Cowell's Billy Barlow – then Billy lives on now, under new and various titles.

Name-Shifter where once he was Shape-Shifter.



The Name – Billy Barlow – After 1865

Throughout the second half of the 19th century, after the end of the Civil War, the name Billy Barlow popped up from time to time in America, sometimes connected with the entertainment business, and sometimes not. In the British Isles and Australia, the name seems to have always been more likely to have been used on stage or in street theatre. Elsewhere, there were a few examples of the use of the name. It occurs less frequently everywhere in the world in the 20th century. Certainly men named William Barlow were, and still are, known as Billy. This does not explain the many examples of men whose family name is Barlow, but who were not officially named William, who were known as "Billy" Barlow. I have found no evidence that any of these references include men who also took on the character of Billy Barlow, but equally, there is no evidence that they didn't. Many of them do appear to have been eccentrics of some sort.

There is for example:

1869. Silk Merchant Billy Barlow

In the Vital Statistics from The British Columbian 1866-69, an entry appears as follows:

" Died at Victoria (BC), Dec. 18, 1869, Samuel, alias 'Billy' Barlow, n/o Poland and was

once an extensive dry goods dealer in Sacramento, CA...although those who knew him here would scarcely imagine that he ever sold laces and silks.”

I'll buy you ribbons Lass, and I'll buy you rings
I'll buy you a necklace of amber-o
I'll buy you silken petticoats with flounces to the knee
If you'll just come down to my chamber-o.

From *Maid of Fyfe* ~ Scottish Traditional.

1900. Barloworld Billy Barlow

A big and still expanding multi-national corporation, calling itself Barloworld, and now involved in everything from mining to manufacture of a wide range of goods, began life as a company selling woolen articles in South Africa. It was founded as an independent branch of an English family business in 1900. Its founder was known as Major Ernest (Billy) Barlow.

[2]

Was he always known as Billy Barlow? Was the name acquired in England or South Africa? Billy Barlow was still well-known in both places when the Major was young. Touring players, George Coppin and Robert “Billy” Barlow among them, had made Cape Town part of their circuit.

1919. Little Billy Barlow

Walter Clyde Barlow, who lived in Northeast Missouri during the early part of the 20th century, told his family that, “... when he was little he was called Little Billy because he tagged along after Big Billy”.

Could it be that both Little Billy and Big Billy were nicknamed Billy Barlow after the well-known character?

The other question raised here is: was there a popular song around at this time that has some connection with the nick-naming of Little Billy – a song that seems to have been forgotten, except for a small fragment, remembered by Frank Drinkwater who lives in the town of Forbes in New South Wales, Australia? The fragment is:

Little Billy Barlow what shall I do?

Little Billy Barlow what shall you say?

There were also cases of men whose actual names were recorded as William Barlow or Billy Barlow, who were of sufficient interest to earn them at least a mention here. They were all known as Billy Barlow. At least one of them may have used the name as an alias. Several certainly used the name Billy Barlow because of the famous character. Some probably did. Some may have no connection at all. Again, there is no evidence that any of them assumed Billy Barlow’s character.

1840. Castaway Billy Barlow

A castaway called Billy Barlow was living on the island of Pohnpei in Micronesia in 1840.

[3 – click]

Nothing else is known of him to date. An English friend of mine, singer Ian Russell, remembers that a song about Billy Barlow was known in the engine rooms of the Merchant Navy ships, where he once worked. He has forgotten the details.

1845. Australian Aboriginal Rebel Billy Barlow

An Aboriginal resistance leader called Dundalli was hanged in a particularly, if unintentionally, cruel manner in Brisbane, Queensland, in 1855. His lieutenants were named as Make-i-light and Billy Barlow. Dundalli had conducted a brave but ultimately unsuccessful campaign, involving murder and robbery, against the white settlers, for ten years before he was caught. Make-i-light was captured in 1847, after the ambush and killing of two timber workers with the unlikely names of Waller and Boller. There is no account of the fate of Billy Barlow.

[4 – click]

There are Aboriginal and White families by the name of Barlow living in that part of Queensland. None are related to the famous Robert “Billy” Barlow and anyway they preceded his arrival there in the 1860s. However the character Billy Barlow was known from George Coppin’s appearances in Sydney, well within the time-frame discussed here.

