

LEGACIES OF

EWAN MACCOLL

THE LAST INTERVIEW

Edited by

**ALLAN F. MOORE
AND GIOVANNI VACCA**

An **Ashgate** Book

• ASHGATE POPULAR AND FOLK MUSIC SERIES •

LEGACIES OF EWAN MACCOLL

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The Last Interview

ALLAN F. MOORE
GIOVANNI VACCA

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Unless otherwise stated, all photographs are © Doc Rowe. Reproduced with kind permission of the photographer.

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Notes on Contributors

Franco Fabbri is a musician and musicologist, and teaches popular music and sound studies at the University of Turin. His main interests are in the fields of genre theories and music typologies, the impact of media and technology across genres and musical cultures, and the history of popular music. He has served twice as chairman of the International Association for the Study of Popular Music (IASPM). Fabbri has published on the rapport between music and technology (*Elettronica e musica*, 1984), on the confrontation of musical cultures in the contemporary world (*L'ascolto tabù*, 2005) and on the intricate fabric of influences and coincidences in the history of popular music (*Around the Clock*, 2008). His most read book (*Il suono in cui viviamo*, 1996, 2002, 2008) contains articles on diverse subjects including genres, analysis of popular music and aesthetics of sound. He is co-editor (with Goffredo Plastino) of the new series Routledge Global Popular Music.

Dave Laing is Honorary Research Fellow at the Institute of Popular Music, University of Liverpool and an editor of the journal *Popular Music History*. His books include *The Sound of Our Time* (1969), *One Chord Wonders* (1985), *The Marxist Theory of Art* (1987) and *Buddy Holly* (2010).

Allan F. Moore is Professor of Popular Music at the University of Surrey. He is coordinating editor of the journal *Popular Music*, author of a number of edited collections and monographs, including *Rock: The Primary Text* (1993) and *Song Means* (2012), series editor of Ashgate's Library of Essays in Popular Music, and author of some 60 academic articles. He is currently engaged in writing revisionist histories of both modernist concert music and English folk song: a lifelong devotee of English folk clubs, he felt it was about time this fascination bore some academic fruit!

Matthew Ord is a musician and PhD researcher at Newcastle University. After two years of philosophy and ethnomusicology at Queens University Belfast, Matt took a year of continental philosophy at the University of Greenwich before graduating in 2005, remaining in London to work as a freelance musician and teacher. He completed his MA in 2011 and after obtaining an AHRC studentship began work on his doctoral thesis (entitled 'Ideology and Sound Recording in the Second British Folk Revival') the following year. He continues to perform as a singer and guitarist with a particular interest in the traditional music of Britain and the southern United States. His other research interests include the history of broadcasting and recorded sound, the documentary film movement in Britain, and philosophies of everyday life.

Doc Rowe has been documenting British cultural tradition, song and dance for 50 years. Using a wide variety of media – video, film and photography as well as audio – he has accumulated a unique collection of contemporary and historical material on the traditional culture of the British Isles. Doc met Ewan MacColl and Peggy Seeger through Charles Parker, who produced the BBC *Radio Ballads* in the early 1960s. A working relationship with Charles, Ewan and Peggy over a number of years involved a variety of folksong and drama related projects, including Philip Donnellan’s TV versions of the *Radio Ballads*. Doc also produced artwork for Ewan and Peggy’s LPs and an exhibition on Ewan for ‘The Artist: Maker or Tool’ Symposium held at County Hall, London in March 1986. Teacher, photographer, broadcaster and performer on aspects of folklore and tradition, he has also been researcher, consultant and writer on television productions. His photographs are regularly published and his own books include *We’ll Call Once More Unto Your House* (1982); *With a Crash and a Din* (1984) and *MayDay: The Coming of Spring* (2006). More recently, he joined artists Alan Kane and the Turner Prize winner Jeremy Deller in a travelling exhibition ‘Folk Archive: Contemporary Popular Art from the UK’ which is currently touring with The British Council (website: www.docrowe.org.uk).

