Fielding's Gang

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▶Key Words

Henry Fielding, Sir John Fielding,
Bow Street Runners, *Wild and Wicked Youth*,
In Newry Town, Roud 490, Highwaymen

▼Abstract

This article concerns itself with the connection between the song *The Wild and Wicked Youth*, or *In Newry Town* (Roud 490), and the Fielding brothers, Henry and Sir John, and their 'gang', the Bow Street Runners. It notes that many of the attitudes implicit in the song are reflected in the brothers' writings on crime prevention. It also notes and attempts to explain the song's longevity and continued popularity.

Fielding's Gang

There are many folk songs in English concerning highwaymen. Some are comic, such as the cluster of songs around *The Highwayman Outwitted* (Roud 2637, 2638 and 2640, Laws L1 and L2, Child 283[1]), and some involve women dressed as highwaymen (Roud 7, under various titles, including *The Female Highwayman*). Many, however, describe the career and inevitable downfall of a bold robber. This article will focus on one song of this type, a song most commonly known in England and Ireland as *The Wild And Wicked Youth* or *In Newry Town* (Roud 490), though it goes by many other titles, including, in its somewhat different American version, *The Rambling Boy*. In particular, the focus will be on the mention of 'Fielding's gang', who arrest the highwayman, and the connection between an entirely generic, fictitious criminal and such a specific group of thief-takers.

The Song

The song is told in the first person, and takes the form of a potted autobiography of the nameless man's life, from birth to hanging. As such, it belongs to the genre known as goodnight ballads, purportedly the confession of the criminal on the night before being hanged. We could divide the song into seven sections, though few versions contain all seven, as follows:

i) His birth and apprenticeship
ii) His marriage and need to support his wife
iii) His highway career
iv) Assertions about who he robs
v) His arrest and conviction
vi) His parents' laments
vii) His wish for a flashy funeral

This division differs from that of Renwick (2001: 37), who divides the funeral (vii) into two parts, for male and for female participants, and does not include assertions about who the highwayman robs (iv). As an example, here is the version sung by Jumbo Brightwell in 1953 (*O'er His Grave The Grass Grew Green*, notes p 40), entitled *Newry Town*:

Now, in Newry Town I was bred and born.
In Stevenstown I died for scorn.
I signed myself to a saddler's trade,
And they always called me a roving blade.

For at seventeen I took a wife.
I loved her as dear as I loved my life,
And to maintain her both fine and gay,
A-robbing I went upon the King's highway.

I robbed Lord Golden, I do declare.
I robbed Lady Mannon; 'twas in Grosvenor Square.
Putting the shutters up, I wished them good night;
Carried home their gold to my heart's delight.

To Covenant [*Covent*] Gardens I made my way
All for my bride to see the grand play
When Feelan's [*Fielding's*] gang they did me pursue.

Taken was I by that cursed crew.

My father wept for his only son.
My wife she cried, "It's I am undone."
My mother she tore her grey locks and cried,
"I wish in his cradle that he had died."

Six blooming maidens to follow my pall.
Give them white gloves and its ribbons all.
Six highwaymen for to carry me.
Give them broadswords and sweet liberty.

Now when I'm dead and a-gone to my grave,
A decent funeral it's let me have,
So when I'm in my grave they may speak the truth:
"There lies a wild and wicked youth."

It is clear from many other versions that the references in the fourth stanza are to Covent Garden and Fielding. As an example of the fourth element of the song, his assertions about who he robs, we can supplement Brightwell's rendition with a verse from Walter Pardon's 1974 version, *The Rambling Blade* (Topic TSCD514, notes p 18):

I never robbed a poor man yet,
Nor was I in a tradesman's debt,
But many a maiden will weep for me
When my sad life ends on the gallows tree.

Our nameless protagonist's place of birth varies widely, from Newry to Newlyn, Newark, Newbury, Norwich, Sheffield, Horsham, and, in Ireland, Dublin, Derry, and Kerry. He would often seem to have an Irish connection, and Dublin places are sometimes mentioned as the scene of his activities (Stephen's Green, for example), but the song does seem to be English (Roud & Bishop 2012: 308, against Purslow 1972: 143). Rather more to the point, in many versions he starts out in life with an honest job, albeit a humble one. In a world of horses, a saddler could be sure of a living. Thus, where this start in life is mentioned, we will not feel that he became a highwayman out of dire necessity, as discharged soldiers and sailors might do, and our sympathy for him will be limited.