1850. Reverend Billy Barlow

A William Barlow in Alabama, whose occupation was listed as carpenter and farmer in the United States census of 1850, was called, in one record, Reverend Billy Barlow. There was an English clergyman by the name of William Barlow back in the 1700s, who was chubby like Coppin’s Billy Barlow, though very serious in his powdered wig. He was unlikely to have been known in Alabama. More likely that, if Alabama’s Billy was nicknamed after anyone, it was the music-hall Billy Barlow.

1878. Reporter Billy Barlow

A reporter whose name is given as Billy Barlow wrote from Salt City, Kansas, in June 1879, about a steamship under the command of Commodore Berkey, that had “..... made another successful voyage down the raging Arkansas, with less water than Columbus started to sail on.....”

[5 – click]

1881. Billy the Kid’s Patsy

This is how Billy the Kid met his fate:
The bright moon was shining, the hour it was late,
Shot down by Pat Garrett who once was his friend,
The young outlaw’s life had met its sad end.

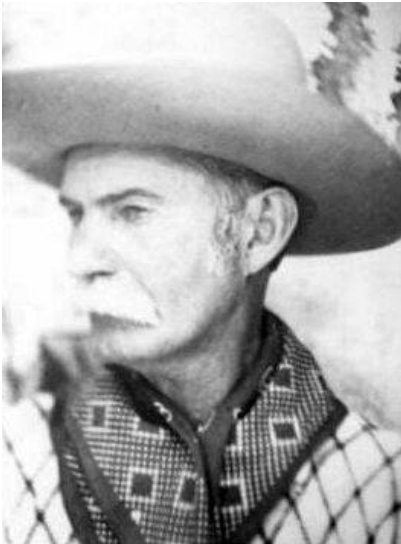
From *Billy the Kid* – Author unknown.



There is an alternate legend told about the killing of Henry McCarty/William Bonney/Billy the Kid. It was, and still is, told by those who believe that Billy didn't die that night in 1881. The official story is that Billy the Kid, accompanied by several friends, rode into Fort Sumner, New Mexico, late on a moonlit night in July. Sheriff Pat Garrett shot and killed the Kid in the bedroom of a ranch-house owned by Pete Maxwell.

Garrett was inside the darkened bedroom when Billy came to the door, asking, "Quien Es?" ("Who is it?"). Billy was fluent in Spanish, and not too much need be read into the fact that he used that language here. Garrett shot Billy in the chest, from inside the room, killing him instantly. The body was identified by witnesses — all of them friends of Billy or Garrett or both — and a legend that swiftly outgrew its main character was born. After his death Billy the Kid progressed from petty criminal and general nuisance, (with the blood of a few men on his hands), to folk-hero.

The other account of his death has him riding to the ranch-house with his companion, Billy Barlow, a Mexican (possibly half-Mexican) who was a little younger than, but otherwise closely resembled, the Kid. As told this way, it was Billy Barlow who entered the dark room with the question, "Quien Es?", and Billy Barlow who took the bullet that night. The idea is based on the fact that there is reason to believe that a cover-up story of the episode would have suited Garrett just as well as the truth would, so long as Garrett got the credit for killing the Kid.



Subsequently, according to this alternate legend, the Kid, wounded but not fatally, fled to Mexico. In 1940 an old man, who shared many of the Kid's characteristics, was discovered in Texas. He was known as Brushy Bill Roberts.

[6]

A wonderful time was had by all in the merry dance that followed. It was from here that the alternate story arose, and here that the name Billy Barlow first turned up. This name does not appear in any official records, although this means little in the days before the West was tamed, when outlaws frequently used aliases. (Compare this with convicts transported to Australia using Billy Barlow as an alias.) If this alternate story is true, then it would seem that Billy Barlow appears in Billy the Kid's life in the role of the Billy Blin of old legend – the faithful servant who solves a problem for his human master. In this case he sacrifices his life. Since the Billy Blin was (is?) supernatural, and presumably immortal, the sacrifice was perhaps not what it seemed.

