

1962

## Heenan and Sayers

Mrs. Elwood Nickerson

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Song: "Heenan and Sayers"  
Singer: Mrs. Elwood Nickerson  
Town: Corinna, ME  
NA 331 CD 6 Track 15  
Collector: Sister Poulin  
Date: 1962  
Roud: 2148  
Laws: H20

**"Heenan and Sayers"** was known to many in North America, and possibly in Australia where it was also popular, as "Johnny Bull." John Bull is a national personification of Britain, much like Uncle Sam is for the United States (also mentioned in this song), and in this ballad the name Johnny Bull is used derisively by American singers. Both John and Sam appear in the song as representatives of the larger picture. The ballad is part of a tendency, a tradition in and of itself really, among eighteenth and nineteenth century Americans of finding incredible value in any victory over the British, whether symbolic or real (stanza 7 is a good example of this). For the British, this was likely just another boxing match, as one may see in the tone of the British versions of this song. But for the Americans, this was a great victory that symbolized their nation's ascendancy over their former imperial ruler. Of the many versions of "Heenan and Sayers," some of which are entirely different from Mrs. Nickerson's, this theme (call it "American ascendancy") appears with some variation. The tone in this song is mixed, with most of the song belittling the British and a sort of reconciliation taking place in the final stanza.

In the final stanza, another element also works its way into the song that leads to the history of the real bout between Heenan and Sayers. The song tells of a boxing match between American John C. Heenan (known as "The Benicia Boy" because he grew up in Benicia, California) and British champion Tom Sayers. The fight took place April 17, 1860 in Farnborough, Hampshire, England. Boxing matches did not usually merit memorialization in song, but this match was significant for two reasons: it was supposedly the last official bare-knuckle fight and the inaugural "world championship" fight. Moreover, it was attended (even though it was illegal) by no less than Edward Albert, the 19-year old Prince of Wales, Charles Dickens, William Thackeray and the prime minister, Lord Palmerston (and partly because of his presence, Parliament voted new rules for boxing matches including three minute rounds and the requirement for gloves). Other fights significant enough to merit a ballad include several of John Morrissey's bouts, which oddly enough includes the last fight of his career against, you guessed it, John Heenan ("Morrissey and the Benicia Boy," Roud 9781). As the present song tells the story, Sayers drew first blood, but ultimately Heenan went on to win after the police stopped the fight in the forty-second round. The fight lasted about two and a half hours. At the same time this fight took place, the United States was experiencing a constitutional crisis of such magnitude that it ultimately resulted in the American Civil War. For whatever reason, this ballad, as learned by Mrs. Nickerson, included a brief lament for the state of the Union, "May the Union hold together..." Moreover, the last lines of the song go on to promote American imperialism. These were certainly thoughts on the minds of many Americans around 1860, but why and how they made their way into this song is entirely unclear.

Along these lines, we will leave the final word on the song and the fight to an unnamed correspondent from *The New York Times*. An article published on May 5, 1860 includes a commentary on the Heenan and Sayers fight, which was apparently the talk of the town in Baltimore, even as Maryland was

debating secession from the United States. That point should not be understated: Maryland was about to hold a convention to debate secession, and the people of Baltimore – at least according to this correspondent – were more interested in Heenan and Sayers:

The Heenan and Sayers excitement has now partially subsided. Our 'fancy' are contenting themselves with perusing the choice literature of that event, furnished by police gazettes, flash pictorials and other vulgar sheets, which may be seen posted up in all directions, for a disgusted community to stare at. The chief moral effect of this great 'international conflict' is made manifest in half-grown ragamuffin boys setting-to, or squaring up to each other, imagining the crowning glory of earthly ambition is to become renowned as HEENAN. Show me either boys or men emulative of such brutality, and I will select from among them fitting candidates for the penitentiary, the gallows or degraded poverty... Progressive ages have their characteristic follies, which art, science and refinement, springing from elevated genius, uniting with better cultivated intellectuality, must eventually subdue. Theological philosophy teaches us that good sometimes springs out of evil. Hence an intelligent, virtuous world may hope that the recent brutal combat, having so palpably demonstrated its loathsomeness, will serve, eventually, to cause enlightened England and Republican America to fix their broad seals of discountenance upon similar pugilistic displays in future. All devout humanity should mourn in sack cloth and ashes over the morbid taste which encourages and feeds vulgar appetites with superabundance of poisonous food congenial thereto. Behold to surfeit, even unto gorging, in the pictorials!