He seems to have married rather above his station in life, to someone some might now call a trophy wife. The word 'gay' can carry many meanings in folk song, not all of them positive, but we can perhaps infer that as well as being beautiful, the lady enjoyed the finer

things in life. There is no suggestion that she pushed him towards crime; rather, he felt the need himself. This is understandable, though not a good motive.

The names of the people he robbed seem fictitious in most versions, though there was a Lord Edgcumbe (Reeves 1960:152) and a Lady Mansel (O Lochlainn 1978: 70). He did, in one version, rob a 'lovely Nancy' (Palmer 1999: 124), but the general point is that he robbed the rich. He was also bold in his choice of locations, as apart from Grosvenor Square, they included Leicester Square (Walter Pardon's version), St James' Park and Hounslow Heath (Shuldham-Shaw & Lyle 1983: 264). This may seem unlikely, but Robert Walpole, first minister from 1721 to 1742, was held up in Hyde Park (Beattie 2012: 15), and Hounslow Heath is on the road between London and Windsor, and so was much frequented by the wealthy. Our hero also seems to have enjoyed his crimes, with rather exaggerated courtesy shutting the window shutters on the victims' carriage himself and wishing them goodnight. His courtesy did not prevent him from robbing women, however.

He robbed the rich, but he also asserts that he did not rob the poor. There would be little point in robbing people with nothing, and a highwayman is aiming at carriages, and so the wealthy, anyway. The line about not being in a tradesman's debt is clearly a dig at the aristocracy, who were notoriously dilatory in paying their bills, often causing cash flow problems for tradesmen. The Robin Hood element is more to the fore in other highwayman songs, such as *Brennan On The Moor* (Roud 476), as given in Hodgart (1965: 204):

> He never robb'd a poor man upon the King's highway;
> But what he's taken from the rich, like Turpin or Queen Bess,
> He always did divide it with the widow in distress.

Even though our highwayman makes no suggestion of helping poor widows, there is an appeal to the feeling that the rich, in an unequal and unjust society, deserve to be robbed, having gained their wealth in a dishonest, albeit legal, manner.

Covent Garden was until recently an area where rich and poor mingled. In the eighteenth century it was an entertainment district, a place of drinkers, gamblers and prostitutes, as well as of that slightly less disreputable pastime, theatre (see, for example, Hibbert 2001: 36-38). Our man is undone by unwisely using his gains to entertain his wife very close to Bow Street, the home of 'Fielding's gang'. That word 'gang' suggests little respect for the forces of the law.

His parents' (and wife's) laments are not present in every version – Dillon (1950: 138), Palmer (1999: 124) and Roud & Bishop (2012: 360) do not have them – but, where present, they make a clear statement that this is indeed a bad man. We may have a sneaking admiration for his boldness, but the consequences fall heavily on others.

Finally we come to his hanging and funeral. That he should come to a bad end is inevitable in such a song, as crime cannot be seen to be rewarded. Real life highwaymen, such as Dick Turpin (executed 1739) or Willie Brennan (executed 1804) may be folk heroes, but

they paid for their crimes, including in song. The flashy funeral can be seen as a last gesture of defiance from a man who lived fast and well. It implies a fellowship of highwaymen, as if it were a respectable trade, as well as his attractiveness to women. Further, a public execution was a major social event. As Thompson (1991: 65-66) puts it:

> The procession to Tyburn (later, the scaffold outside Newgate) was a central ceremonial of eighteenth-century London. The condemned in the carts – the men in gaudy attire, the women in white, with baskets of flowers and oranges which they threw to the crowds – the ballad-singers and hawkers, with their 'last speeches' (which were sold even before the victims had given the sign of the dropped handkerchief to the hangman to do his work): all the symbolism of 'Tyburn Fair' was a ritual at the heart of London's popular culture.

One reason the two-mile procession from Newgate prison to Tyburn was stopped was that on occasion the condemned prisoner was altogether too popular with the crowds, which led to disorder. Thompson also points out (p 64):

> Highwaymen and pirates belonged to popular ballads, part heroic myth, part admonition to the young.