Wodin exploring the wisdom of the Dead?

"Quien Es?"

"La Muerte."

c. 1900 Indian Chief Billy Barlow

There are three separate references to Native American Billy Barlows. Because of the meagre details it is impossible to tell for sure whether or not they are connected, but it would appear that they are not. One is known to us from the diary of a settler on the West Coast of Canada around 1900.

[7 – click]

The diary entries call this Billy, Chief Billy Barlow, and it is noted that he is head man of the local Native village.

He would once perhaps have been a Shaman. The title of Chief was a European idea. How he came by the name Billy Barlow is not mentioned, but both George Coppin and Sam Cowell had taken the music-hall Billy to Canada back in the 1860s, and both had been received with great enthusiasm.

Another Billy Barlow appears in a photograph labeled "Billy Barlow – Ute." It depicts a proud-looking man of indeterminate age posing in the tribal costume of a Plains Indian. There is no date and no details about him. If he was a member of the Ute Nation he is unlikely to have been in Canada or the area where the third Billy Barlow lived. However, one reference claims that there was a Billy Barlow in Oklahoma who was a Ute or maybe a Choctaw.

The third Billy is on an enrollment form with very little information. It is noted only that between the years of 1898 and 1914 there was a Native American Billy Barlow who was a male, a parent, and of the Creek Nation. The Creeks were not near the Utes nor were they near Canada. The Creeks and the Choctaw lived in the same area, and there is room for speculation about a link between the second and third Indian Billys. The outfits of the Plains Indians, with their beads and fringes and feathers, became the standard costume for Native American performers in Wild West shows. If the Billy Barlow in the photograph was in show business, maybe even taking his name from the show-world, he would have been unlikely to wear the costume of either the Creeks or the Choctaws. Did he call himself a Ute because it fitted better with the show-going public's idea of Indian costume? Was he deliberately vague about his origins, except on the one official document, for the same reason?



1914 and 1937. The Deaths of Two Minstrel Billy Barlows

On the 14th of October 1914, the city of Little Rock, Arkansas, woke to the headlines:

WILLIAM BARLOW SHOT

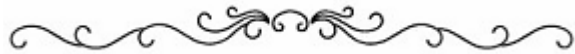
The story, in the New York Times, went on to tell of the murder of the "...formerly widely known minstrel..."

The story claimed that William Barlow's wife had also been murdered and that an "unidentified negro" was responsible for the attack. A posse had set out in pursuit of the suspect. A calmer account, based more firmly on the facts, followed some days later. Here Barlow was not named as William at any point in the article but as "Billy" Barlow.

".... "Billy" Barlow was 60 years of age. He was well known in theatrical circles, and was at one time a minstrel of wide fame."

Barlow's twenty-three-year-old wife had in fact survived the attack, which had involved a hatchet rather than a gun. The couple's two young children, Billie and Laura, were unharmed. It is not clear where this minstrel "Billy" Barlow fits into the picture.

There was a group of Barlow Brothers, who performed alone as Barlow's Minstrels, and also in combination with other minstrel troupes, at the end of the 19th century. There are many sheet-music covers that have them on their title pages. None of the records show any of the brothers using the name Billy Barlow, although one was called William. Another William Barlow died in 1937 at the age of eighty-five. He had appeared in two silent movies. At his death he was called, "the last of the Barlow Brothers Minstrels." Nowhere is he called Billy. The Billy Barlow murdered in 1914 would seem to be of the right age to also belong in this family.



Further on into the 20th century, it seems to me that it becomes less and less likely that the name Billy Barlow was used to intentionally connect with the 19th-century Billy Barlow.

A Black saxophonist by the name of Bill Barlow was quite well-known in the middle of the 20th century, and he may have been responsible for the nick-naming of entertainers around this time. A saxophonist in the little town of Walpeup in Victoria, Australia was known as Billy Barlow, and was probably named for Bill Barlow.

The Song – Billy Barlow – After 1865

In America, as long as Company C of the 109th Pennsylvania Volunteers met for reunions after the Civil War, the Billy Barlow song called Lookout Mountain probably lived on among the companions of its author, John Valleau. It must never have had more than limited appeal.

