

**A Ballad Pilgrimage**  
By Moira Cameron, November 2012

I have known people who have embarked on religious journeys to sacred lands and holy places. And I have friends who have travelled on pilgrimages of another sort to the abodes of long dead but religiously revered rock stars. I too have recently undergone a spiritual journey. It started as a bit of fun and an opportunity to learn about history, but in the end the effect the experience had on me was indistinguishable from that of more conventional pilgrimages.

The journey began in spring of 2011 when I decided to learn a very controversial Child Ballad called “Sir Hugh, or The Jew’s Daughter” (Child 155).

I first heard a version of this ballad as a young child. Which version and sung by whom are details I no longer recall. I do remember, though, how the story first struck me. In a manner unique to those children especially fond of gruesome tales, I was fascinated by the horridness of the storyline. Being so young, however, I was unable to appreciate the other horror of the tale: that of the evils of racism, ignorance and religious persecution.

The initial impact the ballad had on me as a child never left me; but as an adult, I found it difficult to bring myself to learn a song so rooted in anti-Semitism. Nevertheless, the ballad remained on my “to learn” list for many years, waiting for the right version to come along that would sufficiently inspire me to add it to my repertoire. That moment finally arrived in the spring after I ordered *The Long Harvest*, a 10 volume recording of Child Ballads performed by Ewan MacColl and Peggy Seeger<sup>1</sup>. On volume 5 of the set I listened to several versions of the Jew’s Daughter, one of which was sung by MacColl. It was the melody in his version which compelled me to learn the ballad at long last. Once I had the lyrics committed to memory, I began doing some online research which brought forward some very interesting facts to accompany the song.

First of all, for those people who are not familiar with the ballad, it is a story of a little boy who is lured by a Jewish woman into her home where she then murders him in the most gruesome manner. Later, after she has disposed of his body in a well, his mother searches for him. His spirit informs her where his body lies. In some versions, miracles take place which are ascribed to his martyrdom.

Although similar narratives sprang up all over England and other parts of Europe, the ballad’s story reputedly dates back to the middle ages to an incident that took place in Lincoln, England in 1255. In Lincoln at that time, there was a sizable Jewish population, members of which made significant contributions to the community, most notably financial assistance for the construction of the Lincoln Cathedral. Regardless, the Jews were not welcomed by their neighbours. When a boy named Hugh went missing on July 31<sup>st</sup> and his body found a month later, suspicion immediately fell on the Jewish residents.

A Jewish man was taken into custody and under pain of torture he confessed to being one of a number of Jews gathered in Lincoln from all over England to perform a mock crucifixion on a child, supposedly as part of an annual Jewish blood ritual. As a result of this unfortunate man’s confession, Jews from across the country were rounded up, imprisoned, and their possessions confiscated. In the end, 18 Jews were executed for the crime.

In the meantime, Little Hugh, as he became known, was considered to be a Christian martyr. His body was interred at the Lincoln Cathedral where a shrine was erected in his honour. Stories were told of miracles, and soon this little boy became known as the patron saint of torture victims (although he was never formally canonized)<sup>2</sup>. People traveled many miles to make pilgrimages to the shrine.

The shrine remained intact until the Reformation when it suffered much damage, however a notice was put up which continued to inform the public of the popular ‘facts’ surrounding Hugh’s death. Although the numbers of people going on pilgrimages to see the shrine diminished over the centuries, morbid curiosity lingered concerning this gruesome story of ritual murder. In the early 1900s, a man eager to exploit the curiosity of potential tourists had a well built on a property in Lincoln which he falsely advertised as THE well into which the little boy’s tortured body

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<sup>1</sup> This was originally recorded onto LPs, but has recently been made available on CD by special order through CAMSCO Music in the United States.

