

White Goddess and Willie Whitecap: A Glance at Sap-Whistle Rhymes from Far and Near

J. B. SMITH

“O heilige Loren
Mach aß mer d’Pfyfe nit verschränzt.”¹

When in 1944 Robert Graves wrote the drafts that were to become *The White Goddess*,² he nowhere indicated that this remarkable product of his poetic imagination was to be taken as metaphor or myth, rather than as the literal truth that, not surprisingly perhaps, uncritical readers were only too keen to descry. More critical readers are frequently perplexed by what he made of material painfully gleaned from diverse sources.³ Whatever one’s views on this, the fact remains that, once stripped of the trappings of speculation, much of what he brought to light will reward further investigation.

Here is an example. In Graves’s eleventh chapter, his second on the tree-alphabet, we are given an excellent piece of objective information, obtained by the author from his friend Ricardo Sicre y Cerda. It is that when green alder-branches are made into whistles by the boys of Cerdaña in the Pyrenees, the process is accompanied by a traditional “prayer”, repeated by the boys while they tap the bark with a piece of willow to loosen it from the wood. Of the original “prayer”, only the first two words are given, followed by an English rendering. Here is what we read:

“Berng, Berng, come out of your skin
And I will make you whistle sweetly.”

Berng, we are told, alias *Verng* in the allied Majorcan language, is – and here we leave the factual domain – the Celtic deity Bran the Blessed, to whom the summons or “prayer” is addressed “on behalf of the Goddess of the Willow”. Further, the use of willow for tapping, instead of another piece of alder, suggests to Graves – why exactly is not clear – that such whistles served witches in conjuring up destructive winds, especially from the north.⁴

For present purposes we need follow Graves no further. For us two facts emerge that take us elsewhere. The first is that *berng* and *verng*, far from being the name of a deity, represent a Catalan common noun *vern*, which means “alder” and goes back to the pre-Roman, Gaulish name *verna* for that tree, which survives, incidentally, not only in French placenames, but also in *Werneth* (Cheshire), “alder swamp”, and *Warren Burn* (Northumberland), “alder stream”.⁵ The rhyme thus simply begins by addressing the piece of alder wood held by the whistle-maker. The second fact is that here we have a traditional rhyme of a type intoned in many parts of Europe by boys tapping a piece of alder or other wood to loosen the bark with a view to making a whistle. This was always done in spring as the sap rose, thus making it easier for them to separate the outer bark from the soft inner bark, alias phloem or bast. Such rhymes have been much collected and scrutinised in German-speaking countries, where they are known as *Bastlösereime*, or “rhymes for the loosening of bast”. Since in English we have the term *sap-whistle*, *sap-whistle rhymes* will serve as a loose

translation. There can be no doubt that, by their very nature, such rhymes were indeed “prayers”, in the sense of verbal charms or magical incantations summoning the bark to separate from the bast without getting broken or damaged.

Instead of now illustrating my argument with copious examples of sap-whistle rhymes from many parts of continental Europe, I shall restrict myself to one or two more recent reports, beginning with a particularly vivid account that has the additional virtue of containing a reference to a word for alder derived from the Gaulish *verna* and thus related to the Catalan *vern* that we have shown to be at the back of Graves’s speculations. The author is Maurice Zermatten (1910-2001), a native of Suen near Saint Martin, “where the Middle Ages have scarcely come to a close”. For him alder (southern French *verne*) was the most suitable wood. After a selected length had been soaked in spit, tapping began, in time with the constantly repeated incantation

“Sève, sève, bel et bien,
J’aime mieux l’eau que le vin.”

(“Sap, sap, well and fine, water for me is better than wine.”)