The Dodge City Cowboy Band

The *Hey Ho! Raggedy Oh!* refrain that connects all the many variants of the old Billy Barlow song (including *Lookout Mountain*) was still well-enough known in 1882 to have been used by the musicians of The Dodge City Cowboy Band. This brass band was supposedly made up of ordinary cowboys from the area around infamous Dodge City in Kansas. It may have in fact used a mixture of professional and amateur musicians who lived near enough town to meet for practices. Some of them would have had ordinary day-jobs as townsmen. It is unlikely that many, if any, of its members were actually cowboys, who were likely to be either itinerant workers or ranch-hands living away from the town.



The band members dressed for the part in leather breeches with fancy stitching, colourful shirts, bandanas, silver spurs, slouch hats with longhorn badges, and buckled-on ivory-handled revolvers. The band leader kept time with a gun which he claimed was always loaded, “to kill the first man who strikes a false note.”

The standard of their playing suggested that they were no instant, hastily assembled band. They played at fairs and cattlemen’s conventions and toured all over the United States. The businessmen and ranchers of the Dodge City area sponsored the group initially, helping pay for their costumes and travel expenses. They soon became very much in demand. Early in their career, in the Summer of 1882, they travelled by train to Topeka to enter a band competition at a soldiers’ reunion. A newspaper in a town along the way commented on their “rigging” and noted that,

“As the train passed they were singing ‘Oh! dear, raggedy Oh!
just look at the riggins on Billy Barlow.”

Compare these lines with a couplet out of the Billy Barlow song published by J G Osbourne in 1834:

If you want the cut of a coat or anything just so
Just look at the rigging of Billy Barlow.

The Dodge City Cowboy Band played, as part of their repertoire, a variety of pieces that included classical music, marches, dances, and popular songs of the day. Among these pieces must have been the Billy Barlow song. Twenty-five fabulously dressed, musical, cowboy Billy Barlows must have been a truly wondrous sight.

[8 – click]

It is noted in the biography of George Coppin that the *Billy Barlow* tune was played, with a trombone solo, by a brass band on the streets of Melbourne Australia in the latter half of the 19th century.

I've found no records of the last time the *Billy Barlow* song was sung in character by any of the performers who played him. Coppin frequently said goodbye as Billy, but he probably played Billy Barlow for the last time in 1901, just five years before his death. Other early music-hall performers who sang *Billy Barlow* songs in character – Sam Cowell, John Lawrence Toole, W. G. Ross, John Sims Reeves, and Benjamin Olliver Conquest – were all dead by 1908, as was Robert “Billy” Barlow. If the elusive Billy Barlow murdered in Little Rock Arkansas in 1914 sang Billy's song in his act as a minstrel, it's possible that he had been still performing it after 1900. The newspaper article seems to imply, however, that he had been long retired by the time of his death.

As is the case with so many of the very early music-hall songs, *Billy Barlow* is not in collections from the turn of the century. Some songs that were not tied to a specific character – like Sam Cowell's, *The Railway Porter* and *Bacon and Greens* – lived on. Some of the early songs that were stories told in the third person, like Lord Lovell and Thomas Haynes Bayly's, *The Mistletoe Bough*, passed back and forth between the stage and rural folk communities as they had always done. This was a phenomenon confined mostly to America, and to a lesser extent Australia, by the 19th century. In the British Isles there were few of these isolated communities left. In America, songs that were set to a dance tune had a good chance of survival, often as play-party songs. Play-party is the name given to events where the singing of the dancers replaces the use of musical instruments.

Hundreds of 19th-century popular songs made their way to Australia from America, arriving as song-sheets and with American gold-diggers, settlers, minstrel troupes, and solo-performers. Thousands of copies of sheet-music were shipped from the big American publishers, who saw a growing market in Australia. There was competition from British printers, but they were, however, far behind their American cousins in marketing skills. Also British song-sheets took much longer to reach Australia. When ships docked in Sydney, crowds of young men and women were waiting there for the latest popular song-sheets.