<sup>2</sup> See Little Hugh’s listing in an online index of patron saints: <http://saints.sqpn.com/sainth22.htm>

was cast. Visitors could even buy postcards of the well to send to friends and family. Eventually, thanks to the honesty of the contractor who actually constructed the well, this man was exposed as a fraud.<sup>3</sup>

As incredible as it may seem, it took seven centuries for the true facts of the case to be publicly acknowledged on the walls of the Cathedral. The old racist notice was removed, and a new one took its place outlining the entire account of this unfortunate chapter of Lincoln history – the murdered boy, the torture induced confession, the prejudice and myths surrounding people of the Jewish faith, the false convictions, and the unjust executions.

It so happened that my learning this ballad coincidentally preceded a planned holiday to England. I decided I would fit a visit to Lincoln into my travel itinerary. Before I embarked, I jokingly told friends that I would be taking a “Ballad Pilgrimage”. Little did I know how accurate this ironic phrase would be.

I took the train from London to Lincoln on the last day of my holiday. I was immediately struck by the beauty of the city, and was impressed with its pedestrian-friendly historic centre. I walked along Lincoln High Street until its name changed to Steep Hill Street; so named because it climbs at a 45 degree angle. Nestled in amongst other centuries-old buildings, I found the “Jews House”, a structure dating back to the time of Little Hugh’s murder. There is a book store there now, run by the Archeological Society of Lincoln. I managed to find a booklet on the Jews House and its history. There was a chapter dedicated to the story of Hugh. I asked the book seller whether people still travelled to Lincoln looking for the shrine. He said, “Thankfully, not so much nowadays.” He seemed unimpressed and even a little dismayed when I told him I had learned the ballad and had expressly travelled here as a result.



*The Jews House*



I continued on my way up Steep Hill towards the Cathedral. My arrival coincided with preparations for Lincoln University’s graduation ceremonies. The Nave was beautifully lit with blue lights accenting the high arched ceiling. I had about half an hour to find the shrine before the ceremonies began.

Not knowing where to start looking for the remains of the shrine, I started along the right hand side of the Nave, admiring the architecture as I silently walked. I was surprised to find the shrine quite readily about halfway down a long darkly lit corridor. The remnants of the container which once held the remains of Little Hugh were resting against the wall.

It was not much to look at, really. All that was left of the original shrine was an unadorned stone box about three feet long and 2 feet wide and deep. It was perched atop a simple stone platform similarly unadorned. On the wall beside the remnants was an artist’s rendering of what the shrine’s design would have looked like before the Reformation. Below the drawing was printed a detailed and honest account of the history of the shrine. The narrative ended with a fervent wish for a world without bigotry.

As I stood there in deep contemplation, I felt powerful emotions building inside me. I bent down and brushed my fingers almost reverently on the cold stone remnant. I recited the ballad lyrics softly to myself; tears rolling down my cheeks. The tears were not for the murder of Little Hugh; nor for the travesty of justice which followed. I wasn’t crying for the sadness of the story. I was crying for the awe I felt being able to reach out and touch a piece of an ancient ballad.

<sup>3</sup> R. W. Morell, “The Mystery of St. Hugh’s Well, Lincoln”, originally published in *Mercian Mysteries* No.14 February 1993. The article is also available online on “The Edge: Exploring new interpretations of past and place in archaeology, folklore and mythology”; <http://www.indigogroup.co.uk/edge/Sthugh.htm>

When I sing a ballad, I ‘believe’ the stories I am telling, in the same way one feels ‘belief’ watching a story unfold in a film or television drama. But the depth of my reaction in the presence of Little Saint Hugh’s shrine indicated to me that this was more than a simple suspension of disbelief. I somehow knew it was my spirit, more than my mind that was the source of my response. Understanding why required reflection.

When I was growing up, I did not have a religious upbringing. Instead, I was raised with ballads and stories shaping my perceptions of the world. In a very real sense, the entire canon of ballads was and is like a sacred text to me. I gain spiritual, personal, and social understanding from their teachings just as someone might from a holy book. This was a concept I had already contemplated many times before. However, it was only while enveloped in the peaceful atmosphere of Lincoln Cathedral’s darkened hallway that the concept seemed to crystallize, becoming tangible. If the ballads were like my sacred texts, then this medieval shrine before me was not unlike a holy relic. It represented to me a kind of ‘proof’ of the truth I perceive from singing and listening to ballads.