Giovanni Vacca has worked extensively on folk music, folk and urban cultures and song-writing, and holds a PhD from La Sapienza University, Rome. He is the author of *Il Vesuvio nel motore* (1999), on Neapolitan working-class music, *Nel corpo della tradizione* (2004), an anthropological study on Southern Italy folklore, and *Gli spazi della canzone* (2013), about Neapolitan Song. He has occasionally written song lyrics for Neapolitan world music bands (website: giovannivacca.com).

General Editors' Preface

Popular musicology embraces the field of musicological study that engages with popular forms of music, especially music associated with commerce, entertainment and leisure activities. The *Ashgate Popular and Folk Music Series* aims to present the best research in this field. Authors are concerned with criticism and analysis of the music itself, as well as locating musical practices, values and meanings in cultural context. The focus of the series is on popular music of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, with a remit to encompass the entirety of the world's popular music.

Critical and analytical tools employed in the study of popular music are being continually developed and refined in the twenty-first century. Perspectives on the transcultural and intercultural uses of popular music have enriched understanding of social context, reception and subject position. Popular genres as distinct as reggae, township, bhangra, and flamenco are features of a shrinking, transnational world. The series recognizes and addresses the emergence of mixed genres and new global fusions, and utilizes a wide range of theoretical models drawn from anthropology, sociology, psychoanalysis, media studies, semiotics, postcolonial studies, feminism, gender studies and queer studies.

Stan Hawkins, Professor of Popular Musicology, University of Oslo and
Derek B. Scott, Professor of Critical Musicology, University of Leeds

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Foreword by Peggy Seeger

Who was Ewan MacColl?

He was a Marxist, a playwright, an actor, a singer, a songwriter, a cultural catalyst – but above all, a visionary: one of those dreamers who create a future in their minds then attempt to make it happen in real life. A folk legend, he now exists in many versions. MacColl Sagas are passed on fairly accurately by people who really knew him, but MacColl Folklore abounds, often created and spread by people who know someone who knew someone who heard from someone who thought he or she read somewhere in a book by someone who claimed to have met Ewan (but who, it turns out, was born after Ewan died). Journalists, critics, workmates, biographers, singers and songwriters – all have their own views of him, making him both bigger and smaller than he actually was.

He was a self-made man: a child born in dismal poverty, crippled by a sense of unworthiness and by lamentable schooling; an insecure boy with a passionate appetite for life; a youth driven by class rage into political action, thence into manhood where all of those facets of his life-so-far combined to urge him to self-make the credos by which he lived and worked. He created most of the disciplines that he taught, forgivable possibly in a field that is not represented in establishments of higher learning. He went to no university to which he could refer to verify his impromptu curriculum. He was musically illiterate, creating a huge variety of songs (some of them quite complicated) without once putting pen to staff paper. A voracious reader, he gathered his vocabulary from every possible type of book. A magnet for ideas, he constructed a personal *raison d'être* that defies description. The need to maintain this image was his Achilles heel.

He was easy to criticize – but ‘the proof of the pudding is in the eating’. Ewan’s ‘puddings’ were delicious and varied. He had a sense of ‘truth’ as regards artistic creation, stage performance and political allegiance. It was based on instinct rather than on book-learning. This un-academic approach often offended even the un-academics. He only worked well in groups where he was the leader, when he could set the pace and make the rules. We made a gaggle of enemies who loved the puddings but who misunderstood – or feared? – the recipes by which they were made.

So who **was** Ewan MacColl? He was essentially an evangelist and an entertainer. His familiarity with many subjects made him fascinating to listen to. He spoke without hesitation, his sentences being a good balance between Proust and Hemingway. To Ewan, everything was connected. Working with him may have sometimes been uncomfortable, but you were ... connected.

We met many interviewers during our three decades together but to host one – an Italian student – for seven days was unprecedented. After our first meeting in 1987, we invited Giovanni Vacca to visit us once again. It was quite a week, during which he fitted effortlessly into our chaotic routine and we developed a lasting mutual personal and academic respect and friendship. It is largely due to him that this book, with its unique and thoughtful European perspective, has been written. The contributions by Franco Fabbri, Allan F. Moore, Dave Laing and Doc Rowe provide full background and Giovanni's interviews at last give Ewan a chance to speak for himself. It's about time.