In Australia there was brief, though only mild, interest when *Billy Barlow in Australia* was rediscovered in the 1950s. It had appeared in several 19th-century collections published in New South Wales. Folksong collector Hugh Anderson wrote a book of *The Songs of Billy Barlow*, in which he gives the words to, and some background on, this and several other Billy Barlow songs.

In America and in England, the Billy Barlow songs lay packed away in the collections of theatre memorabilia kept by all sorts of people, some of them actors and singers. These boxes of souvenirs typically get lost or destroyed, unless they come into the hands of an enlightened descendant of the original collector.

Fortunately for those of us who are interested in the songs of the 19th century, the collecting of sheet music was a popular hobby, and the publishing companies had responded to the demand enthusiastically. They had even instigated it. Libraries all over America now hold huge numbers of 19th-century music-sheets and booklets, donated to them from various sources. In this way, as indeed in many other ways, America became the treasure trove of songs, both traditional and composed, of the Western World.

Billy Barlow/Let's Go A-Hunting was found and taken up in the folksong revival that began in the late 1950s. Never one of the most well-known songs of this era, it has proven to be enduring, even though it is now mostly found in books and recordings of children's songs. As I've already noted, its origins are obscure.



The old Billy Barlow song with the refrain, Hey-Ho-Raggedy-Oh, has also been recently resurrected, possibly as a result of a renewed interest in the Civil War since the making of an American documentary on the subject by Ken Burns. Collections of Civil War songs now have *Billy Barlow* and *Lookout Mountain* listed among them. Few singers will be interested in bringing 19th-century Billy's words back, but his tune is timeless and lovely, whether played on a fiddle, a banjo, a tin whistle, or a harp.

The Character – Billy Barlow After 1865

Evidence of the use of the costume, the makeup, the persona, and the name of Billy Barlow, the ragged clown, after this date, may lie buried in the diaries, memoirs, and letters of 19th-century actors and singers. George Coppin's last performance, in 1901, probably included his Billy Barlow. Sam Cowell played him during his American tour in 1860-1862, and probably continued as Billy after returning to England, shortly before his death in 1864. John Lawrence Toole performed up until 1896, but it is not recorded when he played Billy Barlow for the last time. He did play Billy in Australia in the 1890s. There is no evidence that Robert "Billy" Barlow actually sang Billy's song, or dressed in Billy's outfit, after his early performances in London in the late 1830s and the 1840s.

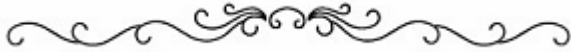
There will probably never be any way of testing the theory already mentioned, about the migration of the character Billy Barlow into the bodies of the American Hobo and Tramp Clowns. These clowns are said to have come out of the depression of the 1930s. They became well-known stage and film characters after this time. With their female equivalent, the Bag-lady Clown, they remain as one of the main clown-types. If this is the place where Billy Barlow came to rest he did not take with him his name or his song.

George Coppin is on record as having continued to play Billy Barlow, in character, until about 1901. It is my opinion that he was the last complete Billy Barlow.

The trinity of Name, Character and Song.

He was also one of the first.

The life of his Billy Barlow dates from before 1841 in England to about 1901 in Melbourne, Australia.



Conclusions and Some Answers

My soul-mate, who was at first my teacher of song accompaniment, taught me to always go back to the source before finding my own interpretation of a song. *Back to the source!* has become my mantra for studies beyond the singing of songs, and echoes in my ears whenever I contemplate the Billy Barlow phenomenon. This has meant searching out pictures, sheet-music, and first-hand accounts that date from the time when Billy Barlow existed in the flesh, and comparing them with the legends he might have left behind. I think I always knew that I might never find the first Billy Barlow. He always skips off into the more and more distant past when it seems sure that I have found him. Still, it's been the characters, including the many versions of Billy, that I've met along the way who have come to be the real prizes of the Quest.

Somewhere there was once, and may still be, the answer to the question:

Who was the first Billy Barlow?