*Little Hugh's Shrine*

To be clear, I don’t mean to imply that I consider the story told in the ballad of “The Jew’s Daughter” to be factual. Nevertheless, there is a kind of ‘truth’ in the ballad. The truth is manifested in how the ballad’s narrative makes me feel and in what it teaches me. Another way in which the ballad is like a holy text is that the truth it conveys is multi-layered and can be interpreted in a variety of ways. Take out the anti-Semitic element, for instance, and what remains is an all too familiar story found with disturbing frequency in modern news reels.

“Sir Hugh, or the Jew’s Daughter” is a unique ballad for many reasons. It has an extremely powerful storyline (even without the Jewish element), coupled with an equally compelling historical context. Its story has been examined and written about for centuries, beginning with Chaucer, making it perhaps the most commented ballad of the English speaking world. And it is one of the few traditional ballads whose origins one can actually visit and experience firsthand. All this made it possible for me to appreciate my love of ballads, and my spiritual connection to them, more clearly than I have ever been able to before.

As the train pulled away from Lincoln, I recalled my joking reference to going on a “Ballad Pilgrimage”. Irony aside, it was clear the word ‘pilgrimage’ was profoundly apt. As with conventional types of pilgrimages, this one left me with a sense of being part of something truly wondrous, and that my continuing journey as a balladeer will prove inspiring and rewarding for years to come.

Sir Hugh or the Jew's Daughter, Child #155  
Source: Ewan MacColl (The Long Harvest, vol. 5)

Most of these lyrics come from a Scottish version published in 1765 by Bishop Percy, under the title of "The Jew's Daughter," in his Reliques of Ancient Poetry. I altered the words slightly in my own version, and added the "miracle" verse at the end from another version.

The rain rins doon through Lincoln toon  
Sae does it doon the pa',  
Sae rin the lads o' Lincoln toon  
When they play at the ba'.  
Then oot and cam' the Jewis dochter  
Sayin' "Will ye come in and dine?"  
"I winna come in, I canna come in  
Wi'oot my play frères nine.

She pu'd an apple red and white  
Tae entice the young thing in.  
She pu'd an apple red and white  
And that the sweet bairne did win.  
Then she's tain oot a little penknife  
And low down by her gair;  
She has twined the young thing frae his life –  
A word he niver spake mair.

And oot and cam' the thick, thick bluid,  
And oot and cam' the thin,  
And oot and cam' the bonnie hairt's bluid –  
There was nae life left in.  
She laid him on a dressing board,  
And dressed him like a swine,  
And laughing said, "Gae noo and play  
Wi' your sweet play frères nine."

She laid him in a cloak o' lead,  
Bade him lie still and sleep.  
She cast him in a deep draw well  
T'was fifty fathoms deep.  
When bells were rung and mass was sung  
And every lady went hame,  
Then ilka lady had her young son,  
But Lady Helen had nane.

She rowed her mantle a' about.  
And sair, sair 'gan she weep.  
And she ran tae the caistle yaird  
When they were all asleep.  
"My bonnie Sir Hugh, my pretty Sir Hugh,  
I pray thee tae me speak!"  
"O mither, rin tae the deep draw well  
Gin ye your son would seek."

Lady Helen ran tae the deep draw well  
And knelt upon her knee:  
"My bonnie Sir Hugh, gin ye be here,  
I pray thee speak tae me."  
"The lead is wondrous heavy, mither,  
The well is wondrous deep.  
A keen penknife sticks in my hairt,  
But mither, dinna weep."

Gae hame, gae hame, my mither dear,  
Prepare my winding-sheet,  
And then gae oot and dig my grave  
And lay me doon tae sleep."  
Then a' the bells o' Lincoln toon,  
Wi'oot men's hands they were rung;  
And a' the books o' Lincoln toon  
Were read wi'oot men's tongues.