Finally the bark came away from the moist, white wood beneath, which after the usual whittling and notching was reinserted into the bark. Girls, who did not possess knives, looked on in silent admiration. If the bark cracked, that was a disaster, the only solution being a fresh start amidst the jibes and jeers of one’s fellows.⁶

Since, as we have mentioned, sap-whistle rhymes have attracted a good deal of scholarly attention on the Continent, especially in francophone and germanophone regions, it will be appropriate to ask whether there is evidence of similar rhymes in Britain, and, if so, what has been done to collect and research them. Certainly there is no lack of evidence that boys have traditionally made sap-whistles in spring. On the other hand, sap-whistle rhymes seem to be few and far between. D. Parry-Jones’s delightful book *Welsh Children’s Games and Pastimes*, in which the author draws largely on his own experiences as a child in north Carmarthenshire soon after 1900, provides us with a useful indicator. In a chapter entitled “Toys and Playthings” he has a detailed account of how, at the end of April or beginning of May, every country child would be in possession of a whistle made from young sappy branches of sycamore. There is a careful description, accompanied by illustrations, of how this was done. Parry-Jones continues with an account, from an exiled native of Latvia, of how he as a child made flutes from willow branches, using techniques identical with those described by Parry-Jones. The difference is that all the time he was gently hitting a branch with the handle of his knife to loosen the bark, the Latvian would, to prevent the wood from splitting in the process, repeat a “magic verse” that ran:

“Stay clean, my flute,
The bones for the wolf
The fur for me ...”

What we miss in Parry-Jones’s description is any mention of an analogous Welsh rhyme.⁷ If he had known of one he would assuredly have mentioned it.

As for England, a search for sap-whistle rhymes in the south has yielded nothing at all. This does not mean that the whistles as such were unknown. From Cornwall comes for instance the information that in the late nineteenth century young green shoots of sycamore, sharing the name *may* with whitethorn, were made by children into whistles known as *feepers*, an expression also used for whistles made from green stalks of wheaten corn.⁸ Robert Hunt, for whom the sycamore is the *may-tree*, has a detailed account of how, for the Cornish May Day celebrations, *may-whistles* were made from it in ways that will by now be familiar, but he makes no mention of any accompanying rhymes.⁹ Turning our attention now to Dorset, we have evidence from William Barnes (1801-1886), who tells us that “almost anybody could make a good whistle-pipe by drawing off the rind of a clean length of sappy ashen rod, and setting in a piece of the wood as a heading of the usual kind above the breath-hole”.¹⁰

Against *whistle-weed* in *The English Dialect Dictionary* we find an entry from Wright’s Gloucestershire correspondent H. S. H[utton] to the effect that the bladder-bearing seaweed thus named, and found along the lower banks of the Severn, was used to make whistles. The next entry is *whistle-wood*. This referred in parts of the north including Northumberland to the plane-tree, but also the alder, while in west Yorkshire the reference was to the wood of the mountain-ash. In Northumberland, but also further north in Perth, *whistle-wood* could be any smooth wood used for whistles. The Northumberland entry runs: “It is cut into lengths of about three inches, wetted and hammered gently until the outer bark slides off entire. It is then hollowed to make a whistle and the bark is replaced.” Returning to Scotland, we find that in Lothian the *whistlewood tree* was the willow, while in Selkirk it was the plane.¹¹ Charles Murray (1864-1941), who originated from Alford, a few miles to the west of Aberdeen, wrote a poem called “The Whistle”, about a herd-boy:

“He cut a sappy sucker from a muckle rodden-tree [rowan],
He trimmed it, an’ he wet it, an’ he thumped it on his knee.”¹²

In contemporary Scots, the expression *whistle-wood*, referring to any wood with a slippery bark suitable for making whistles, is apparently still current only in Dumfries.¹³

Such information seems to indicate that, while the making of whistles from a variety of woods in spring was common through much of Britain, rhymes accompanying the process were either unknown or ignored by those who recorded the information. Certainly a search in the south of England has to date uncovered no verbal tradition. Only when we come to East Anglia does something of relevance come to light, though the whistle described is not of wood. In a book on Suffolk lore published in 1932, the author, who at a rough guess will have been born about 1870, wonders whether, in the harvest field, boys were at the time of writing still cutting *squakers* from stiff new-cut wheat straw. He continues with the information that a length would be cut off with a knot at one end, after which a slip would be sliced back to the knot to form the reed. When properly cut, and put well inside the mouth, this would produce “a horrible, strident note” that could be varied according to the length of the reed. If it would not sound at first, the ritual was to roll it between the palms of the hands, and recite as follows:

“Rake ye; Rake ye,
If ye don’t squake
I’ll break ye.”