Oxford, 2011

Acknowledgements

There are some people to whom I am indebted and to whom it is absolutely important to express my grateful thanks here: first of all Peggy Seeger, for providing me with materials and writing a touching foreword that remembers those marvellous days spent together; Professor Sheila Whiteley, who first suggested this project and supported it to the hilt; Professor Giuseppe Massara, for backing me many years ago when I first came up with the idea of interviewing Ewan MacColl; Paola Carra, who spent six months transcribing the interviews; and Peter Cox and Sheelagh Neuling for supervising and correcting them. I'd also like to thank Dave Laing for providing a final overview of the transcribed interviews, and for his essay, Allan Moore for sharing the making of this book with me, Doc Rowe for his photographs, Franco Fabbri for his contribution, Pierke Bosschietter for compiling the indexes, Stefano Pogelli for digitalizing the original tapes, Andrea De Falco for permanent computer assistance and Dai Griffiths for solving a Welsh enigma we found in some of Ewan's words. Thanks, again, to Valerie Moyses and Felicity Roberts of the Ewan MacColl and Peggy Seeger Archive located in Ruskin College, Oxford, to Paul and Hazel Jennings who put me up over there when I visited, and to Doug Lang. Thanks, finally, to Dick Greenhaus of Camsco Music, Ted Power, Jean Newlove MacColl, Malcolm Taylor of the English Folk Dance and Song Society and to my parents and friends for offering help or supporting me in various ways: Pino Mereu, Domenico Gloriani, Alessandra Morelli, Chicca Vitale, Claudio Vedovati, Nicoletta Giacchetti and Francesco Giannattasio.

GV

My thanks to Giovanni, Dave and Franco for swift and fulsome responses to my niggling queries, to Ashgate for their support for this slightly unorthodox book (and particularly to Derek Scott and Sheila Whiteley for their belief in the project), to Matthew Ord for sterling work chasing up references from the interviews and, far from least, to Ewan MacColl whose 'Dirty Old Town' led me to a very early encounter with the folk tradition which remains in my bones.

AM

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Introduction

Allan F. Moore and Giovanni Vacca

As E.H. Carr once remarked, the history you tell depends on the perspective from which you view it. As musicologists from very different backgrounds, we necessarily bring our own perspectives to bear on developing an understanding of Ewan MacColl's legacy. Indeed, we have tried to adopt a single perspective, but one which has two very particular facets: the internationalist, and the labour of MacColl as singer and writer. The perspective is clearly one of re-evaluation. MacColl has been dead now for more than two decades and while critical approaches to his work have developed, they have been somewhat narrow in their focus. One aspect of our perspective is to expand that focus. This collection, then, offers a very European, non-insular take on his work.

From time to time, an artist appears who seems to embody in her/his work the dominant features of a whole historical process, to speak not only for him- or herself but for the unknown, voiceless people around them. Woody Guthrie springs to mind. Thanks both to his notoriety, and to the way cinema has imagined American folk culture, an image of such culture is quite widespread. MacColl is perhaps the nearest equivalent the UK has, although what he represents has little of Guthrie's mythical presence.

If there is a country in the world that has a stereotyped image outside its borders, it is England. Too often, over most of the European continent, England and the English are still perceived mainly through the most trivial clichés: eccentric, conservative, snobbish and at the same time cohesive and with only occasional disruptive social emergencies like the Mod riots in the 1960s, the Punk protest in the 1970s, the miners' strike in the 1980s, football hooliganism in the 1990s and knifings in London in the 2000s. The history of social conflicts in England, its proletarian culture, the inner dynamics of power and resistance and the way the Industrial Revolution actually came into being and produced a popular culture are barely known in Europe. Not many know the beauty of its traditional ballads and the fascinating world of its broadsides. Even fewer know about peculiarities like the travelling people and their culture. How many would know the difference between Gypsies and Tinkers, and how many know of Tinkers in the first place? Although historians from E.P. Thompson to Eric J. Hobsbawm have focused their work on the culture of the English working class, it seems that, except for those who happen to read their books, a strong ideological veil surrounds it, preventing access to it for the majority. This was the world in which Ewan MacColl lived and worked.

