



Maryland's state song

Eternal vigilance is the price of preserving just about everything, and a vigilant committee of the Maryland legislature has nipped in the bud a particularly wicked "reform." It has killed the bill that would have stripped "Maryland! My Maryland!" of its status as the state's song.

According to one legislator, if the bill had gone before the whole legislature, there would have been a "bloodbath." Good: Let there be no lukewarmness when traditions are in jeopardy.

The song is based on a poem written by an excitable secessionist after the riot that occurred when Union troops passed through Baltimore in April, 1861.

Twelve rioters and four soldiers were killed. The poem, a hymn to the Confederate cause, begins briskly:

*The despot's heel is on thy shore,
Maryland!
His torch is at thy temple door,
Maryland!
Avenge the patriotic gore
That flecked the streets of Baltimore...*

As a loyal son of the Great State (Illinois), I must admit that the song carries free speech too far: The "despot" referred to is Mr. Lincoln. The patriotic gore was, truth be told, seditious gore: If the rioters had not been bent on secession, Baltimore's streets would not have been flecked with them.

The poem canters along through nine stanzas, each bristling with stuff like:

*For life and death, for woe and weal,
Thy peerless chivalry reveal,
And gird thy beauteous limbs with steel,
Maryland! My Maryland!*

The poem rises toward truculence ("Thy beaming sword shall never rust..."), dips briefly into bathos ("Dear Mother! burst the tyrant's chain, Maryland! Virginia should not call in vain, Maryland!"), then hits an operatic high note:

*But lo! There surges forth a shriek
From hill to hill, from creek to creek—
Potomac calls to Chesapeake,
Maryland! My Maryland!*

After some thoughts about the "crucifixion" of the Maryland soul, the poem roars to a worthy conclusion:

*She is not dead, nor deaf, nor dumb—
Huzzah! she spurns the northern scum!
She breathes! she burns! she'll come! she'll come!
Maryland! My Maryland!*

My goodness. Some of my best friends are northern scum. Come to think about it, I am northern scum. The poem and the song are, of course, nonsense. But splendid nonsense.

Leaving aside tasty crabs and tangy politics, Maryland is perhaps most famous for inspiring splendid nonsense, such as John Greenleaf Whittier's poem about Barbara Frietchie of Frederick. According to Whittier, when Stonewall Jackson's troops fired at her Union flag, Ms. Frietchie, age 90, spoke:

*"Shoot, if you must, this old gray head,
But spare your country's flag," she said.
A shade of sadness, a blush of shame
Over the face of the leader came.*

...Will

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*The nobler nature within him stirred
To life at that woman's deed and word.
"Who touches a hair of yon gray head
Dies like a dog! March on!" he said.*

Darn right he did. Oh, some spoilsports say Whittier embroidered the truth, but a bit of such embroidery hurts neither Stonewall nor Ms. Freitchie, nor thee nor me. Indeed, it is good for us when we encounter it a century later.

It preserves, like a butterfly in amber, the colorfulness of our shared past. It is an echo of honest passion in an age singularly short of such. Furthermore, we should find it fun and improving to reflect that we are descended from people from whom the exuberant language of "Barbara Freitchie" and "Maryland! My Maryland!" was as natural as the flattened language of news broadcasts and bureaucracies is to us.

Maryland's song has lost its power to inflame, but it remains instructive. And attempts to sanitize what the past has

passed on to us are disloyalties disguised as fastidiousness, disloyalties to our parent, the past.

The attack on Maryland's song was the work of an otherwise splendid state senator, Howard Denis, a Republican who thinks it wrong for a state's song to call for the violent overthrow of the federal government. (Many Republicans constantly call for that, in their hearts.) Being the forgiving sort, I assume the senator was just temporarily deranged by the stress of serving in a legislature when Democrats hold 165 of 188 seats. Such domination by the Democratic Party gives fresh meaning to the words, "The despot's heel is on they shore."

Any "reform" regarding the song would have placed Maryland on the slippery slope to ruin. If that "reform" had not been stopped dead in its tracks, a raging flood of awful modernizing would, I do not doubt, have changed even the state's official sport. Which, by the way, is jousting.