\*One final note on the transcript below: One line in stanza seven and a single word in eight are marked with brackets because the transcriber was unsure if he heard these parts correctly. No other available versions of the song include these specific lyrics.

1.

Way down in merry England, the home of Johnny Bull,  
Where the English drink their glasses, they drink them brimming full,  
Saying, "Here's to merry England, likewise our Britons brave,  
The champions we are o'er the land and o'er the wave."

2.

Way down in merry England, all in the bloom of spring,  
Where English burly champion stood stripped off in the ring;  
To fight that noble Heenan, the gallant son of Troy,  
To try his British muscle on the bold Benicia Boy.

3.

Two heavy flags were hoisted that floated o'er the ring:  
On one there was a tiger all ready for a spring,  
On the other was an eagle, a gallant bird she was,  
For she had a bunch of thunderbolts and held them in her claws.

4.

Oh, the pennies they were tossed and the melee did begin,  
The bets on Sayers and Heenan two to one came rushing in;  
They fought like noble heroes, 'til one received a blow,  
Which caused a crimson tide from young Heenan's nose to flow.

5.

"The first blood for Johnny Bull!" old England shouts for joy,  
But the following cheers arose for the bold Benicia boy;  
The tiger rose within him, like lightning in his eye,  
Saying, "Smile away, old England, but Johnny, mind your eye."

6.

Then up rose Uncle Sam and he looked across the way,  
Saying, "Do I hear the Bull a-bellowing again?  
Has he forgotten the giant who lives across the pond,  
Who used to play with lightning when his day's work was done?"

7.

"Or has he forgotten the Battle of Bunker Hill?  
Or has he forgotten where the English got there fill?  
Or down in New Orleans, boys, where Jackson made them pay,  
[And there they lost their picking and the bully of the day!"]

8.

Then the last round was fought, the likes were never seen,  
The son of Uncle Sam arose the champion on his feet;  
'Twas by the throat he held him, and [walled] him in the air,  
And with one hand he threw him out, while the Englishmen did stare.

9.

Come, all you Yankee heroes, likewise all Britons brave,  
Look on your lofty eagle and never be ashamed.  
May the Union hold together and never flag unfurl,  
And the Star Spangled Banner proudly float o'er the world.

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Source: Laws, G. Malcolm, Jr. *Native American Balladry*. Revised Edition. American Folklore Society, Bibliographical and Special Series, 1. Philadelphia: American Folklore Society, 1964, 240 (H20); & Beck, Horace G. *The Folklore of Maine*. Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1957, 267. Also see The Minnesota Heritage Songbook, edited by Robert Waltz at [www.mnheritagesongbook.net](http://www.mnheritagesongbook.net) (under "Additional Songs") and this article in *The Guardian* that commemorated the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the bout: [www.guardian.co.uk/sport/blog/2010/apr/14/john-heenan-tom-sayers-boxing](http://www.guardian.co.uk/sport/blog/2010/apr/14/john-heenan-tom-sayers-boxing). For the *New York Times* article, see "MARYLAND AFFAIRS.; The Heenan and Sayers Combat Moral Effects, &c. The Constitutional Union Convention Delagates [*sic*] Arriving Railroad Arrangements Hotels, &c. The Republican Movements The Editorial Excursion The New Police The Weather Business, &c." from May 5, 1860, available online at [www.nytimes.com/1860/05/05/news/maryland-affairs-heenan-sayers-combat-moral-effects-c-constitutional-union.html](http://www.nytimes.com/1860/05/05/news/maryland-affairs-heenan-sayers-combat-moral-effects-c-constitutional-union.html).