The centrepiece of this collection can be found in Chapters 2–6. These are transcribed from two lengthy interviews undertaken by Giovanni Vacca in 1987 and 1988, interviews that have never before seen the light of day. Although some of the views expressed here appear in his biography, there is very much that is new, and we have endeavoured to retain the very energy of MacColl's conversation, one of the reasons he so divided his listeners (his followers, his detractors). The internationalist perspective he adopted is everywhere apparent in these interviews, and provides the rationale for the collection's closing essay, Chapter 10, where Franco Fabbri discusses MacColl's relevance for the largest European folk revival outside the UK, that of Italy. In Chapter 1, Vacca offers a commentary on these interviews, contextualizing and critiquing MacColl's position. Key to this, of course, was MacColl's awareness of the social role of his activities. For non-British readers, MacColl's example offers material from which to re-think English/British society from a different angle, particularly in regard to the role that the alternative, minority, cultures had in building it. For British readers it serves, even if only partially, as a reminder that cultural links across the Channel are sometimes more potent than those across the Ocean.

MacColl's work is also important for the push for renewal he gave both to theatre and to song, and for the social issues he raised in his artistic work: for the focus it gives to manual work, for example, through his powerful ability to describe it in great detail. Manual work is less visible today and is often dismissed as 'simple' and unskilled. The cohesiveness of the working class has been lost through the monstrous process of mutation that industrial societies have undergone in the last 30 years (in the transition from Fordism to 'Post'-Fordism, the financialization of the economy, the dismemberment of large factories into small dispersed units and so forth) but manual work is still as present as ever it was, still as important (immigrants do the hardest jobs, which the locals don't want to do any longer) and it certainly deserves to be recognized again and be much better paid. Can folk singers help spread a consciousness about all this? They can if the quality of their work is high and penetrates into common consciousness: and the quality of MacColl's songs is extremely high, in form and content, and it has penetrated society. His melodic lines and ability to capture images, for example, produce pleasure combined with an effect of consciousness and can act not only by providing new ways of observing reality but also as a powerful stimulus in probing deeper into the different human worlds he conjures up. But this 'work' is not only that of originator (composer, writer) but also that of performer. Thus, in Chapter 8, Giovanni Vacca writes of MacColl as songwriter, seen against a backdrop of European writers of analogous intent, and reveals how MacColl's particular technique derived from his previous experiences in the theatre and in the languages of the avant-garde. In Chapter 9, Allan Moore attempts to pin down the particular characteristics of MacColl as singer, in relation to both source singers and other revivalists.

What is really needed is a dialogical evaluation of MacColl's work, a critical scrutiny, far from the polemics that accompanied his career, even further from the theoretical, discussed stances he took as a revivalist, and focused mainly on the beauty and the strength of his work. In Chapter 7, Dave Laing opens up this argument with a historically focused consideration of his activities, counterposed to critical writing on MacColl to date. We hope that this book can help relaunch discussion about Ewan MacColl and inspire contemporary artists to rediscover his immense heritage: it is important to have a renewed consideration of MacColl's work, as a folk singer/songwriter and even as a playwright, although our view is that his own songs, often produced with Peggy Seeger, are really the peak of his activity. Even if they had no overt political content, still they would stand out in themselves and shine like diamonds purely for the way they are made.

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Chapter 1

On Interviewing Ewan MacColl as a Young Student: The Interviews

Giovanni Vacca

The political and social climate of 1970s Italy sanctioned the success of its own folk music revival and the development of a politically engaged song-writing movement. As in Britain and the United States the two were often intertwined but in Italy the political situation was quite different. Between the 1950s and the 1970s, the country experienced a fast and radical mutation from an agricultural to an industrial society, with inner mass immigration from the south to the north and the building of infrastructure works set to a rhythm reminiscent of that in England a century before. Great turmoil and a strong progression of the working class accompanied this historical moment but the social cadre was completely stuck: access to power of the Communist Party (PCI), the largest in Europe, was blocked by a series of alliances among centre and left-centre parties. At the two extremes, instead, were fascist groups, often threatening a putsch, and the growth of a vast radical extra-parliamentary left wing dissatisfied with the reformist policy of the PCI. This climate of high social tension sanctioned the display of every kind of intellectual dissent and alternative culture. The politically engaged songwriters (*cantautori*) and the folk music revival were two expressions of a vast movement of ideas and both aimed to achieve not only political change but also the establishment of a real alternative culture within Italian society. The *cantautori* seemed to sweep away the traditional Italian sentimental song, bringing into their music the tensions of the historical moment (as Dylan and Baez had done in America and as the *chanteurs-compositeurs-interprètes* had done in France). The revival of traditional folk music seemed to show, in the rhythms of the peasants' drums and in the rituals that had survived industrialization, a rediscovered sense of community set against what was considered the alienation of the new urban society. Both the *cantautori* and the folk revival therefore presented new directions for Italian popular music: songs could provide a narrative of the country, instead of indulging the heritage of the romance, and folk music appeared a possible alternative to commercialism, bringing back to light sounds and local rhythms that had appeared on the verge of extinction.