Rake ye seems to mean “bestir yourself”.¹⁴

Of course we are mainly concerned with sap-whistle rhymes in the sense of rhymes accompanying the making of sap-whistles from sappy wood in spring. For our long-sought examples of these we go north to Yorkshire and Lancashire. Relevant information is to be found in *The English Dialect Dictionary* under *sip-sap*, “mountain ash, *Pyrus aucuparia*”. The first item here, from the West Riding of Yorkshire, runs:

“Sip, sip, say,
Sip, sip, say,
Lig [lie] in a nettle bed
While [until] May-day.”

We are told: “The lines were said as the lads beat the wetted bark with the “heft” of their penknives, the piece of twig being generally held on the knee during the process.”

The second item provided under the same heading is from Furness in north-west Lancashire. Our authority tells us that after the branches had been cut to shape, the bark notched round with a knife, and the length of wood placed on the knee, the knife haft was beaten against the wood to the words:

“Sip sap, sip sap,
Willie, Willie Whitecap.”

This account was originally published in 1869.¹⁵ Rather remarkably, a fuller version of the same rhyme was recorded, likewise from the Furness peninsula, in 2005, when selected branches of sycamore trees, not mountain ash, were referred to. Our informant, who appears to be from Soutergate, just to the south of Kirkby in Furness, states: “The initial removal of the bark or skin (without breaking it) was a tricky operation and involved spitting on it and then gently tapping with the body of a knife whilst it rested on your leg and at the same time turning it and incanting a magical ditty

Sip Sap, Sip Sap
Billy Billy Whitecap,
Come off yar! [whole].

Making a whistle that actually whistled was quite an achievement!”¹⁶

Finally, returning to *The English Dialect Dictionary*, we find under *sap* in the sense of “mountain ash” a “boy’s rhyme when taking off the bark of a twig of mountain ash to make a whistle”. This undated item was provided by Wright’s west Yorkshire correspondent J. J. B[rigg]. It runs:

“Sip Sap:
Doff off thy black cap

And don on thy white one.”¹⁷

Note that the last four verses quoted share an opening echoing the word *sap*, and that the last three clearly show their affinity in their use of the word *white*, referring to the colour of the wood once the outer bark had been removed. *Pace* Graves, on the other hand, the whiteness of the White Goddess is best left out of the equation. Of greater relevance for us is for instance the fact that, as we have seen, typical opening expressions such as *sip-sap* came to refer to the mountain ash, a process surely suggesting that the rhymes once enjoyed wider currency and greater popularity than the sparseness of our English evidence might lead one to believe. In the circumstances, one can only hope that more English-language sap-whistle rhymes will come to light and attract the attention they deserve. Here is an example of the sort of material still to be found elsewhere.

Our authority is the writer Peter Kremer, who was born in 1901 in the small town of Kaisersesch, fourteen kilometres to the north of Cochem on the Mosel, and who in 1961 recorded his boyhood memories of sap-whistles and the rhymes that accompanied their making in his part of the Eifel.

The boy begins with what is described as an ancient magical formula:

“Hip, hap, hup!
Wenn de Huupe kraachen,
Mos mer neie maachen,
Hip, hap, hup!”

(Squeak, creak, squeak!/When the squeakers break,/we have to make new ones!)

As work proceeds, he tries a different formula, one that is particularly suited to the spot he has chosen on a bridge over a stream no doubt fringed with the willows that have provided his raw material:

“Saft, saft, seiden,
de Schlange en de Weiden,
de Kröte en de Baach,
dat mein Hup-hup auskraacht!”

(Sap, sap, silken,/the snakes among the willows,/the toads in the brooks,/may my squeak-squeaker crack loose!)¹⁸

Of particular interest in the first of these two verses is the *Huupe* of the second line, echoed in the refrain, but also in the *Hup-hup* of the last line of the second verse. Elsewhere we find the word *Pfeifchen* or the like, literally “little pipe”, for the instruments under consideration. Strictly speaking, a *Hupe*, unlike the whistle-like *Pfeifchen*, is an instrument producing only one unvarying strident note.¹⁹ Hence my translation “squeaker”. In fact Kremer’s next and last rhyme, the rhythm of which is well suited to the beating action eventually resulting in the separation of bark from wood, mentions a *Hup* in the fourth line and a *Pfeifche* at the end:

