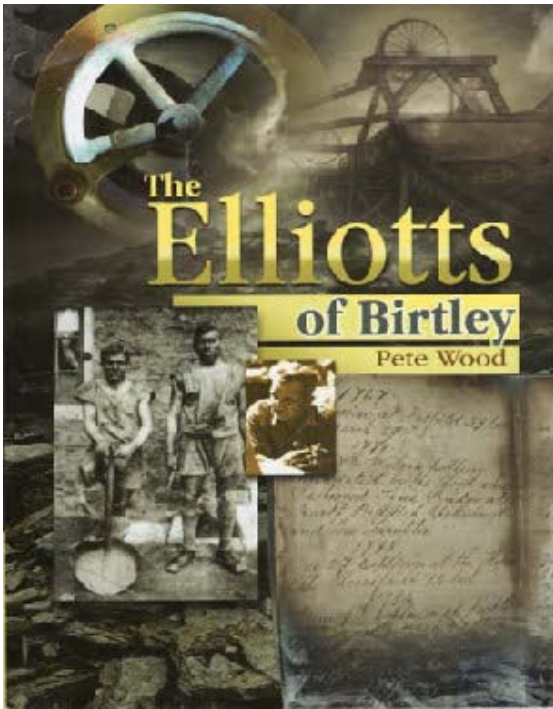


Pete Wood - THE ELLIOTTS OF BIRTLEY (David Herron Publishing)



This book is as essential for folk music enthusiasts as for students of local and industrial history or folk culture in the north-east.

It's also truly hard to put down; but it demands careful reading, for although its central story (that of the lives of the Elliots and their involvement in folk music in the north-east) is keenly told, there are numerous side-threads and ancillary issues that can all too easily (albeit pleasantly!) divert and preoccupy the enquiring mind!

The family saga centres round Jack Elliott, his brother and "marra" Reece,

his wife Em and his family, and their lives during the early part of the 20th century. The family's history is seen in many ways to reflect the hardship of many mining families in the Durham coalfield, yet the Elliots, as Pete rightly emphasises in his thoughtful, insightful commentary, are unique in their character, their political conviction and (most especially) in their heritage of song.

Writing this book has evidently been a true labour of love for Pete, as he not only tells the family's history in a readable and entertaining manner, displaying considerable natural sympathy for his subjects, but he's also able to bring his own extensive folk-scene background and knowledge to bear when recounting (and informedly discussing) their interaction with that scene and the folk revival in all its aspects. These ranged from their inborn deep-rooted love of singing, their interest in songs of the mining community (which led to their assistance in providing essential source material for Ewan MacColl's Radio Ballad *The Big Hewer*), their establishment of one of the country's longest-running folk clubs, and their unflinching support of the political life of their community (the family is still at the core of the Durham Gala).

Pete's own special insights and direct experiences supplement his selection of relevant personal reminiscences and recollections, bringing the events and personalities to life right before us.

This is living history, told in the most persuasive manner imaginable, both from the heart and from the heart of the community as it were and without a trace of dry academe (although the book would still make an excellent "set text"!).

References and index are well organised, and there are two appendices, the first of which usefully gives full lyrics and basic tune notation for the 20 "full songs" from the family's original core repertoire. The book's layout is attractive: the photos are well chosen and reproduced, and the photographically-enhanced family-tree's a good idea too. I could raise a minor quibble re ambiguity of detail: e.g. sometimes it's not ideally clear which family member is being referred to (especially where Christian names are common across generations). And (just an idea, albeit perhaps not so easy to achieve!) how about a companion CD?...

But in all seriousness, it's impossible to do the book justice in this short space, so I'd recommend you buy a copy.

And incidentally (the author tells me), it's been the only book on folk music ever to have an Author's Evening at Waterstone's!

<http://www.petewood.co.uk/home.htm>