Overall, then, our hero is indeed a wild and wicked youth. He pays for his crimes, but dies defiant, refusing to conform to the social order. He abandons a poor but honest life in order to maintain himself and his slightly dubious wife in an unbefitting manner, and his parents suffer the consequences. On the other hand, his boldness is appealing, as is his subverting of an unjust social order. If he were simply a villain, the song would not have lasted, yet its popularity can be seen in that the earliest printed versions (broadsides) date from the 1780s and 1790s (Roud & Bishop 2012: 508-509); estimated dates of the 20 copies in the Bodleian broadside collection run from 1802 to 1899, and the Madden collection at Cambridge has over 40 examples; and the song has remained current until today.

The Fielding Connection

In the first half of the eighteenth century there was no effective police force in London. The legal system was corrupt and haphazard, and large numbers of crimes, including relatively minor crimes against property, were capital offences. There were parish constables, but they were restricted to their area, and thus unable to pursue criminals, even if they had the energy and inclination. One government attempt to reduce crime was to offer rewards to informers, sometimes as much as £100, a large sum. This simply led to perjured evidence against innocent people as a means to claim the reward (Beattie 2012: 7-8; 18-19). Victims of theft

would also offer rewards. One person who took advantage of this system was the thief-taker Jonathan Wild, who controlled large criminal gangs, would arrange thefts and then collect and share the reward offered by the victim, and would denounce and send to their deaths any criminals who crossed him. One of those he arranged to have arrested was John Sheppard, a thief, who became famous and wildly popular for his remarkable ability to escape from prison (on four occasions). He was hanged in 1724. Following a change in the law to make receiving stolen goods a crime, Wild himself was convicted and hanged in 1725 (Defoe, in Holmes 2004). (See Beattie, Hibbert and Holmes.)

As a result of all this, informers and thief-takers were regarded with great suspicion. When, in 1753, Henry Fielding began the formation of an official, salaried, group of detectives, they were unpopular, and regarded as corrupt. Ill health soon forced Henry to stop his work, but his blind younger half-brother John took over and continued until his death in 1780 (Beattie 2012: 25). Working from Bow Street, near Covent Garden, he gradually established a regular detective and police force, which became known as the Bow Street Runners, and lasted until the formation of the Metropolitan Police in 1829.

Both Fieldings were aware of the unpopularity of the forces of law. Defoe and others had written about Wild, showing how reviled he was, particularly at his execution (Defoe in Holmes 2004: 115-117). The character Peachum in Gay's *The Beggar's Opera* (1728) is based on Wild, while the popular serial jailbreaker Sheppard becomes Macheath. Henry Fielding himself wrote a satire based around Wild's life, *Jonathan Wild* (1743). On the subject of thief-takers, Henry Fielding writes (1988: 153):

> ... I much question whether in the Acceptation of the Vulgar, a Thief-catcher be not a more odious and contemptible Name than even that of Informer.

John Fielding writes (1755: 8):

> A captain of the guards was sometime ago robbed on Hounslow Heath in a post-chaise, and the moment the highwayman left him, disengaged one of the horses, and pursued the robber; and who will believe it? though he drove him through a public town at noon-day, crying out highwayman! highwayman! Both being in full view of the populace, yet no one join'd the pursuit, more than if all the inhabitants had been interested in the highwayman's escape.

Both John (1755: 6) and Henry (1988: 162-163) write about the problem of perjured evidence. *Jonathan Wild* concerns itself satirically, indeed sarcastically, with 'Greatness', whether that of Jonathan Wild himself, Walpole or Alexander (the Great), criticizing the corruption in high places. People did not trust the legal system, with good reason. As Gay, to the air of Greensleeves, has it (2013: 66):

Since Laws were made for ev'ry Degree,
To curb Vice in others, as well as me,
I wonder we han't better Company,
Upon Tyburn Tree!
But Gold from Law can take out the Sting
And if rich Men like us were to swing
'Twou'd thin the Land, such Numbers to string
Upon Tyburn Tree!

This helps to explain the popularity of condemned criminals at their executions. Hogarth catches the spirit of such occasions in his engraving *The Idle 'Prentice Executed at Tyburn* (1747), as does Swift (*Clever Tom Clinch Going To Be Hanged*, 1726):

As clever Tom Clinch, while the rabble was bawling,
Rode stately through Holborn to die in his calling,
He stopt at the George for a bottle of sack,
And promised to pay for it when he came back.

Henry Fielding writes (1988: 167):

> The Day appointed by Law for the Thief's Shame is the Day of Glory in his own Opinion. His Procession to Tyburn, and his last Moments there, are all triumphant; attended with the Compassion of the meek and tender-hearted, and with the Applause, Admiration and Envy of all the bold and hardened.