“Saft, saft, siele,
 Korn in de Mühle,
 Stan in de Baach,
 De Hup es noch net gemaach.
 Mutter, gib mir Pfennige!
 Wat duste mit den Pfennige?
 Nadeln kaufen – Nadeln kaufen.
 Wat duste mit den Nadeln?
 Säckelcher flicken – Säckelcher flicken.
 Wat duste mit den Säckelcher?
 Stäncher raffén – Stäncher raffén.
 Wat duste mit den Stäncher?
 Vigelcher werfen – Vigelcher werfen.
 Wat duste mit den Vigelcher?
 Braten – braten.
 Jetzt ist mei Pfeifche gut geraten!”

(Sap, sap, siele,/corn in the mill,/stones in the brook,/the squeaker’s not ready yet./Mother, give me some pennies!/What do you want the pennies for?/To buy needles – to buy needles./What do you want the needles for?/To patch little sacks – to patch little sacks./What do you want the little sacks for?/To put little stones in – to put little stones in./What do you want the little stones for?/To throw at little birds – to throw at little birds./What do you want the little birds for?/Roasting – roasting./Now my little pipe has turned out well.)²⁰

Finally, consider a striking variation on the same theme from Saarburg-Ockfen, with related versions elsewhere in Rhenish and Mosel Franconia:

“Frächen, gemmer e Steinchen!
 Wafir ös dat Steinchen?
 Fir de Vigelchen ze werfen!
 Wafir sön de Vigelchen?
 Fir ze broten!
 Wafir sön de Broden?
 Fir de Hären!
 Wafir sön de Hären?
 Fir de Mössen ze lesen!
 Wafir sön de Mössen?
 Fir de Abgestorwenen!
 Wafir sön de Abgestorwenen?
 Fir ze berfaulen!
 Mei Pifchen, wenn dau net ausgeihst,
 Da schlihn eich deich mausdot!”

(Grandmother, give me a little stone!/What is the little stone for?/To throw at little birds!/What are the little birds for?/For roasting!/Who are the roasts for?/For the clergymen!/What are the clergymen for?/For reading masses!/Who are the masses for?/For the departed!/What are the departed for?/For mouldering and rotting!/My little pipe, if you don’t turn out well,/I shall kill you as dead as a doornail!)²¹

We began with thoughts on the mythical associations of a children’s rhyme or “prayer”. Long before Robert Graves, scholars and poets were fascinated and inspired by

what they saw as a kind of incantation or invocation. Jacob Grimm referred to sap-whistle rhymes as “magic formulas” (“Zauberlieder”), a species of conjuration (“Beschwörung”) effecting the separation of bark from bast.²² His successors were only too keen to follow in what they took to be his footsteps, often viewing the rhymes as reliques of ancient mysteries, and some of the rhymes’ obscurities as allusions to pre-Christian divinities and rites, or historical figures of a more recent past.

Perhaps, though, we should attempt to view the rhymes from the angle of those who actually used them. Here wise words are spoken by Renate Brockpähler, who sees no evidence in the copious material collected by her that boys reciting the formulas thought in mythological terms. Any alleged allusions to “mythical” figures grew out of the contingencies of rhyme and rhythm rather than some shadowy mythological substrate described by scholars. Rather more telling are the statements of adults harking back to their own childhood, when they were convinced that all their best whistle-making efforts would fail unless they intoned the appropriate formula.²³ For them, the chanting of this formula was indeed an incantation, literally “the singing of a magic formula”. By this, what they wanted was *made* to happen, and without it what was a difficult and tedious operation was bound to fail. Compare a different type of work-rhyme, “Come, butter, come”, formerly used in dairies when the butter was slow in forming. In either instance we have what may be referred to as a “verbal charm” rather than a “prayer”, subtle though the difference is.²⁴

