

IN MEMORIAM

Robert Patten (1948 – 2018)

Sarah J. Davies

At Bob's funeral on 18 October 2018, celebrant Alison Orchard commented, 'A country man at heart, in the introduction to his book, *Exmoor Custom and Song*, printed in 1974, Bob wrote, "For (country folk) Nature was always a dynamic and wayward force that had to be respected . . . not dominated . . ." Bob was in accord with this sentiment and embraced October as 'his time to go'.

Alison continued, 'Held in the highest regard by many, Bob's sharp intellect, his enthusiasm for gaining knowledge and his fascination—with so many things—was inspirational and, unfailingly meticulous and careful, anything Bob did, was done well; he set high standards for himself and was a natural archivist and custodian'.

Bob was born in Somerset, brought up in a farming family on the Blackdown Hills. Bob's father and uncle together ran a haulage company, Patten Bros Ltd. It was these formative years which shaped the man Bob would become, with his enduring love of the country and interest in country ways. Bob's wife once said friends had suggested she market Bob's accent, which was 'pure West Country'.

Bob was an able student and, on passing his eleven plus exam, gained a place at the Grammar School in Ilminster. 'From his late teens Bob had also become absorbed by local and social history, he spent many an evening, weekend and holiday travelling around to local pubs, listening and taping people's memories, stories and songs; he loved folk music and folk clubs' (Alan Quick, 'Bob Patten of Morchard Bishop – a true gentleman who will be greatly missed', *Crediton Courier*, 3 November 2018). Bob went on to read Chemistry at Aberystwyth University and achieved a 2:1.

Bob had been particularly inspired by Kingsley Palmer, whom he knew from school. Palmer came to live in Somerset in his early teens and completed an M.Phil. at the Institute of Dialect and Folk Life Studies in the late 1960s. During this time, he worked on the classification of oral traditions from Somerset and Dorset and maintained an enduring interest in fieldwork.

In his working life, Bob continued his links to agriculture and became an expert in the milling industry. He was a well-respected and trusted manager at Crediton Mill and other mills for many years. However, he always chose to remain in the West Country, turning down offers to work overseas or options which involved being away from home for more than a few nights at a time.

Bob's marriage to Jacqueline in 1982 marked a watershed moment in his work as a collector. Jacqueline helped Bob with some of his research when she worked at the Somerset Record Office. They had met at Halsway Manor when Jacqueline was at school and Bob at university. She shared his passion for collecting and, once married, worked as a freelance historian from their home.

Bob and Jacqueline were a strong collaborative team. She was an essential part of the thinking and redrafting process in terms of the written output that followed fieldwork and was a planner of their recorded interviews. Jacqueline was an active fieldworker, accompanying Bob and networking with other collectors. Jacqueline sang, read, and had an appreciation of music. All the decisions about their ever-expanding archive, they made together. The Pattens' collecting interests were people-centred, motivated by a concern with social history and a high regard for recording

contemporary life. In spite of its name, the Bob & Jacqueline Patten English Folk Music Collection (British Library reference C1033) is proportionally less song-focused than other West Country archives, such as The Westcountry Folk Centre Archive (British Library reference C1441) for which Sam Richards, Paul Wilson, and Tish Stubbs were three key collectors. It strikes a balance between folk song, dance, folk narrative, custom, belief, language, and all other aspects of living, with a strong focus on Somerset.

In 1993, Bob applied for the Folklore PhD studentship at the University of Plymouth, linked to The Westcountry Folk Centre Archive. Bob, an exceptional candidate, discovered he was not eligible to take up the position on a part-time basis. His first impulse was generosity. Practical assistance and contacts were immediately offered to whichever candidate secured the post that day.

Bob networked with other collectors of West Country material. He accompanied the folk song collector and scholar Sam Richards on some of his expeditions. Bob and Jacqueline remained constantly connected with other folklore enthusiasts and their resulting collections, including the writer Ruth Tongue, Paul Wilson and Marilyn Tucker of the (then) Wren Trust, The Westcountry Folk Centre Archive and staff at Rolle College in Exmouth, the archives at Cecil Sharp House, and Doc Rowe in London. For almost three decades Bob was involved with the West Gallery Music Association.