The manner in which many condemned men and women died has led McKenzie to call them *Tyburn's Martyrs* (2007), but this is going a little far. In many cases these were hardened criminals, who had been quite happy to rob anyone with anything worth stealing (Sheppard regularly stole from shopkeepers (Defoe in Holmes 2004; Hibbert 2001)). Nor did they shrink from violence (Beattie 2012: 1, for example). And the life of a highwayman was scarcely noble: when Sheppard briefly 'took to the road' he ended up stealing half a crown from a lady's maid on one occasion (Hibbert 2001: 85). John Fielding (1755: 10) comments on one Fleming, 'who was supposed to have subsisted three or four years by the road', as if such longevity were unusual.

Beattie (2012: 3) tells us that the officers under the Fieldings' command 'were known at first simply as 'Fielding's men', or 'Sir John's men' after he was knighted in 1761'. The name 'runners' came during the 1770s. Beattie also tells us that the runners gradually overcame the general reputation of the forces of the law, and particularly thief-takers, and came to be respected and trusted (see p 77, for example). They became an effective means of catching

criminals in and around London, and sometimes further afield. They were brave and honest (being properly paid), and so neither the threat of violence nor bribery could turn them aside. This certainly gave them a high profile, and must have reassured many people at a time of very high crime. However, as the song suggests, they did not convince everyone. Those caught would have good reason to hate Fielding's 'gang', but for the Fieldings to be remembered for so long suggests that many others disliked them, too.

It should be noted that versions of the song often refer to Ned or Lord Fielding. Ned is a short form of Edward, not Henry or John, and neither brother was ennobled, so there is some inaccuracy here. Often the melody requires an extra syllable before the word Fielding, though that does not explain those particular syllables. Another song, known variously as *Valentine O'Hara* or, by a fine mondegreen, as *Alan Tyne of Harrow* (Roud 2403), also mentions Ned Fielding. In this case the eponymous highwayman buys a gelding from him, one which can jump a five bar gate, and so one which can jump the turnpike and enable its rider to escape the law. In this song the highwayman defeats Fielding, at least temporarily.

Since the Fieldings

As we have seen, judging by the extant broadsides, the song was popular in the late eighteenth century, and remained so throughout the whole nineteenth century. Broadside printers were in it for the money, so any song that did not sell would not have been reissued. During the nineteenth century class conflict remained just as stark as in the Fieldings' time, from fears of revolution during the Napoleonic Wars, to the Luddites, then the Chartists, and on to later Socialist movements. Songs about highwaymen were numerous – Roud lists more than 40 – and the already well known Jack Sheppard and Dick Turpin were made more famous by the works of Harrison Ainsworth: *Rookwood* (1834) on Turpin, and *Jack Sheppard* (1839). These continued and augmented the idea of the Gentleman of the Road, an anti-Establishment figure that many of us can identify with.

The Bow Street Runners have remained famous to this day, though the name of Fielding in connection with them has not. To give two examples, the comic film *Carry On Dick* (1975), aimed squarely at a popular audience, assumes that they know of the Bow Street Runners, and the more recent TV programme *City of Vice* (2008) assumes the same, but also introduces a fictionalized version of the Fieldings.

Performances of the Song

The song was collected fairly often from traditional singers around the turn of the twentieth century, from James Townsend in Devon in 1890 (Roud & Bishop 2012: 358-359), from Charles Woodhouse in Hampshire in 1906 (Reeves 1960: 153), from Joseph Laver in Somerset in 1906 (Reeves 1958: 178), from a Mrs. Webb in Worcestershire in 1906 (Purslow

1972: 107-108), by Cecil Sharp from Charles Neville in Somerset in 1908 (Karpeles 1974 II: 162-163) and by Ralph Vaughan Williams from Robert Hurr in Suffolk in 1910 (Palmer 1999: 123-124), among others. Neville's version includes the stanza about never robbing any poor man yet. The song was also collected in Scotland; there are three versions in the Greig-Duncan collection (Shuldham-Shaw & Lyle II: 264-265), one of which, from Miss Bell Robertson of Aberdeenshire, mentions 'old blind Ferlding' (i.e. John). Indeed Lloyd writes (1967: 219):

> Nearly every surviving traditional singer in England with anything like a decent repertory knows a version of "The Flash Lad"

There are recordings of traditional singers from the second folk revival (though extant recordings seem to focus on East Anglia). Bob Scarce (recorded in 1953), Sam Larner (c.1958), Harry Cox (1965), Gordon Hall (date unclear), Walter Pardon (1974) and Jumbo Brightwell (1975) can all be heard singing 'this most masculine song', though Stradling tells us, and we have seen above, that women also sang it (notes to Sam Larner, *Cruising Round Yarmouth*). Gordon Hall does not mention Fielding, but the others do. Only Walter Pardon includes the Robin Hood element of never robbing the poor.