If nothing else, this note will have shown that sap-whistles and sap-whistle rhymes have much to offer students of folklife and folklore, and deserve more attention than they so far appear to have attracted in our islands. Our own particular focus has been on “mythological” aspects, and in this connection the question now arises as to whether there are for instance legends that would further illustrate the numinosity of the instruments and their music. None is to hand that is specific to sap-whistles as such. There is, though, a body of lore that is relevant to folk instruments and their music in general, and to whistles in particular. An example that will stand for many is provided by a legend widespread in the Swiss Alps, according to which a shepherd learnt the art of playing his whistle, or sometimes received the whistle itself, from a demonic figure called the *Alpbutz*,²⁵ one of the bogeys that move into Alpine huts once dairymen and shepherds have left for their villages in the autumn. Here is “Der launige Alpbutz”, a variant from Grisons that in my translation I am calling “The Rum Old Bogey”:

The bogey up on Ober-Säss in Schlapin was a rum ’un too. Up there one autumn the head cowherd had accidentally on purpose left a cow behind when the rest were brought down for the winter. The next day he sent the herd-lad up to the alp to collect the missing beast. Now for as long as anyone could remember there had always been a bogey spooking about at the Dajagmach. As it happened, the head herd couldn’t abide the lad, and his thinking was that, once the little good-for-nowt had found his way up, the bogey would take care of him. Obeying his master, the lad traipses up and arrives at the hut, where he finds the cow contentedly chewing her cud in the byre. So he makes himself comfortable too, unpacks his dinner bag, and begins to chommer away. After a bit, the bogey comes along and without saying a word sits down on the ground next to the lad,

who is busy feeding his face. The lad offers the bogey some of his dinner, and doesn't he dig in as well! When they take leave of each other, the bogey makes the lad a present of a lovely little whistle. When in the evening the lad gets home with the cow and his whistle, the head cowherd looks pretty mystified, especially when he hears how sweet-toned the whistle is. He thinks to himself: "The bogey can't be such a bad 'un after all, and a whistle like that would suit me very nicely too." He has it put through its paces, and he tries it out as well. Oh how he could play on it, so loud that the very mountains rang with the sound, and so softly and gently that he his own self could hardly hear it. "The bogey's just got to give you one like this, whether he wants to or not," thinks the herd. That very same autumn he too makes his way up to the alp. And that's the last anyone ever heard of the greedy cowherd.²⁶

Notes

1. "O St. Laurence, Please let my sap-whistle turn out well." This rhyme from Aargau in Switzerland is quoted in Richard Weiss, *Volkskunde der Schweiz*, 3rd edn, Zürich and Schwäbisch Hall, 1984, p. 227. For related versions from Alsace, see E. Martin and H. Lienhart, *Wörterbuch der elsässischen Mundarten* (1899-1907; rpt. Berlin, de Gruyter, 1, pp. 182, 360 and especially 362.
2. Robert Graves, *The White Goddess*, amended and enlarged edn., London, Faber and Faber, 1961.
3. See for instance Ronald Hutton, *The Pagan Religions of the Ancient British Isles*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1991, p. 145.
4. Graves, 1961, p. 170.
5. See for instance W. Meyer-Lübke, *Romanisches etymologisches Wörterbuch*, 5th edn, Heidelberg, Winter, 1972, p. 29, no. 367, *alnus*, and p. 770, no. 9232, *verna*; Joan Corominas and José A. Pascual, *Diccionario crítico etimológico castellano e hispánico*, 1, Madrid, Gredos, 1980, p. 175; Oscar Bloch and Walther von Wartburg, *Dictionnaire étymologique de la langue française*, 8th edn, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 1989, p. 45; Xavier Delamarre, *Dictionnaire de la langue gauloise*, 2nd revised edn, Paris, Errance, 2003, pp. 315-316; Eilert Ekwall, *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of English Place-Names*, 4th edn, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1960, pp. 499 and 507.
6. Maurice Zermatten, *Les Sèves d'enfance: récits*, 1968, rpt La Léchère, Cabédita, 1994, pp. 21-22.
7. D. Parry-Jones, *Welsh Children's Games and Pastimes*, Denbigh, Gee, 1964, pp. 42-44. For illustrations see p. 40.
8. Joseph Wright, *The English Dialect Dictionary*, 1898-1905, rpt London, Oxford University Press, 1970, 2, p. 323, and 4, p. 63.
9. Robert Hunt, *Popular Romances of the West of England*, 3rd edn, London, Chatto and Windus, 1881, pp. 382-383; Wright, 1898-1905, 4, p. 63.
10. William Barnes, "Fore-Say", in John Symonds Udal, *Dorsetshire Folk-Lore*, 1922, rpt Guernsey, Toucan, 1970, p. 2.
11. Wright, 1898-1905, 6, p. 470.