For now, I can only wonder which one among the hundreds of comedians, who performed during the earliest years of the 19th century, started the Billy Barlow phenomenon. There is a formidable list of possibilities, for instance, the comic and serio-comic actors of London street-characters: Frederick Robson, Robert Keeley, Charles Mathews and his son Charles James Mathews, William Henry Liston, Edward Wright, James Munyard, Billy Rogers, John B. Buckstone, and John Pritt Harley, to name just a few. So far, I have not found any records of these actors performing as Billy Barlow, but the possibility is there. John Reeve is a good candidate. He was "a funny little fat chap", and he certainly sang the Billy Barlow song in America in 1835. He performed as a member of The Adelphi Theatre Company in London from 1819. He was at least among the first of the Billy Barlows. The Adelphi Theatre may well hold the clue to Billy Barlow's origins. Its name comes up in connection with many of the men closely associated with him. There was also James Catnach, the printer of Billy Barlow broadsides and of several stories based on Adelphi plays. Among the tangle of characters and actors from those same plays, Jemmy Green, a character in the Adelphi play, *Life in London*, found a namesake in a character who is clearly Billy Barlow, in the convict-written Australian play *Jemmy Green in Australia*. Several characters out of Adelphi plays are mentioned in Billy Barlow songs. None of these connections are particularly surprising when you look at the whole picture of Victorian society, but they are intriguing all the same.

At the end of this journey into the world of Billy Barlow, there are some points about him that can be confidently claimed as facts. There are many more that may be less confidently noted, and still more that are studied guesses. There are questions, some of them key ones, to which I have not yet found answers. For some questions it may always remain so, no matter how many faded old books of reminiscences are found, or how many dusty theatre-bills turn up in library collections. The way has been a tangle of false trails and true deviations, dead ends and parallel paths. A linear progression through man-made time has not been possible. There are surely avenues as yet unexplored. There are side trails that lead to interesting but unconnected worlds, peopled by real and imagined beings. Time to ruminate a while. Time to reflect on the journey. Time to try to tie together some of the aspects of the Billy Barlow phenomenon.

Some key questions can be explored, and to some degree answered, in retrospect: Who was Billy Barlow the raggedy clown, who sang the songs about himself that have the refrain – Hey Ho Raggedy Oh?

The men on record as playing Billy Barlow in character and singing his song were:

George Coppin

from about 1840 to about 1901 ~ in the British Isles and Australia. Also on tour in Cape Town, New Zealand, North America, Mexico, Panama and Canada.

Sam Cowell

from about 1840 to 1864 ~ in the British Isles and on tour in America and Canada.

Billy Barlow the “original” London street-clown

during the 1840s. Said to have taken his name “from the song.” !

Another Billy Barlow, also a London street-clown

sometime in the 1850s interviewed by Henry Mayhew.

John Lawrence Toole

from about 1850 to about 1895. – in the British Isles and on tour in Australia.

Men who sang Billy Barlow songs in character were:

Jack Reeve

probably before 1835 ~ in England. Certainly in 1835 ~ in America.

Mr. Wills

in 1836 ~ in America.

Benjamin Oliver Conquest

from the late 1840s ~ in England.

W G Ross

from about 1850 ~ in The British Isles.

Men who sang Billy Barlow songs – maybe or maybe not in character were:

W. H. C. West

from the 1830s? ~ in England and then America.

John Sims Reeves from 1840s? ~ in the British Isles also possibly during tours in America, Europe and South Africa.

Mr. Rolls 1857 ~ in India on tour from England. Probably also in the British Isles.

Men who may have sung Billy Barlow songs were:

T.E. Purday

during the 1830s ~ In England. He was the publisher of a Billy Barlow song.

P.F. Fallon 1834 ~ in America. Fallon arranged the piano accompaniment for Billy Barlow as sung "by himself". He may or may not have also been the singer.

Men who each wrote one Billy Barlow song and might have sung it were:

Benjamin Griffin, A Gentleman of Maitland

in the 1840s ~ in Sydney, Australia. Who wrote the song, Billy Barlow in Australia.

Edward Clifford

1863 ~ in America. Civil War Billy Barlow. May have been just the publisher of the song.

John M. Valleau

1865 ~ in America. Wrote the Civil War Billy Barlow song – Lookout Mountain.