At the end of the decade all that was over: the technological gap and the post-Fordist industrial restructuring, the defeat of the trade unions and of the students' movement, with the tragic appendage of terrorism, the ideological transformation of the Italian Socialist Party (PSI) into a virtually right-wing party

and the expansion of a mass culture centred on commercial television led to the so-called '*riflusso*' ('reflux') – the abandonment of political engagement by large sections of Italian society in favour of pure entertainment and social cynicism. The developments that just a few years previously had almost resulted in revolution were now completely dissolving. The effects of such events have found fruition in the Italian political situation of recent years, characterized by a left wing totally incapable of bringing about real social change and by an aggressive and populist right wing climate now hegemonic at all levels, even when the Democratic party is in power. In the 1980s, anyone who searched for a means of reflecting a society in music and song was obliged to look elsewhere: it was for this reason that as a young student of foreign languages I started to listen to music coming from the British Isles, with the help of friends who already had some records and tapes. I remember seeing Christy Moore at the Cambridge Folk Festival in 1984, for example, during my first trip to England, the discovery of the Moving Hearts, the songs of Leon Rosselson, those of Dick Gaughan and then the work of Billy Bragg, The Pogues, The Dubliners, the Wolfe Tones and many more. The gruelling miners' strike, the situation in Northern Ireland and the opposition to the government of Margaret Thatcher (with the creation of the left-wing Red Wedge musical collective) drew quite a different picture to that in Italy, not only through the songs that told what was really happening on British soil but also through the performers themselves at the forefront of the political battle. In Italy, on the contrary, the *cantautori* were busy adapting themselves, with few notable exceptions, to the new context, while the protagonists of the folk music revival were being confined in the 'Indian reservations' of small local festivals, out of which they would later unexpectedly re-emerge with the explosion of World Music in the 1990s.

Among the many English songs I listened to, one struck me for its peculiar rhythm and for a refrain that sounded 'go, move, shift ...'. It was sung by Christy Moore and he had recorded it in 1978 on an album called *Live in Dublin*. This is the first song of Ewan MacColl's that I ever heard: I later discovered that its real title was 'The Moving-on Song' and that it was about the travelling peoples of Great Britain. Continuing to listen to this kind of repertoire, I gradually realized that the songs I liked most were always written by Ewan MacColl or Peggy Seeger and, often, by Ewan MacColl and Peggy Seeger together (and I did not know who Peggy Seeger was; I only knew of Pete Seeger). 'Schooldays' End', 'The Compañeros', 'Ballad of Accounting', 'Song of Choice', 'The Father's Song', those that I found on the records of Christy Moore or Dick Gaughan, were songs that appeared to have content, linguistic strength and musicality far superior to others, and this I found enormously enhanced when I had the opportunity to hear them sung by their composers. When in a folk music fanzine I found the address of Blackthorne Records, which I knew was his last record label, Ewan MacColl was already a myth for me and I had collected all the information I could find about him: I was 23 years old. I had taped some of his almost impossible to find old albums, borrowed from folk fans that I had contacted throughout Italy, and I had also photocopied some of his songbooks which really were rare objects. In 1987

I wrote to Blackthorne Records to ask whether I could interview Ewan MacColl for my degree thesis in English Language and Literature, which I originally meant to be about various English songwriters but which, after the interview, ended up being solely about MacColl. It is not easy to describe how amazed and surprised I was when I received a letter from the man himself (who an English folksinger, Tony Rose, had described as ‘a somewhat remote and inaccessible figure’ (quoted in Gammon 1983, 23–4)) inviting me over to England, asking whether I was also interested in meeting some ‘women songwriters’ and telling me that Peggy Seeger ‘with whom I work, has written the best feminist and anti-nuclear songs that I have ever heard’.