12. Charles Murray, "The Whistle", in Hugh Macdiarmid, ed., *The Golden Treasury of Scottish Poetry*, 1940, rpt London, Macmillan, 1948, pp. 265-268.
13. Mairi Robinson, *The Concise Scots Dictionary*, Aberdeen, Aberdeen University Press, 1985, p. 790.
14. Ernest R. Cooper, *Mardles from Suffolk*, 1932, rpt Woodbridge, Barbara Hopkinson, 1984, p. 151. According to Wright, 1898-1905, 5, p. 19, sense 13, *rake* in the sense I am investing it with belongs to the West Country rather than to East Anglia.
15. Wright, 1898-1905, 5, p. 447.
16. Gordon Calderbank, "Making Sap-Whistles", in *History of Kirkby Group: Soutergate*, 4, 3 (March, 2005), 1.
17. Wright, 1898-1905, 5, p. 217.
18. Peter Kremer, "Meine kleine Weidenflöte", www.gevenich.com/index.php?active_id=63, p. 2, consulted December 22nd, 2011. The item first appeared in April 1961 in the Heimatbeilage of *Die Rheinzeitung*. For variants from Trier, Bernkastel, Merzig on the Saar etc., see Josef Müller, *Rheinisches Wörterbuch*, Bonn/Berlin, Erika Klopp, 1928-1971, 7, p. 687.
19. For information on different types of home-made instrument fashioned from bark in spring, see for instance Klaus Beitzl, "'Pfiffle, Pfiffle, grot mer!' Maipfeifenschneiden und Bastlösereime im Vorarlberger und Liechtensteiner Kinderbrauch", *Jahrbuch des österreichischen Volksliedwerkes*, 15 (1966), 116-133; Renate Brockpähler, "Rinden-Instrumente in Westfalen", *Jahrbuch für Volksliedforschung*, 16 (1971), 135-163.
20. Kremer, 1961, pp. 2-3.
21. Müller, *Rheinisches Wörterbuch*, 6, p. 686. Among the approximately 570 (!) Westphalian sap-whistle rhymes dealt with by Renate Brockpähler in her "Bastlösereime in Westfalen", *Jahrbuch für Volksliedforschung*, 15 (1970), 81-135, twenty two variants of this ditty, described by her as a "chain rhyme" (*Kettenreim*), are discussed on pp. 124-127.
22. Jacob Grimm, *Deutsche Mythologie*, 4th edn, 1875-1878, rpt Graz, Akademische Druck- und Verlagsanstalt, 1968, 2, p. 1038.
23. Brockpähler, 1970, 133-134.
24. Cf. Jonathan Roper, *English Verbal Charms*, Helsinki, Academia Scientiarum Fennica, 2005, p. 16: "Prayers petition, charms command." The difficulty of distinguishing between charm and prayer is illustrated by my epigraph, which, unlike most of my other examples, on the face of it begs for intercession from on high. For Roper's discussions of "Come, butter, come" see the page references in his Charm-Type Index, p. 242.
25. Weiss, 1984, p. 227, as in note 1 above. For the canton of Uri alone we find more than a couple of dozen variants in Josef Müller, *Sagen aus Uri*, 1945, rpt Basel, Krebs, 1978, 2, pp. 281-295, "Der Jodelbub. Dreierlei Milch".
26. Dietrich Jecklin, *Volksthümliches aus Graubünden*, 1874, rpt Zürich, Olms, 1986, p. 46. Perhaps the nearest parallel in British tradition is the story of how a despised younger son of the MacCrimmons of Skye received from a fairy a black chanter and the skill to play it. See for instance Katharine Briggs, *A Dictionary of Fairies*, London, Penguin, 1977, pp. 8 and 139. Irish parallels are legion, as in the story of how a fiddler was rewarded with the jig entitled "The Gold Ring" after returning to a fairy a lost gold ring. See for instance David A. Wilson, *Ireland, a Bicycle and a Tin Whistle*, Montreal and Kingston, McGill Queen's University Press, 1995, pp. 141-142.