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Sunday afternoon found me on the coast of Yorkshire, in Staithes, a little town where the mist droops low beneath the cliffs, as if curtsying before the land, and where the waves break wild and grey against the rocks and the boats sit bonny in the beck. We turned off the radio, listened to the gulls and the waves, sat at the kitchen table drinking tea. And then through the window pressed the sound of the fishermen’s choir rehearsing in a nearby garden. “And it was Haul boys, Haul/ Haul boys, Haul!” they sang. “Heave away the capstan lads and lets get up the trawl/ When the winds are blowing, the ships a gently rolling/ My Emma, my Emma, won’t you be true to me?” Their voices rose and fell, strong and deep and silty. It was one of the sweetest sounds I have ever heard.

I read up about the choir when I returned, learned how in days gone by the fishermen would congregate on a Sunday evening in front of the Cod and Lobster pub, then together march up the street singing. It was a methodist community, strong enough for three chapels, the Primitives, the Wesleyan and the Congregational, and as the fishermen reached each chapel, the members of that church would peel off from their number and enter the chapel, voices still aloft. “And it was then,” remembered one of the fishermen in an interview in 1997, “that if you come down at this village you’d practically hear them lifting the roofs off.”

Often they sang hymns, many of which were by the American evangelist and composer, Ira D Sankey, pictured, who was known as the Sweet Singer of Methodism, and who with fellow evangelist Dwight L Moody wrote Sacred Songs and Solos, first published in 1873. Today the choir is secular, not sacred, and along with the old hymns –



Laura Barton Hail, Hail, Rock’n’Roll

A Shelter in the Time of Storm, Hold the Fort – they sing folk numbers such as The Mingulay Boat Song, a Scottish tune from the 1930s that has swum from the Atlantic Ocean to the North Sea: “Wives are waiting, by the pier head,/ Or



looking seaward, from the heather;/ Pull her round, boys, then you’ll anchor/ ‘Ere the sun sets on Mingulay.”

Way up in the pub at the top of the hill that Sunday night they’d been drinking since three o’clock. And now they were at the piano. The keys were wheezing and huffing as the women sang. These were young voices, creped by Pop Idol and blurred by booze, but singing with such sweet, hoarse passion that it took me a little while to realise they were playing Run by Snow Patrol: “Light up, light up/ As if you have a choice/ Even if you cannot hear my voice/ I’ll be right beside you dear.”

It was strange to think that after all this time, when the harbour no longer brings home catches in such numbers, there should still be fishermen down on the staith singing of the sea and of the women they left behind, of how “the fish don’t wait for lovers, and you might quickly find/ So put on your oilskin jackets lads and leave the girls behind.” And that there should still be wives waiting, women on the shore, singing a song so resolutely of the land; that while the menfolk sang of trawling, the women sang of running. And stranger still that both sang songs about being true, about being together, even when they were apart.

We don’t sing together like we used to. Oh, we chant in the football ground, we join along with the chorus at the stadium show, we roar along drunk as we wend our way home. But mostly we sing alone, as we Hoover the living room, wait for the kettle, drive to work. And it makes me a little sad to think of how we have lost each other’s voices, drifted too far now from those communities sewn together by song, where music is the thread that runs from generation to generation and from each to each, joining neighbour to neighbour, sacred to secular, land to sea.