On 23 June 1987, Peggy picked me up at Bromley South station, in Kent, and we headed for Beckenham, where they lived. I remember the enthusiasm with which Ewan welcomed me on the staircase of their big house, starting to describe the musical instruments hanging from the walls of the main room so that I had to ask him to wait a minute to allow me to get the tape recorder out of my bag. The first interview, which should have lasted no more than two hours according to my agreements with Peggy, lasted a whole day. Some months later I got my degree at the University of Salerno, sent them a copy of my thesis and told them I would like to work with them again: in August 1988 I was back in London, this time for a whole week, lodged in a room in their house, to start a new and longer interview and delve deeper into English folk music and political song. In those years I travelled continuously back and forth to England and had the opportunity to rub shoulders with some of the protagonists of the English folk music revival. I met Leon Rosselson (for whom I also organized a short Italian tour), Roy Bailey, Martin Carthy, Frankie Armstrong and many others, although some of them probably won’t remember me now.

I stayed a whole week with Ewan and Peggy and I barely remember leaving their house except to meet the rock producer Steve Lillywhite, who had married Ewan’s daughter Kirsty. I spent my time talking with them, listening to their records and photocopying lyrics and articles. (I also did some wonderful recordings of Peggy showing me how she played her instruments and telling me about her activities.) It was an experience that really marked me deeply and gave me a direction for everything I have done since. I felt almost ‘adopted’ by them and I have many memories: their singing voices chasing from room to room, Peggy who cooked (on every cake she made she put a label with its name on) and Ewan who washed the dishes, their kindness and affection and the evenings at home, with friends who came and went (and Ewan worried about the conversation going too fast so that I could not follow it ...). And I remember also the only moment of friction, when I touched a nerve by insisting that Bob Dylan was a poet and Ewan, irritated, said that it was not true: ‘And I can tell you, as we have read much more poetry than you have!’ And I also remember Peggy coming later and asking me if I had been offended In short it was a fantastic time and I certainly got to know two people very differently from the way they were described in the magazines they

themselves had in their drawers: 'arrogant', 'elitists', 'exclusive', 'authoritarian'. I know many people will disagree but that was my experience.

It really looked like something that was bound to continue but then, in 1989, Ewan died and Peggy went back to America for a long time. Although I always kept in touch with her, for the following 20 years I dealt mainly with the music and culture of southern Italy, and in particular of Naples, the city where I was born. It was actually Ewan himself, affirming once again an old idea of his, who suggested that there would be no sense in my working on English folk culture if I had not metabolized the folk culture of the land where I was from. My tapes, including probably the longest interview he ever gave in his life, languished in my drawers (although carefully protected, I must admit) for almost 20 years. Then, some three years ago, perhaps owing to a saturation effect of Neapolitan things, I started to be drawn back again towards British music and maybe it was not only a coincidence that I met Professor Sheila Whiteley in Rome, at a congress I was chairing. Immediately enthusiastic about these unpublished interviews, Sheila convinced me to put forward a proposal to an English publisher, being certain that the interviews would be of interest to British and American scholars and readers. And so this book was born: it includes the transcription of almost my whole interview with Ewan, except for some parts that would be of no relevance today. I retained my questions, being conscious that they were the questions of a young foreign student who was just beginning to work on folk music: within Ewan's extraordinary 'stream of consciousness' they may perhaps help to clarify and to orientate the reader. As a matter of fact it was my questions and observations that often helped him to connect memories and to pick up themes, perhaps reminding him of a name or a word, or just trying to provoke or contradict him. They were the questions of an Italian student who could hardly speak English and they mirrored my interests at the time; they were the questions, often naive, sometimes clumsy, of a beginner and of course they would be very different today. Ewan's knowledge and eloquence, though, always turned them into a powerful stimulus for long, meditated and fantastic answers which encapsulated a whole century of English history. I can't but underline the generosity with which everyday he lent himself to our conversations, for hours and hours, because we inevitably continued our discussion even when I ran out of tape. I was always embarrassed to interrupt him to go upstairs and fetch more tape (our agreement was an hour long session every day; at the time he was busy writing his brilliant autobiography *Journeyman*) so a lot of what he told me is unfortunately lost forever. Besides, I had no idea at the time that I would ever make a book out of the material: it really was a 'gift', and I could have done anything I liked with the recordings.

