

The Bold Northwestern Man

words & music: Traditional

The oldest recorded ballad concerning a Northwest event is "The Bold Northwestern Man", once a favorite in the forecastles of the maritime trading vessels. The event mentioned involved Captain John Kendrick, and occurred in 1791. This particular version appeared in the Bulletin of the Folksong Society of the Northeast (Number 10) edited by Phillips Barry (Powell Printing Co., Cambridge, 1935, and reprinted by the American Folklore Society, Philadelphia, 1960).

The tune is the first traditional version of the ballad to be recorded in the U.S., although two Canadian versions were already printed. The words to the ballad appeared on a broadside between 1830 and 1836, circulated by one Leonard Deming, a ballad-printer of Boston and Middlebury, Vermont. This version comes from Mr. F.E. Kneeland of Searsport, Maine, as learned from his father's singing.

In the ballad, it appears that the ship was attacked without provocation. But, in reality, the attack was an attempt at revenge on the part of the Indians. Kendrick and other maritime fur traders were in the habit of imprisoning and punishing the Indian leaders for the slightest infraction by a tribal member. In one incident in 1813, a silver flagon was stolen from John Clarke of the John Jacob Astor Company. An Indian was identified as the probable thief, and Clarke ordered him hanged. The flagon was never recovered. This event appears in a 1913 ballad called "The Silver Flagon" found in American Murder Ballads by Olive Woolley Burt (Oxford University Press, New York, 1958). The closing verse is as follows:

Now this old tale of the Silver Flagon,
With carven image of the dragon,
A lesson for each of us will make --
"Think well before revenge you take;
Beware of sowing teeth of the dragon
In vengeance for loss of a Silver Flagon!"

It is believed that many "raids" and "massacres" were a direct result of the injustices suffered by the Indians at the hands of the early fur traders.

Come all ye bold Northwestmen who plough the raging
 main, Come listen to this tra-ge-dy, while I re-late the
 same; 'Twas on the "Lady Washington" at Cowper where she
 lay, And by Queen Charlotte's Islands in North America.

'Twas on November the second day, in seventeen ninety-one,
 The natives of this country on board of us did come;
 And then to buy their furs of them, our captain did begin,
 But mark what followed after, before it long had been.

Up upon our quarter deck, our gun chest there did stand,
 The keys they being left in them, by our gunner's careless hand;
 The natives they perceiving, thought our ship to make a prize,
 Thinking we had no other means for to protect our lives.

Up upon our quarter deck, our captain there did stand,
 With twelve of those bold savages with knives drawn in their hands;
 All pointing at his body, ready to run him through,
 If we should offer to resist -- Great God! What could we do?

Then into our cabin, straightway we did repair,
 But to our sad misfortune, no arms could we find there;
 Except it were two pistols, one gun and two broadswords,
 And immediately it was agreed; "Fight them off!" it was the word.

Our powder we got ready in our gun room openly,
 Our souls we did commit to God, our bodies to the clay;
 All standing in one cabin waiting for a sign,
 But there could no sign be given for fear we should be slain.

Then with what few arms we had, we rushed on them with main,
 And by our being spirited, the quarter deck did gain;
 And the number that we killed of them was seventy and odd,
 And as many more were wounded, as since we've understood.

Come all ye bold Northwestmen, wherever you may be,
 Trust not an Indian savage in North America;
 For they are all so desirous, your shipping to obtain,
 That they never will leave it off till the most of them are slain.