The song continues to be sung by revival singers. Martin Carthy has recorded it three times, once solo (*Newlyn Town*), once with Waterson-Carthy (*Newry Town*) and once with Brass Monkey (*The Flash Lad*), mentioning Ned Fielding's gang, Fielding's gang and Lord Fielding's gang respectively. The Brass Monkey version also includes the assertion of chivalry and class solidarity:

> I never robbed any woman yet
> And I was never in a tradesman's debt.
> But I robbed the lords and ladies gay
> To carry home the gold to my love straightway.

Robbing upper class ladies is acceptable, it seems, as opposed to robbing lowly women, who are from the same class as the robber; clearly class trumps gender. Martin Simpson sings a version combining *In Newry Town* with the widespread variant *Adieu, Adieu* (which never mentions Fielding). He also mentions Ned Fielding's gang. Lisa Knapp (*Wild & Undaunted*) mentions the Fieldings' gang, as well as not robbing any poor man or being in a tradesman's debt. Her use of 'undaunted' in place of 'wicked' gives a different nuance to the song, more sympathetic to the protagonist. A further example is The Furrow Collective, whose rendition of *Wild And Wicked Youth* mentions Fielding's gang. There are many more recordings, with a number of Irish versions available on the Internet.

The Appeal of the Song

If we continue the Lloyd quotation above, we read:

> it is not easy to account for the extreme vigour the song still shows after two hundred years or so of life. Two centuries is no great time in the life of a folk song, it is true, but this particular piece, picturesque as it is, is hardly of the kind whose roots lie very deep in the psyche, one would think.

Well, we can try. It is surely a song of class warfare, where even today many ordinary people do not see wealth as fairly gained. They see the legal system as part of the defence of privilege, particularly the defence of wealthy people's property. London's Metropolitan Police, more than other forces, are seen as corrupt, violent and racist by many people, and by some as just another gang – that word again - vying for control of the streets. British policing is supposedly by the consent of the people, a consent withheld by some.

Poor criminals seem to be severely punished for minor offences, while the rich get away with worse crimes. One need only compare the treatment of the rioters of 2011, who often received prison sentences for minor thefts, with that of the bankers, not one of whom has even been prosecuted. Britain has a very high rate of imprisonment today, just as it had a high rate of execution 250 years ago. The system seems vengeful, and, given the high rate of recidivism, ineffective (and Henry Fielding (1988: 121) had doubts about the good effects of prison).

But another reason why the song has endured is its ambivalent attitude. Our highwayman defies an unjust social order, which appeals to fantasies of rebellion in those trapped by it. In relatively recent times the Great Train Robber Ronald Biggs became something of a folk hero by escaping from prison and reaching the safety of Brazil (and even recording with The Sex Pistols). The notorious gangsters the Kray twins had tremendous funerals for their mother and then themselves. But our highwayman is also a violent lawbreaker, of a type who in reality often targeted ordinary people (just as the Great Train Robbers did), and as such he deserves his punishment. Unjust laws are oppressive, but lawlessness is no improvement.

This leaves us with the Fieldings. Clearly, their efforts in establishing the Bow Street Runners were remembered for some time, and we can only guess that once the standard broadside ballad mentioning them had become established, their name stuck. And it is a good song.

1 Roud numbers refer to numbers in the Roud Folksong Index, available at The Vaughan Williams Memorial Library website. Child numbers refer to numbers in Child's The English And Scottish Popular Ballads (1882-1898). Laws numbers refer to numbers in Laws' American Ballads From British Broadsides (1957).

Acknowledgement

This paper would have been much more difficult to research without the assistance of two websites: The Roud Folksong Index, compiled by Steve Roud, and the Mainly Norfolk resource for 'English folk and other good music' maintained by Reinhard Zierke.

With thanks to Professor Kondoh Hisao for the loan of Henry Fielding's writings.

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