When I got back home the first time I sent him a long letter in which I also analysed 'Song of the Iron Road' in the light of what I had learnt. In the answer, signed by Peggy 'for self and Ewan' (dated 1 October 1987), she wrote: 'Ewan was really pleased! What pleased him the most is that you, an Italian student, were able to see what he is trying to do when many newspaper and music critics have not.' This is not to be boastful but just to show how he felt in the last years of his

life. Certainly he enjoyed our moments together and, although he looked in shape, I later knew that he was not in good health. This book, although trying to be as balanced as possible, is written in his memory and it would be wonderful if he could know, now that he has become cinders spread over his beloved Kinder, that the time we spent together was not spent in vain.

Thanks a lot once again, Ewan.

It is important to know that Ewan MacColl did not have the chance to read the second interview, as he had asked and as is fairly common practice, so it was I who edited it. I do not think that there is anything that might hurt anybody. Ewan read only the first interview, which was part of my degree thesis and which I sent him. The interviews have not undergone any form of montage except for the few sections left out: they have been transcribed exactly.

The Interviews

These long interviews I made with Ewan MacColl obviously raise a number of questions and problems: the first interview is mainly autobiographical while the second one is mostly theoretical. In the first one, while approaching the end of the conversation, it is possible to notice an acceleration of the questions and a relative constriction of the answers, owing to the fact that I did not then know that I would come back again the following year (and, obviously, to the need to complete the programme I had in mind for my degree thesis). The second interview is more relaxed, the questions are more ample and the answers more specific. Most of the questions, as I said, are the result of my 'obsessions' of the moment: for example the emphasis on Alan Stivell, often a reference artist for anybody who started to listen to folk music in the early 1980s both for the undoubted charm of the artist and the aura of mystery that surrounded his music. Even in such a case Ewan helped me to acquire a more critical attitude, although I still like Stivell.

Anyone who has read the many books that deal with Ewan MacColl (from *Journeyman* (1990, 2009), his autobiography, to *Joan's Book* (1995), Joan Littlewood's autobiography, from *Class Act* (2007), Ben Harker's biography of MacColl, to Frankie Armstrong's *As Far as the Eye Can Sing* (1992), not to mention Peter Cox' *Set into Song* (2008) and the books dedicated to Theatre Workshop or those about the English folk revival) may detect a number of incongruities in the events narrated in my interviews when related to the same events told elsewhere. It is clear that MacColl had a tendency to build his own mythology, as we shall see, resetting things on the basis of the needs of the moment and, perhaps, of the interviewer; and Ben Harker is probably right when in his book he likens Joan Littlewood to MacColl in that both, when speaking of themselves, took extreme freedom in reconstructing their lives 'borrowing scenes, changing settings, resequencing events, editing out quieter moments' (2007, 40), namely doing what they used to do when working with other people's plays in their theatre

years. While signalling MacColl's contradictions, it seems to me more productive to investigate the ideas he put forward (and certainly there are a lot that are worth considering) and the ideological level that underlies the whole conversation: in short, to try and set MacColl against MacColl.