The performer who took the name Billy Barlow but may never have sung his song was:

Robert "Billy" Barlow

from 1837 to 1907 ~ in The British Isles and Australia and also in New Zealand, China, South Africa, Europe, America, India and Canada.

Where did 19th-century Billy Barlow come from?

His *name* seems to connect through Blind Barlow, Belly Blind, and Burlow Beanie with the old semi-supernatural household spirit – Billy Blin. By the time Professor Francis James Child made his collection of *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads*, the Billy Blin survived only in a few old traditional songs from the area around the border between England and Scotland. It's likely that in earlier times he would have been more widespread. The name Billy Blin occurs in Scotland as the name of the children's game, Blind Man's Buff. Child thought that the Billy Blin was a manifestation of the Germanic god Woden.

The *character*, costume, and makeup of 19th-century Billy Barlow may have come from one or more of the clowns of the *Commedia dell'Arte* through the English burletta, the forerunner of the pantomime. The court fools and the wandering players of the Middle Ages and many of Shakespeare's clowns have characteristics in common with Billy Barlow. Ragged London street-characters were numerous in 19th-century English theatre and also in the novels of Charles Dickens. The character

Billy Barlow, as he is seen in the 19th century, may have been developed from the early Billy Barlow broadsides.

The *song words* of the Billy Barlow songs are found on British broadsides that could date from as early as 1813, but are more likely to be from around the early 1820s. The form and metre changed very little over the years. Even the song, *Let's Go a-huntin'/ Billy Barlow*, which uses a different tune, is basically unchanged in metre and in verse-length, although there is reason to suspect that this is a newer song that uses Billy's name. In all but this song, Billy retains his persona as a ragged clown who comments on topical events and who sings a version of Hey Ho Raggedy O! as a refrain. Sam Cowell and George Coppin wrote or adapted a large proportion of the Billy Barlow song words found from after 1840.

The *tune* used for all of the Billy Barlow songs, (except for the song collected in America as *Let's Go a-huntun'*), may have been an old tune or a cleverly composed new tune based on old ideas. It is written as modal often enough to suggest this. The change of one note can place it in a minor key, making it appear more modern. The tune used for *Billy Barlow in Australia* shows this change. The fact that the tune sounds Irish to modern ears is not necessarily an indication of its actual origins. The interesting point about the Billy Barlow songs is that the tune remained surprisingly constant over a period of at least one hundred years. This is note worthy when we take into account the many different Billy Barlow songs sung by many different performers, in countries as far apart as the British Isles, America, and Australia.

The *Let's Go a-huntin'* song is still a puzzle-piece that doesn't quite fit, but I will mention in passing that it is possible to sing this song to the tune of the other Billy Barlow songs and vice-versa. The phrasing is the same. You can even add to the experiment the words and melody of *The Cutty Wren*, of which *Let's Go a-huntin'* seems to be a parody, and you'll find that any set of words will fit with any one of the three tunes. The melody used for *Let's Go a-huntin'* is very close to *The Campbells are Coming*, a song also popular in the 19th century, so that it too can be added to the mix – but enough!

The most likely place where Billy Barlow's name, his character and his song came together is London. In fact, if I were a gambler I would be even more specific, and lay odds on either an East End London tavern, or the Adelphi theatre, which was also in the East End of London. (Many of the printers of broadsides were in the East End). However it could have been in any of the big cities of the American Eastern Seaboard, or Edinburgh, or Dublin.

Wherever it was, at the time of his birth, Billy Barlow was by nature a poor Londoner, and he probably already existed as a character in a song.

Who was the first 19th-century Billy Barlow?

Brewer's Dictionary of Phrase and Fable, 1898 edition, claims that Billy Barlow was:

A street droll, a Merry Andrew, so called from a half-idiot of the name, who fancied himself some great personage. He was well known in the East of London, and died in Whitechapel Workhouse. Some of his sayings were really witty, and some of his attitudes really droll.

This sounds like the earlier street performer referred to by Henry Mayhew's "Billy Barlow impersonator". Mayhew's Billy said that he based his act on this earlier Billy Barlow. He also said that the:

"original Billy Barlow" street-clown took his name from one of the songs he sang – *Billy Barlow*, "which was popular at the time".