Bob was an unassuming man and a great supporter of others. At events such as the Sheffield Festival of Village Carols, he was most often seen smiling at the back through his beard. It was an almost shyness which meant Bob was much happier observing others at a knees-up than he was being in the limelight himself. Yet he loved events like the Drayton Wassail, the Padstow Hobby Horse, Dartmoor Folk Festival, and Dunster Carollers in The Luttrell Arms on the Sunday before Christmas. It was this modesty that meant it was not uncommon for people to say they 'knew Bob', but 'didn't know him well'. Yet in spite of this, Bob had an extremely steady nature, trusted his own opinions, and was invaluable in a crisis.

The Patten Collection contains material collected from the late 1960s until 2001. In amassing this archive, Bob and Jacqueline collected a wealth of original material. Some of this was explored and written about in the publications that resulted: *Exmoor Custom and Song* (1974), 'Charlie Showers: Fifty Years a Wassailer' (*English Dance and Song* 42, no. 3 [1980]); 'Mrs Amy Ford of Low Ham, Somerset: Song Learning in a Family Tradition' (*Musical Traditions* 2 [1984]) are just three examples. *Somerset Scrapbook*, a hardback book produced in 1987, was intended to have a wider public appeal. It beautifully combined a snapshot biography of each contributor of songs and stories with an audio-recording of their performance. *The Fly Be on the Turmut: Songs of a Somerset Man* was released by Veteran Tapes (VT133) in 1995.

In terms of its folk song and music content, the archive includes dance sheet music, original music manuscripts (and copies), and notes from research activities. Total material assembled during fieldwork included five hundred audiotapes of which traditional songs, music, and customs were a part. The collection also 'features unique performances of West Gallery Music and Shape Note singing. English carols during house-visiting wassailing and children's rhymes, song and games' (British Library Sounds Archive overview). About one hundred photographs, fifteen hundred slides, and a few videotapes also supplement this collection.

The above publications and releases were just a tantalizing beginning. Some of the material the Pattens recorded was entirely original, since they collected from people who had not been recorded by any other West Country collector. Thankfully, the advent

of digitization and a strong commitment from the British Library Sounds Archive and the South West Heritage Trust has ensured that the Bob & Jacqueline Patten English Folk Music Collection will be discovered, enjoyed, and explored by scholars and enthusiasts for generations to follow. Bob and Jacqueline have made provision for the full Patten Archive to be left to the South West Heritage Trust and some of the material will go to the Taunton Office within the foreseeable future. There will be open access.

Bob shared Roald Dahl's enthusiasm for breeds of old English apple. Danny 'The Champion of the World' remarks, 'It is a most marvellous thing to be able to go out and help yourself to your own apples whenever you feel like it . . . how many families are so lucky?' Bob, ever the custodian, turned fantasy into reality with a field at Redfield near his home in Morchard Bishop. In 1992, Bob and Jacqueline planted the first apples trees of their heritage orchard.

Bob avoided taking himself too seriously. On one occasion, he was praised for his deed as a 'bit of a knight in shining armour'. Bob and Jacqueline had been involved in a tragic accident involving a multi-vehicle pile-up on the M5 near Taunton in November 2011. Bob, in his autumn years at the time, had literally had to carry his injured wife to safety, away from their car. On being compared to a knight, his swift comeback, 'Well, a bit of a rusty one!' was typical, self-deprecating Bob-humour.

Bob's enquiring mind meant he never stopped researching. As a 'seasoned russet' he wrote for his village publication, the *Morchard Messenger*, and researched the histories of the villagers who had lost their lives in the First and Second World Wars. Fittingly, Bob's coffin was crowned with a bouquet combining flowers and apples. Bob is survived by his wife Jacqueline. To know the Pattens well was to share Bob's secret: Jacqueline was his best apple, his most prized, 'Cox's orange pippin'.

Biographical Note

Sarah J. Davies was formerly the Research Student linked to The Westcountry Folk Centre Archive in England. She currently works at the University of the West of England, in Bristol.