It is evident, from the beginning, that MacColl's 'tone' is somewhat emphatic and triumphalist: this may sound irritating but we must not forget that in oral cultures, and certainly MacColl's youth environment was largely oral, boasting, talking big is a normal way of discussing or arguing (Ong 1982). He often boasts figures that I can't possibly check but that I suspect to be some way overstated (Eight million and then 14 million listeners for the *Ballads and Blues* radio series, for example, or 30 million people hearing 'The Ballad of the Carpenter' 'in a national hook-up of the BBC' or, again, two million public performances of 'The First Time Ever I Saw Your Face'). The number of songs written in a short number of years, such as the period 1950 to 1955 ('anything from 150 to 250 political songs'), also seems very large, although MacColl was somebody who worked hard and he certainly did write many, many songs. At the same time there seems to be, sometimes, a certain degree of moralizing, in trying to look not only to me but also, perhaps, to himself, absolutely above suspicion as far as his political militancy was concerned: in short, a sort of 'false consciousness'. This happens, for instance, when he claims to have argued against Theatre Workshop moving into London on the grounds that it would lose its working-class audience in favour of the bourgeois critics (and to have left the group for this reason). Howard Goorney, a member of Theatre Workshop and author of *The Theatre Workshop Story*, supports MacColl's statement but Joan Littlewood puts it rather differently in her autobiography, saying that folk music was then in demand and that Ewan 'had never earned money with his plays in England', concluding that 'abandoning Theatre Workshop to sing in London pubs – what a waste!' (1995, 343). Now, whether that is true or false it does not invalidate all the rest. On the contrary, it makes MacColl look less tough when, for example, he, as any good bourgeois father would, rejoices at the success of his children in pop music (even if he ultimately considered pop music, and television, to be a 'destructive force'). On the whole I would say that the power and the strength of what he says are far superior, in terms of impact, than the perplexities one may have about specific points. The first interview is perhaps more fascinating than the second one, with MacColl looking (and sounding) happy and enthusiastic to talk to a young foreign student for a degree thesis: the story of his life is certainly somewhat fictionalized, but there is also, as we shall see, an interesting discussion about Soviet Communism (those were the times of *Solidarność* in Poland) and about pop music, and there is a first insight into the travelling people. The second part deals with many subjects, from the relationship between mass and folk culture to an extraordinary description of the folk repertoires of the British Isles, Ireland included, with a deeper investigation into the music and the culture of the Travellers. To be honest with the reader I must say that I've omitted two sections that seemed to me either outdated or out of the context: one dedicated to the way he worked with his private

label Blackthorne Records, covering anything from how to use the microphones in the studio to how he designed an LP cover, and another, a long discussion on the situation of the coal mining industry in England at that time (the defeat of the working class in the miners' strike of 1984–85 was just around the corner and still in the air), which was really too technical.

From the very beginning the first interview sets out the three basic components of MacColl's education as an artist: avant-garde languages with the agit-prop groups (but not all the avant-garde as we shall see); the folk tradition with the folk songs and ballads he learnt mainly from his parents and contemporary popular culture with 'the parodies of the pop songs current at that time'. Similarly, it is immediately clear what he wants the aim of his whole work to be: the creation of an artistic 'idiom' to speak to the working class. In the beginning it seems this idiom is already there ('the fact that I came from the working class meant that I didn't have to worry too much about finding an idiom which would be acceptable for the working-class people') but then we discover that it has to be found, and that it was actually found, especially when working on the *Radio Ballads* ('so I began to work on those lines addressing myself to finding a terminology and a point of view that would make the songs immediately accessible to the workers: and I found it! I found it in the *Radio Ballads*! Not because I was a genius, not because I had any great facility even, but merely because I was prepared to listen to the way ordinary people spoke and to the things they said'). So the three 'ingredients', which at first sight may look incompatible, do eventually make up the idiom.

The first part of the first interview describes MacColl's youth as an age of frantic activity: although he makes it clear that politics, not theatre or music, was 'more to the fore', the problem of the idiom runs through the whole conversation and surfaces frequently in the second interview as well. When Theatre Workshop decides to put on *Fuenteovejuna* to support the Spanish Civil War, for example, he learns Spanish idioms in order to write songs for this production ('then I wrote a group of songs which really did sound Spanish') and the same thing happens when they take on *The Good Soldier Schweik* and he works hard to become familiar with soldiers' songs. Again, the method is still the same when during the war years the members of the group, far from one another, study the styles and techniques of different theatres and exchange information in order to re-assemble after the conflict and start working again. MacColl gives an example of the Italian actors of the Commedia dell'Arte, who studied dialects to communicate with peasants. If idioms are more often acquired than being already within MacColl's comfort zone, than the question remains: is it just the fact that he comes from the working class that gives him naturally the proper idiom or is it, more likely, the combination of different artistic languages not necessarily of working-class origin?

'I hear myself talking' (Mrs Jayaben Desai)

The *Radio Ballads* period is certainly the most creative of MacColl and Seeger's partnership and MacColl explains in great detail the way he worked with