I remain unconvinced that the song – *Billy Barlow*, was not performed in character before this. The song was certainly sung well before. There are two American sheet-music booklets, (with pictures of Billy on the covers), many British broadsides, and one American broadside that predate the London street-tramp. The earliest date I've found so far, on record, for a performer singing a Billy Barlow song is – "Himself" on the 28th of May 1834 where Billy sang "with unbounded applause at the Western and Southern theatres". The publication is American. The music was arranged by P F Fallon. Does that suggest that Fallon is "Himself"? There are broadsides, one of them American, that are older than this sheet-music, and I think that there would have been actors performing as Billy before 1834 – but that's a studied guess.

English actor John Reeve was singing the Billy Barlow song in America in 1835 or 1836. He was probably singing it in character well before this in London, (that's another studied guess) where he was a member of the Adelphi Theatre company. Reeve played Jerry Hawthorn in the popular play *Tom and Jerry or Life in London* when it was staged for the first time in 1821. He continued to play Jerry until his death in 1838. *Life in London* has characters who have connections with English ritual theatre – Dusty Bob and Black Sal – as well as characters out of the *Commedia dell'Arte* – like Harlequin, Columbine and Clown. It is also full of London street people. Although there is no mention of Billy Barlow in the cast, his name and his persona would fit neatly, as a minor character, into this play. There is also the interesting connection between Jemmy Green from the same play and *Billy Barlow in Australia*. John Reeve performed one-man acts involving many comic types on the same bill as the Adelphi plays.

If John Reeve was not the first Billy Barlow he must have been one of the first.

Where Did Billy Barlow Go?

Billy Barlow was, at one time or another, a performer in taverns, clubs, music-halls, theatres, the streets of London, and tent-shows. He performed in the British Isles, North America, South America, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, India, China, and France, and probably other parts of Europe. His audiences were:

The upper-classes and the elite including Queen Victoria and Prince Albert, the street people of London, lower and middle-class city workers, soldiers on and off various battlefields, gold-miners in California and in Australia, settlers, cowboys and cattlemen, shearers, drovers, transported convicts, farmers and small-town dwellers, and more.

Billy himself was at one time or another an immigrant, a tramp, a gold-digger, an American Civil War soldier, the resident of a London poor-house, a happily married man with children, a single gentlemanly flirt bent on seduction of every pretty woman he met and of Queen Victoria and the wives of generals. He was adviser to kings and queens and military leaders on both sides of all the battles of the 19th century. He attended all the main events of the century in all parts of the English-speaking world. Sometimes he gave a little help and advice – or would have if he had been asked – but mostly he observed the world around him, and commented on events as they unfolded.

He mixed with actors famous and forgotten, famous and remembered, and others never known well – beyond their own small circle of admirers. He knew performers of all manner of amazing feats. He was the close acquaintance of singers, poets, writers, grand-orators, innovators and inventors.

His name was used for a famous female opera singer who chose to become a music-hall star and a player of Principal Boys in the Pantomime. Billy Barlow's name was also used by dozens of men and a few women, for pets and working animals, for a pocket-knife, and for a showboat in Australia.

For nearly one hundred years there was such an explosion of Billy Barlows that it must have seemed that he would always be with us. Then, as suddenly as he had appeared, he was gone and forgotten.

Today – April Fools' Day in the year of 2003, "Hey Ho" is being used in the streets of Philadelphia by gaily-dressed Clowns protesting with outrageous sarcasm and humour against the war in Iraq. They are not calling themselves Billy Barlows, and it's doubtful that any one of them has ever heard of Billy.

However, the costume of The Clown, and his way of using humour to influence the course of human events remains unchanged.

Hey Ho – the refrain of The Clown, still echoes down the years.

Billy Barlow is just one of his names.

Billy Barlow is dead

but his spirit will live on.

All that's bright must fade,
The brightest still the fleetest;
All that's sweet was made
But to be lost when sweetest.

Thomas Moore

All that's bright must fade
and people can't expect to make
a hundred and fifty per cent for ever

Old Resident of Castlemaine, Victoria, Australia. 1869
– referring to Robert "Billy" Barlow and the good times generally.